A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ADOPTION

The purpose of this study is to develop a theology of adoption by examining the Old and New Testament to discover what they teach believers concerning adoption. The need for Christian action will be communicated and various ways for the Christian to appropriately respond will be outlined. God’s word is not silent regarding adoption or the orphan. The Old and New Testament paint a vividly clear image showing that God is intentional in restoring the fatherless and providing for them great hope. His character and instruction must drive forward the Christian’s perspective toward adoption if Christians are going to contribute to the betterment of the current orphan crisis.

The Orphan Crisis

It is estimated that there are approximately 163 million orphans worldwide.¹ To put this number into perspective, the population of the United States has just reached the 313 million mark.² UNICEF research indicates that this grim situation will only worsen as the HIV/AIDS epidemic is certain to orphan more children.³ Still, the numbers do not tell the full story. “UNICEF does not take into account the numerous orphaned children whose living parents have abandoned them to institutions or life on the street.”⁴ Children who find themselves in this

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situation are no less orphans than those who have lost their parents. In all, it is virtually impossible to know exactly how many children in our world are living parentless.

The problem of abandoned children is nothing new. Children have been left alone, without protection, without sustenance, and without love for thousands of years in nearly every culture. “In the social context of the early church, as well as in the Old Testament, orphans were part of the fabric of society. Wars, disease, or other life events isolated orphans and widows from the system of care traditionally found within a patriarchal society.”

The problem has stemmed from diverse issues like children being born with deformities, parents feeling as though they are unable to meet their child’s needs, and governments enforcing strict regulations on the number of children a couple can bear. And now there exists a plethora of dilemmas that have resulted due to the vast number of orphans in our world. Current research indicates that the human trafficking crisis is directly linked to the orphan crisis. There is also the growing problem of providing for orphans enough clean water and food to keep them physically healthy, especially in less-developed areas of the world. And while it may seem to some as though the United States has no orphan crisis (this truly is not the case) it should shake our souls to recognize that our Foster-care system is currently responsible for more than a half-million children.

Simply identifying the problem is not enough. Though God’s word speaks clearly that God’s people must be advocates for the orphan, not enough consideration is being given in this area. Action must be taken in order to rectify the situation. Stephen G. Post writes, “Adoption has certainly not been of much interest in modern Christian ethics, except in the narrow context


7 Merida and Morton, 40.
of providing an alternative to abortion.”

It is time for Christians to increase their focus on becoming the source, or perhaps better said embracing the Source, for the solution. There are hurdles and obstacles that must be overcome in order to discover solutions to the orphan crisis. These obstacles relate to both the physical (providing food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, and education) and the spiritual (reaching these beloved children with the gospel and reclaiming what rightfully belongs to God). We must not dismiss this problem because it seems too daunting or insurmountable. This is why it is necessary for Christian men and women to prayerfully consider their role in the situation.

Christians need to be asking the question, “Why is it vital for me to consider what God has to say about the orphan and adoption?” In short, the answer is that taking in a human soul and meeting its every need (physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual) deeply reveals the heart of the Father. Consider the words of Dr. Dave Garner: “God’s adoption love is real – determined in the infinite counsel of God’s wisdom and incarnated in his own Son. His love for me is eternally determined, historically demonstrated, personally accomplished, and irrevocably certain. I cherish adoption as a doctrine, because it reveals the unfathomable: God actually cherishes us, His children.”

And take into account the brief, yet powerful statement from Gary Senna, “At its very core and essence adoption is a reflection of the Father heart of God.”

Our heavenly Father is referred to as such by no accident. His Word is filled with references of Him as Abba Father, which is exactly the nature of His being. Yahweh God is a loving Father to His children. This paper will unfold in such a manner as to highlight this viewpoint from a biblical

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perspective. When Christians choose adoption they are living out core principles described in the Scriptures. Yes, the act of human adoption, at its best, embodies the biblical themes of compassion, covenant, and grace.

Defining Adoption

The term adoption has several connotations, but a clear understanding and definition of the term is necessary for this study. Adoption, in this case, refers to the act of taking in another human as one’s own. It is the practice of taking responsibility for a person and his well-being. This means accepting the joys and hardships associated with setting aside one’s own interests in order to extend a heart full of love in a life-long dedication to another who otherwise would likely never receive it. Adoption involves inviting people into a family and giving them an opportunity to belong. Barnhart offers this definition:

Adoption, by its very nature is including in a family unit an individual who without the adoption would remain isolated, alone, abandoned and orphaned. It is an inclusive decision; the adopting person(s) notes and makes the conscious decision to give the adoptee the gift of a family. The choice is not made to treat the orphan and stranger as such but rather, to lovingly embrace and encompass them into the family unit.11

The act of adoption involves taking in an otherwise isolated child to become an integral part of your family and life. Adoption, true adoption, is reaching out to the orphan and extending more than food, shelter, and clothing - it is extending your whole being.

