OUR ADOPTION BY GOD
God’s Plan from Eternity Past:
How it relates to theology and church practice

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But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

Galatians 4:4-7 (NASB)

I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you.

John 14:18 (NASB)

...were I asked to focus the New Testament message in three words, my proposal would be adoption through propitiation, and I do not expect ever to meet a richer or more pregnant summary of the gospel than that.

J. I. Packer¹

¹ J. I. Packer, Knowing God (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 214.
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INTRODUCTION

Adoption was thrust into the public eye of the American people in 2002 by two famous Hollywood stars. That year, Rosie O’Donnell discussed on her show the struggle to adopt that she and her partner had experienced in light of their sexual orientation, and Angelina Jolie adopted her first child from Cambodia after filming a movie there. Inspired by their example other stars, including Madonna, later adopted. What is striking here is not that celebrities adopted children but that in today’s society those best known for adopting tend to be celebrities. The question that naturally arises from this for Christians is, who should best be known for the adoption of children? Who should be best recognized for rescuing children, redeeming them from their lot in this life and making them members of their own family? The answer is simple, those who themselves have been adopted.

Our adoption in Christ is a theme that is expounded in the New Testament and its undercurrents are found throughout the entirety of Scripture. This christocentric adoption is a powerful representation of the gospel, yet it has remained underdeveloped as a theological standard of the church and has been left largely unpracticed by her. If true religion is defined as the care of widows and orphans (James 1:27), why is the Church on the whole neglecting their care? As those adopted by God into His family and redeemed from this world, we can reflect what the Father has done for us through adopting orphans and providing for their care. Tangibly living out the Gospel through adoption is an expression of “true religion” that would be undeniable to the world, God honoring, Gospel proclaiming and ultimately God glorifying.

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Theologians in the past have hinted at the importance of theological christocentric adoption, but its development for contemplation and action in the life of the Church has been lacking. The purpose of any theological discourse should be practical application, not a mere exercise of the intellect without ramifications to our personal and Church lives. We should not forget that theology is “the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life.”¹ John Calvin, in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, does not devote a chapter to the theology of adoption, yet its understanding underpins much of his thinking so much so that he is called “the theologian of adoption.”² The Westminster Confession addressed adoption in the twelfth chapter but the effect on the Church in practice has been wanting.³ Other theologians and church creeds have mentioned adoption, but it has not been significantly developed theologically and thus its application to the life of the Church has also been wanting.

In this work, I will expound the Doctrine of Adoption and show that our adoption into the family of God was His plan for His people before the foundation of the world and that this plan spans the entirety of the Bible. I will begin this survey by a review of the social practices of adoption in the ancient world and how this relates to the theological development of adoption in the Bible, and particularly in Paul’s writing. I will review this theological development from a combined redemptive-historical and systematic perspective in order to illuminate how essential adoption is to Pauline theology and consequently all of Scripture. Next I will summarize the churches’ historical development of the Doctrine of Adoption and finish this survey with a

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³ The Westminster Confession of Faith is a confessional document drawn up by the Westminster Assembly in 1646 and adhered closely to the Calvinist Tradition of the time. It has had a large influence on the Presbyterian Church worldwide.
review of thoughts from John Calvin. Finally I will discuss the practical implications of understanding theologically our adoption by the Father. The main purpose of this thesis is to show how theological adoption magnifies our understanding of scripture in its entirety and how the Church practicing sociological adoption in the world further mirrors the work that the Father did for us through the Gospel before the foundation of the world. Understanding properly the Doctrine of Adoption requires some type of response by the church in the field of orphan care and orphan ministries. Our imaging in the world the work our Father did in us through our adoption into His family will proclaim to the world the Gospel in a new and fresh way that is God honoring, Gospel proclaiming and God glorifying.
CHAPTER 1
ADOPTION IN SCRIPTURE AND THE ANCIENT WORLD

As those made in the image of God and filled with the Spirit, we should be about the business of knowing God, His thoughts and ways. We have the mind of Christ and should exercise it to discern God’s council found in His Word (1 Cor. 2:16). Right thinking is a part of right living (Prov. 23:7). For this reason, we will start our survey of the doctrine of adoption with a brief overview of its occurrences in Scripture and relate it to the corresponding social practices of the time.

Theologically, adoption is first introduced to us by Paul in the New Testament (Gal. 4:4-6, Eph. 1:4-6, Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4). In Romans, Paul tells his readers that they have been rescued from the bondage of slavery and have been adopted into the family of God with all its rights and privileges. The readers learned they could cry out to God as Abba Father just as Jesus had done in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). Paul shows that God adopted Israel as His son during the exodus, and in Ephesians he further shows that the adoption of Gentiles as sons goes back to the predestination of God that occurred before the foundation of the world. I will delve into this deeper in the following chapters. These references are the starting point of our understanding of the depth of God’s redemptive plan to make us sons which spans the entirety of Scripture.

Adoption in the Old Testament and Ancient Near East

In Ancient Near Eastern times, adoption did occur, though it was not (to our knowledge) codified clearly in a particular legal system. In this era adoption was solely for the purpose of maintaining one’s family line. Its practice in this culture existed informally as an adoption

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formula. The patriarch of a family could claim a child as his own and place him as the heir if a biological one was not living. This patriarch would claim the potential adoptee as their own, promise them an inheritance and vow parental discipline when necessary. The adoptee was provided an inheritance, safety, a family name and discipline in return for carrying on the family name and providing a proper burial for the parent. At times, adults would be adopted after the death of the head of a household. In this case, after proving their ability and potential to continue the family line, they could be adopted legally. They would receive a new family name that would further represent their change of family status and social position.1,2 This privilege could as well be extended to a household servant or slave if no heir was born into the family. An interesting caveat to the arrangement above is that if an heir were to be born in the household after the adoption, then the adoptee would relinquish their inheritance rights.3 This adoption formula outlined above comes from archeological evident uncovered from the recently discovered Nuzu tablets.4

The above is exemplified in a story found in Genesis 15. Eliazer was a slave born into Abraham’s house and was to be the heir unless Abraham and Sarah had a child. If a son were born, then he would replace Eliazer as the rightful heir. Several other similar examples of individuals being brought into a family through naming include Moses, Ephraim and Manasseh. In the second chapter of Exodus Moses is brought into Pharaoh’s household, given his name by Pharaoh’s daughter and then raised up in the house as a potential heir. We encounter an intra-family adoption in Genesis when Jacob takes parental authority over Ephraim and Manasseh,

3 Ibid., 234.
makes them his sons and promises each one of them an inheritance equal to that of his natural born sons. Jacob formalizes it by saying “your two sons . . . are mine” (Gen. 48:5). These are other Old Testament examples of claiming a child and thus incorporating them into a new family via an established adoption formula.¹

The first explicit divine example of adoption occurs in Exodus 4:22-23. Here God calls Moses to go to Pharaoh and deliver His people out of Egypt. What is striking in this passage is God’s passion in defending His “firstborn” son. “Israel is my son, by firstborn son. So I said to you ‘Let my son go that he may serve me,’ but you have refused to let him go Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.” God claims the Israelites as His own and immediately starts the process of rescuing and redeeming them from slavery. From the beginning God shows His intent and how seriously He takes His plan of redeeming and bringing His people out of Egypt and to Himself at Mt. Sinai. There is no question that He will make it happen and even the most powerful king in the world at the time can’t stand in His way.

God directly applies this adoption formula when He adopts David’s son Solomon in 2 Samuel 7:12-15. Here God promises David that He will be a father to David’s son and establish his throne forever. God adopting Solomon guarantees David’s family line and He promises His steadfast love will never leave him. God will give him an inheritance, discipline him if needed and even renames him Jedidiah, which means loved of God (2 Samuel 12:25).

In Hosea 11:1-9 the theme of Israel as the son of God is developed further. God shows His unwillingness to abandon His son. God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, yet they abandoned God, so He disciplines them for their disobedience. Here there is an implicit divine refusal to abandon the Israelites even though they have abandoned their Father. A similar theme

is expounded in Jeremiah 3:14-19. Here Israel is referred to as God’s sons and He calls them back from their rebellious ways to follow Him anew. Discipline is again part of the process to get His sons to return. This language found in these prophets reminds God’s people of His initial proclamation in Deuteronomy 7:6-8 and 14:1-2 that they were His people. God claims Israel as His own, uses the language of sonship in reference to Israel and encourages obedience through discipline.

Adoption in the New Testament and 1st Century Roman World

In the Hellenistic world, similar to the Ancient Near East, adoption’s primary purpose was the maintenance of a family line. One of the marks of an Old Testament adoption formula is the claiming of a child through naming which occurs over and over in scripture. Moses is named by his new mother, Solomon is renamed by God and Israel (Jacob) is renamed by God, to list a few. We can trace this into the New Testament as well. Joseph being a righteous man was about to put Mary away secretly when he discovered she was pregnant and the child was not his (Matt. 1:20-25). However, he was instructed by an angel of the Lord to take Mary as his wife and to name the child Jesus. Jesus will thus be a part of the Davidic line. Through this earthly adoption by Joseph, Jesus can claim to be both Son of David through Joseph and Son of God through the holy conception in Mary’s womb. This is expressed in the genealogy in Matthew chapter 1. Jesus’ lineage goes through Joseph to David and Abraham, not through Mary. Paul capitalizes on this when he writes of Jesus being descended through David according to the flesh and Son of God with power (Rom. 1:1-6). Paul is not referring to Jesus’ conception since He was conceived

2 Ibid., 386-387.
of the Holy Spirit but is referring to his descent through Joseph (Mat. 1:20). This shows that Jesus’ adoption by Joseph had far reaching importance theologically to Paul.¹

The last place in scripture that we encounter God’s renaming people is in Revelation 2:17 and 3:12. Here He renames those who overcome with a name only God knows and he who receives it. I do not have space here to develop this but only mention it to show that the God’s claiming of a people, renaming them and placing them in His house occurs at the end of the Scriptures as well. I will later develop adoption in Paul’s theology and how he shows that this was God’s plan from the beginning.

Adoption in the Greco-Roman world of the first Century was codified in Roman law as contrasted to the adoption formula of the Ancient Near East discussed above.² For this reason we have a clearer understanding of its operation and how it affected the society of the time. In Roman law, just as in the ANE, adoption was for the purpose of family succession and the maintenance of the family line, it was not for the adoptee. The adoptee was taken out of his previous social state (e.g., slavery, servant hood) and placed in his new family and with his new paterfamilias.³ He would start a new life with all of his former debts cancelled by being paid for by his new family. The paterfamilias would now be responsible for all the adoptee’s property, debt, or acquisitions; have the right of discipline; and control the adoptee’s relationships. At the same time, the paterfamilias is liable for the actions of the adoptee and owes the reciprocal duties of support and maintenance.⁴ The adoptee would perpetuate the family name by taking it

¹ There is debate as to the significance of the two differing lineages of Jesus found in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. The majority view is that Matthew reflects the lineage of Joseph and Luke that of Mary. The significance to our discussion is that the lineage through Joseph is effected through adoption
³ The paterfamilias was the family head that held family authority and legal standing over all in his family.
as his own. The relationships formed through adoption only applied to the males and the family authority or *potestas* only passed through males. So for example, when Julius adopted Caius, Julius was his legal father, but Julius’s wife was not his legal mother. The obvious social effect of this was that the majority of adoptees were males.\(^1\)

Adoption also had a legendary place in Roman society and a pervasive place in its psyche—Rome was founded on it. Its founders, Romulus and Remus, were purportedly abandoned orphans that were taken in and mothered by a she-wolf. A Roman entering the forum in Rome in the 3\(^{rd}\) century B.C. would be reminded of this when they saw the statue there of the she-wolf suckling Rome’s founders.\(^2\)

I have repeatedly used the term male instead of child or infant for an important reason. In Roman practice usually a young man who had proven his worth and valor as a successor was chosen as the adoptee. This individual did not have to be from the same family and could come from outside of it. Roman culture did not possess the concept that one’s genetic material must be maintained and propagated as we do today. Infants had yet to prove themselves and many times would die before reaching adolescence. So adopting an infant was a risky business for the family. Also the *patria potestas*, or family authority, was only passed down through males so adoption of a female was not desirable. The best known historical example of Roman adoption is that of Octavius by Julius Caesar posthumously by decree in his will. Octavius was nineteen years old at the time of his adoption.\(^3\),\(^4\)

Despite the fact that adoption in the ancient world was primarily motivated by the needs of the adoptive family (i.e. maintaining the family name or lineage), both the Old and New

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3 Ibid., 383.
Testament address the needs of orphans, though the concept is not always directly associated with adoption as it is more commonly conceived today. Orphan care is a contemporary term that spans all aspects of care and provision for the fatherless. Orphans were a part of the ancient societies of the Old Testament and 1st century A.D. War, famine, disease and the like made the orphan a common part of society. God made sure the Israelites were reminded of and did not forget their former state as an enslaved people in Egypt. They were commanded to pay special heed to widows and orphans. This is shown in Exodus 22:22-24:

“You shall not afflict any widow or orphan at all. If you afflict him at all and he cries out to me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”

This group has God’s ear and He promises to hear their cries. In the passage above we read that those who turn their backs on this group can expect an especially severe judgment. There is no command to build orphanages; the care for the orphan is the responsibility of the covenant community. This command extended even to how the land was harvested. During the annual harvest, the Israelites were commanded not to go back and get the sheaves of grain left behind. They were to pick the grape vines only once and not return a second time. The olive trees were to be beaten only once. All of the leftover was specifically for the widow, orphan and alien who did not have formal care or standing in the community (Deut 24:17, 19-21). Even a special tax was levied on the people for their support with the expectation that obeying this command would bring blessing on the people of God (Duet. 26:12-15).

