

“Theology of Adoption: The Father Heart of God”

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By
Donald Winters

Theology of Adoption: The Father Heart of God

“Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” James 1:27

Introduction

On December 26, 2004, my family and I watched the television as horrific images revealed the impact of killer waves produced by a tsunami in the Indian Ocean. “By the end of the day more than 150,000 people were dead or missing and millions more were homeless in 11 countries, making it perhaps the most destructive tsunami in history.”¹ Although we knew no one who was directly injured or killed, the events of that day dramatically changed my family’s lives forever.

At the time I was seven months into my first pastorate. We were experiencing a time of stabilization in our lives. Our finances were steady and we had more disposable income than we had ever had. My wife and I were satisfied with our current situation of raising and homeschooling our three boys. We were not seeking any major life changes at the time, but slowly and surely that is where we were headed.

After the tsunami hit, we, like many others, gave money to help those in need through trusted charitable organizations. We felt it was the least we could do. I had personally been thinking about how we could better help the poor. People on the other side of the world were in desperate need and we were certainly blessed and able to contribute. Even after giving, my wife and I felt a burden on our hearts for the children. The tsunami had created thousands of orphans

¹ National Geographic. http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/12/1227_041226_tsunami.html. accessed February 6, 2010

in an instant.² What would happen to these children? Who would care for them? Is there anything we could do?

For the first time in our married lives, my wife and I discussed adoption. We never felt any urge or calling in this direction before. We generally thought of adoption as something for people who could not conceive children. However, as we soon learned over the next few years, “increasing numbers of individuals and couples are adopting out of a sense of calling, of religious and humanitarian commitment.”³ In this time of great need we felt motivated to respond sacrificially and holistically. As we investigated we came to understand that these children would not be put up for adoption to Americans. Many of the countries that were affected were nations that would not allow foreigners to adopt.

Though we were unable to adopt any of the children orphaned by the tsunami of December 26, 2004, the events of that day began a progressive thought development and a calling. This calling resulted in my wife and I flying to Guatemala City in March of 2006 to meet our daughter and begin what proved to be a difficult two year process of emotional highs and lows. In March of 2008, we brought our daughter, Melinda, home as a member of our family.

Purpose and Direction

This paper will have two major parts. First, I will seek to show that adoption is a vital part of a holistic response to living in a fallen world. One reality of a fallen world is children who have been left without proper care. I will present the world’s need for adoptive parents and

²Tsunami Orphans. <http://tsunamiorphans.org/> accessed February 6, 2010

³ Stevenson-Moessner, Jeanne. *The Spirit of Adoption*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 3

identify the church's role in adoption. In identifying the church's role I will formulate a proposal that will be grounded in the local church body that I am a part of and extend to the denomination of ABC/USA. Issues facing churches and parents who choose this response will be briefly discussed. Secondly, I seek to present a Christian theology for adoption. In developing this theology, I will make use of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. A worldview that is grounded in the creation-fall-redemption-restoration model will be used to understand how adoption functions within God's overall purposes for humanity. The biblical record will serve as a primary source and norm for understanding an adoption theology. Tradition, reason, and experience will also serve as sources that are subject to the Scriptures. The social sciences as well as other theologians will be given a voice in developing this theology. My own experiences, as well, will be included.

Current Situation

The world we live in is extremely harsh at times. "The reasons why children continue to suffer are complex and include poverty, greed, discrimination, lack of education, gross inequality and war."⁴ UNICEF estimates the number of orphans at 210 million in the world today.⁵ In the United State alone "More than 800,000 children pass through our country's foster care system each year."⁶ Thirty-five thousand children die every day from hunger and malnutrition.⁷ The United States of America has 2,800,000 orphans.⁸ According to UNICEF the country where my

⁴ Mission One Million http://www.mission1m.org/about_the_need.html accessed February 6, 2010

⁵ Ibid. Others show this figure to be 163 million. The numbers are astronomical either way.

⁶ Cruver, Dan. *Together For Adoption*. 2009. <http://www.togetherforadoption.org/wp-content/media/Together-for-Adoption-eBook.pdf> (accessed February 6, 2010), 2

⁷ Mission One Million

⁸ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/usa_statistics.html accessed February 22, 2010

daughter was born, Guatemala, has 360,000 orphans.⁹ An estimated 2,000 of these Guatemalan children are being sexually exploited, and the law has been doing little to protect them.¹⁰

The continent of Africa is, by far, the geographic location with the most critical condition in terms of orphan care. “The suffering of African orphans is relentless and huge in magnitude. Orphans are more deprived than their national peers of education, socialization, and nutrition.”¹¹ Traditionally, Africans have had strong family units that have allowed them to care for children that have lost parents. However, “The once seemingly limitless network of extended family—that expanded through geographic areas and generations—is depleting because of migration, Westernization, demographic changes, and AIDS.”¹²

Children often become available for adoption for different reasons in the United States. “In terms of infants, parents most often put their children up for adoption for one of several reasons. It may be that the mother is young, even a minor, and is not socially capable of raising the child.”¹³ In other cases, “the woman may be unmarried, and have not planned on becoming pregnant, and believes that having a baby now would interfere with her long-term goals and plans, or that she would not be able to financially provide for her baby.”¹⁴ For older children it is “more common that the children will have been removed from their home” for various reasons.¹⁵

⁹ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/guatemala_statistics.html accessed February 22, 2010

¹⁰ Thomas Nebo http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/guatemala_46566.html accessed February 22, 2010

¹¹ Shaw, Jini L and Stacy Roby. "The African Orphan Crisis and International Adoption." (*Social Work* 51, no. 3 July 2006), 200

¹² *Ibid*, 200

¹³ <http://www.thelaboroflove.com/articles/why-do-parents-put-their-children-up-for-adoption/> Accessed March 2, 2010

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid*

The North American Council on Adoptable Children reports that there are 4,407 foster children in the State of Illinois that are waiting to be adopted.¹⁶ Furthermore, in 2007, 1,245 youth in Illinois aged out of foster care without a permanent, legal family.¹⁷ The vast majority of statistics are not favorable for children in this situation. The report continued by stating, “The best way to improve these outcomes is to ensure that youth do not age out of care without a family. For those youth who do not find a family, states and counties must provide support to help them make the transition to independent living with the help and support of caring adults.”

