

In January, 2001 the Reverends Terry L. Johnson and Stephen E. Smallman were asked to lead the PCA through an “umpired debate” of the Sonship program. The following are the three submissions of Mr. Johnson.

Sonship: An Adequate Psychology of Christian Experience?

“It’s just a matter of emphasis,” the defenders of the Sonship program claim. But a growing number of PCA pastors see not emphasis but harmful imbalance and error. The endeavor to highlight one aspect of Christian truth may in itself be legitimate. It only becomes problematic when its counterpoint is not merely de-emphasized, but inaccurately represented. After listening to several tapes of the Sonship material, corresponding with its leaders, and having numerous conversations with its advocates over a span of several years, I have come to the conclusion that the Sonship perspective suffers from significant problems, theological, exegetical, and experiential. Primarily my concerns have to do with how Sonship would have the Christian see himself. Much of its program is aimed at an outlook, what one might call a psychology of Christian experience that I believe is faulty and damaging. I offer the following for consideration:

Questions

1. Does the Bible primarily promote sanctification on the basis of adoption or regeneration? Certainly ethical appeals are made on the basis of sonship (Matt 6:44-48; Eph 5:1ff; 1 Pt 1:14-18). But the essential thing is that we are new men, new creatures in Christ (2 Cor 5:14ff), indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:1ff; 1 Cor 2:10-16; Eph 2:1-10; 1 Pt 1:3ff; Gal 5:16ff). Because we have been “raised in newness of life,” sin “shall not be master over” us (Rom 6:1). Regeneration, not adoption, is the typical basis for Scriptural appeals to holiness. The need for Sonship to locate these appeals elsewhere, namely in adoption, leads to flights of exegetical fancy. This is particularly true of their handling of Galatians. The Galatians problem (justification) is regularly misapplied to Sonship’s theme (sanctification). Galatians 3:1-5 in particular is made to apply to sanctification issues, where it does not belong.

Be that as it may, I consider this to be the least troubling of Sonship defects. I point it out primarily to illustrate the point that Sonship aims to recast the psychology of Christian experience. Adoption is being forced to provide the incentive for that for which Scripture provides other incentives, and is being warped in the process. We will see this repeatedly as we proceed.

2. Does the Bible teach that the child of God can never know God’s anger or even His displeasure? This is what Sonship makes of what we might call “the psychology of adoption.” The sons of God are “in Christ,” their sins are forgiven, God sees them as righteous (and only righteous), and (here comes the exegetical leap) therefore could never be displeased or “mad” at them. So goes their argument. It is noteworthy that there is no exegetical basis upon which this latter claim is made. Rather it is inferred on the basis of what they think adoption must imply. I have correspondence in my file in which a leader in the Sonship Movement discusses the nature of the atonement and its application and asks, “Therefore, how can He ever be angry with me again?” Good question. It just so happens that there is no Biblical support for their answer. If God is always pleased with me, why must I make it my ambition to be pleasing to Him (2 Cor 5:9; cf 1 Cor 7:22-24; 1 Jn 3:19-22; Heb 13:21)? What are we to do with the Psalms, which regularly speak of God’s anger with His people (e.g. 6:1; 27:9; 30:5; 77:9; 78:21,38,50; 85:3,5; 90:7,11; 103:8; 145:8, etc.)? I think I know what a dispensationalist will do with them. What will the champions of Sonship do?

Good fathers become displeased and even righteously angry with their wayward children. Would it not be more Biblical and sensible to distinguish between the anger of God toward the reprobate (which destroys them) and that toward His secure and unconditionally loved children (which refines them – Heb 12:5-11)? Can Sonship integrate this into its psychology of Christian experience?

3. Is there in Scripture a connection between our faithfulness and God's blessing? Do we reap what we sow (Gal 6:7)? Is the path of obedience the path of blessing? Do we forfeit the blessing of God through disobedience? The advocates of Sonship are eager to persuade those who are "performance" oriented that they cannot earn or merit the blessing of God. This is meant to result in certain psychological benefits: peace, joy, and freedom in knowing that I am unconditionally accepted. Fair enough. But is there *no* connection between what we do and God's response? For example, is it true that when we ask we receive, when we seek we find, and when we knock it is opened to us (Matt 7:7ff)? Conversely, is it also true that we have not because we ask not (Jas 4:2)? Listen to the Apostle John:

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. (1 Jn 3:21,22)

Note what John says about *why* we receive what we ask from God. Read it again: "*because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing (!) in His sight.*" The New Testament is loaded with conditional promises like these, the condition being our obedience/faithfulness. Is the *gracious* connection between our obedience/faithfulness and God's blessing being taught and distinguished from *meritorious/works* understanding of that connection? Can Sonship account for this connection in its formulation of the psychology of Christian experience?