The reasons for such commands are theological. They are derived from God’s divine attributes of holiness and justice. God is the surrogate father and defender of the orphan and stranger. He reminds the Israelites of their former state as slaves prior to deliverance from Egypt. God delivered Israel and made the nation His son; He made the enslaved nation of Israel His
own. God also is a father to the fatherless. Therefore, the Israelites are to care for the orphan here as God cares for Israel. He promises blessings to those who take care of His children and swift judgment and destruction to those who do not care for them (Ps. 10:14, 18; Jer. 49:11; Hos. 14:3; Deut 27:19).

Adoption is the process of taking someone who is fatherless and making them one’s child, thus giving them a father and a family. Adoption occurred in the Old Testament times as well as in the New Testament times. God provided a biblical framework for the Israelites to care for the fatherless that was founded on their previous identity as a slave in Egypt and God’s identity as a father to the fatherless. This altered the social fabric of Israelite society by placing a mandate on them to care for the orphan and widow. This occurred in the context of societies that practiced adoption for the purposes of familial propagation. God held the Israelites to a different standard. They were to care for orphans because God delivered them out of slavery and He remained the Father of the fatherless. This changed the social structure of Israelite society and how all other members of society banded together to care for the widow and orphan.

Significance to the 1st Century Church

This was the context in the 1st century A.D. in which Paul expounded the doctrine of adoption. The new covenant community of the church in the 1st century initially was founded in Jewish synagogues within the context of the Graeco-Roman world. Paul, from a legalistic Jewish heritage, was speaking to a Church in a Graeco-Roman world about the new believers’ identity as children of the Living God. Their new faith made them children of God through adoption. Paul expands in his epistles the depth of what it meant to be a child of God and how this heavenly adoption of believers forever changes our relationships on earth and in heaven. The

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Gospel becomes more scandalous as we understand more fully and in a more profound way what the reality of our new position in God’s family truly means and how it affects our relationships with the world, other believers and God Himself.

So we encounter in the New Testament a new type of divinely ordered family. Unlike the well-defined family of the Greco-Roman world we see a fluid family based on a confession of faith, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, whose familiar bond is in Christ. It is a theological picture of redemption alluded to in the Old Testament and mirrored in the familiar social structure of the day. Yet it is so much more. It includes women, not just men, gentiles and strangers from other lands. This is not an exclusive birthright only to the firstborn son but all share equally in the inheritance. In this new family all are on equal ground as adopted sons (Gal. 3:26-29, 1 Cor. 6:20).

In Roman society, adoption served as a lifeline for the maintenance of a family line that was in danger of dying out. The family unit included slaves, foster children, and adopted children, as well as a mother, father and natural born children. This unit was the fundamental bedrock of Roman society and the primary context for social, religious, political and economic security. Each family had its own cult worship that had been passed down from past generations and when a child was adopted they became part of this familiar cult worship. For this reason, the language of family and brotherhood in the early Christian communities coupled with this new Christian ‘cult’ worship was seen as an attack by Roman authorities on the bedrock of Roman society.¹

For the early Christians, their adoption into the divine family of God created a new loyalty that replaced all others. In this family, God was the paterfamilias. Although Greco-

Roman religions were accepting and syncretistic, the only area that was sacrosanct was the family order and this was now becoming disrupted by Christianity. Becoming a member of the family of God was viewed with distrust by pagans. Jesus prepared his followers for this tension. To follow Him meant leaving one’s loyalty to their family and devoting themselves to Jesus and their new eschatological family of brothers and sisters. All family ties were now subordinated to the new family ties with Christ (Matt. 10:35; 12:47-50, Luke 14:26, Mark 3:31-33). This new family had their entire cult worship reoriented through their awakening to God as Abba Father (Gal. 4:6, Rom. 8:15). This caused no small disruption in the social order in which these new believers lived.¹

We see this struggle expressed through undercurrents in Paul’s writings. In Galatians, Paul was writing to a new community of believers who had just forsaken their former pagan worship and lifestyle (Gal. 4:8-11). As we’ve discussed, this would have had a far reaching disruptive effect on their family ties. Paul addresses this as he stresses their new sense of family and belonging and tells of his own experience of leaving his old family for the new family of believers (Gal. 1:13-16; 6:10). Paul emphasizes God as the divine paterfamilias whom we are enabled to call “Abba Father” (Gal 1:1-4; 4:6). Under the old economy, only Israel had the right to claim to be the son of God but under the new one, all who trust in Jesus are incorporated into the family as sons of God (Ex. 4:22, Deut. 14:1-2, Is. 1:2-4, Hos. 1:10, Gal 3:6; 2:20; 4:5). In Galatians chapter four, Paul shows theologically the adoption of the Gentiles, which started with the household of Israel. All were under the law as heirs while still infants—in fact their condition was no different from that of a slave. Once the appointed time of guardianship was over, Israel, first on the day of Pentecost, and now the gentiles are able to enter into the full rights as sons.

Their new understanding of their new family and position in it was meant to give the Galatians consolation, hope, peace and security. Paul devotes the rest of this chapter encouraging his readers not to go back to their former family of bondage but to remain in the new one of liberty.\(^1\)

We should not underestimate the importance of what Paul is saying to the Galatians. He uses purely familiar language to address their fears and concerns while at the same time showing the glory to come in their new family. Becoming a believer in the new sect from Nazareth would have meant expulsion from Jewish families or persecution from Roman ones since the new believers were now either apostates from their Jewish faith or enemies of the Roman state. They refused to worship Caesar as lord and no longer held to a strict understanding of Jewish law and customs. The new Christian Brotherhood was one of disaffected people who had lost their natural born homes and country.\(^2\) They were pilgrims in the world not only spiritually but also socially. This unique situation in the 1\(^{st}\) century created a reliance in the church for a close association and interdependence, \textit{koinonia}\(^3\) was a necessary reality for them.

This flight from our old familiar identity and entering our new family during our pilgrimage here on earth is part of the gospel story. We were a part of a family of those who walked according to the flesh but now are in a new family of those who walk according to the Spirit. The adoption that began with Israel (Deut. 32:10) is now expanded to all families of the earth. We were all adopted in Christ and He is not ashamed to calls us brothers (Heb. 2:11). This change in status from an earthly to a heavenly family had a disruptive effect in the lives and familiar social structure of the believers that Paul was writing to and it still does to this day.

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\(^2\) Russell Moore, \textit{Adopted for Life} (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2009), 51-55.
\(^3\) \textit{Koinonia} is a Greek word translated ‘fellowship’ in English and is an important concept in Pauline theology.
An important contrast to mention here is that between God and the cultures into which He condescended. In both the Ancient Near East (ANE) and Greco-Roman world adoption was primarily for the adopting family and any benefit for the adoptee was secondary. What God does is a radical departure from the practices of these cultures. The Father plans the adoption of Israel first and finally the nations at an immense expense to Himself and His only begotten Son.

Because God is the ultimate ground of all being and existence and is eternally self-sufficient, He has no need of bringing more into relationship with the Holy Trinity. Yet because of who He is He binds Himself to Abraham (Genesis 15:6-21) in a covenant that cannot be broken and which ultimately is fulfilled only through the sacrifice of His own Son (Luke 24:25-27). God’s desire is to make the fatherless His sons solely for their benefit. His divine plan starts with Israel but with a view to include all nations. This scandalous selfless act of God is in opposition to the practices of the world in which He enters. As we come to a more complete understanding of our adoption into the family of God the result is that the Gospel becomes more glorious, grace becomes more gracious and all to the glory of God. Let us now consider the doctrine of adoption.
CHAPTER 2

A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE DOCTRINE OF ADOPTION

I’ve shown previously that familial adoption is not a uniquely Pauline idea, but occurs throughout Scripture. However, Paul does expound it in such a way that it becomes an integral part of the *historia salutis*, or God’s history of salvation. The New Testament uses familiar terms to describe our new family in Christ: God as Father, Jesus as Elder Brother and each other as brothers and sisters. An important key to apprehending this is that Jesus is the only begotten Son of the Father (John 3:16-19); the rest of us are sons through adoption (Rom. 8:15).

The conviction that we can speak to the Maker of the Universe in such an intimate term as Father is at the heart of the Christian faith. (1 Jo 3:1-2). The fundamental way for a Christian to think of themselves is in terms of being a child of God. God is our Father. A Christian’s self-image always begins with God and a knowledge of who He is. Then we understand our relationship to Him as our Father, which results in our seeing other believers in a relational way as well. They are sons and daughters of the Most High and my brothers and sisters as well. In this way we discover our deepest roots. This however is not the common way Christians think of themselves. We tend to think in more forensic terms of the order of salvation, or *ordo salutis*: a distinct series of connected events that describe our salvation experience, namely regeneration, faith, repentance, sanctification, perseverance and glorification. Yet the New Testament explicitly uses familiar terms to describe our new status, not legal terms. In Galatians 3:26-4:7, Paul reviews the history of our family starting with Abraham and concluding with our inclusion into our new family. In Ephesians 1:3-6, we learn that God’s purpose before time began was to create a family through adoption for the purpose of showing His glory. We learn in the New
Testament that Jesus entered the world for the specific purpose of being made like His brothers so that He could be the firstborn in a family of many (Heb. 2:17, Rom 8:29).

In fact, this is such an important process that it has been the work of the Trinity from before the beginning of time as part of God’s elected decrees (Eph. 1:3-6). The Son came to make us brothers and sisters, the Spirit was sent to make us aware of our adoption and privileges and the Father predestined us to be children in the Family of God (Heb. 2:17, Rom. 8:15-29). So whether we view our Christian experience from the standpoint of God as Author or us as recipients, sonship is central to it.¹

What is required here is a reorientation of our perspective. When dealing with adoption, past authors have focused on the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) and not the *historia salutis* (history of salvation). Said another way, past authors have focused on a systematic theological understanding of adoption while ignoring its redemptive-historical implications. The oversight and underdevelopment that have resulted become more striking when we realize that although churchgoers have been exposed to the *ordo salutis* for hundreds of years, most show little understanding or interest in it. Yet the concept of God pursuing us and bringing us into His family so that we can call Him “Abba Father” at great cost to Himself and His only begotten Son brings emotive tears to us even though most have only a superficial understanding of what this means.

**The Redemptive History of Adoption**

We see the development of our adoption into God’s family through the redemptive history of God’s dealings with Israel, then Christ and finally with us. God took Jacob and his sons and formed them into a nation of people in Egypt. They became His firstborn son as a

nation (Exodus 4:22-23). God specifically calls Israel His son before bringing his people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. He then delivers them and brings them through the Red Sea as a sign of His faithfulness (Deut. 1:31, 14:1). God brings them to Mt. Sinai and gives His new son Israel His divine law. A revealing aspect of God’s law with His people is His emphasis on the care of the orphan. God has rescued His son Israel from slavery and bondage and commands his people to remember where they came from (Deut. 6:12). A large part of this remembrance is providing care for the widow and orphan.

God took a people in the bonds of slavery, delivered them with a mighty hand and claimed them as His own son. He then starts to use familial language to describe His new relationship with His new son (Ex. 4:22-23, Isa 1:2; 63:16; 64:8, Jer. 31:9). What He did for Israel He now expects mirrored in the protection and care of the orphan and widow among them. He begins this through laws directly handed to Israel from Mt. Sinai. God’s divine laws contained direct commands to protect the widow and orphan. God hears their cry (Ex. 22:23). He specifically provides food and clothing for them and gives them justice (Deut. 10:17-19). Later in Psalms we even see God call Himself their Father (Ps. 68:5). God then commands Israel to be the vehicle through which He provides for their needs and gives them justice (Deut. 24:17, 19, 26:13). Finally, at the end of Deuteronomy, a special curse is made against anyone who distorts justice for them (Deut. 27:19). The historical event of the Exodus that resulted in the deliverance of Israel and their becoming a nation was to be the foundational reason they are to defend the helpless. Israel was never to forget their former life, they were to always remember what God did for them (Lev. 26:13, Deut. 6:21). A pattern emerges in Deuteronomy. God redeemed His people Israel from bondage and made them His son. For this reason Israel is to protect the widow and orphan among them and do for them what God did for Israel.
But Israel became unfaithful and wandered from God. He pleaded with His prodigal son but to no avail—Israel rejected his birthright and turned away from God (Deut 32:20, Isa. 1:2-3, Mal. 1:6, 2:10). The story of God’s adoption of His son Israel as a nation is diverted and becomes the story of Israel’s rejection of God’s grace, choosing a different lover and eventually being rejected as a nation (Rom 9:4). The Israelites perverted justice for the orphan and stole from the widow (Isa. 1:17; 10:2). They did not fear the Lord and this was displayed in their neglect of the orphan (Mal. 3:5). God is true to His word and brings about judgment on Israel for their neglect of giving justice, writing wrongs and providing materially for the orphan (Ex. 22:22-23, Micah 6:6-8).