Reports out of Russia prove to show the most devastating effects of long term institutionalization. According to Mark Elliott:

A Russian Interior Ministry report estimated that of the 15,000 children leaving orphanages annually, 40 percent were soon unemployed and homeless, 30 percent committed crimes, and 10 percent committed suicide. Also, a recent study estimated that 40 percent of orphan graduates become addicted to alcohol or drugs, while estimates for prostitution among female orphan graduates run as high as 60 percent.¹⁸

Foster care was never intended to be a permanent solution for individual children. “But many Illinois children remain in care for years. For children waiting to be adopted in Illinois, the average length of stay in care is almost four years (46.8 months). On average, children who were adopted in 2007 spent 47.8 months in care before the adoption was finalized.” The report suggested that “To shorten the time children spend in care, child welfare agencies must employ the best recruitment tools possible to find families.”¹⁹

¹⁶ <http://www.nacac.org/policy/statefactsheets/IL.pdf> Accessed March 2, 2010

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Mark R. Elliott Russian Children at Risk, *Religion In Eastern Europe* XXVIII, 3 (August 2008), 9

¹⁹ <http://www.nacac.org/policy/statefactsheets/IL.pdf> Accessed March 2, 2010

Issues in Adoption

Those who respond to the call to adopt should become educated on issues regarding adoption. Financially speaking, adoption can vary from being very expensive to costing little. Children available for adoption may have attachment issues, drug and alcohol exposure, and prior abuse. As we were told by more than one adoption agency, there is always a chance that you may start the adoption process with a child who may never come home. Adoption can be very rewarding for both children and parents, but it is not easy, nor is it a fairytale life. Adoption is a biblical response to a need by some of the world's most vulnerable persons.

Pre-adoption

“The adoption experience is fraught with incalculable risks, uncertainties and palpable concerns. The adoptive legal process is often frustrating and cumbersome, while also being an invasion of one's privacy with all the required social worker visits and home-studies.”²⁰ For my wife and I, the experience seemed un-ending: from dozens upon dozens of sheets of paperwork to multiple submissions of background checks to fingerprints. After a year into the process it seemed that our daughter would become a victim of political battles and removed from foster care to live in an orphanage. When we finally brought our daughter home, the Director of our agency said she had never had another case that became as difficult and the child eventually went home. Most of the difficult cases ended with the child getting lost in the system and not being adopted. The following journal article from my wife expresses our great joy and relief when we finally received some good news.

²⁰ Ryan Noel Fraser, A Fairy Tale with a Twist: Pastoral Counseling with Adoptive Families *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, (Spring-Summer 2005, Vol. 59, Nos. 1-2), 65

January 5, 2008 – Don took the boys to the grocery store. While they were gone, I got THE phone call. The phone call that we have been waiting for for close to two years. Our adoption agency called to say that our Guatemalan paperwork had finally been approved. Our paperwork had been caught up in an “investigation” for over a year. We had lost hope so many times. And, this is finally it. I didn’t even know how to respond to the lady on the phone. My emotions were screaming. I heard her say about five weeks till we could bring Melinda home. Elation! I hung up the phone & literally screamed with joy. What a relief. What a moment. I had to take a few minutes to let it sink in and praise and thank God before I could call Don. Don told me later that it is hard to stay cool and finish your shopping when you can’t see the shopping cart because of the tears in your eyes. We broke out the Sparkling Grape Juice that evening – the bottle we hadn’t had a chance to drink on New Year’s Eve.²¹

Post-Adoption

Dr. Sherrie Eldridge, herself an adopted child and now a psychologist working in the field, has written:

As with most everything in life, adoption has positive and negative elements. None of us wants to acknowledge the negative, painful side-that is, loss. But the truth is, the very act of adoption is built upon loss. For the birth parents, the loss of their biological offspring, the relationship that could have been, a very part of themselves. For the adoptive parents, the loss of giving birth to a biological child, the child whose face will never mirror theirs. And for the adopted child, the loss of the birth parents, the earliest experience of belonging and acceptance. To deny adoption loss is to deny the emotional reality of everyone involved.²²

As children mature they often seek answers to their past. “They often wonder why they were placed for adoption and why they cannot have biological parents as their friends do. Secretly they may wonder if their birth mother is looking for them, and possibly even fantasize about their birth mother coming to "rescue" them.²³

For those who wish to work with and help adopted children, there are things that should be understood. Nola Passmore offers the following explanation: “Not only have adoptees lost their

²¹ Barb Winters Unpublished Journal

²² Eldridge, Sherrie *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wished Their Adopted Parents Knew* (NY Dell Publishing, 1999), 4-5