The American College Dictionary states that an orphan is a “child bereaved of parents.”12 The Greek New Testament uses the term “orfanoß” (orphanos) to refer to what we call “orphans.” The Greek lexicon BDAG explains the meaning for this term as “pertaining to being

11 Senna, 64.
deprived of parents and as typically in need of parents.” This being said, it is important that we fix firmly into our mindset the belief that an orphan is more than someone without a parent. An orphan is someone who is uncared for, left to fend for himself. Being an orphan brings with it a sense of hopelessness. To be orphaned can even mean to be lonely. The orphan is the child who, as a result of circumstances beyond his control, finds himself in the unfortunate predicament of being isolated from someone to provide and care for them. Orphans are dealt a hand in life that is absent from the love that every child was designed by the Maker to receive.

The Bible Reveals God’s Love for the Orphan

God loves orphans and this fact His word proclaims. Theologically speaking, all of humanity stood at one point orphaned. We were separated from God the Father as a result of the chasm created through Adam’s fall. When Adam and Eve fell victim to Satan’s schemes (as outlined in Genesis 3) the world changed. From that point forward all of humanity would live with the effects of sin. This catastrophic event, referred to as The Fall, led to five primary “separations.” Dr. Scott Horrell classifies these as: 1) man separated from God, 2) man separated from himself, 3) man separated from fellow man, 4) man separated from nature, and 5) nature separated from nature. There are multiple aspects of the curse that are painfully felt by the orphan. Dr. Horrell is careful to point out that one particular outflow of the separation of man from fellow man includes a “breakdown of marital and familial relationships.” The orphan feels disconnected from his fellow man, namely his birth parents. Secondly, the emotional and

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14 Scott Horrell, “Class Notes.” The Fall and Its Five Separations, ST103 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 2010), 5.

15 Ibid.
spiritual side effects of his abandonment almost always lead the orphan to feel distant, even unloved, from God the Father. While Christian doctrine would uphold God’s love toward all humanity, an orphan may dismiss it due to the pain of his situation. This is a truly devastating effect of sin; this is not what God intended.

God desires relationship: “Upon the inception of the created order, the first negative thing that God commented on was the aloneness of Adam (Genesis 2:18); it was not good for man to be alone. His corresponding relational interactions with Adam in the garden bear out God’s relational nature.”16 It breaks the heart of God for humanity to be found in isolation, both from Himself and from others. The orphan, perhaps, feels the awful sting of this isolation at its uttermost level. Our Father recognizes this pain as it effects Him, too. Thus, God uses His word to make known His cry for justice, especially for the orphan.

Adoption is important from a biblical standpoint because the the Bible reveals God’s heart to become a Father to the orphan and for Him to see His people follow His example. The Scriptures do more than merely hint to its readers regarding God’s perception of caring for the orphan, they clearly proclaim that God is a passionate advocate for the case of the orphan. They paint a vivid picture of familial inclusion that must not be overlooked, an inclusion that even surpasses bloodlines.17 Yeats states, “The authors of the biblical text give specific commands regarding the care for the orphan. These commands fell under the general provisions of hospitality and social justice.”18 Yes, God’s word is replete with commands to His people instructing them to look after the fatherless. Consider, for example, what was revealed through

16 Senna, 6-7.
18 Yeats, 66.
the prophet Isaiah: “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.”19 Here Christians are reminded that we are held accountable for our actions in the midst of God’s sovereignty and are to live in a responsible manner. God’s instructions for His people include, among other things, to look after the cause of the orphan. On this very passage Wildberger comments, “The very nature of human activity was to be a reflection of the justice which mirrored the righteousness of Yahweh.”20 Doing good and seeking justice involves defending the orphan. “According to the Hebrew Scriptures, God becomes the surrogate Father (or surrogate husband in the case of widows) to protect their rights. When the cause of the wicked oppresses the orphan or widow, God promises swift judgment against those he identifies as his children (Ps 10:14;18; 146:9; Jer 49:11; Hos 14:3).”21

The book of Exodus is particularly heralded as important for all believers as it is the book where we find perhaps the most concise and fundamental instructions of God, the Ten Commandments.22 And the reason that God speaks these commands to His servant Moses at Mt. Sinai is explained in the preceding chapter, “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the people, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”23 Hamilton points out, “Thus God’s people are unique, separated from the world, but only that they may serve as

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19 Isaiah 1:17 NASB
21 Yeats, 68.
22 These commandments can be found in Exodus 20:3-17.
23 Exodus 19:5-6a
ministers of reconciliation in that world.”