4. Is the desire to protect our security in Christ being allowed to undermine the validity of lesser though valid motives such as fear and duty (Phil 2:12,13; 1 Pt 1:17)? Such are not the highest motives for Christian service, but the Bible often uses promises of reward as well as threats of punishment or loss in order to motivate us (e.g. Matt 5:12, 6:1-19, 10:41; 1 Cor 3:8-15, 9:24-27; 2 Jn 8; Rev 11:18, 22:12). Listen to Peter apply the "psychology of adoption" to his readers:

And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay upon earth; (1 Pt 1:17; cf 2 Cor 5:11)

Note that because God is both our Father and judge we are to "conduct" ourselves with "fear." Good children do and should feel reverential fear toward good fathers. Sometimes these lower motives (fear, duty) sustain our service and obedience when the higher motives of faith and love escape us. This is not ideal, and we are to aspire to the ideal. But the lower motives are legitimate and must be accounted for in formulating a psychology of Christian experience. Sonship is concerned with the psychological burden caused by obedience motivated by anything less than love. It should also be concerned about those who refuse to serve and obey unless sufficiently inspired, or to put it more bluntly, unless they feel like it.

The warnings and threats of the New Testament even include those of damnation being directed at Christian people who fail to walk in obedience (Matt 7:13-23; 1 Cor 5:9-11; Gal 5:19-21). The Scripture takes with

utmost seriousness the dangers of false assurance and self-deception (Matt 13:20-22; Jas 2:14-26; 2 Pt 2:20,21; Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-31). Are these promises/ warnings/threats being accounted for in the Sonship program? Are they made a part of Sonship's psychology of Christian experience?

5. Is the desire to protect the freeness and graciousness of the gospel obscuring the need for *active efforts in sanctification*? In other words, is the "God does it all" principle of justification and adoption being carried over into sanctification, thereby pushing Sonship into a passive and quietistic model of sanctification (Phil 2:12,13; Eph 6:10ff; 1 Cor 9:24-27)?
6. Finally, is the "3rd use" of the law being given proper emphasis? Or is the desire to avoid legalism being allowed to obscure the role of the law as teacher and guide for believers (Rom 3:31, Matt 5:17ff; Rom 8:4)? Sonship's advocates seem uncomfortable with the Reformed and Puritan formulation of the positive function of the law in Christian living (say as articulated in the *Westminster Standards*). Why?

Biblical Balance

Sonship has the admiral goal of freeing Christian people from a performance/legalistic approach to Christian living. It seems even to have helped many to that end. But it also seems to me that its formulations have not yet found the Biblical balance. Left uncorrected the above defects will bear pernicious fruit in the future. The evidence is anecdotal, but already one hears growing complaints of factionalism, spiritual elitism, and carnality. It's no wonder why. Its model of psychology of Christian experience departs significantly from that of the Westminster Standards and our Puritan/ Reformed tradition. The Sonshipper is happy and secure: his heavenly Father is ever and only pleased with him (no matter what), blesses him without respect to his behavior (and he is never to think that he might forfeit that blessing through misdeeds, lest "works righteousness" be introduced), expects service and obedience from him only when he is properly motivated (lest he slip into a "performance" based relationship). He leaves it to God to sanctify him, which, one supposes, progresses apace without effort, and with only passing reference to any law but that of love. It's a great program! No wonder it's popular. Oh for a soul unencumbered by fear of loss, fear of God's "fatherly displeasure" (WCF, XXIII.5), the burdens of duty and the exertions of spiritual warfare. God does it all! I'm safe! secure! free! happy!

If it looks like a duck . . .