²³ Fraser, 69

birthparents and a sense of biological connection to their adoptive parents, but they have also lost other birth relatives, information about their past, and knowledge of their genetic history”²⁴ It should be noted that does not mean a child won’t thrive because of their past. In fact many adopted orphans do quite well in life as Passmore shares. “This does not necessarily mean that adoptees fare worse than their non-adopted peers, but it does mean that those seeking to assist adoptees should be aware of the ways in which adoptive status may impact an adopted person's life.”²⁵ The key, as seen by this psychologist, is “when the adoptive family is supportive, open, and expressive, the adoptee is more likely to develop healthy self-esteem.”²⁶

Any potential parent that is considering adoption needs to understand bonding and attachment issues. Counselor Ryan Noel Fraser defines bonding and attachment this way: “Bonding is a term originally referring to what the child does in the initial stages of the connection, while attachment—strictly speaking—refers to what the parent does early on in the process.”²⁷ As Fraser continues he writes, “Children, who have been kept from an early age in orphanages where they were ignored, being held minimally, or those neglected by birth parents as newborn infants, may experience great difficulty bonding with adoptive parents.”²⁸ There are entire books that are written on these subjects to help adoptive parents understand and deal with these issues. These resources should be utilized.

²⁴ Passmore, Nola. "Adoption and the Father Heart of God: Helping Adoptees Deal with Issues of Identity and Loss." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (23, no. 2 2004), 168

²⁵ Pass more, 165

²⁶ Ibid, 167

²⁷ Fraser, 71

²⁸ Fraser, 71

The Church's Role

With enormous amount of orphans in the United States and in the world, the church has a monumental task before it if it is to practice true religion. James 1:27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." Clearly, the church has its work cut out for it.²⁹

When we think of adoption as Christians we must not only think about individuals or individual families. This is sometimes an overall fault within the evangelical church. God has called the church as individuals and collectively "Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17).

All our orphan care and adoption efforts ought to be done as God's community (the church) on mission in this world by the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot care for the fatherless as effectively alone as we can in community. We can do more for God's glory and the good of the fatherless as the body of Christ, with all its parts working and serving in the power of the Spirit, together.³⁰

Adoption and Abortion

There are two major categories of children in which adoption is a part of a holistic solution: children who are in the world and need parents, and unborn children whose biological parents are unwilling or unable to care for them. Adoption is a viable alternative to abortion. The church, through adoption, has an opportunity to do more than just oppose abortion. Christian author and ministry leader, Randy Alcorn challenges the church with the following:

There are many different things churches can do. Visibility is huge. Adoption can't simply be spoken about from the platform; people have to see with their eyes the difference it makes in people's lives. In our church, the way adoption was highly valued was through four of our pastors who chose over the years to adopt. In one case, we had a pastor who, along with his wife, adopted three

²⁹ Cruver, 2

³⁰ Jason Kovacs, *Glorifying the Father of the Fatherless: How Families Can Change the World for the Glory of God and the Good of Orphans*. Together For adoption e-book. 18

children. Because the pastor and the children were visible, they would talk about the reasons for adoption. Our children's pastor and his wife ended up adopting nineteen children, including a number of special needs children from around the world. They now run an orphanage in Mexico, and recently adopted a Down syndrome child from the orphanage.³¹

Alcorn continues below with a challenge for churches to be consistent:

Being known as pro-lifers, we want to be completely consistent with our message. If we're saying that these so-called "unwanted children" should be brought into the world, then of course we should be thinking of what we can do to care for those who need to be placed somewhere because their parents can't care for them.³²

Becoming Resourceful and Safe Places

Because church staff may be a first area of contact an adoptive parent may encounter, staff must have some level of knowledge about adoption and the journey adoptive families go through. At a minimum, churches need to be able to point people to available resources. This knowledge may prove to be helpful in pastoral counseling. Passmore correctly identified two extremes in both adoption literature and counseling practices. "Counselors need to avoid two extremes when working with adopted clients: over-pathologizing and underpathologizing. The counselor who over-pathologizes is likely to see every problem as related in some way to the adoption experience."³³ Additionally, he offers the following advice for working with the adoptive family. "The astute Christian counselor should guard against attitudes that would further marginalize clients. Indeed, the Christian counselor can help all members of the adoption triad to celebrate their strengths and recognize their priceless value as sons and daughters of the

³¹ Randy Alcorn, http://www.epm.org/artman2/publish/Adoption/Adoption_An_interview_with_Randy_Alcorn.shtml, Accessed February 6, 2010

³² Alcorn, http://www.epm.org/artman2/publish/Adoption/Adoption_An_interview_with_Randy_Alcorn.shtml accessed February 17, 2010

³³ Passmore 170

Most High.”³⁴

In a 2002 nationwide survey commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption reported that “When asked ‘where would you turn for information or advice about how to adopt,’ 52% of married couples indicated they would turn to their local church.”³⁵ While churches were viewed as good sources before adoption, “The same survey showed that post adoption people were nearly twice as likely to turn to their local bookstore (20.5%) as they were to their pastor or local church (11%) for support or help in dealing with post-adoption issues.”³⁶ The explanation for this discrepancy is that high percentage did not feel as though the church was helpful to their needs. In fact, they did not see the church as a “safe place” for their families.³⁷ Ministry leader Michael Monroe put it this way:

I believe that adoptive and foster families are making it clear – they are saying that far too often our local churches are not “safe” places for them – or at least not as “safe” as they can and should be. The unavoidable reality is that many families have responded in faith by pursuing adoption or foster care, sometimes against all odds and in the face of significant and daunting challenges. Simply put, these families have refused to “play it safe.” They’ve said “Yes!” to the lifelong journey of adoption or foster care . . . and I believe that our churches must in turn discover how to honor these responses of faith, obedience and courage by becoming communities that openly welcome, truly understand and fully embrace adoptive and foster families.³⁸

Monroe suggested that the church must do five things in order to become safe places for adoptive families: Become Missional, Become Open and Willing to Learn, Become Honest and Prepared to Get Messy, Become Willing to Change, Become Committed for the Long Haul.