But this is exactly where the mystery of God hidden from the foundation of the world enters in. Israel’s rejection of God’s law results in its rejection as a nation, which is part of God’s purpose of bringing salvation to all nations (Jer. 16:19, Rom. 9:30). The eternal purpose of God becomes clearer and we see His plan to bring many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10). The corporate sonship of Israel is expanded to all nations and changes to an individual call to sonship (1 John 3:1-2). The manner in which this is enacted is through our divine adoption. For this God sends His own Son to be rejected and despised in order to bestow on us an adoption and sonship that is purely of grace and not by nature or birth.¹ And despite all the assumptions to the contrary that are out there, the idea of God’s love being so great as to make us His very sons is the last thing in the world to dawn upon us. God’s wisdom from the beginning has been as foolishness to the wise and a stumbling block to the proud and religious (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

Paul’s teaching on the doctrine of adoption can be best understood in the context of adoption in the Roman culture and its effects. This teaching reflects three things that happened

with adoption: old family ties were broken, a new family was joined and commitments were made between the two. The first step in this process is the breaking of the old familiar bonds and the cancellation of debts. As we come into God’s family, we become released from the burden of sin and guilt that held us in our previous lives (Rom 6:17-18). Our new status is a result of His love and not our worthiness. With the resurrection, Jesus becomes the first born of many brethren. The resurrection is the legal demonstration that the Son who was crucified, buried and separated from the Father is now welcomed back into fellowship with the Father and now Jesus shares His fellowship with the Father with us (Rom. 1:4-6; 6:5, Phil. 3:10, 1 Cor. 15:45-47). Our debts were nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14) at an infinite cost to Jesus. The just died for the unjust in order to bring us to the Father. Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers (Heb 2:11) but makes us holy by grace.

**Adoption in New Testament Theology**

When talking of adoption theologically, one of the first things that comes to mind is Paul’s emphasis on our change in familial status. After the Fall we became “sons of disobedience,” “children of wrath” and slaves to the prince of this world (Gal. 4:6, Rom. 8:15, Mark 14:36). Yet the doxology of Ephesians 1:3-14 shows that our calling through predestination into the family of God occurred before the foundation of the world, not just before we were created but before even the world was created. God’s predestination of us as sons is a product of His divine eternal counsel. This magnifies the blessing of our adoption to an incalculable degree. As individuals we may be motivated to give to the poor and needy out of a sudden sense of guilt and pity, but a parent makes a resolve to provide for their children before they are born. Our Heavenly Father’s divine love is magnified in that He secures our eternal

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provision before any created thing is made.\(^1\) Paul helps us understand this in his doxology through expounding on God’s efficient, material and instrumental causes for our adoption.\(^2\)

The first part of this passage explains the efficient cause of adoption: the grace of the Father. God voluntarily condescended to mankind in order to extend His love toward us even though we had voluntarily broken relationship with Him. Next, He named a family for Himself by predestining the adoption of members from the family of the devil to His own. This is the material cause and explains why Ephesians 1:4-5 is thought as the \textit{locus classicus} of predestination. The Father through Christ foresaw from eternity past those whom He would redeem through adoption into His family. The faith of the adoptee becomes the instrumental cause. Once this takes place, the child is transferred from enslavement in the house of the living dead to the household of faith, the truly living. From that time forward all the new children wait expectantly for the reunion of the family planned by the Father at the end of the age. This “reminds us that while the gospel begins with grace, its \textit{final cause is glory: our glory but ultimately the Father’s.”}\(^3\)

Everything is now made new. When we read the pages of the New Testament, we cannot help but notice the change in language that accompanies this change. Israel was God’s son, but in a corporate sense—this was not realized at the level of the individual. God’s Fatherhood to Israel was a type of what was to come. We now can individually call God “Father.” “Abba” is now our personal cry to the Father, as Jesus could cry to the Father and knew he would be heard, so too now we can cry “Abba Father” and know we are heard (Mk. 14:36, Rom. 8:15, Gal. 4:6).

\(^3\) Ibid., 67.
Galatians 4 we see that we have the Spirit because we are sons, and in Romans 8 we read that we are sons because we have the spirit. The Spirit becomes our assurance of familiar acceptance. In the Old Testament two witnesses were required for evidence to be admitted into court (Deut. 19:15, 2 Cor. 13:1). This requirement is now met—the Spirit witnesses with our spirit (not to it) that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16).

A variety of terms are used in the New Testament to describe our relationship with God: regeneration, redemption, justification, salvation, sanctification and others. Paul uniquely uses the word *huiothesia*, which is translated adoption. It is used by him five times to help convey the idea that a Christian’s sonship is dependent on “adoption” (Galatians 4:5, Romans 8:15, 23, 9:4 and Ephesians 1:5). Jesus is the only begotten Son of God; all others are through adoption. Our adoption in Christ and sonship are inseparable; however theological literature is full of expositions on sonship without adoption.¹ The Greek word *huiothesia* means “adoption as son” or “placing as a son.” In the Hellenistic period of the Graeco-Roman world there were six different words for adoption and the ideas expressed ranged from adopting truth, adopting a moral transformation to a fraudulent adoption.² These other terms were used for non-filial relationships or concepts, but it is *huiothesia* that is used to express that our adoption is as sons producing a filial relationship with the Father.³

In the Old Testament, we see that Israel’s liberation from Egyptian slavery and birth as a nation make it a son in its relationship to God (Ex. 4:22, 2 Sam. 7:23, Hos. 11:1). God’s fatherhood is displayed to the nation as a whole (Deut. 32:6, Ps. 82:6, Jer. 3:19; 31:9, Deut. 14:1; 32:19, Jer. 3:14; 4:22). In the epigraphic book Wisdom of Solomon, the concepts of sonship,

² Ibid., 134.
³ Ibid., 134.
salvation and righteousness are intertwined as well.\(^1\) This sheds light on Paul’s understanding of adoption and the influence of his Jewish heritage and legal training.

The Synoptic Gospels further enforce the Jewish influence on understanding our adoption in Christ. Jesus is repeatedly portrayed as the Son of God, which allows others to share in His Sonship (Matt. 3:17; 16:16, Luke 1:32,35; 4:41). Those who follow Jesus can as well become the Sons of God. In the Sermon on the Mount the peacemakers become the Sons of God (Matt 5:44). Jesus also answers the Sadducees question on marriage in heaven in eschatological terms and relates it to sonship. In the resurrection, those counted worthy to attain to it are called Sons of God (Luke 20:36).

Paul also models the history of salvation through adoption. Israel entered into corporate sonship at Sinai, but as a child underage (Gal. 4:1). So while he was heir to the promises of God, his condition was more like that of a servant (Rom. 4:13, Gal. 3:23). The Law served as a tutor (\textit{paidagogos}), guardian (\textit{epitropos}) and administrator (\textit{oikonomos}) until Israel was ready to receive the fullness of the inheritance (Gal. 4:1-7). During this time, the Israelites learned the basic principles of sonship preparing them for full adoption. When faith came, God’s people were no longer under a tutor and a change in the family composition occurred. Now all the children of faith become children of Abraham and thus heirs to the promises (Gal. 3:6-29; 4:1-7). This new family includes both believing Jews who have the full rights of sons, as well as believing Gentiles who have turned from their heathen gods (Gal. 3:23-28; 4:5,8). Through faith in the completed work of Christ, we become members of this family and receive the Holy Spirit of promise into our hearts as a witness or seal unto the end (Rom. 8:15-17, 2 Cor. 1:22).\(^1\)

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\(^1\) \textit{Wisdom of Solomon} 5:1-5.

This understanding changes our prayer life as well. The Spirit teaches us to pray by our coming to our God as “Abba Father” (Mark 14:36, Rom. 8:15, Gal. 4:6). Abba is a Syriac word meaning my father and Pateau is a Greek word with similar meaning. But why both terms and not just one? The Spirit is teaching us that this new family is for both Jews and Gentiles, both can call on Him.

Establishing the differences in familial language describing how we are incorporated into the family of God is crucial to a thorough theological understanding of adoption. The Apostle John speaks of the fatherhood of God and the Christian’s sonship. He emphasizes regeneration and being born again as the modes of inclusion into the family of God. Both John and Paul describe believers as the children of God (tekna theou) (Romans 8:16, Philippians 2:15, John 1:12, 1 John 3:1, 2). We encounter a filial view of the gospel with God as Father. Throughout the New Testament there are different words used to describe our filial relationship but all are used in reference to the same paternal God.

There is some debate in the theological literature as to why John has a different focus when speaking of the family of God than Paul does. The major differences in John’s language can be explained by a heresy in the church at the end of the first century A.D. The docetists (sometimes called proto-gnostics) did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God but a man on whom the spirit of Christ rested. They saw Jesus as a man on whom the Spirit of Christ fell at His baptisms and from whom the Spirit left when he was on the cross. John’s main thrust in his Gospel and Epistles is to combat this by clearly showing Jesus’ physical lineage and physical rebirth, as well as display Him as the Son of God. He only uses the term huios for Jesus himself,

3 Docetists believed Mat 27:46 actually should have said “my power my power why have you forsaken me.”
thus reserving the divine sonship for Jesus.\(^1\) John’s focus was on establishing Jesus as the only begotten divine Son of God and Christians as children of God through the new birth of the Spirit. This emphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus the Son of God from us as sons of God. John’s emphasis is on origin. Jesus is in the bosom of the Father and the only begotten (monogenes) (John 1:14-18)\(^2\). We are born again from death into life through belief in the Son.

Paul uses both tekna and huios to express the divine sonship of man. He talks of adoption into the family of God that gives us a new status and this status makes us free from slavery. John and Paul help us see both sides of the coin. John talks of birth into the family with us taking on the family likeness. Paul expounds adoption into the family with a focus on the status and freedom of the adoptee.\(^3\) The differing metaphors of adoption and new birth help us better understand the soteriological ramifications of being incorporated into the family of God. In 1 John 3:1 we read “Behold what manner of love the father has bestowed on us that we should be called the children of God.”

There is also an eschatological aspect to our understanding of adoption. Our adoption by God the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord is already accomplished, yet not fully completed. In the first part of Romans 8 and Galatians 4, adoption and sonship are expounded as present realities that point to a future inheritance. Redemption from slavery and adoption as sons become comparative ideas for the reality of our Christian experience. Yet in Romans 8:23 there is the idea that our adoption and redemption are not yet fully completed and its completion is something all creation is waiting for with baited breath. The Spirit of adoption is the inauguration

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\(^2\) Some commentators debate the meaning of monogenes but I follow here the historically accepted translation.

of our new status, but its completion is not yet. The tension between Romans 8:15-16 and 8:23 is
the eschatological tension between the "already" and "not yet." A similar tension, hope and
expectation is seen in Ephesians 1:3-14. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the
world to be adopted through Jesus Christ. Through Him we have an inheritance that is marked
with the Spirit as a pledge looking to a future completed redemption as God's own people.¹

Our new found family is one of faith and not biology (John 1:12-13). "God is the true
paterfamilias."² Those of faith are the children of God and this occurs through a divine act of
procreation in which one is born again. In speaking with Nicodemus (John 3:8), Jesus speaks of
being born from above, born of the Spirit. John refers to the Spirit as the agent of the second
birth and Paul (and possibly in Mark 1:10-11) further explains that the Spirit is the agent of
adoption. Our new life through regeneration is intrinsically bound to inclusion in the family of
God. In Galatians 4, Paul is appalled that the believers there, after escaping the bondage of sin,
would return to it. The method of rescue is adoption, brought about by God's firstborn Son. We
learn that the proof and seal of adoption is the gift of the Spirit. The language and imagery is
similar to that of God’s declaration of Jesus as the beloved Son in Mark 1:9-12 and the
subsequent proof of this being displayed through the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus. The
Spirit is evident when we cry out to our Father, Abba, just as Jesus did. This adoption carries
with it an inheritance and a new name, as we have discussed elsewhere.

As compared to the sonship of Christ, ours is dependent on regeneration and this
regeneration is received through belief that Jesus is the Son of God (John 3:3-18). As the only
begotten, Jesus has a unique oneness and relationship with the father that we are enabled to
partake in through receiving Him and being born into the family (John 1:12-13). Paul deepens

² Ibid., 388.
our understanding of the process by indentifying Christ’s sonship with ours through adoption which enables us to participate with His sonship. John emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ and Paul the uniqueness of the relationship. “Paul . . . focuses on redemption from bondage to sonship by adoption (through union with Christ) resulting in freedom for the grown-up sons and daughters of God.”