Yahweh commands His people to act in a certain manner, a holy manner. He has chosen to use believers as His ambassadors. There is a longing in the heart of God to see humanity rightly restored unto Himself. This is one reason why Christian men and women are not to take their own ministry lightly; God wants to use all of us to bring the world into His grace. One aspect of how God’s people are to respond to the orphan crisis is to love these dear children, our neighbors, as we love ourselves. In Psalm 82:3 the Psalmist explains that orphans are to be defended by God’s people. From the context of the passage we can see that this command is in line with Yahweh’s view of justice. Contrarily, it is altogether unjust for the fatherless to be left unattended. It is unjust, unholy for these children to be disregarded because doing so would essentially be the same as delivering oppression. “The Hebrew noun יָתוֹם (yatom) refers to one who has lost his father (not necessarily his mother, see Ps 109:9). Because they were so vulnerable and were frequently exploited, fatherless children are often mentioned as epitomizing the oppressed.”

Yes, God is serious about bringing justice to the orphan. Deuteronomy 10:18 proclaims, “He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.” “In short, God is particularly concerned for those whose status in social and economic matters makes them most vulnerable in human affairs.”

Deuteronomy expounds on this concept of justice for the socially vulnerable in 24:17, “You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or the fatherless...”

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26 Ibid, Internet.

These children are to be judged fairly and treated justly.\textsuperscript{28} We are right to join with the Father in His desire to bring justice to the orphan for to this cause we have been called and commanded. Adoption, while not the sole means, is an excellent method for defending, caring for, and ministering God’s love to these children.

\textbf{Biblical Examples of Adoption}

Thankfully God not only calls and commands believers to seek after justice for the orphan, but He also provides examples in His word of people who have modeled this action. One example would be Pharaoh’s daughter compassionately taking in the condemned Hebrew son, Moses. The Hebrews at this time were under severe tyranny from the Egyptian government because it was feared that the population of the Hebrews was becoming too great for the Egyptians to control. Thus Pharaoh issued a decree for Hebrew male children two years of age and younger to be put to death. Fearing for the life of her newborn son, Moses’ mother took the only action she knew to take in order to protect him - she placed him in a floating basket in hopes that he would be found and rescued by the Pharaoh’s daughter. The Levite daughter undoubtedly prayed for compassion toward Moses. Her prayers were answered when Pharaoh’s daughter, seeing the Hebrew baby, had pity on him and took him in as her own. The biblical writer states it this way: “The child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter and he became her son.”\textsuperscript{29} “Pharaoh’s daughter had apparently decided to adopt the child as her own, because Miriam hinted that the nurse would nurse the child for thee.”\textsuperscript{30} This act of compassion saved Moses’

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\item \textsuperscript{28} Christensen, 597.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Exodus 2:10.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Edward G. Dobson, \textit{The Complete Bible Commentary} (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 80.
\end{itemize}
life. Although the adoption of Moses was not performed in a method that was intended to glorify Yahweh (at least from the perspective of Pharaoh’s daughter), it remains a significant event in that it clearly demonstrates the beauty of providing protection, sustenance, and care for human being. Furthermore, this act points to the sovereignty of the Father. Moses was adopted in a manner that could only have been orchestrated by his heavenly father, Yahweh, revealing His heart for the orphan.

Another prominent biblical figure that provides an example for adoption is Hadassah, or the better-known Esther. Mordecai, Esther’s uncle, exemplifies commendable behavior in that he was the one to take in Esther after the death of her parents. The book of Esther is typically marked as a text that highlights the sovereignty of God, and rightly so. But what must not be overlooked is Mordecai’s dedication to uphold the justice outlined for him in the Law. He could have easily disregarded the responsibility to take in his orphaned cousin, especially during this time when the Persian king Xerxes was creating an environment which made Jewish obedience difficult. Nonetheless Mordecai took in Hadassah and cared for her. Hadassah’s heavenly Father, Yahweh, saw fit to use this orphan girl to redeem His people.