³⁴ Ibid 171

³⁵ Monroe, Michael <http://tapestry.irvingbible.org/index.php?id=1558> accessed February 6, 2010

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

I would argue that what Monroe suggested for the church which seeks to become a safe place for adoptive families is good advice for any church that seeks to do ministry in the 21st century.

A missional church has been defined as “an authentic community of faith that primarily directs its ministry focus outward toward the context in which it is located and to the broader world beyond.”³⁹ But as Monroe suggests “the term also clearly emphasizes a need to become *intentional* and *focused* in communicating and living out a message of hope and love.”⁴⁰

Furthermore he adds, “Churches that are missional as it relates to adoption and foster care reach out to adoptive and foster families. They must determine to become intentional and focused about living out the heart of God for the orphan and loving and serving families who faithfully respond by adopting or fostering.”⁴¹ If the church is to be anything, she is to be missional. As we will see throughout this paper, adoption reflects God’s heart and missional purposes in the world.

If the church is going to fulfill its missional purpose in the world, it is going to have to be a learning church. The church that is willing to learn is going to be more effective in reaching out to all types of families. Additionally, the church will better enable its own people to express their own desires to be missional through adoption. Churches will need to become more educated on issues that face foster and adoptive parents. This will begin by understanding our own adoption into the family of God.

We need to be honest and be prepared to get messy. Real life ministry is messy. This is a reality of living in a fallen world. Adoptive families have had their share of disappointments and losses in the world. Monroe emphasizes, “That’s not because adoptive and foster families

³⁹ Ronald Carlson
http://www.nationalministries.org/missional_church/docs/MCT_Definition_Missional_Church.pdf.cfm. accessed March 3, 2010.

⁴⁰ <http://tapestry.irvingbible.org/index.php?id=1558> accessed February 6, 2010

⁴¹ Ibid

are any less perfect than ‘normal’ families, but rather because, in my estimation, healthy adoptive and foster families are often more open with their imperfection. In other words, adoptive and foster families are often messy.”⁴² He goes on to state the healthy worldview that can come to light. “These families are daily reminded of a condition that afflicts us all – our brokenness.”⁴³

As churches we need to become willing to change. Church life is constantly changing if we want to be missional. Reaching out and partnering with adoptive and foster families will cause change in how we do ministry. Monroe asks if churches are willing to change to meet particular needs, such as insuring the childcare at church meets the minimum standards required by foster care standards.

Both churches and adoptive parents must be committed for the long haul. Adoption is not easy and doesn’t end. It is a lifetime commitment. Monroe concludes his thoughts on churches becoming “safe places” with the following.

If our churches are willing to walk this journey of faith alongside the families that God has formed and transformed through the miracle of adoption and foster care . . . I believe that not only will they become the “safest place on earth” for these daring families, but I believe they will experience the privilege of being part of something truly remarkable. They will serve as an integral part of the visible Gospel being lived out in the lives of countless adoptive and foster families, all for the glory of God.⁴⁴

Proposal

On January 15, 2004, UNICEF declared; “For children who cannot be raised by their own families, an appropriate alternative family environment should be sought in preference to institutional care, which should be used only as a last resort and as a temporary measure.”⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

UNICEF recognizes what many people and churches have come to realize. There are children in this world that for various reasons are unable to live in the homes of biological families. Long term institutional care in most cases is not in the best interest of the child. Therefore, the church must respond in a way that reflects the Father heart of God. My proposal will begin locally and hopefully move out through the Great Rivers Region of ABC/USA and eventually move with others to influence the denomination.

I want to start with what Jason Kovacs considers the most appropriate response to care for orphans and promote adoption.

The greatest thing you can do to establish a culture of adoption/orphan care in your church is to be gripped by the reality that God has adopted us as His children. The church is God's great trans-racial adoptive family. As the gospel takes root in our hearts and we recognize that adoption is central to the heart and mission of God it also becomes something we care about. We will naturally begin to reflect our vertical adoption in our horizontal efforts. This is the foundation for creating a culture that believes that every Christian is called to care for the fatherless in some way. Not everyone is called to adopt but everyone is called to do something.⁴⁶

I propose the First Baptist Church of Carthage, IL begin an orphan care and adoption ministry. The ministry will have two major components: Education and Financial Assistance. To educate, an adoption resource page will be added to our website. For further education, we will participate in National Adoption Sunday held annually in November. For firsthand experience, there will be a mission trip planned to Murrow Children's Home in Oklahoma this summer.

The financial aspect comes from an idea called One Church One Child by DCFS. This program was founded in Chicago in 1980 to help successful minority adoptions. Through this

⁴⁵ Roby, Jini L &, Stacey A.. Shaw. *The African Orphan Crisis and International Adoption*. Social Work, July 2006, Vol. 51 Issue 3, 201

⁴⁶ Together for Adoption, 2009, 26

program, the department provides funding and technical support.⁴⁷ For our purposes, I recommend that we have a fundraiser that both raises awareness of adoption and to start an adoption fund. The funds will then be available to any qualifying Christian family in our county that is seeking to adopt either foreign or domestically. Hopefully, as we assist and promote adoption, we can serve as a model for other churches.