Many of us will have to be forgiven if we hear the quacks of the "higher life" movements from which we ostensibly escaped by coming to the PCA. We fled Keswick, the "Victorious Life," the "Abundant Life," and other perfectionists aberrations into the safe and sane arms of Westminster/ Puritan spirituality. Forgive us if we are nervous about losing the realism and balance of Reformed piety, where grace and law, love and duty, affection and fear, God's power and our responsibility all stand in beautiful, biblically proportioned relation to one another. We liked the products of that spirituality: the Huguenot, the Puritan, the Covenanter; the modern missionary movement, the Protestant work ethic, precise morals, zeal for holiness, faithfulness amidst suffering, and what Packer calls "an ardor for order," that orderliness that facilitates the fulfillment of all one's duties. We will not quickly abandon this heritage for a reformulation that quacks suspiciously like the failed stepchildren of Wesleyanism.

I submit this article in the hope that it may help the Sonship Movement to correct, balance, and refine its message.

Response to Respondees

It was with considerable reservation that I agreed to the debate on Sonship with Steve Smallman. Steve himself has never been anything but gracious. I have admired his ministry and manner for years. Regrettably the same cannot be said for some of Sonship's more zealous advocates (as a number of pastors can testify) who have tended to be suspicious of the uninitiated ("He's not preaching grace") and uncharitable toward critics. I am grateful to Dominic for the opportunity to respond to the respondees.

Encouraged

First, I am encouraged. I could find very little in Steve Smallman's article with which to disagree. The response of both Steve and the other Sonshippers to five of my six areas of concern has been denial. They say that they do not recognize in Sonship the teaching that I describe. Some have even suggested that I have constructed a "straw man" or have "misrepresented" the program. They agree that the errors I describe would be bad if they were true. But they are *not* true they say. This is wonderful. They would seem to affirm with me:

- 1) God does become displeased, even righteously angry with His children
- 2) There is a connection between a faithfulness/obedience and God's blessings; moreover conditional promises and threats need to be taken into account in our experience of adoption
- 3) lesser motives are valid (duty, fear)
- 4) believers do need to "try hard" in sanctification
- 5) the 3rd use of law is important

Since I didn't manufacture my list out of thin air, but rather was repeating what I have heard and read from Sonshipper's over the years, I am relieved to know this. My hope is that these now clarified views will trickle down through the ranks of Sonship where far different convictions have been voiced.

Convinced

Many of the responses are testimonials to the effectiveness of Sonship in helping the respondees in living and enjoying the Christian life. No one should doubt otherwise. Most of what Sonship offers is solidly biblical and Reformed. God honors His word. Truth even when mixed with error sanctifies. Our own churches and ministries are examples of this. History provides plenty of far more negative examples of people and movements that were used, even powerfully used of God to transform lives: monasticism, Anabaptism, Wesleyanism, the "higher life" movements, the Charismatic movement. It is foolish, it seems to me, not to recognize that God has used these flawed movements for good. There is no inconsistency, for example, with appreciating the monks for their missionary zeal and for preserving learning throughout the Middle Ages, and yet criticizing their separatism and asceticism.

There is a "works" and "performance" and "I'll just try harder" perspective into which Christians slip from time to time. Sonship has been highly successful in helping rescue many from this form of bondage. However, many pastors like myself fear that Sonship's flaws (as we have understood them) may lead to another sort of bondage in the process. That it might not be so provides the motive for my involvement in the debate.

Hopeful

The one area in which disagreement remains had to do with the interpretation of Galatians. The advocates of Sonship continue to apply to sanctification texts that clearly (so it seems to me) are dealing with justification. The Galatians problem was that of “Judaizing.” The “works of the law” were being added to faith as necessary conditions for justification. Judaized Galatians were those who having once received Christ by faith were returning to the law and works as the basis (with faith) for their salvation. This is the theme of the entire book and the context of 2:11-5:12. I don’t see how there is really any other way to read 3:3 – “Having begun by the Spirit are you now being perfected by the flesh?” This is not a question about how they were living the Christian life, but the change in their view of the ground of their salvation. The verse preceding 3:3 refers to receiving the Spirit, was it by faith or by law – certainly a reference to justification (3:2). In the verse following 3:3 Paul laments that they may have suffered “in vain,” a reference not to loss of subjective joy or peace in the Christian life, but a compromising of the integrity of their salvation and open doubt about its credibility, a justification issue (3:4). So it goes for verses 5ff on through chapters 4 and 5. Paul’s fear throughout is not that they might have a flawed experience of Christian living, but that they might not be saved at all. His warnings reach a crescendo in 5:4,

You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Paul’s point in Galatians does not seem to be Sonship’s point. It could be that Sonship is saying legitimate things about Christians who have a legalistic mentality in sanctification. I remain convinced that they cannot be said on the basis of Gal 3:1ff or 5:1ff.