As we will discuss later, many key Eighteenth and Nineteenth century theologians either equated the doctrine of adoption with justification (i.e., Turretin) or omit any discussion about it at all (i.e., Charles Hodge, William T. Shedd), resulting in a neglect of its discussion and development. The focus of discussion became that of Adam’s status prior to the Fall and ignored Paul’s emphasis on adoption after the Fall. Paul is enthralled with the position of God’s people in Christ and emphasizes this by foreshadowing it in his description of Israel as God’s privileged and adopted nation. Abraham was given the divine promise of inheriting the world, and this was to be enacted through Christ (Gal. 3:18, Rom. 4:13). God formed the seed of Israel into a nation for the purpose of redeeming them from Egypt and thus to inaugurate them into a nation—His special people. This corresponded with Yahweh’s corporate adoption of Israel as shown in Romans 9:4. Here we see six privileges given to Israel under this arrangement: the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, the temple service and the promises. Adoption is the first privilege and precedes all others.

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Eschatological Implications

We also begin to appreciate the eschatological nature of our adoption in Christ Jesus. The doctrine of adoption looks from eternity past when it was first conceived in the mind of God to its type and shadow in God’s redemption of Israel, then sees its beginnings with the sealing of the Holy Spirit and finally to its consummation and perfection at the return of Christ. This will be done in plain view of all creation and creation even now is expectantly waiting for the revelation of the sons of God. Creation too will be redeemed and renewed when at the end of times the sons are revealed. This unveiling will herald the making of all things new (Rom. 8:14-25). We see in this passage the entire universe in travail as if it were giving birth. These birth pains contain the hope of a new life for all of creation. We too experience this tension between the already and not yet. We have received the seal or guarantee of the Spirit of our future resurrection, yet we still live in a fallen world under the pangs of sin. Paul uses the term “first fruits” (aparchen) to describe the seal of the Holy Spirit that serves as a pledge or guarantee of what is to come. This word was also used in ancient Rome for a certificate of adoption. The eschatological pledge or down payment of the Holy Spirit serves as a present guarantee, or certificate of adoption, for the future completion of what is to come. ¹ Because of the seal of the Holy Spirit whose proof of authenticity lay in the fact of the risen Lord, we can have hope and a strong consolation that in the same manner as He left, Christ will return for us and complete the adoption process and bring us into perfect communion with Him (Acts 1:11, Col. 1:5-6, 27, 2 Tim. 2:8-19, Eph. 1:13-14).

This realized eschatology also changes how we address our Father and how we experience the indwelling Holy Spirit. Most of us romanticize the phrase “Abba Father” and

think of it as something a child held by a loving father would say like “papa” or “daddy.”¹ But it is so much more than simply saying “daddy”. In Mark chapter 14, Jesus cries “Abba Father” but not the way we picture Him in movies and paintings. His cry is one of anguish so great that blood vessels burst on His forehead and He sweats drops of blood. In Hebrews 5:7, we further understand this anguish as He cried with loud cries and tears to God who could save Him from death. Jesus’ cry of “Abba” is the cry of a son about to be crucified. In Romans 8 we read about the groaning of the Spirit in the heart of believers and see that even creation groans in its expectation for the manifestation of the Sons of God. The Spirit in believers groans as well and by this we know we are a part of this orchestra of expectation. This inward groaning is also another evidence of the indwelling Spirit.

But this groaning is more than just groaning. In Romans we see that this groaning is like that of a woman in childbirth. In ancient times it was not uncommon for a woman to die in childbirth. The Bible even records times when this happened (Gen. 35:19). The groaning and cry of a woman in childbirth was a cry of uncertainty, was a living child to be born or were both mother and baby about to die? This is the kind of groan all of creation is experiencing and in a similar way it is the groaning of the Spirit in the believer. But our hope is secured by the seal of the Spirit on our hearts and we have the promise that our crucified Savior will return to redeem us from this world. He promised not to leave us as orphans but to send His Spirit, and He did.²

Our adoption is finished in the sense that the Spirit has been sent and we have been sealed (2 Cor. 1:22). But in another sense it is incomplete and we await for its completion that will occur when our bodies are redeemed at the resurrection (Rom. 8:23). In Roman civilization

¹ Some scholars debate the exact meaning of “Abba” (see James Barr), but my understanding is in line with that most commonly held today.
there were two parts to an adoption. The first was a private ceremony in which the son was purchased and his debts were paid. The second part of the adoption ceremony was a public spectacle that occurred openly before Roman officials. This is mirrored in Paul’s explanation of our adoption in Christ and its dual significance—the already and not yet. God predestined our adoption, our conformity to Christ and our future inheritance (Eph. 1:5, Rom. 8:29-30, Eph 1:11). Yet we have not entered fully into it. Our debts are paid in Christ and we recognize our new family. But our adoption has not been proclaimed publicly to the world—the world is groaning expectantly for this. The eschatological tension is heightened by this waiting.¹

Privileges of Adoption

It is important here to clarify what adoption is not—it is not son-making, but is son-placing. It is not a creative process, but a redemptive one. When we are regenerated, we receive a new life. When we are justified, we receive a new standing. Both of these occur instantaneously. In our adoption we receive a new position, but its full realization is at the return of the Lord. In the meantime we enjoy several privileges directly resulting from our adoption. First we have the witness of the Holy Spirit, known as the doctrine of assurance. The Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are now God’s children (Rom. 8:14-16). The witness of the Spirit results in our being led by the Spirit and His continual assurance of our new position reinforces the witness of our security found in scripture. The second privilege is deliverance from fear. As those no longer under the bondage of the Law that existed in the old man, we now have the Spirit of freedom and adoption (Rom. 8). The Holy Spirit indwells us and makes our awareness of Divine acceptance so real that fear is banished. The third privilege of adoption is our heirship with Christ. This privilege includes both suffering with Him and being glorified together with Him. (Rom. 8:17).

Many of us think of ourselves as servants, just as the elder brother did in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:29-31). We should reorient our thinking as those who are heirs of God through Christ (Gal. 4:1-7).¹

The fourth privilege, though it may not seem like one, is the loving discipline of Our Father in Heaven. Through discipline we are affirmed that we are true sons and at the same time we are directed to safety so that we will not be condemned as the world. God’s discipline is perfect, corrective and reforming and He only provides it to true sons (1 Cor. 11:32, Heb. 12:4-11, Rev. 3:19). The fifth privilege is that we can now call God “Abba, Father.” In Judaism during the 1st century A.D. men rarely referred to God as “Father” and certainly didn’t use the affectionate term “Abba.”² Yet we now can speak to God in the same affectionate and close way in which Jesus did (Mark 14:36, Rom. 8:15, Gal. 4:6). Lastly, we are able to enjoy God and have the liberty to offer Him our imperfect obedience and hope for its acceptance. Grace truly does become more grace.³

New Relationships

Adoption and Sonship are about a change in relationships: a change in relationship to sin, to the Church, to Christ and to the world. This emphasis on new relationships lends further insight into the nature of our adoption and Sonship. As those who are Sons of God we are to no longer sin (1 John 3:6, 9; 5:18). This change in relationship is also described in terms relating to Adam’s sin and bondage to the Law (Rom 5-6). As we share in Christ’s death, we will also share in His life and will be freed from the bonds of slavery to sin. Our relationship to the Church

changes as well. We are to love one another and walk in the light (1 John 4:7, 2:10). Our love for each other is proof that we have passed from the old (death) into the new (life) (1 John 3:14). The Church is a family and our membership in this new family has far reaching implications and privileges. Our belief and faith in Christ result in regeneration and a new relationship with our Elder Brother (1 John 5:1). This regeneration occurs through the working of the word of God and the Holy Spirit (James 1:18, 1 Pet. 1:23) and results in opening our eyes to the truth of the Gospel. Through this we further understand our new relationship to Christ and can pursue Him more deeply and completely. Additionally, our relationship to the world is changed by our overcoming it (1 John 5:4). Christ overcame the Evil One and destroyed his works (1 John 3:8, John 16:33). We share in this with Christ and through faith in Him overcome the world. “Overcoming the world is part of the definition of what it means to be a Christian in the first place.”¹

Once we become united with Christ, our genealogy is no longer found in the front pages of a dusty old family Bible, but in the Hebrews 11 in the hall of faith. Through adoption into Christ the word brother attains its fullest meaning. We are now a part of a cosmic family that lives by faith, not a family whose line will become extinct at the judgment of the last day. If our churches saw our brotherhood as primarily existing in the family of faith through adoption, would not the care of orphans to include adoption become a priority in the life of our churches? If we, like Jesus, see and know what our Father is doing, we will desire to imagine on earth what He is doing and has done in us in the Spirit. And what our Father has been doing is fighting for the estranged fatherless, making them sons and daughters. But this causes conflict, conflict within ourselves and with our old family. Because of this, conflict becomes a characteristic of

the Christian life. The Deceiver wants to win us back because he knows he has lost and his time
is short (Rev. 12:12).

Our new status as sons of God has changed how we now relate to everything. How we
related to the world, the church, each other and the forces that desire us to forget our new family
and return to our old one. Next, I would like to consider the *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation,
and reconsider the effect of the doctrine of adoption on it.

**Adoption’s Place in the Ordo Salutis**

Conceptually, adoption appears to be the most complete expression our salvation
experience. It contains the elements of redemption, justification, reconciliation and sanctification
as well as eschatology, pneumatology, the Christian life, the work of Christ and the sacraments.\(^1\)
The eschatological tension produced by our inclusion into the family of God by the seal of the
Spirit is not resolved until Christ’s return. In order to fully appreciate how intertwined adoption
is with the whole of New Testament theology, we will address its importance in relation to these
terms and ideas.

The common factor between adoption and redemption is the change of state from
bondage to freedom (Rom. 6:17-19; 8:15-23). Man appears before God in a state of bondage as a
slave in need of redemption. He is bound to the sin nature, his flesh, death, the law and false
gods (Gal. 4:8; 4:5 Rom. 6:16-20; 8:23). Man is in this state due to the break in his original
relationship with the Father forfeited in the Garden of Eden by disobeying the command of God.
The law came as a bridge to start the process of relationship restoration serving as a temporary
stop gap (Rom. 5:20; Gal. 3:19). However man still needed redemption—he was still bound to

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1 The *Ordo Salutis* or ‘order of salvation’ traditionally is used to describe the steps contained within the doctrine of
salvation.
sin by the law and the price for redemption had to be paid. This price was paid through the
pouring out of Jesus’ blood on the cross (Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 6:20). In order for a slave to become
adopted in the ancient world he first had to be purchased out of slavery, or redeemed. Similarly
we had to be redeemed first, prior to our adoption as sons. Redemption is a step towards
adoption.¹

Justification is one more sequence in the process of adoption. The price for our freedom
had to be paid and once paid, the former slave now had to be declared righteous. However, this
declaration of righteousness required what man could not do, namely fulfillment of the law (Gal.
3:10-14). God provides the way through faith. Man obtains righteousness apart from the law
through faith in the one who justifies—Christ (Rom. 3:24; 5:9; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 4:5).
Justification and redemption are inseparable and thus interrelated to adoption. The slave once
purchased (redeemed) and free is now made right (justified) with the purchaser (God).

Reconciliation describes the process of repair of the original relationship that was broken
in the Garden of Eden back to its original state. The estranged son who left the bosom of the
Father now returns home and is accepted back into fellowship with the Father.² The hostility
between God and man is ended (Rom. 5:10, Eph. 2:11-16). Without reconciliation of the
relationship, man would be unwilling and unfit to be adopted by the Father and unable to enjoy
koinonia (fellowship) within the new family. Yet man is still not holy and a holy God cannot
have communion with an unholy individual. We are still unacceptable to come into His presence
without this holiness (Lev. 11:44; 2 Cor. 6:14-18) and we are in need of sanctification.
Redemption, justification, reconciliation and sanctification are necessary in order for God to
fully save us (Titus 3:1-7, Rom. 5:1-11) but these in and of themselves do not signal our

² See The Prodigal God by Timothy Keller for a full development of this idea.
completed adoption. Full sonship is not possible unless man is saved from his perilous condition. Our regeneration is at the beginning of the process but it is not all inclusive, it is still not the restoration of the filial relationship with the Father (Rom. 5). Fellowship is required for this.¹

*Koinonia* is central to our salvation. Our ability to have fellowship with the Father and the Son is restored as well as our ability to have fellowship with each other. Fellowship is part of our transformation from the old man into the new man, which relates to our former position as slaves to sin and our new position as freedmen in Christ. Fellowship within the family is restored through the Holy Spirit and now we possess a common bond of the brotherhood with one another, as well as with the Son. Without fellowship with the Son we cannot be united to the Father (1 John 1:1-3). And without fellowship with the Son we cannot have fellowship with one another (1 John 1:6, 4:7, 4:20). Our fellowship here is also a foretaste of the eternal fellowship we will have with each other and the Holy Trinity when our adoption is completed at the return of Christ. The initial part of our adoption is now complete—we have fellowship within the family of God (1 Cor. 1:8-10, Phil. 2:1, Rom. 8:29-20, Gal. 3:22-29). Yet we still feel something wanting.