Realistically these goals and proposal would have greater impact if they were adopted by the region and denomination. One such ministry has recently started in Pennsylvania and Delaware region, ABCOPAD. This ministry is known as Adoption for Life Ministries at the Baptist Church of Phoenixville founded by Pastor Brent Miller. The ministries vision statement is listed below.

We have a vision for adoption and orphan care ministry for our church and for the entire region! Our dream is to create a ministry that God can use to create forever families for waiting children in Phoenixville, and throughout Pennsylvania and Delaware. We dream of partnering with churches throughout ABCOPAD to make this vision for ministry a reality not only in our local church, but in churches throughout the region.⁴⁸

The Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution on adoption and orphan in June of 2009. Three major aspects of the resolution are listed below. The entire resolution can be found at their website <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1194>. Resolutions such as these are just one example of what ABC/USA can do as a greater vision for adoption emerges.

RESOLVED, That we call on each Southern Baptist family to pray for guidance as to whether God is calling them to adopt or foster a child or children; and be it further
RESOLVED, That we encourage our pastors and church leaders to preach and teach on God's concern for orphans; and be it further
RESOLVED, That we commend churches and ministries that are equipping families to provide financial and other resources to those called to adopt, through grants, matching

⁴⁷ DCFS. *One Church One Child Recruiting*. <http://www.state.il.us/dcf/docs/onechurch.shtml>. accessed March 5, 2010.

⁴⁸ Miller, Brent. *Adoption For Life Ministries at the Baptist Church of Phoenixville*. <http://www.abcopad.org/ABCOPAD%20Ministry%20Teams/Adoption%20Care%20Ministries/AdoptionforLifeMinistriesattheBaptistChurchofPhoenixville.aspx> (accessed March 5, 2010).

funds, or loans.⁴⁹

Theology of Adoption

In developing a theology of adoption, we need to begin by understanding our own adoption through Christ Jesus. From there we can develop theological bases for adoption as a response to the needs of children in the world today.

Although sometimes misunderstood, this doctrine remains an esteemed doctrine in the Christian faith. In regards to this doctrine, Dr David Garner proclaims, “I cherish adoption as a doctrine, because it reveals the unfathomable: God actually cherishes us, his children. He has revealed this love over the course of history, and ultimately and most cogently, in his Son. My adoption is secure and binding in the Sonship of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰ Trevor Burke calls adoption the “pinnacle of Pauline theology.”⁵¹ While J.I. Packer adds:

Adoption is the highest blessing of the Gospel, higher even than the gift of justification "because of the richer relationship with God that it involves." "Justification is a forensic idea, conceived in terms of law, and viewing God as judge... Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the father is greater"⁵²

The Biblical Record- Old Testament

While it is true that the word adoption does not appear in the Old Testament it is these same books that reveal God as “a father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows.” (Psalms

⁴⁹ Sothern Baptist Convention. *SBC Resolution: On Adoption And Orphan Care*. June 2009. <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1194> (accessed March 5, 2010).

⁵⁰ Garner, David. [http://files.wts.edu/uploads/images/files/Adoption%20Interview%20\(Dr.%20Garner\).pdf](http://files.wts.edu/uploads/images/files/Adoption%20Interview%20(Dr.%20Garner).pdf). Accessed February 9, 2010

⁵¹ Burke, Trevor J. *Adopted into God's Family*. (Downer's Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2006), 26

⁵² Packer, J. I. *Knowing God*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973)

68:5) It is these same books that over thirty times express God's special concern and care for orphans. In Isaiah 1:17, the people are instructed to "Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow." It actually makes sense that adoption is not mentioned in the Old Testament spiritually. In the Old Testament and in the time of Christ, "many became convinced that biological connection with Abraham sealed divine favor."⁵³ The Jews are not grafted into Christ it is the Gentiles. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner rightly states, "Adoption is the overarching Biblical image for the invitation and inclusion of Gentiles in the Judeo-Christian lineage as family of God."⁵⁴

As we come to the New Testament, this question of who is a son of Abraham makes the prodigal son story so powerful. The younger son, who was a Jew, lived like a Gentile. But, he repented and was received back as a son. But the older son actually refused what was received by the younger. The fullness of sonship. At the end of the parable, he remains outside the party.

New Testament

Our search for a biblical understanding of adoption comes to fruition in the New Testament. In fact that is the only place in the Bible where the word adoption appears and there it appears only five times. Perhaps this may be one reason why this doctrine is at times confused and possibly why it is not talked about more. Make no mistake - the above theologians are correct in their high placement of adoption.

Dan Cruver reveals a vital understanding about the five times this word is used. "If you print out all five references that contain the word adoption, you will find that they are easily

⁵³ Garner, 3

⁵⁴ Stevenson-Moessner, Jeanne. *The Spirit of Adoption*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 15

arranged chronologically without doing any violence to the text whatsoever, and they walk us along the timeline of salvation's story.”⁵⁵ The five verses are listed below

1. "In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:4b-5).
2. "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (Romans 9:4).
3. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:4-6).
4. "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:15).
5. "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the "firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23).