Emphasis

Finally, I remain perplexed. Granted some Christians suffer from a lack of joy and peace, or lack power in their life because of a legalistic approach to sanctification. Granted such need to be reminded that they are children of God and have all the rights and privileges thereof. Yet I remain confused about Sonship’s judgment as to what emphasis is needed today. If I were to step back and scan the ecclesiastical landscape I would not have thought that this was the central problem for Christians in our day. To put this another way, I would not have thought that the present Christian community, or even the present Reformed Christian community was suffering from too little grace. Rather it seems to me that we are *awash* in grace, acceptance, more grace, forgiveness, cheap grace, and easy believism. Our pulpits are aflame with grace, grace, grace. Is there really a widespread problem of Reformed preachers teaching or even implying that the Christian life can be lived in one’s own strength? Who? Where are the PCA preachers who fail to tell their people of their weakness and their absolute dependence upon the Spirit and grace (John 15:5)? Are there really multitudes of people trying too hard to please God? How many people *are* struggling, whether in God’s strength or even their own, to deserve or preserve God’s continuing favor? My observation may not be yours: not many. The vast majority of evangelical believers assume that they have God’s favor and cannot lose it *no matter what*. The *one* thing that they know is that God accepts them. They may not be living a holy life. There may be faint evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. They may be openly selfish, materialistic, and carnal. But they know God accepts them unconditionally. They’re not trying too hard. They’re hardly trying at all. They’re “at ease in Zion” (Amos 6:1). Is the crying need of our day really that we spoon up still more grace? The privileges of adoption do need to be taught, today and every day (assuming that we agree that items 1-5 above should be a part of the Sonship message). This is beyond question. But does it need special emphasis? Is this *the* strategic message for our day?

J.I. Packer's chapter "Sons of God" in *Knowing God* was life-changing for many of us. Adoption *is* the key to the Christian's identity. The Sermon on the Mount makes that clear enough (Matt 5:16, 43-48; 6:1-7:23). My criticism in a nutshell has been that Sonship has not been true enough to the metaphor of Sonship or our experience of it. Not only has it (through misguided advocates?) gone beyond Scripture in some areas, but it has not gone far enough in others. Our heavenly Father is not only to be loved but feared (1 Pt 1:17). There are not only family privileges but family duties (Matt 5:48; Phil 2:15). There are not only family blessings but family rules (Eph 5:1ff).

The gospel is always addressed to an audience. The audience shapes our message because the distinctives of one group may require one point of emphasis or explanation, and another group something else. Thus must our preaching be ever contemporary, addressed to the present audience. The context of much of Jesus' teaching was Phariseism. The context of much of Paul's teaching was Judaism and Judaizing Christianity. The environment of legalism shaped the early Christian message. Thus Paul and the Psalmist ("O' how I love Thy law") express widely diverging perspectives on the law, not because they disagreed, but because they were speaking in different contexts. What is our context today? What is our audience? Can we agree, at least, that this is not a day of self-righteous moralism? What then should we be emphasizing? Some Christians need the emphasis presented by Sonship. Far more, I suspect, need stronger meat. Ours is not the environment of legalism. The combination of overemphasis upon grace (to the neglect of obedience, duty, responsibility, and effort) within a context of antinomianism is likely to produce license. It is sure to be popular. But is it pastorally wise?

No? Final Response

1. Since I can find nothing with which to disagree in Mr. Keller's contribution, my only question is what does "No" mean? Perhaps he might illuminate us on this.

In the meantime let me tentatively respond. He provides a plausible, and given his ministry, fruitful explanation of how one presentation of the gospel impacts certain types of people. Since my point was about emphasis (and he appears to be interacting with it), is he saying that the emphasis he outlines is the only legitimate one? If so, I would have to respectfully disagree.

