

Adoption and the Goods of Birth

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ADOPTION, AT LEAST FOR THE MOMENT, has thoroughly captured the imagination of those in the United States. Twenty years ago, the practice of adoption was at best marginal and at worst regarded as a social practice attended in various ways by shame. The well-worn tradition of siblings teasing one another with the accusation, “You’re adopted!” has a context. It is striking then to note that *Adoption Nation*, a 2001 bestseller, unselfconsciously bears the somewhat dramatic subtitle, “How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming America.” Although precise statistics are difficult to find, the U.S. adopts more children than all other countries combined,¹ and it seems clear that both the incidence and the cultural influence of adoption are increasing.

These trends have not gone unnoticed in or been unconnected from various Christian communities, particularly evangelicalism. In 2001 it made sense for one theologian to note that “Christian theologians have neglected the doctrine of adoption, with few exceptions,”² and as recently as 2005, Stephen Post noted that adoption “is seldom discussed in theological circles.”³ That appears to be rapidly changing. In July of 2010, Ted Olsen, managing editor of *Christianity Today*, authored a brief editorial, “Adoption is Everywhere: Even God Is Into It,” in which he noted increasing attention to the theme of adop-

¹ “America Adopts: An Open Adoption Meeting Place,” <http://www.americaadopts.com/archives/7604>.

² Robert A. Peterson, “Toward a Systematic Theology of Adoption,” *Presbyterian* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 120-31.

³ Stephen G. Post, “Adoption: A Protestant Agapic Perspective,” in *The Morality of Adoption*, ed. Timothy P. Jackson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 172.

tion at evangelical gatherings—both scholarly and popular. Olson hinted at the theological significance that many see in adoption with a remarkable quotation from J.I. Packer: “Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.”⁴

Packer’s comment represents a powerful way of imagining and pursuing adoption, but as it has taken the form of a theologically invested movement, seeing adoption as reflective of salvation threatens to cancel out the realities of birth. Theological approaches to adoption have varied. On one view, adoption is understood in relation to common, human realities: biological kinship and larger society. An extreme form of this view would see adoptive parents simply as replacements for the “natural parents.” Packer and others mark a shift toward the good of adoption in its own right. Certain elements of this shift, however, serve to put the “goods of adoption” into sharp competition with the “goods of birth.” I will argue that adoptive parents are both more than, and less than, “replacements” for biological parents. For adoptive parents, this means that adoption makes proximate to the adopted family not only the adopted child, but also these “goods of birth.” The complex realities connected with a child’s birth—including individual narrative, culture, history, race, and birth family—cannot then be treated as nonexistent or as a set of evils to be overcome. The task of adoptive parents, rather, is the same task when any created good is made proximate: well-ordered, explicitly human forms of love.

RECENT THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO ADOPTION

Given increasing interest in adoption, it is not surprising that new attention is being directed to the practice of adoption from a theological perspective. This attention has tended to focus on the way in which the actions of adopting parents or the bonds between adoptive parents and adopted children might be understood, and this, too, is unsurprising. Of the three members of the “adoption triad” (birth-parent—adopted child—adoptive parent), those doing the work of theology often belong to the third—or perhaps it is the case that whatever the personal histories of scholars may contain, the third of these identities is most easily made public.⁵ In any case, these explo-

⁴ Ted Olsen, “Adoption is Everywhere: Even God is into it,” *Christianity Today* 54, no. 7 (July 2010): 5.

⁵ Though she writes from a legal, rather than a theological perspective, Maureen A. Sweeney’s 1990 essay, “Between Sorrow and Happy Endings: A New Paradigm for Adoption,” in which she identifies herself as a birthmother, is one of a small number of striking counter-examples. Maureen A. Sweeney, “Between Sorrow and Happy Endings: A New Paradigm for Adoption,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 2 (1990): 329-69.

rations have tended to focus on the motivations of adopting parents and the status of the bond between adoptive parent and adoptive children, especially in comparison with the bond that exists between parents and children born to them.

Very broadly speaking, there have tended to be two kinds of theological approaches to these issues. The first draws upon what is commonly held by all human beings and upon a communal account of good. It is not absent from the accounts of Protestant scholars, but it is taken up more often and more energetically by Catholic writers. In general, approaches of this sort have accorded a certain priority to the natural, biological bond between parents and the children to whom they give birth. A second approach focuses rather on the way in which adoption can be, on its own terms, an expression of selfless love.