When the texts are viewed in the way that Cruver suggests, we have a story that begins in the predetermined plan of the Godhead. God is Father, Son and Spirit of Adoption. "God is *the Father* who places into his family as adult sons and daughters all who believe in his unique Son, Jesus Christ." "God is *the Son* who redeems slaves of sin with his blood so that henceforth they belong to the Father's family".⁵⁶

The story then moves to the Israelites whom God called out to be His firstborn (Exodus 4:22) and chosen (Deuteronomy 7:6) people. It should be noted that adoption is understood differently in Romans 9:4. This is "not that special adoption, which . . . comes through the redemption of Christ, and is received and enjoyed only by believers in him; for all that were Israelites, were not in this sense the children of God; but national adoption is here meant."⁵⁷

In the fullness of time, God sent His only begotten Son to redeem us to be His brothers and sisters. "His sonship is unique in that he is the eternal Son of God by nature; we, by

⁵⁵ Dan Cruver, Adoption in God's Story of Redemption. Together For adoption e-book. 9

⁵⁶ Peterson, 121

⁵⁷ John Gill. John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible. E-Sword. 2009

contrast, become the sons and daughters of God by adoption.”⁵⁸ He then sends His Spirit through whom we are able to cry out and call God our father. “We are adopted by faith, and we are enabled by the Spirit to believe. To combine the two: The means of adoption is Spirit-enabled faith in Christ.”⁵⁹ “What, then, is the Spirit of Adoption's ministry? It is to bring the fact of our future experience of glorification to bear upon our present internal experience so that we might increasingly long for the day when we are revealed to be the true sons of God (Romans 8:19).”⁶⁰

Lastly in the story, we await the consummation of all things and our final adoption as children of God and the redemption of our bodies. As Garner concludes:

We are the sons and daughters of God, the select children of God, because we are Spiritually (yes, the capital “S” is intentional) united to the unique Son of God. Adoption brings us before the face of the Triune God – from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4-5), in his elective grace when he chose Israel as his Son (Rom 9:4), in the historic work of Christ as messianic Son (Gal 4:4-5), in the Spirit’s work of sanctification (Rom 8:15-17), and in the consummation of the ages when Christ returns (Rom 8:22-23).⁶¹

Allen Radmacher writes, “When God places His Spirit in us, "we are not just 'adopted' (in the sense the word now conveys) but genuinely 'begotten' by God”⁶² As John Boswell further explains about how Paul's letter to the Galatians "contrasts the position of natural heir, which is no better than that of a slave, with the superior position of the adopted son." ⁶³ Boswell continues with a vital understanding about our identity in Christ and our continued humanity.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). This glorious truth does not obliterate

⁵⁸ Peterson, 122

⁵⁹ Peterson, 124

⁶⁰ Cruver, 1

⁶¹ Garner. 2

⁶² Radmacher, E. D., Allen, R. B., & House, H. W. (Eds.). (1999). *Nelson's new illustrated Bible commentary*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson. 1440

⁶³ Boswell, John. *The Kindness of Strangers*. New York: Random House. 1988, 154

our humanity. We all have a history but that history does not trump God's unmerited favor. The fact that we are "in Christ" is the first and most important fact that defines our identity. Our adoption practices ought to reflect this fact. Just as Christ has adopted us from every nation, tribe, and tongue (Rev 5:9) and therefore, having made a wise decision, ought to reflect that sort of love.⁶⁴

Although the story of the prodigal son is not typically thought of as an adoption story, it has all of the elements of salvation history from a human point of view and it reveals the Father's heart for our adoption. The story begins with a son who walks away from his father's love and relationship and travels to far off land and lives as a Gentile. When the son finally comes to his senses, he seeks to return to his father's house. But he seeks to return not as a son but a slave. In a real sense he is seeking salvation. Burke writes:

The prodigal son's thinking was, "I really messed up. When I asked for my inheritance and left with it, I dishonored my father profoundly. I've blatantly squandered and belittled his love. So, when I return, I'll return as his slave not his son. It's the right thing for me to do." The prodigal is suspicious of the father's love for him. "He certainly cannot treat me or love me any longer as a son."⁶⁵

Upon returning the son confesses his wrong and asks his father to make him as a slave. The Father not only receives the son (salvation & justification) but insists that he comes home as a son (adoption). "God does not only justify people and then leave them destitute with nowhere to go – he adopts them into the warmth and security of his household."⁶⁶

Our own adoption by God should cause us to reflect about how we should respond to the needs in the world. As "an adopted son was a son deliberately chosen by his adoptive father to perpetuate his name and inherit his estate; he was no whit inferior in status to a son born in the ordinary course of nature, and might well enjoy the father's affection more fully and reproduce

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Dan Cruver, *The Prodigal's Suspicion and the Global Orphan Crisis*, Together For adoption e-book. 1

⁶⁶ Burke, 26

the father's character more worthily.⁶⁷

If adoption is the clear picture of God's love for us and salvation history is consummated in our adoption, then the most God reflecting way we can "look after orphans" (James 1:27 NIV) is through adoption. We have been "created in God's image and restored to that image by the redemptive work of the Son of God, we, as God's children, are privileged to emulate our Father. Imitating our Father is truly a form of worship, and the decision to adopt a child is a crisp Xerox of our Father's love for us."⁶⁸ As Garner clearly and rightly expresses:

If any group of people should be inclined to visit orphans in their affliction in order that they might remove them from it, it should be those in whose hearts the Spirit has placed the "Abba! Father!" cry. It should be those who, through their adoption as sons in Christ, have the sure hope of final and full deliverance from "the sufferings of this present time" (Romans 8:18).⁶⁹

Tradition

In looking to tradition, I want to look briefly at how the church has understood the doctrine of adoption. Secondly, I want to look at how ABC/USA traditionally has approached the plight of orphans.