Adoption has an eschatological part that is yet to be fulfilled (Rom. 8:23-25). We have received the adoption as sons, yet it is not perfectly completed and we groan within ourselves for its completion. The Holy Spirit presently is a seal and a sign of the future completion of our adoption (Eph. 1:9-15, Eph. 3, 2 Cor. 3:17-18, Gal. 5:5, 2 Tim 4:8). Paul even refers to his own salvation at times in terms of the future (2 Tim 4:18).

At this point I’d like to look back and compare adoption with regeneration. There are some significant differences that need to be considered. Adoption is not a creative act but

regeneration is. In regeneration we are created the children of God in Christ, which is effected by being taken out of Satan’s family. This regeneration gives us new life through being born again. In adoption, the newborn children of God are authorized to take their new place as sons. This is an authoritative legal transaction which results in our family transfer and recognizes it and all the associated benefits and obligations.¹

The natural question that now arises is why adoption is necessary if regeneration already includes so much. There are several reasons. Regeneration does not confirm our position as children of God, nor does it give us a guaranteed right to an inheritance. Adoption does. As well, we do not obtain a non-contingent inheritance through regeneration, but through adoption we obtain an inheritance that is incorruptible and reserved in heaven for us (Ephesians 1:3-14). Adam’s position in the Garden of Eden gives us an example of these differences. While in his innocence, he was contingently in relationship to God based on obedience but in this relationship Adam had not been confirmed a son through adoption. So through disobedience he was able to lose relationship with the Father. Those who are adopted cannot lose their relationship through disobedience.² Praise God!

As the children of God, we are justified through faith in Christ. This is clear in Scripture. It is also clear that we must believe in Christ in order to be adopted. Our union with Christ begins in our regeneration, but its consummation occurs in justification, which achieves its full expression in our completed adoption. Said another way, our justification and adoption confirm the union with God that was begun in our regeneration. We are still aware of our rebellious and

² Ibid., 476.
sinful state after our regeneration, but have boldness to believe we possess the privileges of sons and thus can approach the living God through our assurance based in adoption and justification.¹

In the past there has been a lack of distinction in the theological differences between justification and adoption.² Are they the same, similar, or completely different concepts? They both help us understand our position to and relationship with God the Father. In justification we secure our position as subjects relating to God as judge. In adoption, we become related to God as sons and gain security from Him as our Father. Both presuppose regeneration. Justification introduces us to the society of the righteous while adoption introduces us into the family of the Righteous One. Adoption takes our relationship to the Father further by guaranteeing us heirship as sons with an inheritance.³

This may all seem like irrelevant theological gymnastics, but it serves to help us understand deeper and more thoroughly our salvation experience. Our regeneration is not just the creation of children of God. We were old creatures that were rebellious slaves and apostate children of the Devil that are now new creatures made right with our Lord and made sons of the Living God. We are now able to worship God bowing before His throne and then to arise and sit with Him at His table! No other created beings in the universe share in this experience with us. This deeper understanding helps us to more fully comprehend the scriptural language that describes our salvation experience and to apprehend that it is a work that can only be God ordained, God enacted and thus more fully God glorifying.

Adoption as a Work of the Trinity

The last theological aspect of the doctrine of adoption I would like to discuss here is that of the Trinity’s involvement. All three persons of the Godhead are involved in our coming into the family of God. According to Paul the Father elects us into the Family, the Son redeems us and the Holy Spirit seals us into the Family (Eph. 1:3-14). God’s adoption and eternal election are so closely related that Calvin at times equated them.¹ God the Father is the one, who out of love, predestines us through election to be His sons foreknowing what this will cost Him. This is the highest expression of God’s love to us.² God is love, and His sovereign love is manifested through His will. He wills to adopt us. We come to understand in 1 John 3:1 that God’s love is the prime motive behind His redemptive adoption of us. And we also learn in Ephesians 1:5 that our adoption is a part of God’s predestinated plan. There is no other cause that makes us His children than His will to make us His own.

Our adoption occurs through Christ (dia Iesou Christou in Eph. 1:5)³. Through His mediation and His redemptive sacrifice we are brought into the family of God. Adoption is through propitiation, the debt of sin had to be paid. Christ’s substitutionary atonement provides our ransom. Our new status is not a return to our pre-fall state but to a higher status as sons of God who rule and reign with Jesus and are secured in this election (Eph. 1:5, Gal. 4:4-5, Gal. 3:15-29, Rom. 8:17). Our redemptive adoption is wholly christocentric, for without His fulfilling the Father’s will there would be no justification and thus no way for our inclusion into the family. We become united with Christ and begin to share in the very relationship with the Father.

² D. M. Lloyd-Jones, God’s Ultimate Purpose—An Exposition of Ephesians 1:1 to 23 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 112.
that the Son has enjoyed from eternity past. In order for us to receive the full spiritual and legal adoption as sons, we must be united to Christ. Once united with Christ, we begin to enjoy our new state as God’s sons.¹

As previously discussed, the Holy Spirit is the principal agent in adoption. He is the one by whom we are filled that enables us to call out to the Father as Abba. He is also known to us as the “Spirit of Adoption” (Rom. 8:15). The Holy Spirit communicates to and assures us of our new status in the family of God enabling us to cry out “Abba Father.” Today we do not appreciate the intimacy of Abba and thus its significance. The first words of a child were usually mommy (*imam*) or daddy (*abba*) and these were babbled by an infant to their mother or father. As newborns we now can babble to our Father who will hear us and feed us (1 Pet. 2:2). The Holy Spirit witnesses to the reality of our adoption enabling us to intellectually, as well as emotionally, realize what has happened and can now cry out to our Father who hears us.²

Most will not appreciate the significance of the last few paragraphs. *We now share in the Trinity.* This fact is beyond any comprehension and can only result in our giving God glory and praise. It was meant for this (Eph. 1:4-14). We become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3-4). We are admitted into the fellowship of the glorious Trinity. In this way we begin our fellowship with the Father, by the Son, through the Holy Spirit that will continue throughout all eternity. It is purely God-initiated, God-centered and God-glorifying.³

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² Ibid., 165-173.
³ Ibid., 173-174.
CHAPTER 3

THE CHURCH’S HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ADOPTION AS THEOLOGY

It is hard to believe that in two thousand years of theological reflection the Church has only six confessions, which include a chapter on the doctrine of adoption. Over this time very little has been written exclusively on adoption and the silence on the subject is surprising. This lack of development is even more stunning given the fact that care of the fatherless is one of the three pillars of religion mentioned in James 1:27. In Romans and Galatians, Paul emphasizes our adoption as sons and God says of the Israelites in the Old Testament that he adopted them and made them His own. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the historical development of the doctrine of adoption and show a need for its further development in the Church.

We first see the doctrine of adoption mentioned in the body of ecclesiastical writings in the theology of Irenaeus in the 2nd century A.D. He discusses our adoption as sons in the context of the Fatherhood of God, and for this reason does not work out the implications of God as Father. Origen in the 3rd century showed an interest in the familiar themes of Scripture but it was not until Athanasius in the 4th century that a systematic study of these took place. However, once it began in the eastern church, it focused on John’s model of rebirth and not Paul’s model of adoption. Subsequently, the Johannine model became the standard for studies of our familiar relationships in Christ.¹

In the western church, St. Augustine focused on the sovereignty of God and its development. The theology of God as Father, for the most part, was passed over. Modern scholars have noted Augustine’s ideas of deification and mystical union in Christ similar to the

ideas of Athanasius, but in the millennium that followed, theology in the West centered on the sovereignty of God. This is epitomized in Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*, where a judicial view of redemption is espoused. God’s sovereignty by nature has had a legalistic development that Anselm expressed in his understanding of the infinite satisfaction of Christ. This judicial and legalistic understanding continued to be developed until the time of the Reformation. Luther, an Augustinian monk, was so influenced by this view of God that he only thought of God in terms of a judge. It wasn’t until Luther understood justification by faith alone through grace alone that he was able to get out from under the weight of the law, and later in his life it was only after he became a father himself that he started to appreciate the love and comfort that comes from knowing God as Father.

In contrast to Luther, Calvin emphasized the Fatherhood of God to such a degree that he became “*the* theologian of adoption,” according to Trumper.¹ However, in Calvin’s seminal work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he does not devote a section to the doctrine of adoption, but instead alludes to it throughout. As the primary Reformation theologian his thoughts influenced those who would follow. In *Institutes*, he asserts that the entire gospel is embraced in adoption. But since the book does not have a chapter devoted to adoption it has been believed that adoption was not that crucial to Calvin and its importance and further development has been left undone. His thinking has been largely overlooked by the Reformation minded theologians and thinkers that followed.² We will return to discuss Calvin’s thoughts a little more thoroughly after finishing this brief historical summary.

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¹ Ibid., 182.
Both Peter Martyr Vermigli, who corresponded with Calvin, and John Knox, who lived in Geneva several years while Calvin was there, speak of adoption in their writings. Knox mentioned it in relationship to predestination and Martyr’s theology resonated with its familial tone, but it was not long until Reformed theology lost a pervading sense of the doctrine of adoption.¹ Part of this had to do with the influence of Francis Turretin. Turretin equated adoption with justification, replacing the Biblical picture of a family relationship in understanding salvation and going back to a more forensic and legal one. His three volume Theologia Elentica became the standard textbook for Reformed Universities and Seminaries influencing the pastors and theologians trained there.²

During the same time period, the Westminster Divines produced their confession of faith that did include a chapter on the doctrine of adoption. The twelfth chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith states:

God guarantees the gracious gift of adoption for all those who are justified in and for the sake of His only son, Jesus Christ. Those adopted enjoy the liberties and privileges of God’s children, have His name put on them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, and are enabled to cry, Abba, Father. They are pitied, protected, provided for, and disciplined by Him as a Father. They are never cast off, however, and are sealed until the day of redemption and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation.³

This chapter places a clear emphasis on the doctrine of adoption and its importance to understanding its role for the believer. Chapters three and eighteen of this confession also mention adoption in relation God’s eternal decrees (chapter three) and assurance (chapter eighteen). However this understanding and emphasis were not carried on with future theologians.

The 19\textsuperscript{th} century Princeton Theologian Charles Hodge continued the trend of underdeveloping adoption in his Systematic Theology. He saw adoption as part of redemption and put his emphasis on redemption in his writings.\textsuperscript{1} Out of 339 references to adoption in his Systematic Theology, fewer than 20 referred to adoption in the filial sense. The Baptist Reformed Theologian A. H. Strong of the same era placed adoption under regeneration and justification.\textsuperscript{2}

Robert Candlish, another 19\textsuperscript{th} century theologian, and Robert Webb in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century both credit the influence of Turretin and his seminary texts with deemphasizing the doctrine of adoption by equating it with justification.\textsuperscript{3,4}

So why has the doctrine of adoption as a whole largely remained underemphasized and underdeveloped by the Church? There is not space here to fully develop this, but I will briefly touch on it. Historically, it appears that the theological battle of the time determines what doctrines get the most thought, energy and contemplation by the Church. In the first four centuries of the Church, the identity and essence of Jesus was the first battle line. Was He merely a man, was he a man on whom the spirit of God rested or was He indeed the God-Man? In the seventh and eighth centuries, an Adoptionist controversy raged but this one dealt with Jesus’ adoption, not ours. At the heart of this controversy was the theory that the Logos was the only begotten Son of God but the man Jesus was the son of God by adoption. This heresy may have caused a degree of hesitancy for future theologians to develop a doctrine that might be seen as associated with the Adoptionist heresy. The Reformers during their time were struggling to recover the basis of our justification while at the same time struggling for their very lives. The

\textsuperscript{2} A. H. Strong, Systematic Theology (Bellingham, Wa.: Logos Research Systems, Inc, 2004), 812, 856.
\textsuperscript{3} Robert Candlish, The Fatherhood of God. Being the First Course of the Cunningham Lectures (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1867), 238.
time following this found most theologians debating soteriology, justification and the Lord’s
Supper. Unfortunately the emphasis on the doctrine of justification resulted in a neglect of that of
adoption. The next significant distraction from expounding the doctrine of adoption came in the
1860s in the form of a familial focus on the Fatherhood of God. The classic expression of this
occurred in a debate in which Dr. Candlish refuted the stance of Dr. Crawford on the universal
Fatherhood of God.\(^1\) In this thinking, God is the Father of all and in the end will bring all into
His family.\(^2\) Robert Webb showed how this so-called New Theology in the late 1800’s through
its inappropriate understanding of the Fatherhood of God degenerated into the corollaries of the
universal childhood of sinners, the universal brotherhood of man and the solidarity of the human
race.\(^3\) This thinking reconstructed the entire doctrine of atonement by erasing the necessity for
Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice, eternal punishment and the need to punish sin.\(^4\) A recent book,
Love Wins, has reignited an interest in this idea of the Universal Fatherhood of God. Hopefully
the above examples show how previous controversies and social unrest have hindered a
comprehensive development of the doctrine of adoption.\(^5\) As well there are also examples of how
a more thorough development of the doctrine of adoption in the past could have thwarted the
development of erroneous doctrine in the church but space here does not permit this
development.\(^6\)

The resulting lack of extensive exegesis of the doctrine of adoption from the pastorate
and the seminary curriculum persisted until the 19\(^{th}\) century with the writings of Robert Candlish,

\(^1\) Robert Candlish, \textit{The Fatherhood of God. Being the First Course of the Cunningham Lectures} (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1867).
\(^4\) Ibid., 22-25.
followed by those of John Girardeau and Robert A. Webb in the 20th century. Webb, Candlish and Girardeau are the only major modern authors to develop the doctrine adoption but it still remains largely undiscovered by modern pastors and seminaries. Suffice it to say that there is a historical precedent for this trend of neglect of the doctrine of adoption.
CHAPTER 4

THE THEOLOGIAN OF ADOPTION: JOHN CALVIN

John Calvin is known as the theologian of adoption. He deals with it more completely than any theologian before him, yet in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he does not devote a chapter to it, while devoting eight chapters to justification. The reason for this was the times in which he lived. Justification by faith had had its renaissance and was being directly challenged by the Catholic Church. This onslaught had its full expression in the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Calvin therefore spent his energies developing and defending the newly rediscovered jewel. However, it is a misconception that only what Calvin valued most was given chapter headings in *Institutes*. “With the renaissance in Calvin studies, however, we are learning that the ascertaining of the importance of a doctrine for Calvin is determined not by the number of chapters allotted to its discussion but how pervasively it is referred to throughout his work.”¹

From this vantage point when reading the *Institutes* we see that adoption was far more crucial to him than previously thought.² I will briefly summarize some of his thoughts here.

