

10. The Adoptionists

In the seventh and eighth centuries a view arose which claimed that Christ, as to His divine nature, was the only begotten Son of God in the natural sense; whereas Christ, as to His human nature, was a Son of God by adoption. This view occasioned what is referred to as the Adoptionist Controversy. Its champion was Felix, bishop of Urgella, Spain. He held that Christ, as the second person of the Trinity, was the "only begotten of the Father without adoption"; but that the Son of God assumed, or adopted, the Son of man, who is thus adopted and called God. Felix attempted to preserve the unity of Christ's person by viewing the Son of man as taken up into the unity of the person of the Son of God from the moment of conception. Followers of Felix distinguished between a natural birth of Christ at Bethlehem, and a spiritual birth which began at His baptism and was consummated at His resurrection. This spiritual birth made Christ, as to His human nature, the adopted Son of God. These followers of Felix pointed to the fact that believers are sons of God by adoption and are called "brethren" of Christ, and that therefore Christ must also be the Son of God by adoption. They also drew a distinction between two modes of sonship in Christ from the distinction of His two natures; and they emphasized those scriptures which refer to Christ as being lesser than the Father.

Critics of adoptionism claimed that the concept of a dual sonship framed in this manner would logically lead to a dual personality in Christ, thus Nestorianism. Accordingly, the view was condemned at Regensburg in A.D. 794, at Frankfurt in A.D. 794, and at Aachen in A.D. 799.

