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ADOPTION: THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

BY THOMAS WHITE

Whether good or bad, extreme emotions were the order of the day as we pulled into the lawyer's office. Birth parents, for all the right reasons, had determined to put their daughter up for adoption, but we wondered if they would change their minds. The birth parents walked into one room while the receptionist led us into another. In yet a third room, representatives from the law office carried an 8-pound, five-week-old, blue-eyed, strawberry blonde baby girl. She had no relationship to us on that early, Florida morning and a different last name.

Two hours felt like an eternity as the hands of time moved in slow motion within the round-faced clock — one reverberating tick after another. Eventually, the large wooden door opened. Time, and my heart with it, stood still. Confident our heavenly Father knew our destiny, but supremely aware that we did not, nerves and anxiety filled the room like a dense fog. Finally, we learned all was going well and began to sign document after document before the paralegal disappeared behind a closed door. More waiting ensued. I nervously paced back and forth, heightening the emotion in the room. When the door opened again, all I could see was that same baby girl being brought to us.

I'll never forget looking into her bright blue eyes. Not being an experienced father, I applied the only knowledge I had to the situation. Coach always told me to cover the tip of the ball, tuck it in tight, and don't fumble. This little life was about the same size, so I did just what coach said. My palm covered the back of her head and, of course, the tip "of the ball"; I tucked her in tight to my side, and wasn't dare about to fumble.

The White Family (L-R): Rachel, 13; their German shepherd, Duchess; Joy; Samuel, 6; and Thomas

As I looked into this little girl's eyes, I learned a divine lesson on unconditional love. How could I love someone so much this quickly? I would certainly die for and probably kill for this precious baby that I just met. A legal transaction had made me this girl's father. She had a new last name, which was pretty cool since she would now live at the "White" house.

A surreal feeling came over me as they said we were free to leave the office, but not the state, until proper legal agreements between Florida and Texas could be arranged. Still holding my daughter, I reached for our bag, and my mom asked me if I wanted her to carry Rachel. Not appropriately understanding the desires of a first-time "Nana," I remember distinctly replying with words that have never been truer, "She will never be as safe as she is right now in Daddy's arms." Now that she's a teenager, there are days when I wish we could go back to those "safe" moments.

Beyond unconditional love, this life journey taught me practical lessons about the theology of adoption. A legal transaction granted me a forever daughter, just as the legal declaration of justification made by the just Judge of the

The adoption metaphor also extends to the entire nation of Israel, as Moses received instruction to tell Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son" (Ex. 4:22). God used Moses, himself rescued through adoption, to speak of God adopting Israel as His firstborn son. You remember the narrative: Pharaoh commanded the death of all children under 2 years old and Jochebed hid Moses in the bulrushes. Pharaoh's daughter had mercy on this "orphaned" child and eventually reared him in the house of Pharaoh. Moses, saved through adoption, eventually led Israel, the nation saved through adoption, out of slavery in Egypt.

The story of Moses and Jesus contain similarities. Both lived when leaders commanded children age 2 and under be killed. Moses came out of Egypt, whereas Jesus fled to and came out of Egypt. Pharaoh's daughter "adopted" Moses. Joseph adopted Jesus. God used Moses to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, while Jesus rescued mankind from slavery in sin. The analogy breaks down as Moses, a man of the law, could only look into the "Promised Land," while Joshua (Yeshua in Hebrew, the Old Testament name for Jesus) was the greater Moses and completed the journey across the Jordan. The law only reveals our sinfulness, whereas Jesus brings us safe passage to our heavenly promised land by grace through faith.

Turning to the New Testament, we see four passages addressing the theological importance of adoption: Galatians 4:4-7, Romans 8:14-23, Ephesians 1:3-6, and Romans 9:1-4, and two others that mention orphans.

These passages could have easily retained the well-established language of the new birth. Instead, the Spirit-inspired Scriptures reveal imagery of adoption, describing in greater detail the fullness of the doctrine of salvation. From these passages, we may draw four conclusions about adoption.

FIRST, ADOPTION MAKES SONS OUT OF SLAVES.