In the book of Ruth we read of a family stricken by the tragedy of the death of three husbands which leaves three related women widowed: Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. Upon the death of the three men the women were left to fend for themselves in a man’s world. Orpah, at the urging of her mother, decided to leave the family and return to her own homeland and people. Yet Naomi accepts the responsibility of her widowed daughter-in-law Ruth, who in turn accepts the responsibility of caring for her widowed mother-in-law.31 This is an extraordinary

31 It must be noted Naomi was very resistant to this new relationship in the beginning, but Ruth was determined to make this work and refused to depart from her. Naomi’s disposition eventually changed and we see her take responsibility for Ruth by the way she accepted her decision and worked to find her a husband.
demonstration where we see a very unique situation that I will term “two-way adoption.” The Lord blessed their decision to take responsibility for each other by granting them favor in the eyes of Boaz. Ruth and Boaz were married and she gave birth to Obed. Ruth 4:14 provides a fitting statement, “Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel.” Blessed is the Lord indeed. By means of the “two-way” adoption He orchestrated a series of marvelous events demonstrating His love for His children.

This is by no means an exhaustive list as there are other Old Testament narratives providing a background for adoption. Jacob’s wife, Leah, adopted as her own numerous children who were not from her womb. Hosea, at the Lord’s instruction, adopts the children born to his adulterous wife out of wedlock. Samuel’s mother, Hannah, allowed him to be adopted by the priest Eli in thanksgiving to the Lord. These stories, and others like them, provide evidence helping us to see that God is without a doubt pro-adoption.

The Old Testament is not alone in its portrayal of adoptive parents. The New Testament shows us God’s heart for the orphan, even through the story of His own Son, Christ. The account of Christ reveals the character of Joseph, a man who took in a child who was not his own and made Him part of his family. We are reminded from the event of the incarnation that Mary and Joseph were not wed when the young Mary discovered that she miraculously conceived. Mary’s fiancé, Joseph, was heartbroken to find out that his bride-to-be had conceived a child that biologically did not belong to him. “Her pregnancy naturally would have been assumed to be the result of an illegitimate union of adultery, a circumstance usually punishable by death... Indeed, she could hardly have expected Joseph to accept her story of the miraculous conception of the

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32 I am doubtful that this term has ever been used, but it does seem to fit the scenario provided in the book of Ruth.
child by the Holy Spirit.” But Joseph was a good man and therefore, not wishing to bring her any added shame, determined in his mind to divorce her quietly. This would have also meant divorcing himself from caring for her child. Yet God, the ultimate Father, was unfolding another plan altogether. Matthew 1:20 explains that God intervened by sending an angel in order to communicate to Joseph very clearly and precisely the divine nature of the situation. Joseph was instructed to take Mary as his wife and to provide the name for the child, the name of Jesus. He took comfort in this visit from the angel and obeyed the instructions. The fact that Joseph named the boy must not go unnoticed, for it symbolically represents the fact that he was taking Him to be his own. He was adopting the Christ. This adoption legitimizes the genealogy recorded in Matthew 1, for it is a direct result of Joseph’s adoption of Jesus that brings Him into the genealogical line of King David. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became the adopted Son of Joseph. This must not be underscored or overlooked. God the Father provided that His Son become the adoptee of an earthly man. Yahweh intentionally met many of the needs of His Son by leaving Him in the care of Joseph.

Even more, God the Father demonstrates His own adoption of Christ. Patterson points this out:

When the Father sends the Son into the world to redeem sinners, he "adopts" Jesus by proclaiming his sonship. At Jesus' baptism and Transfiguration, the Father testifies that Jesus is his beloved Son in anticipation of his saving work (Mt 3:17; 17:5). In addition, the apostles apply Psalm 2:7 ("You are my Son; today I have become your Father") to Jesus in his resurrection and ascension/session (Acts 13:32; Heb 1:5). The Son's

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33 Dobson, 1164.
34 Matthew 1:24-25.
"adoption" in his resurrection and return to the Father is the basis for our union with him and adoption.\textsuperscript{36}

It may appear to some that our Savior entered the world with no father at all, given the circumstances of His birth. But we can see that He certainly did have both an earthly father in Joseph and a divine Father in God. This makes His sonship similar to our own in that he considered Joseph His earthly father, yet very unique in that He is the eternal Son of God.\textsuperscript{37}

These examples of adoption, all of them, should help us to see that God has a great deal of love for the orphan. He refuses to see them abused, mistreated, and treated unjustly. The orphan matters very much to our Father and as such it should be recognized that practicing adoption falls in line with biblical teaching. The Bible proclaims that God is pro-adoption.