I doubt if Mr. Keller thinks this, but since Sonshippers often talk this way (as though their construction of the message of grace were the only faithful and Biblical way that the gospel can be preached), I'll press on. People are too complex and the gospel too rich for a philosophy of "one size fits all".

The gospel is beautifully and wisely diverse in its message. That it cannot be reduced to a formula is clear in the varying ways in which Jesus addressed His message to different people (e.g. Samaritan woman, Rich Young Ruler, Nicodemus, woman caught in adultery, etc.)

The same is true of the Apostles, (e.g. Paul with the Athenians, before Felix, before Agrippa). Given their examples, shouldn't we resist the temptation to limit what we mean by "gospel" to something more restrictive and more formulaic than what they demonstrated? There are occasions when in preaching the gospel free grace should stand alone. There are other occasions when in addition to grace law must be emphasized. There are other times when the cost of discipleship, or repentance, or warnings of judgment must be underscored if we are faithfully to communicate the whole gospel.

As "No" stands, I agree with it. If "No" means that there is never a time/context/circumstance/environment/era when cost/law/exhortation/threat/warning needs to be emphasized alongside of grace, then I must respectfully disagree. Let me underscore the point. "Grace," narrowly constructed and understood, is not the whole gospel. If we only preach "grace" we are not preaching as Jesus and the Apostles preached, and indeed we betray their message. It is in this sense that we can preach "too much grace," that is, if by preaching only the graciousness of the gospel we neglect the cost. Our responsibility is to proclaim not grace but the gospel. Grace is vital to the gospel but the gospel is more than grace. So then, what does "No" mean?

2. I would have thought that nothing could be clearer than that the Galatians problem was that of compromising justification by adding works to faith.

The problem with Sonship's handling of Galatians is highlighted by Mr. Woolsey. Paul may be, as he says, "drawing on the Galatians' Christian walk to conclude their view of justification is wrong (Gal. 4:8-17, 5:3-5)." Indeed, refusing to eat with "unclean" Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-16), observing days and months and years (Gal. 4:10), and insisting upon seeing saving virtue in circumcision (Gal. 5:7,11,12) are all "Christian walk" items that indicate a wrong view of

justification, and the likelihood that one has been “severed from Christ” (Gal. 5:4). “Why can’t a movement like Sonship do much the same thing?”, he asks.

Oh that it did. Yes, please do trace legalisms to their source in works’ righteousness. Then call the same to true repentance and faith alone. Instead Sonship is using texts and principles that Paul uses to show corrupted views of justification to show corrupted views of adoption and sanctification. This is quite a different thing. Sonship is leaping from salvation to Christian living without showing how it gets there.

So what? We should care about this because Sonship is presenting a theory of sanctification on the basis of texts that do not support the theory. For example, Paul doesn’t mind if we observe days and months and years as long as in doing so we don’t compromise *sola fides* (e.g. Rom. 14:5, 6). To be “enslaved all over again” (4:9) is not a psychological problem to which Paul applies therapy but a forensic problem against which he pronounces curses (1:8, 9). The confusion of justification with sanctification is at the heart of the errors of both Keswick and Rome. As Reformed people have traditionally said, justification is a declaration, sanctification is a process. When either sanctification is made a declaration or justification is made a process, the Biblical gospel is lost.

3. One other caution - all of us are tempted to bash those to the right of us. Those who are more narrow, more conservative than we are tend to annoy us. We see this in the news media daily. It may also be observed in the PCA generally and specifically in this debate. To identify as “legalists” those who complain that “things that are not as ‘Reformed’ as they like” may be arbitrary and unkind.

May it not also be the case that those who complain that “things are *more* Reformed than they like” are legalistic? Are not some of them like Pharisees straining out the gnats of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* while swallowing camels? Are not some like the scribes who claim the letter of the law (confession) while performing hermeneutical gymnastics to evade its true intent and spirit (Matt 23:1ff; 5:21ff)? Legalism and antinomianism are two sides of the same coin. Neither side of the debate is immune. Still, it needs to be said that precise faith and obedience are virtues, not liabilities. One should not be annoyed by another’s zeal to believe and obey all that God says just because they fall to our right on many questions. If it is not their zeal that annoys but their manner, then complain about that. If it is a theological problem, then identify it and offer correction. If they are correct, then thank and join them.