From Adam's choice to follow Eve in eating the forbidden fruit rather than follow God, mankind has been born enslaved to sin. Our corrupt nature leads every human to fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Galatians 4 indicates that God sent forth His Son to redeem those in bondage by the law to adoption as sons. Jesus substituted Himself for mankind,

As part of salvation, believers receive the Spirit, which confirms newly adopted sons as children of God.

universe declared me a child of my heavenly Father, forever adopted into the family of God. Neither an orphan nor a slave to my sin, but a son and an heir free to serve my Redeemer. The closer I looked, the more I learned about the cord of adoption woven through the biblical tapestry.

The Old Testament displays God's passion for adoption through his personhood as Father, the adoption of the nation of Israel as His firstborn son (Ex. 4:22), and adoption stories like Moses (Ex. 2:10), Genubath (1 Kings 11:20), and Esther (Est. 2:7).

The Old Testament reveals God as Father and contains about 40 references to the "fatherless." These references include the command to treat the fatherless correctly (Ex. 22:22) and to "bring justice to the fatherless" (Isa. 1:17). Deuteronomy 24:17-21 compares the plight of the fatherless to that of Israel while in Egyptian bondage.

making sufficient atonement for our sins. Those repenting of their sins and confessing Jesus as Savior experience adoption as sons. Galatians 4:7 speaks to this change of realities as Paul writes, “So you are no longer a slave, but a son.” And in Romans 8:15, the connection is made between the Holy Spirit and the work of adoption as it states, “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons ...”.

Just as God adopted the slave nation of Israel to make them the children of Israel, God likewise adopts believers, making them sons with all pertaining rights and privileges therein — once slaves to sin, now sons of the Sovereign, redeemed not to fall back into fear, but to enjoy the “Spirit of adoption” (Rom. 8:15).

I’ll never forget coming home one afternoon from preaching about 100 miles from home on Sunday. My children and dogs typically greet me with enthusiastic hugs and wagging tails, respectively. It’s the best part of travel. But on this day, only the dogs appeared. I soon learned that my daughter had gotten in trouble for hiding candy wrappers on top of the cabinet in a large decorative bowl. Turns out that we do use those decorative bowls every now and then. I told my daughter to come sit on the couch so we could talk. She walked down the stairs with head and shoulders slumped and her right pinky finger in her mouth. She slid onto the opposite edge of the couch as though she were one with the green leather arm. Even though we sat on the same three-seat couch, her sin separated her from a loving earthly father by distant miles — the same father who would die for her at sunset. As Romans 8 states, we did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but that’s what sin does. Our sin sparks feelings of separation between us and the God who did die for us at sundown and then rose three days later to conquer sin and death, securing a path for salvation.

I remember my own adoption well. Spiritually speaking, most would have considered me an

unwanted child. Stubborn, prideful, and rebellious, my soon-to-be heavenly Father convicted me of my sinful state, as I sat in the second row, fourth seat from the end during a weekend revival service. That night as streaming tears fell from my cheeks, I repented of my sins and placed my faith in Jesus Christ. Through this new birth, God viewed me as united with Christ. Clothed in Christ’s righteousness, God declared me, a flawed sinner, justified in His eyes. Reconciled to the Father, I experienced firsthand the love of adoption — no longer a slave to my own sin but now a son of the King.

SECOND, ADOPTION GRANTS US THE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AS “FATHER.”

Galatians 4:6 states, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba! Father!” Romans 8:15–16 expresses that we have “received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba! Father!” Remarkably, these two texts, written in Greek, use the Aramaic term “Abba,” bringing to mind Jesus’ prayer in the garden. Mark 14:36 records Jesus saying, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me.”

Paul retained the Aramaic words that Jesus spoke to His Father. Imagine the startling nature of this revelation in a Jewish culture that reverentially refrained from speaking the name of their omnipotent God. The Holy Spirit



indwells believers, testifying that the transcendent, holy, Creator of the universe is also the immanent, compassionate, “Abba! Father.” This was God’s plan from the beginning. The fall of Adam did not surprise our omniscient God. In the fullness of time, God sent his Son (Gal. 4:4) to redeem those He predestined for adoption through Jesus Christ. Adoption occurs “according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace” (Eph. 1:5–6a).

THIRD, ADOPTION GRANTS US THE SPIRIT CONFIRMING OUR SALVATION.

