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# Perspectives on Adoption from Christian Adoptive Parents: A Qualitative Study

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## Introduction

- This study was prompted by a theological study of how the Christian God relates to Israel (Jews) versus non-Jews. Gentiles have been “grafted in” to God’s family through adoption (Romans 11), and now all believers are sons of God and thus coheirs with Christ (Romans 8). It is the belief of the researchers that this theological truth can be reflected in the human experience of adoption.
- The Bible contains multiple mandates for orphan care, which may express itself through adoption, as in the commanded to “love your neighbor” (Mark 12:31) and to express pure and undefiled religion through caring for orphans (James 1:27).
- Past research indicates the most common motivation for adoption is to expand one’s own family, whether it be due to infertility or other reasons (Jennings et al., 2014).
- One of the major fears of adoptive parents is being able to relate to their adopted child as they do their biological child. Race and the idea of “kin selection” seem to play a significant factor in this (Segal et al., 2015), although it has been found that religiosity may predict higher positive outcomes in adopting children of another race (Belanger et al., 2008).

## Research Focus

- The purpose of this study was to further understand adoption from the perspective of Christian adoptive parents.

## Method

- When collecting participants, researchers focused specifically on parents who:
  - Had adoptive children in college or younger
  - Were Christians
  - Parented both biological and adopted children
- Approximately 25 families participated in the study. Most interviews included both the father and the mother. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted an average time of forty minutes.
- All participants were asked similar questions. Once the interviews had been conducted, researchers identified the common experiences or thought processes among the adoptive parents. These commonalities are referred to as the “themes” of the study.

## Results

### Concrete Understanding

As a result of the adoption, theological understanding became more concrete. Parents explained that they knew scriptural truths previously, but these truths become more tangible or relatable following the adoption of their child.

- *“It’s definitely been seeing a picture of the spiritual reality of adoption... and getting to see that in high definition rather than just black and white.”*
- *“And before... all of those things were kind of theoretical... but after you’ve lived it and you felt it, you realize what it means to sacrifice yourself.”*
- *“I think I understand better the legal process of adoption... I think that those who haven’t gone through the adoption process, it’s more like figurative language. I don’t want to say it’s fluffy... but it doesn’t hit quite as hard. And then when you walk through the legal process, the biblical language becomes much more concrete.”*

## Results (cont.)

### Theological Motivation of Adoption

Having been asked about reasons for adopting, parents cited that their motivation was primarily spiritual or theological in nature. When elaborating on these theological or spiritual reasons, four subthemes emerged from the explanations. While several parents cited more than one of the following reasons, each subtheme was seen as distinct.

#### **Biblical Mandate for Orphan Care**

Parents referenced the biblical mandate to care for widows and orphans, which in their case, expressed itself as adoption.

- *“James 1:27 speaks on how taking care of orphans is the responsibility for every person who says he or she is a believer in Christ... all of us are called to orphan care in some manner.”*

#### **Adoption is seen as a Ministry**

Parents saw adoption as one way to provide for others in need.

- *“Children need parents, and specifically parents to raise them up in the knowledge and admonition of the Lord... there’s not any place better for evangelism and discipleship than in the home.”*

#### **Adopting as a Result of Spiritual Adoption**

Parents felt motivated to adopt “horizontally” as a result of their “vertical” adoption in Christ.

- *“I think we just felt like we were adopted spiritually by the Lord through Jesus. And I felt like the horizontal application of that was adopting.”*

#### **Adopting to Pay Forward Blessing**

Parents felt they had been blessed with much, and wanted to bless others in return.

- *“I feel like God blessed us to be able to bless others... and I’ve always had way more than I need. And God has blessed me for sufficient means to care for orphans.”*

### Significance of Names

The adopted children were commonly given new names that possessed rich significance in meaning. Parents were eager to explain the names of their children.

- *“And so, we researched the meaning and [found out] it was “God has heard.” I was just thinking about the connection to his birth mom crying out for someone to help... And so to go from “God hears” to “God heard,” we liked being able to keep that meaning.”*
- *“When God was going to do something new with someone, He changed their name. So I liked the idea of changing their name, not because I didn’t like their name, but because God wanted to express what He did for the people who he changed.”*
- *“Our little girl’s name was Hope. And of course, the mother decided to parent her, and that was so tough.... Then, a couple of weeks later, [my wife] called and said there’s a little girl in Uganda, and you need to know what her name is. Her name was given by the orphanage... and it was Ugandan for Hope.”*

## Results (cont.)

### “Adoption Legacy”

In one direction, adoptive parents either had parents who had been adopted or siblings who had been adopted. In another direction, as a result of gaining an adopted sibling, their biological children developed a heart for orphan care or expressed a desire to one day adopt a child into their own future family.

- *“[My biological son] has said things like ‘I really hope my future wife will want to adopt. And I really want to take care of an orphan when I’m older.’”*
- *“And even our youngest boy, who was displaced as the baby, says to other people often that adopting his sister was the best thing that has ever happened, and even today asks if we’re gonna adopt again.”*

## Discussion

- Theological or spiritual reasons were of primary significance in the decision to adopt. This differs from previous literature which states that, usually, the primary motivation to adopt is to expand one’s own family.
  - A major factor in this may have been the fact that these families had both biological and adopted children. In cases where infertility was a factor, sometimes occurring after the first biological child was born, the motivations appeared slightly different.
  - Most families saw that orphan care was a biblical mandate, but agreed that the way in which one obeys this command could vary among families.
- The names chosen for adopted children have a significant meaning and also play a part in the assimilation of the child into the family.
- Families appeared to be very open when talking about their adoption experience, even in regard to their past and current struggles throughout the process. There did not seem to be a concealment of hard experiences; rather, there seemed to be a desire for others to better understand their experiences.

## Limitations & Future Studies

- Limitations
  - Our sample was based on a self-selected sample. Additionally, parents were often interviewed together, which may have led to greater agreement in their answers than if they had been interviewed separately.
- Future Studies:
  - It would be interesting to specifically study the significance of adopted children’s names, including parents’ rationale for either keeping a name or choosing a new one.
  - A similar study could be conducted widening the sample demographics to include Christian, religious but non-Christian, and secular adoptive parents.
  - More research could be done investigating the ways in which parents love their adopted child versus how they love their biological child. Many parents indicated that there was a difference, yet there was no difference.

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