John Calvin, according to J. Scott-Lidgett, made more of the Fatherhood of God than any other Reformation writers and was the first theologian since Iraneus to do so³. His familial exegesis of our relationship to God focused primarily on the Fatherhood of God while neglecting a systematic development of the familial consequences of our adoption into the family of God. Calvin saw adoption as a process in which all three persons of the Trinity were involved. The Father is the agent in adoption; the Son performs the work of atonement, securing the grounds

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² Ibid.,182-184.
for adoption, and the Holy Spirit is the spirit of adoption who functions to create in us “filial confidence” or assurance of our newly adopted state.¹ The privilege of adoption is constituted by grace as a consequence of the “free benevolence of God”.²

Calvin saw us as all the posterity of God due to our creation in the *imago Dei* but this was lost in the Fall. We became disowned as sons due to Adam’s sins but the message of the Cross is that God was redeeming us back to Himself through Christ.³⁴ Thus Calvin saw adoption as redemptive sonship. No adoption occurs outside of Christ and His work on the Cross (*Institutes* 2:6:1). Only through Christ can we with confidence address God as Father. As such adoption is the category used to describe one who is released from the law. It is the fruit of the cross that we must humbly embrace if our sonship is to be restored (*Institutes* 2:6:1). Furthermore the incarnation makes possible the atonement which then restores us to God as our Father and us as His sons. “The incarnation is itself an event upon which our adoption is founded.”⁵ He took our nature upon Himself in order to impart to us what was His, heirship of the heavenly kingdom (*Institutes* 2:2:2). His becoming the Son of Man makes us the Sons of God with Him. His taking on our mortality enables us to partake of his immortality. He took our poverty and suffering resulting in the transference of His wealth to us. “By taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us) he has clothed us with his righteousness.”⁶ Thus, redemptive sonship.

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³ Ibid., 4:17:2
⁵ Ibid., 105.
The Holy Spirit here helps with our weakness. These lofty ideas seem hard to grasp and believe yet they are true. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Adoption for this very reason. He is the witness and guarantee to us of the free and generous gift of our adoption by God (Institutes 3:1:3). Calvin believed that the assurance of salvation was the essence of saving faith. This “assurance of our sonship comes from leaning and resting upon the knowledge of the divine favor towards us as revealed in the Word.”¹ This promise of adoption is found in the Scriptures but its truth is realized through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.

The other major aspect of Calvin’s thought on adoption was from a covenantal dimension, which can be more easily understood today from redemptive-historical theological perspective. More specifically, this refers to the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan for mankind through his historical dealings with mankind. So when Calvin thinks of sonship in the Old Testament, he writes about it in New Testament terms. The covenant with Abraham is received by free adoption as sons by those who were formerly enemies (Institutes 1:10:1). The covenant with the Jews is referred to as a covenant of adoption (Institutes 3:2:22). Old Testament believers resemble slaves even though in fact they are sons. They are under guardianship until the time appointed by the Father, after which time they will be free. They were the corporate son of God and so were free, yet they did not possess that freedom until the coming of Christ.² This follows the thinking of Paul in Galatians 4 where the covenant by Hagar is a legal one and that of Sarah was evangelical. One covenant made slaves, the other free men. An inheritance is appointed for children, and since we are adopted as such, an inheritance has been ordained for us as well.³ Our future inheritance is the climax of our adoption, which includes the redemption of the body.

² Ibid., 110.
³ John Calvin, Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Roman, translated by John Owen (Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1849), 301.
without which the sacrifice and death of Christ would be in vain. The receipt of the heavenly inheritance and the redemption of the body become juxtaposed to a third and final element. All those he adopts he conforms to the image of Christ.\(^1\) This is the climax of God’s process of adoption—the image of God is renewed in us. We become conformed not to the first Adam but to the last Adam, Jesus Christ.

Another aspect of Calvin’s thought on adoption is that he viewed adoption and justification together. Adoption prior to the late 18\(^{th}\) and mid 19\(^{th}\) centuries had not been thought of as distinct from justification, but rather subordinate to it. Adoption is not a distinct locus of soteriology, but is a central core and privilege to those who are saved.\(^2\) This has been touched on previously in this paper. In Ephesians 1, Paul states that we were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless; this predestination results in adoption as sons. Furthermore, this adoption results in an inheritance. Calvin sees God’s justification freely in Ephesians 1:6 in the word “acceptance”. Our being destined to adoption further solidifies his position that equates justification and reconciliation resulting in his thought that justification and adoption may as well not be distinct.\(^3\) “Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in him conjointly are inseparable—namely, righteousness and sanctification.

Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he at the same time bestows the Spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15).\(^4\)

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The last aspect of Calvin’s thoughts on the doctrine of adoption that I’d like to discuss here are his views on adoption and the Christian life. Adoption consists of responsibilities and privileges that exist in the context of God’s family. The adoptee has responsibilities toward the Father, the family and finally the world. The first responsibility is to revere God as Father and act toward Him as sons.\(^1\) Secondly we are to show affection to our new family members and live in the reality that we now all have one Father.\(^2\) The final responsibility is to live with a loving and forgiving spirit in our relationships to unbelievers. This is the mark of out adoption to the world.\(^3\)

These responsibilities could be viewed as burdens, but the privileges of adoption make these weighty responsibilities seem light. Through adoption we have confidence of our Father’s care for us; in fact He cares so much that he even pays attention to the numbers of hairs on our head. Through adoption we become sons and have hope beyond this world in our eternal inheritance. When God reveals Himself as Father, He testifies by His very self that we are His and His mercy will never fail us. To look for help from any other source is to reproach God.\(^4\)

In this world the ideal advocate for one would be their father. What greater comfort can one have than to have the God of all comfort and Father of all mercies for our security and defense. Our relationship to our Father gives us a new perspective from which to view all the hardships in the world. We come to understand that our Father of mercies is behind all our circumstances and uses these for our maturity and perfection (Institutes 3:8:1). “This is how even Christ as the Son

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\(^2\) Ibid., 3:20:36.


of God learned obedience, and it is for the noble and ultimate purpose of conforming us to Christ’s image that our Father so proceeds with us.” (Heb. 5:2)

From this short summary, we can see that the doctrine of adoption is peppered throughout the Institutes and his other writings. Adoption was central to Calvin as seen in the connection between adoption and the Fatherhood of God, pneumatology, the covenant, justification and the community of believers. Calvin’s thought closely mirrors that of Paul and this explains his grasp of adoption. Calvin ties the two together in his commentary on the Gospel of John.

The enlightening of our minds by the Holy Spirit belongs to our renewal. So faith flows from its source, regeneration. But since by this same faith we receive Christ, who sanctifies us by His Spirit, it is called the beginning of our adoption. When the Lord breathes faith into us He regenerates us in a hidden and secret way that is unknown to us. But when faith has been given, we grasp with a lively awareness not only the grace of adoption but also newness of life and other gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Additionally in Institutes 3:3:10 we see that “the children of God (are) free through regeneration from the bondage of sin.” But in this we also see the uniqueness of adoption overlooked. Calvin mixes Pauline and Johannine terminology (regeneration verses bondage and freedom) without developing the differences. This suggests that Calvin may not have grasped the huiothesia as uniquely Pauline or that he had realized it but had not worked out a clear way to connect adoption and regeneration without blurring the distinctiveness of either. The same can be said of later Puritan writings, whether those of the WCF or of theologians such as William Ames.

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4 “In the biblical references added to the WCF, of twenty-one for the ‘Adoption’ chapter only nine come from Paul, four from the OT and eight from other NT books. It may be claimed without exaggeration that a perusal of post-Reformation reflections on adoption leads us to believe that John 1:12 is the closest rival to Galatians 4:4-5 as the locus classicus of adoption. . . In William Ames we have one such example. He lists 27 points under the heading of adoption. Of these 27 points, eight have no cross reference, six are supported by solely Pauline references . . . of the
Calvin’s autobiographical account of his conversion informs us that his theology on adoption was not a mere abstraction, but radically affected his life. He believed he had no other hope or refuge for God’s salvation other than His gracious adoption.¹ In the Institutes he asserted that the authority of the gospel rests in adoption and how it empowers our salvation (Institutes 3:25:3). “It is a pity that, for whatever reason, his layout of the Institutes does not reflect the important place the doctrine of adoption occupies in his theology. That later Calvinism failed to pick up on this is in part due to Calvin’s decision not to apportion the doctrine a section in the Institutes.”²

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¹ Life of John Calvin (Tracts, vol. 1, cxxiv [CO 21 (49):162]) as cited by Tim Trumper in “The Theological History of Adoption I: An Account,”
 CHAPTER 5
ADOPTION AND UNDERSTANDING OUR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
A Redemptive Historical Summary of the Doctrine of Adoption

Up to this point I have been developing individual aspects of the doctrine of adoption. I would like to attempt to briefly summarize these findings and then relate how they are important to our understanding of Scripture holistically and the resulting implications in the life of the church.

God's divine election from before the foundation of the world included our adoption in Christ. God condescended to man and started to display this plan by setting His heart on Israel. While the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God called them “My Son” and began the task of redeeming them to Himself. After rescuing the Israelites with a strong arm, He brought them to His Holy Mount and gave them His law. Part of this law and the rules in it were to remind the Israelites of where they had come from and their identity prior to their rescue. For this reason very specific laws were given to regulate care for the orphan or fatherless. Strong judgment was handed out if the Israelites did not care for the powerless and the weak, God identified Himself as their father.

Israel disobeyed God’s law and fell back into bondage and slavery, but God never gave up on His son. God’s divine decree was that His Only Begotten Son would come to redeem His people, but at the level of the individual and each would become partakers of the Holy Spirit, who would seal or secure them this time in their adoption, not to ever be lost again. While on earth, the Only Begotten Son made a special effort to associate with the disenfranchised and equated care for them for caring for Him. He showed the spiritual significance of mercy in parables and stories. In Matthew 18 He tells of a story in which a master forgives an unrepayable
debt and expects that servant to, in a similar fashion but to a lesser degree, forgive others. And in Matthew 25 He tells how when He returns He will judge based on how the righteous cared for the stranger.

Paul expounded the significance of our adoption in Christ and how it changes all our relationships and how we now are to interact with the world around us. James showed the practical aspect of what this meant and how care for the widow and orphan is an essential aspect of true religion. James’ call alludes to God’s call to His people to do justice and mercy. This is seen in Micah 6:8 (and other places in the Law) where God directly equates His mercy to His people with how they show mercy to the weak and helpless around them.

The underlying theme is that God has redeemed us from slavery and adopted us into His family. He has a special place in His heart for the downcast, forsaken and above all the fatherless. For this reason he structured the Law to protect this group and commanded His people to do the same. In the New Testament we discover we have been grafted into the family of God in a unique way that was hidden from the prophets of old. This adoption into the family of God heightens the law and its spiritual meaning and significance and should conversely heighten our concern for the orphan. We too once were orphans in this world and as those redeemed from the curse of the law we should mirror the act of God in our life in a tangible way through care and protection of the orphan.