Romans 8:14 says, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” Scripture confirms that those led by the Spirit are adopted as sons, and vice versa. Those adopted as sons are led by the Spirit. As part of salvation, believers receive the Spirit, which confirms newly adopted sons as children of God. Romans 8:16 adds, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

One Saturday afternoon, I partially reclined in the La-Z-Boy, working on my laptop. My daughter walked up and said, “Sit in your lap, Daddy.” I laid the computer aside and cherished a 4-year-old little girl wanting to cuddle with Daddy. In a priceless moment, she snuggled her head on my shoulder with a faded, pink bear and tattered blanket in hand. Her blue eyes gazed into mine as she said, “I love you, Daddy.” Depressing the lump in my throat and holding back the developing tears in my eyes, I responded, “I love you more.” My daughter has never asked to see the adoption paperwork, call a judge, or look at a birth certificate bearing her name to understand that I am her “Daddy.” She simply knows. In like manner, we have no need of a “new birth” certificate nor papers of spiritual adoption. The Spirit renders such things useless as He testifies to our hearts that we are sons, and God almighty is our “Abba! Father.”

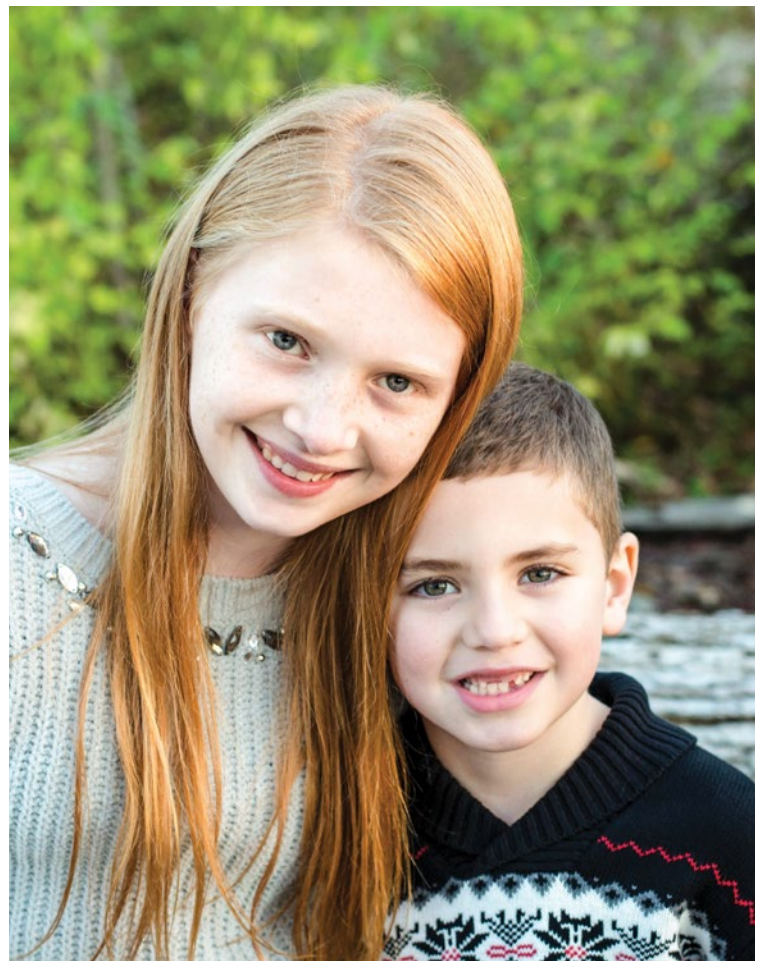
You may or may not remember your spiritual birthday, just as I don’t remember my physical birth, but I know that I am alive. For those of us who believe, we have the Spirit in us, testifying of our salvation, combating the lies of the evil one trying to fill us with doubt by his accusations. Those who have repented of their sins and

believed in Jesus are adopted into the forever family of their heavenly Father. This adoption as brothers and sisters leaves no room for economic, racial, or prejudice of any kind. We all equally kneel at the foot of the cross of King Jesus.

FOURTH, ADOPTION TURNS ORPHANS INTO HEIRS.