GROUNDED IN COMMON HUMAN REALITIES

The first way of thinking about adoption, grounded in common human realities, is seen in at least two forms. First are those that turn to natural law. Central to Catholic moral theology since at least the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, natural law describes a way in which human beings participate in God's own prudential ordering of creation. As rational creatures, human beings are creatures particularly able to pursue what is good and to inhabit well a world that possesses order through its createdness. There are differences in the way this tradition is appropriated, but, most modestly, we can say at least that it sees the biological kinship that occurs naturally as an instance of this orderedness, and as a created good.

Scholars drawing on natural law then identify a "natural" account of the family that guides, in turn, reflection on adoption. As Lisa Sowle Cahill notes, "the Catholic natural law tradition recognizes that biological kinship is an extremely important factor in identity and in social organization, and is rightly a valued facet of all cultures everywhere."⁶ At least two implications for adoption proceed from this beginning in natural law. First, it accords a certain weight to biological kinship as "natural." Second, it recognizes biological kinship as being, at least in some sense, paradigmatic for the parent-child relationship, and considers how adoptive parenting can be understood in light of that paradigm. This is not to say that biological kinship is considered to be absolute; indeed, if this were so in the extreme, there would be no place for adoption at all. To put it simply, adoption is considered a situation in which, given some disruption in

⁶ Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Adoption: A Roman Catholic Perspective," in *The Morality of Adoption*, 164.

biological kinship, the good ends toward which biological kinship is directed—above all, an intimate nurturing of children toward adulthood—can be undertaken in a family setting without that biological connection. The tradition of natural law offers an account of adoption that could be seen, ultimately, as an invitation for human beings to participate in the good toward which creation is directed, even in the midst of brokenness.

A second form of this first approach involves an appropriation of the concept of the common good. This second form focuses not so much on the way in which an adoptive family approximates a biological family, but rather on the reasons for which an adoptive family might do so. Although the term “common good” is used more broadly in political, social, and ethical thought, a particular account of the common good—growing out of the tradition of Catholic social thought—tends to be appropriated in theological reflection on adoption. It assumes all of the commitments of Catholic social thought in general, including the sacredness and dignity of the individual person, but the notion of the common good directs our gaze beyond individuals, not only to families, but also to larger forms of community. While it includes concern for individual human persons, the common good insists that those persons are necessarily relational and that a good exists that is more than simply the sum of the good of all individuals.⁷ It insists strongly that individual benefit must be considered in light of communal realities.

Consideration of adoption growing out of the common good directs attention to the dynamics and the goods of larger forms of communities, not simply to adopted children and certainly not simply to adoptive parents. A focus on the common good begins with the claim that communities and societies flourish when their children are well cared for and well-formed, and it argues that adoption can serve this purpose.

There is, in this perspective, a fundamental insistence that adoption is always caught up in, and directed toward, purposes larger than the individuals involved. Indeed, it depends on the insistence at the heart of the notion of the common good, that those individuals are profoundly connected to others and inevitably connected not only toward their own individual good, but the good, communally understood. This approach to adoption insists that adoption cannot

⁷ The common good was defined at Vatican II as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment.” *Gaudium et spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 26, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, eds. David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992).

be seen only in terms of individual family-building, but rather that it must be evaluated and pursued in light of these larger, communal goods. It resists any tendency to think about and pursue adoption with a concern only for individuals, whether adoptive parents or the children they adopt. Adoption, it insists, occurs in a web of human connection, including both biological kinship and larger human communities.

AN EXPRESSION OF AGAPIC LOVE

Returning to our larger taxonomy, we leave behind theological accounts that begin with what is common to all human beings and turn to a second way of thinking about adoption. This approach tends to think of adoptive parenting, not primarily in connection to or in terms of biological parenting, but rather on its own terms as an act that embodies selfless love. Especially, it is seen in analogy to God's work of salvation, described more than once by St. Paul as "adoption."⁸ This perspective, more commonly taken up by Protestant scholars, tends to focus more exclusively on the adoptive parent(s) as individual agents and to draw on this particularly Christian account of love as the framework for understanding these actions. In general, accounts of adoption of this kind have accorded relatively less weight to the biological bond between parents and the children to whom they give birth, and they have even thought of adoption as possessing a certain kind of priority.