We have been adopted in Christ. We have been redeemed. We have been rescued from slavery and made free in the family of God. These are historical realities of God’s moving on our behalf. The next logical step would be for us to mirror in this world what God has done for us in this life and the eternal one to come. Though it would be a poor and meagerly image of His
immeasurable work, it would show the world in a demonstrative way what the Father has done for us.

The Doctrine of Adoption and the World Around Us

Our religious experience of being brought into the family of God, with a new family, a new name and an eternal inheritance occurs through our spiritual adoption. Understanding this changes how we understand and experience our salvation and redemption. When Paul wrote Romans he knew his audience well and wanted them to understand how radical their adoption into the family of God by the faith of Abraham truly was. He was writing to a Jewish community in a Hellenistic world under Roman law. In this culture, unwanted children were routinely sold into slavery, abandoned or in some cases, poor parents might allow their child to be adopted by a wealthier couple. Roman culture placed a high value on succession and producing heirs so a childless couple would be eager to adopt. The Roman law provided that adopted child all the rights of inheritance as biological children.¹ Paul assures his readers in Romans 8 that God has not left them alone or abandoned them in their struggle in this world, but has claimed them as His very own children and inheritance. Though they are in the midst of a severe persecution and struggle they should be assured of their status as adopted children in Christ and not doubt their future inheritance as God’s beloved children. Paul uses the adoption metaphor again in Galatians 4 to reassure his readers that their status is not a lesser status than that of natural Jews, but they hold the same status in the family as those natural born.

As those adopted through Christ, we as the Romans and Galatians are in a great struggle and experience longing for that which is yet not fully complete. How can that be? In Romans chapter 7 and 8 Paul shows his readers that the suffering and longing they experience is not

proof of their separation from Him, but evidence of their belonging to Him. The indwelling Holy Spirit is at odds with the condition of the world and longs for the banishment of sin and death. As joint heirs with Christ, we expect to share in His sufferings as well as His glory. The world too is in this state of tension. It groans in expectation for the manifestation of the sons of God knowing that is will be renewed at their revelation (Rom. 8:16-24). We groan within ourselves in solidarity with creation for this manifestation. “Believers are being saved not from creation but with creation . . . . Having the Spirit does not distance believers from creation but increases the solidarity of believers with creation.” However, even as the Spirit groans within us, we have hope—this Spirit has been given us as a pledge for the life to come. It is a sign of our redemption. This seal of our adoption, though not complete, gives us hope that He who has begun a good work will complete it in the end (Phil. 1:6).

We have been sealed, the legal adoption papers have been signed, yet we do not reside with our Heavenly Father. We struggle and hurt; at times we feel abandoned, and at others we feel His love. The tension of belonging to God, yet still living in this broken world, estranged from our true home in Heaven, at times seems unbearable and incomprehensible. “Far from promising a life free of grief and pain, our adoption as God’s children means that we will share in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of God’s good purposes, for the liberation of a world in bondage” in order that it may be redeemed, justified and united with God.2

And yet we long for others to be adopted just as we are in order to one day experience the union with Christ that we so desperately long for. This is where the paradigm of spiritual adoption and its struggle meets that of natural adoption in this world. It’s moving to see the pain

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and suffering of couples struggling to adopt a child. Regardless of the setbacks, they remain steadfast in resolve in the face of what at times appear to be insurmountable obstacles and defeats. There seems to be no limit to what they will do in order to complete the adoption and make that child their own. “Is this not an apt metaphor for what God has done for us in Christ, expending himself in order to make us who are ‘orphans’ in a world of sin and death his very own children and heirs? Is this not a poignant image of the God who pursues us relentlessly until our adoption is complete and will not let us go?”¹

Adoption is the clearest examples on earth of unearned acceptance and love by another family with a new status and name that is unrelated to the previous one. The worse the birth situation and circumstances are, the greater the grace and mercy shown to the adoptee, and correspondingly, the greater the love displayed to them. Our response to orphans and the need for their care theologically offers us a unique opportunity to show what true fatherhood is and instill lifelong positive constructs in the adoptee, their new family, our Church families and the communities in which they exist. It is unfortunate that at times the result of adoption in our fallen world is that the adoptee has intra- and interpersonal struggles and a sense of low self worth when it is possible for them to have a sense of their uniqueness and special worth as one chosen through no work or characteristic of their own. Because they are made in God’s image they have value and countless worth.

The ultimate struggle one has is the struggle with the understanding of God, “the fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern.”² Struggling with one’s own apparent loss in the context of our ultimate concern creates a depth, direction and unity to all our lesser concerns,

resulting in a deepening of the whole person. This crisis that the adoptee faces is one of their true identity and lineage. Biologically, they are from one family but relationally and emotionally from another. “Escaping God, refusing to notice our own nakedness, is always the temptation.”\(^1\)

“When God is not apprehended because spiritual suffering leaves one blind to God’s being in early life, the very resource that is needed for spiritual imagination and refreshment is not available. This is sometimes the dilemma of the adoptee—the real God is not experienced as being around.”\(^2\)

But this struggle of identity and belonging is the struggle of every believer prior to coming into the Family of God. We were all estranged from God. We were all at one time strangers to Him and His love. We were slaves to sin and bound to iniquity. In fact we were His enemies and at war against the only one who has ever loved us perfectly. We were at enmity with the Father of Lights and our sins were the reason His Son had to go to the cross. We didn’t sense His presence, though there has never been a time in which He was not near, and we didn’t sense His love, though He is the essence of love.

All of mankind struggles with a sense of estrangement from its true nature. We are separated from our truest identity found in unbroken relationship with God our Father, Maker and Redeemer and so we struggle to find a sense of meaning. Unfortunately, this is usually done outside of God. We attempt to maintain this separation psychologically and so our mind sets up an unending host of idols in order to escape the reality of God. For the Christian, this means taking on a true identity in Christ which is outside the ability of the world to apprehend. This sense of identity is essential to stand up in the world as a person. This identity begins in our awareness of the personal past (which includes our ethnic and cultural identity) put in the context

\(^2\) Ibid. 257.
of what our new future holds in the family of God. Our pilgrimage on earth creates an inner
tension of the already and not yet, we know from where God has brought us and wait expectantly
for the completion of where he is going to take us.

“Religious experience is the experience of struggling with being itself.”  
Now we can grasp the possibility for the deeper understanding of God that an adopted individual can have.
They uniquely are strangers and pilgrims in this world, abandoned by their genetic family. They are uniquely chosen in this world, by both an adopted family and God himself who placed them in their new home. The danger is that they falter psychologically and don’t comprehend what true family is, thus developing a psychological illness, such as depression. But also the potential is there that unlike anyone else, they grasp the deeper meaning of adoption by God through their personal experience, and through their understanding and experience teach the unadopted a deeper meaning of the Fatherhood of God.

There also is an opportunity for the Church to better understand grace through the understanding of the adoptee. Many people struggle with a sense of self worth and familial ties, resulting in an inability to apprehend the reality of God as father. The power to affirm one’s self is a gift, not an ability or a mere act. Said another way, “This is not a pulling-of-bootstraps activity, not a work, not an accomplishment, but instead the moment of meeting and knowing the God beyond God in the midst of diminishment and shame.”

It is a matter of grace. The adoptee understands this experientially like no one else. Their experience it not just spiritually but emotionally and physically. Their struggle is deeper and more palpable, but their struggle also gives them the opportunity to understand the heights of God’s grace in a way that others cannot.

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2 Ibid., 258.
Like the Prodigal Son who “came to himself,” and the modern Christian who “experiences God,” the adoptee has a physical coming home and a spiritual awakening.

The doctrine of adoption expressed through the act of adopting and orphan care offer us an opportunity to understand our position in the family of God better and then to show the world an example of what it looks like to be in God’s family. Through the doctrine of adoption we comprehend what God has done. Through the care of the orphan we mirror what He has done and through preaching, we tell of what He has done. Reclaiming adoption in the life of the Church and in our personal lives would no doubt radically transform the Church and make it conform that much more to the image of Christ.
CHAPTER 6

HINDRANCES TO ADOPTION

Up to this point my main emphasis has been discussing the theological doctrine of adoption. I would now like to change gears and start discussing sociological adoption. When most people think about adoption, the adoption of children is what they automatically gravitate toward. I would like to start by discussing the need for sociological adoption, the adoption of children, and then discuss why it doesn’t happen often in the church relative to its theological importance in scripture.

The population explosion of the 20th century has been coupled with an explosion in the numbers of orphans. In 2006, there were 143,400,000 orphans in the world.¹ This number translates to 1 in 13 children in the developed world being orphans. This is a steep rise from the UNICEF numbers released in 2002 in which there were 70,000,000 orphans in the world.² More than 16 million were orphaned in 2003 and to date over 15 million children have been orphaned by AIDS in the world.³ The sheer need for orphan care is greater now than any other time in history. So why as a whole is caring for the orphan off the radar of most churches, civic organizations and Christians?

There are several ways to understand the lack of Church involvement in addressing this need. The first is our culture’s philosophical bent away from adoption, which is expressed in “genealogical essentialism”.⁴ This is a core belief that is expressed in the idea that the only “real” family is a genealogical family, one in which children share the genetic make-up of their parents.

In the past, this was understood in terms of blood kinship. Scientific developments such as In-vitro fertilization (IVF) and intracytoplasmic sperm insemination (ICSI) have helped to further propagate this thinking to a new level. Human DNA has been described as fundamental to human identity and fate. As more research into human genetics comes to the forefront, scientists are accounting more human characteristics and disease processes to our genetic make-up. In the medical field, the result is a stronger emphasis on the genetic basis of disease. In the societal arena, this is lending scientific support to a general anti-adoptionist sentiment in our society. At the most basic level, this is expressed in our concept of “real” parents. The real parents are the sperm and egg donors who give us our genetic material, not the persons who care, nurture and provide for us the first 18 plus years of our life. This is in opposition to the biblical view discussed above that challenges our cultural assumptions that only birth kinship is “real” kinship. One unfortunate practical result of this is that when Christian couples are faced with infertility they lean more toward IVF than adoption. If their views were influenced by a doctrine of adoption, sociological adoption would be the first thing they would think of, not scientific procedures. As those made in the image of God, adopted into the family of God, and called on by God to defend the fatherless, imaging Him in this world through natural adoption would seem to be the natural progression. “Even if blood is thicker than water, it is not thicker than agape . . . Families can be built as well as they can be begotten.”\(^1\) We must remember that families can be created by agape as well as begotten biologically; this is how the first family can into being.\(^2\)

A natural assumption that arises from our cultural bent against adoption is the commonly held belief that adopted children are more likely to suffer from mental disease and family

\(^2\) There is not space to further develop this idea, but scripture is clear in the New Testament and further developed by Calvin that the love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit was the driving force for the creation of man in God’s image.
discord. It only seems natural that adoptive families would be less stable, but a recent study on adoption showed that to the contrary, adoption creates a more stable home environment and adoptive children are at least as psychologically stable as their non-adoptive counterparts. This study of 715 randomly selected families between 1974 to 1980 looked at adopted children ages 12 to 18.¹ Some of their findings are as follows:

- Adoptive families have considerably lower divorce rates compared to non-adoptive.
- Adopted children have slightly better psychological health compared to their non-adoptive peers.
- Self-esteem of adopted children is similar to that of their non-adopted peers.
- The majority of adopted children accept their adoption with ease, only 27 percent see adoption as problematic in how they view themselves.
- Adopted children are as deeply connected to their adopted parents as their non-adopted siblings.

Another hindrance to adoption has been its lack of ethical development. There has not been any substantive interest in the development of an adoption ethic in modern Christian ethics, except in the narrow spectrum as a response to abortion. For this reason, it is difficult to discuss Christian ethics as they relate to adoption due to the lack of literature to review. The only active substantial ethical discussions on adoption are as it relates to combating abortion.²

Abortion is a divisive topic in our culture and churches today. Limiting the ethical discussion of adoption to its relationship as a solution to abortion has only served to limit the discussion of adoption without aiding the pro-life cause.

The third and most important hindrance to sociological adoption in the Church is the lack of its theological development and exposition by church leaders. One of the major points of this

¹ Peter Benson, Anu Sharma, Eugene Roehlkepartain, Growing up Adopted: A Portrait of Adolescents and Their Families (Minneapolis, Minn.: The Search Institute), 1984.
paper is to show the lack of development of the doctrine of adoption despite its importance and prevalence throughout Scripture. “Theology is the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life.”¹ The theological underdevelopment of the doctrine of adoption in the Church has naturally resulted in a paucity of its practice by the Church. Seminary students don’t systematically study our adoption in Christ and how it impacts theology. The result is that it isn’t preached from the pulpit or discussed in the pews. It is not mentioned in premarital counseling as a gospel centered response to infertility. Roughly twenty percent of women will experience fertility issues.² This is a huge struggle for many young couples yet I have never spoken with a married couple who has received any pre-marital counseling from their pastors about infertility and how it relates to adoption. Christian laypersons aren’t taught to think of themselves as adoptees in the family of God. James 1:27 defines true religion in terms of orphan and widow care, yet we don’t think of ourselves or our churches in these terms. God the Father calls Himself the Father of the fatherless, yet as those created in His image we don’t struggle with what that means practically in our lives and Church communities. If we all saw ourselves as those redeemed from this world through adoption into the family of God, and understood the New Testament message of adoption through propitiation in the context of the understanding that we are made in God’s image and called to do the same works as our Father, it would result in a culture of adoption within the Church (John 5:36, 14:10-12).³

The last hindrance to adoption is adoption itself. Adoption is an expression of the gospel. Care of the orphan is a part of our biblical mandate on Earth. Without the theological aspect of adoption, it becomes mere charity, and without the missional aspect it becomes mere metaphor.