\textbf{Christ Relates to the Orphan}

It is no wonder, then, that Christ possesses a powerful and very real connection to the orphan. Christ, who is our best representation of what it means to walk fully in the will of God the Father, explained to His disciples, “I will not abandon you as orphans, I will come to you (John 14:8).” Christ echoes the heart of the Father. He reassures those who were closest to Him, His disciples, that they will not be abandoned. The disciples are meant to be comforted by the fact that they are not going to be separated from their Savior. But why does our Lord use the phrase “abandon you as orphans” when speaking to the men? Because feeling this sense of abandonment, being \textit{ orphaned}, must never be considered part of God’s will. In fact, being \textit{ orphaned} is contrary to the will of God. He desires for humanity to live in community, with the


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
rest of humanity and Himself. Christ understands this isolation better than any other person. He knows what it is like to feel utterly alone, apart from the Father. While on the cross the Bible records Jesus speaking seven different times. One of these moments sheds light onto the magnitude of despair He experienced while shedding His blood for humanity. Matthew 27:48 records Christ’s words, “My God, my God why have You forsaken Me?” The late minister of the gospel, Matthew Henry explains:

That Christ’s being forsaken of his Father, was the most grievous of his sufferings, and that which he complained most of. Here he laid the most doleful accents; he did not say, ‘Why am I scourged? And why spit upon? And why nailed to the cross?’ Nor did he say to his disciples, when they turned their back upon him, Why have ye forsaken me? But when his Father stood at a distance, he cried out thus; for this was it that put wormwood and gall into the affliction of misery. This brought the waters into the soul, Ps. 69. 1-3.38

What can be determined is that the most agonizing pain felt by our Lord was the feeling of being forsaken, abandoned, and yes, orphaned, from His true Father.39 Christ positioned Himself on the cross in order to make Himself the propitiatory sacrifice for all mankind. The weight of humanity’s sin bearing down upon His soul makes it understandable to see how He felt such an intense feeling of isolation from His Father, the Father who abhors sin. Dobson comments, “The sense of being forsaken was not necessarily caused by God the Father looking away from Him, but from His looking at in wrath, as He would look in judgment at a condemned sinner.”40 Nonetheless Christ’s words tell the story of His emotions; Jesus felt abandoned. In His humanity Christ may have surely felt orphaned. His experience is heartbreaking and must lead us to see

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39 This comment is not to suggest that God the Father actually abandoned or orphaned Christ. More to the point, it signifies the emotional experienced by our Lord during this time. His words, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me” are quoted from Psalm 22. This Psalm of lament is used by David to express his own feelings of isolation during a particular hardship he was facing. Christ reciprocates David’s words and David’s emotions to higher level still.

40 Dobson, 1230.
more clearly the magnitude of His sacrifice. To state it clearly, Christ knows the heart of the orphan, both the spiritual orphan and the natural one, from firsthand experience. Christ loves the fatherless.

**The Believer’s Spiritual Adoption**

The Bible also provides evidence of every believer’s adoption as a son or daughter of God. If there is one piece of Biblical evidence that would resonate with the heart of every believer I would suppose the concept of the believer’s own spiritual adoption would be it. J.I. Packer succinctly states, “To those who are Christ’s, the holy God is a loving Father; they belong to his family; they may approach him without fear and always be sure of his fatherly concern and care. This is the heart of the New Testament message.”

This is primarily found in the epistles written by the Apostle Paul. Yeats states that “Paul gives us the most vivid language concerning adoption as a theological concept.” Perhaps one of the primary reasons Paul focused to such extent on spiritual adoption was a result of the tendency for traditional Jews to focus on their biological heritage in Abraham. They firmly held to their natural genealogy as their bedrock of faith. This heritage, along with their obedience to the Law, separated them from the Gentiles and made them righteous before God, at least in their own eyes. Paul, however, understood that God’s plan was to bring all the nations and the people to Himself through Christ.

Paul’s writings also include a shift from providing social justice for the orphan by using the imagery of adoption in explaining the redemption of sin for humanity. “For Paul, there was no more powerful picture of what God had done through Christ for the Gentiles in particular and

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42 Yeats, 69.
43 Galatians 3:7-8 explains that those who place their faith in Christ are indeed sons of Abraham.
all believers in general.”

Consider his words to the people of Ephesus: “Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will...” Paul intentionally uses the language *adoption as sons* as a means of offering a clear mental image of a believer’s relationship to God. He explains that God Himself initiated this relationship through Jesus Christ as an act of goodwill. We would do well to recognize the agape love expressed behind act. Galatians 4:7 states, “Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.” This statement draws upon the parable of the Prodigal son in Luke 15.

