

# What is the Doctrine of Adoption?



Basics of  
the Faith

S E R I E S

Michael A. Milton



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## **Basics of the Faith**

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Sean Michael Lucas, Series Editor

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## ADOPTION IS SO MUCH MORE

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines the doctrine of adoption this way:

Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God. (Shorter Catechism, Question 34)<sup>1</sup>

Yet the doctrine of adoption, described with brevity and clarity in this catechism, is worthy of a deeper study. This glorious and most beautiful truth of God's Word is too often overlooked, under-taught or rendered indistinguishable from other doctrines, such as justification and sanctification, in the order of salvation. This is what theologian Professor John Murray (1898–1975) meant when he wrote the following:

Adoption is an act of God's grace distinct from and additional to the other acts of grace involved in the application of redemption. It might seem unnecessary to say this. . . . Too frequently it has been regarded as simply an aspect of justification or as

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another way of stating the privilege conferred by regeneration. It is much more than either or both of these acts of grace.<sup>2</sup>

I have seen Murray's opinion fleshed out in countless counseling sessions with those professing faith in Christ. A continued lack of understanding of this key doctrine can lead to mental confusion, lack of assurance, spiritual depression, and various other diseases of the soul. The cause of this misunderstanding comes from a combination of several dark sources: a lack of knowledge of the whole counsel of God, satanic attack, lies to self or others, doctrinal distortions, misunderstandings, and blatant false teachings of this "present evil age."<sup>3</sup>

Why is it worth our while to consider the doctrine of adoption? In a word, freedom: "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). As it is revealed in God's Word, adoption remains, from beginning to end, a unique and necessary truth to be received, taught, and embraced personally by believers and corporately by church congregations. A correct understanding produces a healthy, balanced view of God, others, and self. As Dr. Joel Beeke has written,

Adoption is heavenly before it is earthly. One is what God does; the other is what we do. Adoption is something God has done and is doing before it is something we have done and are doing. God invented adoption even before He created the world. Adoption is how God brings us into His family.<sup>4</sup>

It is my prayer that this little book in the Basics of the Faith series by P&R Publishing will bring about God's own inten-

tion: that those who trust in Jesus Christ as the resurrected and living Lord should no longer live as “cosmic orphans,” alone in a cold, postmodern age of nonabsolutes. Instead, they should live as sons and daughters of the living God, secure forever in the growing family of a loving heavenly Father who will never let us go.

## THE DOCTRINE OF ADOPTION IN LIFE

Adoption is not a process. Adoption is not an identity. Adoption is a singular, nonrepeatable, unilateral event based on love, choice, sacrifice, and law, which binds the parties forever by an authoritative decree. I know that. I was not “given up”; I was *placed*. I was placed to become a son with a home and a name and a new life. I am not an “adopted person.” Rather, I *was* adopted.

The question of what language to use for adoption—in the earthly or the heavenly family—is not just a matter of sensitivities and politeness. In the New Testament the Greek word for adoption is a “presumed” compound of the Greek word *huios*, “son,” and the word *tithæmi*, “to place.” Adoption is therefore, according to the Greek word employed by the Holy Spirit, most properly, “the placing of a son, or child, into a welcoming family.” This also shows dignity as we contemplate all sides of adoption, including the human realm for the birth parent (or the court, as in my own case) who must make a plan to “place”—not give up—the child.

My father’s sister, my Aunt Eva, adopted me when I was orphaned as a young child. The proposal came before a judge, and he made his authoritative ruling and placed me in the arms of Aunt Eva legally, just as I had been physically placed in her arms before that. By the judge’s word the law of

the land was applied to the love and choice of my aunt, and in one decree, one moment, from the ashes of my story and the desire and prayers of my Aunt Eva's story—a childless 65-year-old widow—a new story began: our story together. Once the story was settled, she never referred to me as her “adopted son.” Sometimes I hear others refer to their children this way. Insensitive and thoughtless remarks about “real children” versus “adopted children” make adoption an ongoing identity rather than a once-and-forever event. They elevate bloodline over covenant, a wrongheaded, human way of thinking in fleshly juxtaposition to the concept of family presented in the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

Unchecked and unexplained, this misguided talk about adoption can ultimately lead to the appearance of malignancies of the human soul, mental anguish, a crisis of personhood, and a host of other diseases of the heart and mind. This is true for both the child and the parent. Just ask a parent whose child was born to them through adoption whether they have heard hurtful remarks; you will hear stories with anger and with tears.<sup>6</sup> I heard others whisper about the widow woman who adopted a little baby as we were in the market, the hardware store, and other places around town. But I thank God that Aunt Eva never used the word “adopted” when she spoke to others about me. I was just her boy, her son, her child just like any other child placed by God into this or that family. Her wording was indicative of more than just wise insight into the heart of her child. It was legal language and, as we shall see, her attitude and actions concerning adoption were radically biblical.

Justin Taylor wrote on his experiences as a father of a child “born” to them through adoption. In dealing with insensitive questions like “Is that your real child?” he wrote these words: “But sometimes I wonder if the way we speak

about physical, earthly adoption shows that we have not yet let the truths about spiritual adoption truly sink into our hearts and minds.”<sup>7</sup>

In fact, my Aunt Eva believed in the truths about “spiritual adoption.” She reared me as her son, loved me as her son, wept over me when I was her prodigal son, and prayed for her son to return to God. The day finally came when she saw the answer to her prayer and rejoiced over her saved son.

As Aunt Eva grew older, my wife Mae and I took care of her. She was my mother and that was right. When our son was born, through adoption, she rejoiced at her grandchild. At almost 99 years of age, when she knew the Lord was calling her home, she raised her hands and blessed my wife and son. She pulled me down to her and whispered in my ear, “Son, keep up the good work of the Lord.”