The Greek word *orphanos* occurs in James 1:27 and John 14:18 in the New Testament. James 1:27 stresses the importance of ministry to orphans as true and undefiled religion. In John 14:18, Jesus promises not to leave the disciples as orphans but will send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit calls the lost and regenerates responsive orphans into sons, and as sons, we become heirs.

The designation of heirs makes the imagery of adoption as sons, in contrast to sons and daughters, essential. In the Jewish context, sons receive the birthright and the blessing, while daughters only had a relationship. In salvation, men and women are equally adopted into a relationship and as heirs. Galatians 4:7 states, “and if a son, then an heir through God.”



Through our justification by grace, a radical rags-to-riches story emerges — orphans transform into heirs. Our new birthright through adoption awaits us in heaven as we trade dying, sin-infected jars of clay for resurrected, glorious bodies.

Altogether, adoption should matter to us because adoption matters to God. Through adoption we fulfill the Bible's command to care for orphans and illustrate God's plan of salvation. Adoption demonstrates true and undefiled religion. Through the planning, cost, and sometimes pain of adoption, we learn more about the divine love expressed in our spiritual adoption. These reasons should cause everyone to consider adopting or supporting adoption. Those who cannot adopt can help single moms or children with absentee fathers understand the love of our "Abba! Father."

The day for the finalization of our adoption came. Anxiously, I realized the judge could ask anything he wished. Surprisingly, the judge pontificated on the permanency of adoption. He stressed the finality of his signature, stating, "You cannot undo it. You cannot turn back the clock. After this, you cannot change your mind. Like it or not, until Rachel becomes 18 years of age, she is your responsibility. Do you understand?"

The devilish little boy in me emerged as I responded, "Well, that is the point of adoption isn't it?" Realizing the seriousness of the judge, I quickly clarified, "Yes, I understand and gladly accept the responsibility, your Honor."

Later that day it dawned on me that my theological understanding of adoption had affected my cultural understanding. I always understood the permanency of adoption because I understand that spiritual adoption grants eternal security. We often express it as "once saved; always saved." Yet we live in a world where everything from Cabbage Patch dolls to hamsters can be "adopted" and then abandoned at a whim. We must regain the theological understanding of the permanency of unconditional love and adoption for life. We must continue to practice true and undefiled religion by supporting foster care and adoption as James commands. Spiritually, adoption accompanies justification and guarantees sanctification and glorification. Just as my spiritual adoption as a son of God will never be revoked once finalized, this judge communicated that Rachel's adoption would not be revoked once finalized. That day through a courtroom exchange, my appreciation for the theology of adoption grew deeper. I realized more than ever that adoption is at the heart of the Gospel.

Thomas White became Cedarville's 10th President in 2013. He earned his Ph.D. in systematic theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author and editor of numerous publications, including *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Freedom* (B&H Academic).



CU WOMEN SUPPORT FOSTER CHILDREN WITH "SWEET CASES"

Last November, CU Women, an organization made up of female faculty, staff, and friends of Cedarville University, partnered with foster support organization Together We Rise to provide duffel bags, also called "Sweet Cases," for children in foster care. The group far exceeded its initial goal of \$500, finishing their campaign with more than \$1,800 raised. That money supplied 67 bags to 67 foster care children.

CU Women filled Thomas and Joy White's home with the duffels, where they were decorated and filled with gifts.

Together We Rise collaborates with community partners to bring resources to foster children, such as "Sweet Cases," which give foster children a duffel bag loaded with a few supplies, a Bible, and a teddy bear. Many foster children have only a trash bag to carry their belongings.

Mary McCulley, Assistant Professor of English, suggested the idea of a service component to CU Women. She saw it as a way to live out their focus on James 1:27, which calls Christians to look after widows and orphans.

Within a week of the fundraiser being announced in October 2017, their goal of \$500 was almost met, so CU Women raised the goal to \$1,000. In a matter of days, that goal was met as well. When the campaign ended, they had raised almost four times their initial goal.

"I am thankful that so many people see this need," said McCulley. "We wanted to include people outside of the CU Women organization in this fundraiser to create connections and allow students and others to serve the community."

After they were assembled, the bags were donated to the Bair Foundation, a faith-based foster and adoption agency in Dayton, Ohio.