The parable is a remarkable image of what it means to be considered a son as opposed to a slave or servant. Jesus tells the story of a young rebellious son who leaves his father with his share of an inheritance in hand. In a season of thoughtless, wild living the young son wastes his inheritance until he had nothing left. Far away from home and overwhelmed with guilt, the boy hired himself out as a servant to a pig farmer. Now destitute, the boy day dreamed of eating the pig’s food. Finally, finding himself in sorry plight, he realized that he still had the option to return home. The Scriptures read, “I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.’” He then acted on this plan and started making his way back home to his father. His plan, however, was never fully carried out because the father, seeing his son returning in the distance, became so overwhelmed with joy that he ran out to meet him and even kissed him. The son, still stricken with guilt, pleaded for forgiveness and

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44 Yeats, 69.
45 Ephesians 1:4-5.
bargained with his father hoping to be reinstated with the family as servant. The father would hear none of that, though, and instead embraced his son! He ordered for new clothes and a feast in celebration of the restoration of their relationship! The father was pleased to offer his son the finest he had to offer, even after his rebelliousness.

This parable shows the distinctions between a slave and son. The young son believed that due to his sinful living he must be treated as a slave or a servant in order to pay for his mistakes. The father, though, recognized the repentance and newness in his heart. He was overjoyed at the rebirth of his son as Luke 15:24 points out, “For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found. And they began to celebrate.” Christians are themselves reborn by the Spirit of God through their faith in the Son of God. When this miracle occurs they too are accepted as true sons among the true Father. Believers are now privileged to call God “Abba! Father!” Christ referred to God as “Abba” in the Garden of Gethsemane, while readying His spirit for the Cross, for God is truly His Father and He is truly His Son. Servants have no inheritance, nor do they participate in a familial relationship with their master. Sons and daughters, by grace, receive both. “Jesus always thought of his followers as children of his heavenly Father, members of the same divine family as himself.”

Belief that we are sons and daughters of the Father must be embedded deep within our spirits for Paul reminds us in Romans 8:15-16 that we have “received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.” No matter our circumstances, our predicament, or our plight we can have the utmost confidence that we belong to God, the Father. The Holy Spirit of sonship signifies this in

48 Packer, 209-10.
our hearts. We are never forsaken, alone, or orphaned; Christ has bound us to God through the price He paid for our inheritance. This understanding, this knowledge of our true relationship with God should humble our spirits, control our character, and result in praise to our Father.

That God the Father would initiate such a bond, such a contract of adoption with humanity deeply reveals the extent of His love. God the Father is the ultimate source of pure adoption due to His initiation of our spiritual renewal, or better stated, our spiritual rebirth. The believer’s adoption is a direct result of the Father’s love. 1 John 3:1 states, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us; that we would be called children of God; and such we are.” J.I. Packer maintains that of all the extraordinary gifts made available to believers through grace, adoption is the greatest.

As we recognize our status before the Father we also do well to recognize that we now have a part to play. Our status as sons and daughters entitles us to numerous spiritual blessings such as direct access to God through prayer, inheritance into His kingdom, and unified membership into His body, to name but a few. Yet our status as heirs to the Kingdom also demands responsibility and action. Not only have our identities undergone transformation through faith in Christ, the way in which we serve God and our world has also gained new meaning. We must now consider how to extend this wonderful, redeeming love to those in need.

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50 Packer, 228.

51 Merida and Morton, 33.
Adoption Embodies Biblical Ideals

In their work, *Orphanology*, Merida and Morton contend that, “We must realize that God has placed in us the call to go to the orphan to ease his and her suffering.”52 Luke 7:47 explains that those who have been forgiven much will reciprocate by loving much. Christians, as ex-orphans and now sons of God, have certainly been *forgiven much*. The way to reciprocate this ultimate forgiveness is by extending our lives in a manner of love - love for the orphan. Adoption may very well *not* be the path God calls you take, but the call to care for the orphan is clear. That being said, adopting orphans should be prayerfully considered. There are various ways to care for the orphan, as will be explained later, but the act of adoption must be something that we are willing to bring humbly before God. I can think of no better life-redeeming event in an orphan’s life than for him to be received into a Christian home and be brought into the family of God. The act of adoption in the fullest sense is an excellent embodiment of the biblical ideals of compassion, covenant, and grace.