The "2nd century church father, Irenaeus, who as the first biblical theologian, views adoption as a synonym for salvation."⁷⁰ "Abraham Kuyper writes of it in connection with regeneration. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., places adoption under glorification."⁷¹ Robert Peterson notes how few theologians address the issue of adoption and how often they place it in different

⁶⁷ . FF Bruce, 1963, p.166 *The epistle of Paul to the Romans: An introduction and commentary*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.

⁶⁸ Garner, 3

⁶⁹ Cruver, 1

⁷⁰ Garner. 1

⁷¹ Ibid 121

contexts.⁷² For example, he notes that “Hodge, Berkhof and Hoekema all treat it as a subset of justification.”⁷³

Peterson has properly asked and answered the question: “Why the confusion? There are at least two reasons. First, theologians differ as to where to place adoption in relation to other doctrines because they regard it as an afterthought, hardly deserving attention in its own right.”⁷⁴

“Burke agrees that “adoption ought not be subsumed under justification or mistaken for justification.”⁷⁵

Does Paul teach that justification and adoption are exactly the same? No. Rather, the doctrines overlap. Sinners are both adopted and justified by God's grace through faith in God's Son. In addition, justification and adoption are both legal metaphors. Nevertheless, that is where the two diverge, because they occur in different places in the court. Justification takes place in the criminal division of the court while adoption occurs in family court. Of his free grace God the Judge declares righteous condemned sinners, when they trust Jesus as Lord and Savior. Of his free grace God the Father places into his family all slaves of sin who trust his unique Son as their Redeemer.⁷⁶

God could have saved his people from sin without adoption. The amazement of the Jewish Christians was not that God could save Gentiles. The amazement is that they were co-heirs. The amazement is that through faith people were descendants of Abraham. God created one family out of many. Adoption is an addition to salvation.

This becomes very important as we look to the plight of children in the world and adoption. It is one thing to give money for food and clothing. It is quite another to bring a child into your home as your own child and make that child an heir. “Christian ethics suggests that

⁷² Peterson, Robert A. Toward A Systematic Theology Of Adoption , Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review 27/2 (Fall 2001), 121

⁷³ Ibid, 121

⁷⁴ Ibid 121

⁷⁵ Burke, 24

⁷⁶ Peterson, 124

even if blood is thicker than water, it is not thicker than *agape*, which informs the altruistic imagination underlying the historical Christian theology of relinquishment and adoption.”⁷⁷

American Baptists, like many other Christian groups and denominations, have for many years responded with love and care for some the most vulnerable in our world through the founding of orphanages. For example, American Baptist missions in Alaska began at Kodiak Baptist Orphanage in 1893. Hudleson Baptist Children’s was “founded in 1903 as a private facility for orphaned and needy children and has operated in affiliation with the American Baptist Church since 1911.”⁷⁸ Additionally, homes such as Murrow Children Home for Native Americans, along with Central Baptist Children Home, have been opened in the mid-west to serve not only orphans but other children with various life struggles.

Some of the changes to these children’s homes reflect the cultural and social science changes. In more recent years, great efforts have been made to keep families together, move children to foster homes rather than orphanages and allow willing families to adopt when these other options are no longer available. “It is clear that American adoption statutes emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century on the wave of Protestant reform movements in order to provide for the welfare of dependent children as an alternative to pitiful almshouses.”⁷⁹ According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, “Approximately 120,000 children are adopted each year in the United States. Children with physical, developmental, or emotional handicaps who were once considered unadoptable are now being adopted (“special needs adoptions”). Adoption helps many of these children to grow up in permanent families rather

⁷⁷ Stephen G. Post Adoption Theologically Considered *Journal of Religious Ethics* (1997), 151

⁷⁸ <http://www.state.il.us/court/opinions/appellatecourt/2002/5thdistrict/august/html/5010057.htm>. accessed March 5, 2010

⁷⁹ Ibid, 151

than in foster homes or institutions.”⁸⁰

As of yet, there does not seem to be any unified effort within ABC/USA to further promote adoption as a part of a holistic solution and a theological answer to the needs of children in the world.

Reason

For the reason aspect of the theological model, I will turn to the social sciences.

A working definition for the nuclear family is a social subsystem within society in which there is interdependence, intergenerational relationship, and where the members' lives are inexorably intertwined. Families are intended to be a gift from God where there resides love, mercy, forgiveness, and full rights of inheritance.⁸¹

Lily Fairchilde is quoted as saying, “Deep down even the most hardened criminal is starving for the same thing that motivates the innocent baby: Love and acceptance.”⁸² That really seems to be the heart of things. There are innocent and sometimes not so innocent young people in the world that are looking for love and acceptance. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner writes, “We crave connectedness. We want to belong. We want to be ‘at home’ somewhere with someone. We desire to be known.”⁸³ Andrea O’Reilly writes,

Before the child can *love* herself, she must experience herself being loved and learn that she is indeed valuable, and deserving of affection. Children who are orphaned, abandoned, or denied nurturant mothering are psychologically wounded as adults. Never having been loved by their mothers, the unmothered children never learn how to *love* themselves.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry . *The Adopted Child*. http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/the_adopted_child . accessed March 5, 2010

⁸¹ Fraser, 76

⁸² *Lily Fairchilde quotes*. http://thinkexist.com/quotes/lily_fairchilde/ accessed March 6, 2010