Had she been a rich woman I would have received more than the tattered old family Bible, a shoebox full of fading black and white photos (of mostly unidentified people who had once meant something to her), and a few household remnants that she kept. That is all she had. It was so little, but I did inherit what she had left. It was only right. I was her heir. I was her son.

Although this book is not about family adoption, we cannot answer the question “What is the doctrine of adoption?” without referring to families. Family adoption has its reference in God’s love and free choice of us as His sons and daughters. God’s adoption of us as His sons and daughters helps us understand adoption in family life.

R. E. Ciampa, in his article on adoption in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, defines adoption as “the legal establishment of a kinship relationship between two people that is recognized as being equivalent to one based on physical descent.”<sup>8</sup> We need that good, sturdy, concise definition.

We need to know that family relations are more than DNA and bloodlines according to the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

One example of the Bible's definition of families is that relationships are formed in Leviticus according to marriage, not bloodline alone—with the effect of restricting who may be married to each other. For instance, a father's son may not marry his deceased father's wife. This understanding, known as consanguinity and affinity, refers thus to blood and affinity through marriage. See Leviticus 18:6–23 and 20:11–21. See also the case studies of Herod's relationship with his brother Philip's wife in Matthew 14:3–4 and of Paul's condemnation of a son marrying his father's wife in 1 Corinthians 5:1.

As with family adoptions, when biblical adoption is not understood or believed, the same hurtful questions emerge.

- Are you *really* God's son, given where you came from and what you have done?
- Are you *really* brothers and sisters since you come from such different backgrounds?
- Will you *really* be loved and welcomed into God's family with the baggage that you bring with you?
- I wonder if adoption means that I will *always* be God's daughter? What if I do something bad? Can this be reversed? *Will He always be my Father?*
- Does adoption make me different from others? Is this special identity good or peculiar?
- The world says that adoption is a second choice, leads to questions of identity, and seeks to perpetuate a story of an inner wound in search of a healing.<sup>10</sup> Is that my destiny as God's child? Am I destined to spend my life seeking my *real* identity?
- Am I whole? Can I ever feel complete?

These existential questions are important. They are important because you or many of those around you are asking them. And there are answers. Some of those answers originate from the philosophies of man or even the diabolical suggestions of mankind's enemy. The world and the devil fill us with so many wrongheaded notions about "flesh versus covenant relations," and hurt, pain, and confusion fester from such ideas.

As a pastor and a minister of the gospel serving a seminary, I long to explain the scriptural doctrine of adoption. I believe that the apostle Paul had that longing too. Have you noticed that nothing changes? There is nothing new under the sun. The same bad teaching or absent teaching on adoption has always been present, with the same tragic results. This is why Paul wrote to believers in his day because he did not want the flock of Jesus, the daughters and sons of God, limping through life as spiritual orphans. So he would teach, with warmhearted pastoral sensitivity,

So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son,  
then an heir through God (Gal. 4:7).

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but  
you are fellow citizens with the saints and members  
of the household of God (Eph. 2:19).

As we transition from thinking about the relationship of family adoption to spiritual adoption, we would do well to meditate on the words of the good old Puritan Thomas Watson. He helps us see that, as wonderful as physical adoption is, like all attempts at trying to describe what God does for us in Christ in human similes and comparisons, we cannot completely describe the ethereal, unsearchable glory

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of God's goodness. We are left to praise Him without fully comprehending the unfathomable richness and insuperable love of our Savior in adoption.

Extol and magnify God's mercy, who has adopted you into his family; who, of slaves, has made you sons; of heirs of hell, heirs of the promise. Adoption is a free gift. He gave them power, or dignity, to become the sons of God. As a thread of silver runs through a whole piece of work, so free grace runs through the whole privilege of adoption. Adoption is greater mercy than Adam had in paradise; he was a son by creation, but here is a further sonship by adoption. To make us thankful, consider, in civil adoption there is some worth and excellence in the person to be adopted; but there was no worth in us, neither beauty, nor parentage, nor virtue; nothing in us to move God to bestow the prerogative of sonship upon us. We have enough in us to move God to correct us, but nothing to move him to adopt us, therefore exalt free grace; begin the work of angels here; bless him with your praises who has blessed you in making you his sons and daughters.<sup>11</sup>

As we move forward in this little book, which I prefer to be a pastoral epistle to your heart from the Word of God, here is my sincere prayer for you:

Let the truth of the doctrine of adoption shine through, O Christ, that Your people—this person reading this book—may be free, that we may be the happy and secure children that You have called us to be. Let this little book be used of Your Spirit, O God, in some way, to

magnify the steadfast love of You, O Father, to little boys and girls who desperately need to know that we have a family; to know who we are in Christ Jesus. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen!

Let's get going.<sup>12</sup>

## SCRIPTURAL TEACHING ON THE DOCTRINE OF ADOPTION

The Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, teaches the doctrine of adoption. It is clearly taught as revealed doctrine in the New Testament passages that we shall examine, and it is taught in sacred story and divine example in the Old Testament, while admittedly in its primordial form. The Bible, when studied as a whole, teaches us that the doctrine of adoption is related to the revelation of four ways in which the almighty God expresses fatherhood.

Before we move forward, it is good at this point to take a more systematic-theological overview of God's fatherhood in the Bible. God's fatherhood is, first, to quote Murray—as I shall do in all but one of the names for God's fatherhood—intertrinitarian. We cannot relate to God's fatherhood in this revealed way. We will never be sons in the same way Jesus is a Son. There are Scriptures that speak of the love of Father God for His Son within the Trinity. An example of this is in the intimate language that the Son uses in John 10, verses 18 and 29 respectively: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father"; "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."