If we believe Jesus about heavenly things—our adoption in Christ—we will mirror Him in earthly things—the adoption and care of children. But adoption is warfare. It is contested in its theological, missional and cosmic aspects. Space does not allow for development of this idea here. Suffice it to say that anyone who has adopted can attest to the mental, emotional and spiritual battle experienced in rescuing an orphan. Chapter 2 of this paper is devoted to the history of God’s plan for our spiritual adoption and the battle Satan wages seems to converge on orphans who God later uses in His plan to rescue His people (i.e., Moses and Jesus). In the end, it’s an adopted babe in a manger who sets the captives free and breaks open the gates of hell. The scriptures inform us that there are powers that would rather we not know our identity in Christ and would rather we ignore the earthly type and shadow of our heavenly reality and find our identity in what we can see and identify with our senses.

The Satanic powers want to rule the universe, but a tiny baby born in a manger conquers their reign. Thus, they rage all the more against babies made in His image. This titanic warfare is imaged in Revelation 12. A woman is about to bear a man-child who will rule the nations with a rod of iron and the dragon awaits His birth to consume Him but He is caught up to heaven. The dragon then goes out to make war with the children of the woman and has done so ever since.

This battle against babes is a story has played out from the beginning in Scripture. This makes sense given the fact of who in the end is to enter the world to bring down its principalities and powers. Cain, the seed of the evil one, murders righteous Abel (1 John 3:12), Pharaoh orders the murder of the innocents (Ex. 1&2), Herod does the same in Bethlehem in hopes of murdering Jesus (Mat. 2:16). In the ancient world infanticide was a common occurrence in the culture and there was a low value on human life as a whole. There was even a demon-god in the Old

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1 Alvin Schmidt, How Christianity Changed the World (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 48-75.
Testament called Molech, who demanded the sacrifice of infants to satiate his wrath. God forbids Israel from his worship and even threatens punishment on those who turn the eye to one who gives his child to Molech (Lev. 20). Children, and especially orphans, have a special place in God’s heart. He redeems us to Himself through the Spirit by adoption in the blood of His Son. For us to image God in this world through adoption, will be battle as well. “The demonic powers hate babies because they hate Jesus... They know the human race is saved—and they are vanquished—by a woman giving birth (Gal. 4:4; 1 Tim 2:15).”¹ What if Christians were once again known as those who care for orphans and the Church reclaimed it role in defending the fatherless. “Adoption is about an entire culture within our churches, a culture that sees adoption as part of our Great Commission mandate and as a sign of the gospel itself.”²

We should also realize that part of our final judgment at the coming of the Kingdom of God will arise from our care of the orphan. If it is one of the three pillars of true religion, we should expect no less. In Matthew 25, Jesus states that the sheep and the goats will be judged based on their treatment of the hungry, naked, and homeless. Job realized this over a thousand years prior and states it in Job 31. In his defense against his friends, Job says that he has been the champion of the widow from the time he left the womb and from his youth he was a father to the fatherless. In this passage, Job’s main defense is the fact that he defended the least of these. God has given Himself the title Father of the Fatherless and has entrusted us to carry out their care on His behalf here on Earth (Ps. 68:5, Ex. 22:22-24, Deut. 14:29).

As a man thinks, so is he (Prov. 23:7). Of all the hindrances above, the most fundamental is the theological. If we understand more clearly what God has done for us, it will inform us better in what we do for our fellow man. We can only know ourselves by knowing God and in

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² Ibid., 19.
knowing Him we will come to think His thoughts. We will love what He loves and hate what He hates. We will be angry when He is angry and have pity when He has pity. We will have His mercy in our lives and be the defenders, protectors and guide to the fatherless. We can be no less; He has commanded us to do so (Deut. 10:18, 24:17, 26:13, 27:19; Isa. 1:17, 23, 10:2; Jer. 49:11).
CHAPTER 7

RESPONSE TO SCRIPTURE’S TEACHING ON ADOPTION

The scriptural call is clear.\(^1\) What should our response be to God’s act of redemption from darkness, and bringing us into His family? First, we should read and search Scripture to understand how it instructs our lives. Everything we do and every thought we have should have its origins in Scripture and its proper understanding. Hopefully this brief review will help direct and inspire a grace centered, gospel driven response. A response to the call to care for orphans can occur at any level: church, organizational, pastoral or individual. However, responding with our minds first will prepare us to respond with our hearts. Sermons can be given on the doctrine of adoption to inform congregations about their relationship to one another and this understanding can help build the Christian community. Small groups can study our adoption in Christ and build each other up in the faith. The local church can focus on creating an orphan-friendly culture that meets the needs of its members and the fatherless in your locality. Pastors and small group leaders can lead the way through teaching about the social need to care for orphans that is driven by the theological command to do so.

Next we can look inward and see the need within our local churches that exists with single mothers. We can reach out to help the fatherless created through divorce and unwed mothers within the local church. Para-church organizations can be formed and that provide nurture and support to single mothers and children in the foster care system. Churches can start local efforts to care for children in the foster system. Small groups can adopt a single mother or widow in the church and provide help and support when needed. These are but a few ideas for

starting points. This should all be driven by an understanding of what God has done for us and not done solely as ‘good works.’

Next we should recognize that adoption is a calling and not something every Christian should do, just like every Christian is not called to be a pastor. However, every Christian is called to help with the care of the orphan and fatherless, like all believers are instructed to share the Gospel. This can include a myriad of things from mission trips with your church, going to overseas orphanages and rocking babies that have never been held, being involved with foster care or financially supporting those who are called to adopt but can’t afford the expense to do so.

Many church leaders do not know what local resources exist for orphan care and are unable to provide those to their members—they should educate themselves. When pastors do pre-marital counseling, they can include issues such as infertility and adoption in the topics discussed with the engaged. Some statistics quote that up to one in five couples will deal with infertility. Pastors should prepare newlyweds for this reality and give them a way in which God can be glorified in their difficulty and the world can see the Church in action.

Below is a brief listing of possible resources as a starting point for places to obtain ideas for involvement in orphan care. These are but a few options or ideas, but it serves at least as a starting point for ideas.

- Sponsor an orphan with Children’s Hope Chest.
- Find a widow and help with basic things (e.g., mowing yard).
- Have your small group adopt a single mother or widow to help when needed.
- Become a foster parent.
- Get involved with organizations that help to find families and provide funds or accept donations for international children with special needs, such as The Shepherd’s Crook, Bethany Christian Services, or Brittany’s Hope Foundation.
The above list serves as a resource for those whose local church currently does not have any ministry or resources and would like a starting point from which to get involved.

The Church is in a struggle with the world for the souls of the fatherless. The numbers of orphans worldwide is increasing exponentially. The doctrine of adoption has lain dormant for centuries and we have forgotten our adoption through Christ into the family of God. This has affected our ability to see the call by God for us to be the defenders of the fatherless here on earth. The expense of adoption alone discourages many from attempting it. Our cultural fixation on our genetic heritage has caused us to lose sight of that reality that strong families can be made through adoption and need not be made through technology. Current technological trends are encouraging scientific procedures for fertility issues and indirectly discouraging adoption. Government intervention through foster care has become the mainstay of orphan care in our country. European laws are in the making that will prevent adoption by Christian couples due to the concerns over those couples affecting the self identify of the adoptee through religious indoctrination. UNICEF’s official policy on adoption discourages adoption and considers it only as a last resort.¹ A recent result in their policy has been the closing of Guatemala to outside adoption. Here in the US, homosexual lobby groups are actively working to legalize adoption for same sex couples. Is the Church going to continue to relegate this ministry to society at large?

“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

“Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” —Isaiah 1:17

CONCLUSION

Despite all the evidence to the importance of the doctrine of adoption in the Bible, there has been a neglect of its development in both biblical and systematic theology. Over time, the lack of theological development of this doctrine has led to a general neglect in its relation to practical theology with a resultant lack of its application to the life of the Church. The result is that the Church at large has left the practice of orphan care largely neglected. Yet this doctrine can be seen throughout scriptures. The first hint or seeds of it are seen in Genesis, it becomes clearer as God redeems Israel out of Egypt, the legal mandates for orphan care thereafter are found in the Law and the Prophets and finally its full understanding is revealed in the New Testament.

Paul’s understanding of adoption is best understood in the context of the Kingdom of God as made up of God’s sons and daughters. The typology of Israel as son, which Paul applied to the Church, further shows his understanding that this thread goes from the Old Testament to the New. As one reads from Genesis to Malachi there is a change in emphasis from the nation of Israel to the individual members in the nation and their relationship with God.\(^1\) Paul’s stress on adoption is closely related to his teachings on the 1\(^{st}\) and 2\(^{nd}\) Adam. Both Adam’s affected our relationship to the Father. The 1\(^{st}\) (Adam) forfeited his status that he originally possessed and the 2\(^{nd}\) (Jesus) through His work on the cross, restored this relationship (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:23, 45; Rom. 1:3; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 4:13).

Paul viewed our adoptive status as a present part of our salvation with the seal of the Holy Spirit. Through the seal of the Spirit, the future completion of our adoption becomes guaranteed. The eschatological tension heightens our sense of longing for our future home, but

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\(^1\)Daniel Theron, "Adoption" in the Pauline corpus,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 28, no 1 (Ja-Mr 1956): 8-10.
provides a secure hope in this present world of our present hope and salvation found only in Christ. We learn from Paul that our adoption in Christ was predestined as part of God’s eternal will. The process of adoption includes the whole Trinity. The Father wills, the Son redeems and the Spirit seals. From Paul’s teachings we gain a vantage point from which we can then see how the doctrine of adoption is inclusive of the whole of Scripture.

From this vantage point, we can appreciate more fully how the apostle John viewed our salvation. He viewed our experience relationally. His emphasis on regeneration focused on our joining Jesus in His relationship with the Father. As we share in this with Jesus, we become sons of the Most High God. He did not identify adoption as the mode of family inclusion as Paul did, but is clear that the relationship formed is that of sons. In his epistles we see love as the bond of the brotherhood of believers and we learn that without this love of the brethren no one can have fellowship with the Father. In Revelation, we learn that God names those He has called, an act similar to what happens to orphans adopted by Roman patrons.

God has been in the process of naming those He calls out from the beginning in Genesis. He changed Abraham’s name right before the birth of Isaac to signify His new destiny. God similarly changed Jacob’s name to Israel after he wrestled with Him. Israel later was identified with the nation that God claimed as His son. God delivers the Israelites, brings them to Mt. Sinai, gives them the Law and then proceeds to disciple the nation as His son throughout the remainder of the Old Testament. Within the Law and the Prophets are embedded commands to protect the orphan and widow. God identifies Himself as the Father to the Fatherless and then commands His nation to do as He has done—protect and defend the fatherless. God is expressing the theological reality of His identity as Father of the fatherless through practical laws to protect the fatherless.
Jesus also picks up this theme in the Gospels. It is epitomized in the judgment of Matthew 25. The judgment at Christ’s second return is intimately linked to care for the least of these—Jesus equates caring for them as caring for Him. The Son of Man will bring the nations before Himself and judge them based on their care for the least of these, those whom He equates as His brothers.

Hopefully now the power and importance of the doctrine of adoption is becoming clear. It brings together disparate people—Jews and Gentiles. Adoption includes an eternal inheritance that looks toward the future. Adoption is sealed by the Holy Spirit. It starts with Israel and Israel's king and finds its fulfillment in Christ and His new brethren. It spans the whole of Scriptures and touches on a remarkable range of biblical themes. Adoption transcends ethical and biological boundaries and shows God's working from the foundation of the world to include us into His family. Through adoption, we learn our identity does not rest with us but with God who makes us His own, calls us by name and in the end will give us a name that only He knows. It points to the present reality of God's grace and the future promise of participation in His glory. Adoption sheds light on our election; though we may wander and suffer correction, our Father will pour out His very self to ensure that we will never be let go.

The unresolved question is this. How will we respond? Does our theology change the very core of our beings or only inform our minds? Does our thinking the thoughts of God and knowing His eternal will change our minds and wills? Should we copy in earthly things what our Father has done in heavenly things? Should we mirror in this world what God has started for us in this one and will finish in the world to come? Jesus promised us that He will not leave us as orphans—He will come to us. What better example is there in this world of what God has done for us than care for the orphan? If there is none, how do we respond?


