

If Children, Then Heirs
A Brief Introduction to the Doctrine of Adoption

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receive a spirit of slavery to law back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing

Last year, while out trick-or-treating with my son and our neighbors, a friendly lady opened a door and presented us with a chocolate bar and a tract. It was one of those (in)famous Chick tracts, and this particular one shared the story of a man convicted of a terrible crime who was to be executed for it (http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0027/0027_01.asp). At the last minute, the convict's mother decides to die in his place, and the man receives a pardon. The tract then launches into the fact that someone has in fact died for us. While the decision theology of the Chick tracts always falls short of the grace I wish they showed, I realized that the basic story within the tract is the story that gets repeated so often as the Gospel in brief – the ransom/substitute story. How often does this story sit behind a sermon on a Sunday morning? How often does it get rehashed in a camp or youth group skit? Is this the only story we have to tell? Has justification come to mean merely the story we tell in preaching and less about God's mighty work and our own undeserved salvation?

At some level, the story is a gruesome one, and one that fails to connect with our culture. In a culture that does not have an intuitive sense of guilt or sin, the judgment of the story hardly connects at all. One who thinks God merely wants us to be happy and "nice" can scarcely connect to God the Angry Judge who becomes Merciful Savior. And what's more, the story sets up the old problem of God as divine child abuser, if God is willing to sacrifice one child for the sake of our broken world. The basic outlines of the story might work from time to time, and it certainly ties in nicely with the doctrine of justification, but the story creates more problems than it solves, and it certainly doesn't move us to the heart of good news proclamation in this day. Our culture cares more about relationship than it does about sin, and we need a proclamation to go along with that. The ransom/substitute story is not working any longer, and perhaps it is time that the metaphor of adoption was restored to its place in Christian thinking.

To be clear, the story of the ransom/substitute, of someone dying in our place, is a Biblical story. One need look no further than the heart of Mark's Gospel to see that Jesus' ministry was that of ransoming many (Mark 10.45). As the Gospel spread and as the apostles worked to articulate it in the Roman world and beyond, the idea of ransom and sacrifice took hold as the heart of Christian proclamation. Particularly in the letters of Paul (later emphasized and magnified by Augustine and Luther), the ransom/sacrifice story wedded to the doctrine of justification takes center stage. Romans 3.20-26 lays out that pattern of proclamation as well as anywhere else in Scripture:

²⁰For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.²¹ But now, irrespective of law, the

righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets,²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction,²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed;²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

But it is also Paul who gives us so many other ways of speaking of salvation, other ways of telling the good news of Jesus Christ.

Ironically, the adoption story is found side by side with the justification story in Romans 8. The same chapter in which we read:

²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

also gives us the story of our adoption as God's children. Indeed, God desires that we become member of a large family, with Jesus Christ our eldest sibling:

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

For Paul, the adoption story and the justification story sit side by side, different but interlocked ways of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

Paul doesn't spell out the courtroom drama that is commonly related as the ransom/substitute story in our preaching and the background of most of our theology, so it should not be surprising that the adoption story remains just a hint and glimmer in his letters. The adoption story, like the ransom/substitute story, takes place in a courtroom. Instead of a criminal court with serious charges pending against you, this story is a civil court and the matter in one of guardianship, caretaking, adoption. Somehow it seems, you find yourself in the court without someone to care for you, without a parent to defend you, even protect you from yourself. You have been in and out of homes of people pretending to care for you; the powers of sin and the devil looked very appealing, but they have been unable to convince the court that they should receive permanent guardianship. Without other candidates to adopt you, someone stands up in the courtroom and offers to take you home as a child. The person looks familiar to you, and has an uncanny resemblance to the judge. Quickly, the judge orders the adoption be finalized, and you find yourself in a new home that evening, with an older brother and the judge as parent. You who were abandoned and alone in the world, find a home, a family, a parent – all willing to do the hard work of making you a member of this family. The parent and your older brother are absolutely clear that you are an heir of every good thing this family has and that nothing can change that. You are no longer just a child, but now a child with a parent, with a place in a family, with an inheritance. Everything has changed.

This is a beautiful story to be sure, a loving portrait of God's desire for relationship with us. God wants children, not just slaves or servants or observers. And this is the point at which most commentators launch into the benefits of being God's children, of the meaning and the process of living as God's children in the world. All of those works are of course very helpful, but they leave unmentioned the scandal of the cross, unconsidered why the cross was necessary for God to adopt us. If our usual way of speaking of the cross as ransom/substitution no longer serves the church as well as it once did, we should be careful to elaborate on the necessity of the cross in the adoption paradigm, lest we drift too far afield of the centrality that Scripture clearly places on the cross. Using the adoption story as our paradigm, the cross is still necessary to salvation in a number of ways.