⁸³ Stevenson-Moessner, Jeanne. *The Spirit of Adoption*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 1

⁸⁴ O’Reilly 1996

Dr Ross Campbell believes that what children need is unconditional love. He defines this as “loving a child no matter what. No matter what his assets, liabilities, handicaps. No matter what the child looks like. No matter what we expect him to be and most difficult, no matter how he acts.”⁸⁵ Campbell suggests that “only that type of love relationship can assure a child’s growth to his full and total potential. Only this foundation of unconditional love can assure prevention of problems such as feelings of resentment, being unloved, guilt, fear, insecurity.”⁸⁶ Ronald P. Ronhner, adds that children, “regardless of differences in race, ethnicity, gender, or culture— tend to respond in essentially the same way when they experience themselves to be loved or unloved by their parents.”⁸⁷

Experience

I will use a few sources to pull experiences into the theological equation. My experience comes from being an adoptive father, a Christian, and one who was adopted by my step-father at a young age.

Fraser writes that, “During adolescence, adoptees often struggle inwardly with the longing to search for their birth parents. This desire is usually prompted more out of curiosity than anything else, as well as the need to bring some closure to their search for personal identity.”⁸⁸ He continues with, “Adoptees desiring to search for birth parents ordinarily want to

⁸⁵ Campbell, Ross. *How to Really Love Your Child*. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977), 30

⁸⁶ Campbell, 29

⁸⁷ Ronhner, Ronald P. "Father Love and Child Development: History and Current Evidence." *Current Directions In Psychological Science* (7, no. 5 1998), 157

⁸⁸ Fraser, 73

do so to answer identity questions about themselves and not to replace the adoptive parents.”⁸⁹

To some degree, as one who was adopted, I can relate to this desire to search and know answers. For me it was more of a personal desire to know more about my biological heritage than anything. I met my biological father at the age of 19. I did not want to replace the person I grew up calling dad. I was not old enough to remember any of the adoption process. I do know that being adopted gave my brother and me a sense of belonging. My brother and I lived with our mother, adopted father, and two sisters that came from that marriage. Others in similar situations have reported that they did not feel the same or think they were treated like other siblings that were biological. Right or wrong, we did not feel that way.

As an adoptive father, I did have some initial fears (during the early pre-adoption stages) that I would not be able to love my adopted daughter as much as my biological children. Those fears moved away quickly as God gave me an immediate love and compassion for Melinda. Just like all of our children, she is the same, but different. At this age, she is a little young to seek out some of the deeper questions of her background. We shall see what the future holds and walk with her through it. We know parents that have blended families with step-children. The parents identify the children as either “his” or “her” child. My wife and I have decided all of ours are God’s.

Conclusion

One of the issues that has arisen across the board is identity. From the Bible, the question was: Who are the children of Abraham? From tradition and reason, the question remains: Who am I in this world? From experience, it becomes: What is my role and again who am I?

⁸⁹ Ibid 74

The beauty of our adoption in Christ is that we are all one in him. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) Garner connects this back to Adam.

First, because all of us are descendants of Adam, we are actually all one race. Language, cultural, or ethnic distinctions do not trump the central truth of our common heritage.”With this in mind, trans-ethnic adoption is reflective of the heart of God, who has set aside for himself people from every tribe, tongue and nation (Acts 2; Rev 5-6). From the promise to Abraham (Gen 12), to the commission of Jesus (Mt 28:18-20), to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), and then to the consummation of God’s purposes (Rev 4-7), we discover that God’s people are extraordinarily diverse.”⁹⁰

While I agree with Garner that we are one race that traces back to Adam, I think Christ is really the connecting point because He transcends all social and ethnic barriers that have been constructed. The theology of adoption tells us that it is not our biological heritage that gives us sonship with God. We are linked through common faith in Christ Jesus, who enabled us to become children of God. Therefore, as he states, we do reflect the heart of God in trans-ethnic adoption.

Foskett takes a slightly different viewpoint on things from Garner as she writes:

Thus Paul's use of adoption imagery erases neither ethnicity nor race nor other sources of identity. Keeping to the central theme of Romans ("For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek," Rom 1:16), Paul's allusions to adoption support his notion that identity is a source of distinction but not of redemption or exclusive privilege.⁹¹

I think she is correct that Paul’s use of adoption doesn’t erase these other sources of identity. Galatians 3:28 doesn’t mean that people’s biological heritage has changed. In our own adoption, we remain biologically related to Adam’s gene pool. But, we have become children of

⁹⁰ Garner, 3

⁹¹ Foskett, Mary F. "The Accidents Of Being And The Politics Of Identity: Biblical Images Of Adoption And Asian Adoptees In America." (*Semia* 90-91 2002), 142

God and brothers and sisters with Christ. In the same way, my daughter will always be of Guatemalan descent. Yet my children are one. They are all equally my children and equal heirs.

All sources confirm that people need to experience love and acceptance. That is what Christ did for us. Romans 5:8 tells us, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” In the Spirit of God’s love and His adoption, His people must show that same love to those that are in desperate need. Scripture, experience, tradition, and the social science point to both the need and the dangers of not receiving love.

Lastly, beginning with the Scriptures, we see that God functions in community to assure our adoption. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all participate. Tradition affirms this action of the Triune God. Both experience and the social sciences affirm that children need loving families. The idea of community flows throughout adoption. The community that Christ has left on the earth to join Him in His missional purposes in the world is the church. The church in the Spirit of adoption must join with the Father heart of God and care for the world’s orphans in the best manner in which we can.

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