Adopting a child provides a great example of *compassion*. When Christians adopt they are in essence committing their lives to the well-being of another. There are many rewards that come to the adopter as a result of adoption, but this must not be the motivating factor behind the action. Rather, adopting a child should be seen as an act of self-surrender, laying one’s own preferences and comforts aside for the betterment of the child. Bringing in the orphaned child should result from a strong sense of compassion. “The word that is translated ‘compassion’ in our English Bibles means ‘to be inwardly moved.’”53 As has been explained, orphans are suffering and their needs are great. Merely recognizing these needs is not compassion. Rather,

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52 Merida and Morton, 38.

compassion stirs our souls emotionally and spiritually as a result of recognizing a need which leads to action. Our God is a God of compassion, as seen by His heart for humanity and His actions toward humanity. Psalm 103:8 states, “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.” Christ, just like God the Father, shows compassion, as in Matthew 9:36, “Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Christ’s willingness to lay down His life on the Cross demonstrates just how deeply moved He was by compassion. These references are provided to show that compassion is a “fundamental and distinctive quality of the Biblical conception of God.”

God’s compassion led Him to initiate His adoption of believers. We have an opportunity to reflect this compassion through the act of adoption, too. The adopter is the person who sees the orphan, is emotionally stirred, and thus brings him home. Adoption embodies the biblical ideal of compassion.

*Covenant* is a theme that runs throughout the biblical text. When we think of the ideal of covenant we need to recognize that from a biblical perspective the term “refers to the act of God in freely establishing a mutually binding relationship with mankind.” Our Father has invited humanity into a mutually binding relationship with Himself through faith in His Son, Christ. This relationship cannot be earned or merited by the person. It is God who initiates and empowers believers to accept His terms of relationship. The Bible records God establishing covenants with men like Noah, Moses, and David. Christians can have confidence that God is true to His word. He is no promise breaker, rather He is a God who refuses to lie as this is

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56 Paul explains in Philippians 2:13 that God is the one who does the work in our lives to live obediently.
contrary to His nature Christ poured out His own blood to establish the new covenant, fulfilling the Law and prophecy spoken of in the Old Testament. He did this, too, as a way of establishing His relationship with believers. The covenant that believers share with God is a covenant that makes us His sons and daughters. He offers humanity a new life through His covenant. Eternal life received from God is just that, it is eternal. Believers are never threatened God to have their new eternal lives removed, taken back, or stripped away. “When the Gentiles in view believed, God sealed them in Christ. This provided a guarantee of their eternal security.” The act of adoption mirrors this biblical theme. The parents are the ones who initiate the relationship, thus creating a covenant with the child to offer them a new life, much the same way God does for believers. The covenant is mutual because it is the child who responds to his parents, he reciprocates their initiation of the relationship by becoming their son. This relationship, this covenant, is binding and is not to be undone. Adoptive parents are not ever to consider breaking their promise of love. Instead, adoption must be seen as lasting covenant that will never be severed. This is the proper way to view the promise made to the adopted child because it is God’s view. As such we see that adoption embodies the biblical ideal of covenant.

When a person chooses to adopt they are displaying grace. Grace is merited to all believers. To rightly understand grace is to rightly understand the love of our Father. Swindoll says that “to show grace is to extend favor or kindness to one who doesn’t deserve it and can

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57 Titus 1:2 and Hebrews 6:18 speak to this.

58 John Piper, *God's Covenant with David*. [article on-line] (soundofgrace.com, December 18, 1983, accessed April, 2012), available at http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper83/121883m.htm; Internet. John Piper explains that God’s covenant is not free in that sense that it extends to all, but is free in that it is undeserved by all. The covenant only extends to those who accept God’s terms for the covenant, as Piper states, “When God makes a covenant he reveals his own job description and signs it. In almost every case he comes to the covenant partner, lays his job description out and says, "This is how I will work for you with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my strength if you will love me as I am, cleave to me, and trust me to keep my word."

never earn it.” That a holy and perfect God would be willing to not only look upon the sin of mankind and be filled with compassion, but become man Himself in order to offer redemption is the ultimate display of grace. We will never deserve nor can ever earn God’s favor; it is only by means of grace that we receive it. Paul explains in Romans 3:24 that believers are justified as a gift of grace made only possible by Christ’s sacrifice. The fact that the heart of a believer is even capable of possessing faith in God is an act of grace. And though this grace is made available freely to those who would believe, it was not free outright. The price of justification was great and God alone was able to provide this for us. “Justification must have been accomplished by the payment of a price. The price of our redemption was the blood of Jesus Christ (Mt 20:28; 1 Cor 6:20; 1 Pet 1:18-19).” By grace we are ushered into the family of God. Similarly, it is by grace that orphans come to belong in their adoptive families. It is by grace that parents extend themselves and become committed to bring home the orphan. And it is by grace that God brings together the heart of the orphan with his family so that they share joy, life, and love. What has the orphan done to merit his acceptance into the family? How can he ever repay his parents for their decision to commit themselves fully to him? The answer: he will never be obligated to such a debt because their kindness is an act of grace, reflected from the heart of God. The adopted child is offered this gift freely just as God has freely Himself to those who call Him Abba, Father. Believers are called by God to model His grace to the world and adoption does just that, it embodies grace.