Perhaps most similarly to the ransom/substitution story, the cross could be construed as God bearing the consequences for human brokenness as part of being our loving Parent. This is not so the death of Jesus as ransom or payment, but more Jesus bearing the estrangement, disharmony, and shattered relationships into which humans have led the good creation headlong. God as Parent assumes accountability for our mistakes and injuries. Anyone who has adopted or loved a family formed by adoption knows that adoptive parents must deal with the results of trauma for their children not of their own creation. Whether facing the specter of past abuse or just the trauma of identity integration in the adolescent years, adoptive parents will bear wounds alongside and on behalf of their children. Even in my own family of one biological son, my wife sometimes marvels at the responsibility on us as parents for our son. God suffers for us and we become God's children as "we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8.17).

God does not shirk the responsibility of the Parent to bear consequences for God's adoptive children. In Jesus, God bears those consequences for us, suffering trauma, estrangement, and loneliness on behalf of God's children who bear those scars each day. God deals with the wages of our brokenness. God our defender, our loving Parent, suffers death with us and for us. Or constructed in a more subjective sense, the cross is God demonstrating the depths to which God is willing to go in order to have us as sons and daughters.

If one delves more deeply into the Roman environment of adoption, Jesus' death on the cross becomes the necessary prelude to the legal adoption of other sons and daughters. Under most circumstances, in the Roman world, only a couple that lacked a male heir was eligible to adopt. Adoption was about maintaining the family line, not the welfare of children. If this is so, then Jesus' status as the only Son of God is an impediment to God adopting the rest of the human family as God's children. With Jesus' death on the cross, God is able to adopt others into God's family by the outpouring of the Spirit (Romans 8, John 14.18). With others safely added to God's family, God is then able to raise up Jesus as first fruits and again first born of God's family. The death of Jesus enables the adoption of the rest of God's family.

While this logic might seem backwards, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 21.33-43, Mark 12.2-12, and Luke 20.9-19) points towards it. In the parable, the tenants beat and mistreat various messengers and servants of the vineyard owner. Finally the owner sends his son, who he assumes will be respected by the tenants. However, the tenants plot to kill the son and thereby take his inheritance, which is of course a ridiculous idea that murder

would somehow make them heirs of the family of the dead man. But Jesus, preaching this parable a few days before his death and resurrection, believes that is exactly how God's vineyard will work. By killing the heir, the evil tenants remarkably become heirs as well.

And it is exactly this issue of inheritance that motivates God's work. While in the modern world, we honor adoptive parents who make abundant sacrifices to protect vulnerable children, adoption in the Roman world was about inheritance, as seen by the row of adoptions that solidified claims on the emperorship during the first century. God desires to share God's inheritance with us, to restore to us our proper inheritance which we lost in the fall. In our adoption, we are restored to being children of God, as God originally intended us to live (see Luke's genealogy). To be clear, we certainly benefit from God's protection as God makes us God's children, but God adopts us for the sake of God's own glory, because God is faithful to God's own name (Isaiah 48.11 and others).

The adoption story presents salvation as a matter of relationship rather than ransom, and takes the focus off of human sin and places it more solidly on God's good work of restoring relationship. The adoption story retains the forensic/declaratory nature of justification as it is classically presented in Lutheran and other evangelical teaching. An adoptee has no say in his or her adoption, but that rests entirely in the hands of the adopter; one is declared to be adopted and one does not do anything to merit adoption.

And once adopted, one enjoys an inheritance. This inheritance may seem problematic from an earthly perspective. If my parents suddenly (surprisingly!) have another child, my own inheritance would be reduced from one-half (the other half going to my sister) to one-third. But this problem of dividing the inheritance is of no problem to God, who as the Creator of everything has everything to share with God's children, and more than enough to go around among innumerable children. And of course, from our modern perspective, one only comes into an inheritance by death of another. But in the Roman world, one received an inheritance by birth. The child, though not in complete control of the inheritance while the father is alive, is still the owner of it with the father (Galatians 4.1). God's children are heirs of everything God has – the creation, eternal life, a great store of God's love – not in some glorious hereafter by right now.

Perhaps this adoption story is a new/old way of proclaiming the Gospel to the world. With Paul, we can marvel at God's great work and willing suffering in order to have us as children. We cry out to God, addressing God as intimately as Daddy, with the spirit witnessing that we are dear, beloved, adopted children of God. Out of great love, God makes us God's own children, and if children, then heirs.