When Christians adopt they are not only changing lives (their own and the orphan’s), they are also living out biblical principles. The Bible provides great insight into God’s character...
and the nature of His relationship to believers. It teaches that God is compassionate, covenantal, and gracious. As His children, we are called to imitate His character and reflect His love to our neighbors, the poor, the oppressed, and the orphan. Adoption is not only an excellent means of caring for the orphan, it also provides believers an opportunity to demonstrate compassion, covenant, and grace.

**Called to Care for the Orphan**

God’s Word makes clear that He desires for believers to care for the orphan. Doing so means for many that they will pursue the adoption process, but not all believers are called or even expected to adopt. Caring for the orphan does not simply mean to adopt as there are a variety of ways to minister God’s love to the parentless. You may be too young, too old, stretched financially, strapped for time, or even fully convinced that God has not called you adopt. These things do not make you a bad person or off mark in your thinking. Not all believers should adopt, but all believers should be ready to extend their heart to the orphan.

A 2010 study has indicated that in the U.S. there are approximately one half million children in the national foster program. Our government is actively pursuing the betterment of these children’s lives, but this does not mean that Christians are void of a role to play when it comes to fostering. Fostering children is a method of ministering to the orphan, which means that it should be considered by Christians, too. Children in a foster care situation typically reach that point as a result of a deeply troubled family and home life. Ultimately the goal of the foster program is to see families restored and children returned to their original families once healing has occurred. During the healing process these hurt children should be afforded a safe

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environment. Christians should look at the foster care program as an opportunity to extend love and hope to hurting children until their previous situations are mended and determined healthy again. In Christ, Christians are equipped to meet these needs.

Orphanage support is a great need that can be met by Christian men and women. Due to the overwhelming population of orphans, especially in under-developed parts of the world, orphanages can be ill-resourced to meet the task at hand. Orphanages require food, clothing, medicine, educational materials, recreational equipment, adequate housing, and most of all - people. Without these things life for children in an orphanage can be even more difficult. Churches have started to recognize needs like these and are responding. Regular, annual mission trips are planned around how best to minister to children in these situations. Traveling to visit the children, spending time with them, and simply becoming their friends go a long way in ministering to the parentless. Hosting a food drive, collecting toys, and gathering school supplies are all worthy endeavors. And volunteering your time to help at orphanages (which are often understaffed and underpaid), whether it be teaching math or cleaning bathrooms, is a great service. The success of an orphanage requires the commitment of all types from all kinds of people.

Utilizing the tools of the local church is fundamental in caring for the orphan. One potential ministry to the orphan might be to host a meeting at your church that raises awareness about the orphan crisis and teaches others how they can get involved in the solution. Churches especially need to make sure they are teaching about God’s heart for the orphan and helping to equip people who desire to learn more. You may want to seek out your pastor to see how your church can begin an orphan fund in order to raise financial support specifically for the parentless. Another ministry that must never be overlooked is the ministry of prayer. Take initiative to
assemble a group of men and women to meet regularly and pray for the cause of the orphan. All of these, and many more, a great ways care for the parentless, for the children God has called us to serve.

This is only a sampling of the many ways Christians can become involved with solving the orphan crisis. There are numerous others, perhaps options that have never even been considered. God has created all of us uniquely with diverse strengths and gifts. We need to work creatively and cooperatively to see what we can do to help. With the help of the Father we are certain to make great progress.

**Conclusion**

James 1:27 reads, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” God cares deeply about the orphan, His word is clear on this issue. He also expects us to seek how we can be used by Him to reflect this fundamental teaching. Adoption, while it is certainly not the only method of ministering to the orphan, should prayerfully be considered as a way of sharing God’s love to His dear children. How important is adoption? Consider this: “Adoption was never plan B; it has always been plan A. It existed before the world existed. Paul wrote, “In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will” (Ephesians 1:4-5). God planned on the act of adoption before the creation of the world.” Yes, adoption is near and dear to the heart of God. May it be ever so with our hearts, the hearts of His sons and daughters.

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64 Merida and Morton, 55.
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