The work of Stephen Post, for example, involves an explicit rejection of what he calls "genealogical essentialism," that is, the assumption that "the genealogical family is the only 'real' one..." and an account in which "the adoptive parent-child relationship is understood 'as-if-begotten' and 'as-if-genealogical.'" Post insists, rather, that "while Christian ethics is deeply appreciative of the birth ties between parent and child as a matter of natural law, it neither suggests pretending that the blood connection exists in cases of adoption nor supposes that the adopted individual will necessarily need to search for his/her genealogical or supposedly 'true' familial identity."¹⁰

The focus, rather, is on the selfless love exhibited by adoptive parents, and the way in which that love can embody and imitate divine generosity. Post identifies this love with the New Testament category of love in the form of *agape*. "Adoptive love," says Post, "is resonant

⁸ Cf. Rom 8:15, Rom 8:23, Rom 9:4, Gal 4:5, Eph 1:5. The Greek term used is *huiothesia*, as in Rom 8:15: οὐ γὰρ ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα δουλείας πάλιν εἰς φόβον, ἀλλὰ ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα υἰοθεσίας, ἐν ᾧ κράζομεν, Ἀββᾶ ὁ πατήρ.

⁹ Stephen G. Post, *More Lasting Unions* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 122.

¹⁰ Post, *More Lasting Unions*, 123.

with *agape* in Protestant thought.”¹¹ Post does suggest that adoption is connected to those outside adoptive families, but it is primarily in a form of witness. It is interesting to note that he explicitly takes the further step of indicating that a commitment to natural or biological family ties is dangerous. “The successful practice of adoption,” he says, “is proof that parents can transcend the ‘selfish gene’ of the evolutionary psychologists, and that children can prosper without the narrative of a biological lineage (which can easily be idolatrous).”¹²

It is not the case, of course, that Post or similar thinkers reject biologically founded parenting. They often affirm the longstanding tradition within Christianity that it is good, and indeed an obligation, for parents to care for their own biological children. They insist, however, that adoption not be seen simply as a substitute for biological parenthood but as a good in its own right. Some even go on to insist that adoptive parenthood possesses a certain priority over biological parenthood. Post notes the influence of Karl Barth, who insisted that the sacred bond between parent and child rests ultimately not in any biological connection, but rather in the will of God and that *all* human parents, of whatever kind, are parents in only a secondary way, always relative to God’s parenthood. Post observes that this influence may be particularly influential in certain Christian communities: “It may be in some small part the Barthian influence on evangelical Protestant Christianity in the United States that has elevated adoption to the pinnacle of moral idealism, for in the final analysis, the only ‘real’ parent of any child is God.”¹³

Scholars taking an approach similar to that of Post tend to speak explicitly of the specific biblical moorings for their framework. They mine deeply the Pauline employment of the concept of adoption, and often note other biblical examples of those “adopted” by non-biological parents, including Moses and Jesus himself.¹⁴ This second way of thinking about adoption focuses on the possibility of seeing adoption as valuable in an intensely personal way and in its own

¹¹ Post, “Adoption: A Protestant Agapic Perspective,” 173.

¹² Post, *More Lasting Unions*, 121.

¹³ Post, “Adoption: A Protestant Agapic Perspective,” 178.

¹⁴ We might also loosely categorize approaches to adoption that draw on theological themes such as “covenant” or “hospitality” in this second group, although I do not focus on these approaches here. As a reminder that a simple description of the first kind of approach as “Catholic” and the second kind of approach as “Protestant” is inadequate, we might note the work of Brenda Destro, who articulates a Catholic view of adoption by relying heavily on the notion of “covenant.” “When professional adoption practice is merged with the concept of adoption as covenant, the result is a good model of Catholic adoption.” “Celebrating the Good Message of Adoption,” U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, <http://old.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rfp/97-rlpdes.shtml>.

right. Adoptive parents are not simply substitutes for biological parents, but are embodied witnesses to a divinely inspired form of selfless love.

DIFFERING APPROACHES IN DIALOGUE

The respective emphases of these two approaches do come into tension in practice. They tend to differ in the priority given to biological and to adoptive parenting. Practically, the relative weight given to biological kinship influences decisions of whether and when children should be separated from birth parents, either by the state or by the decision of those parents themselves. They differ in the paradigms by which they understand adoptive parents and adoption in general. Still, these differing accounts, in which birth and adoption, respectively, are given priority, need not be seen simply as mutually exclusive.

One possibility would be to return to the Pauline texts for further analysis. Although it is more than can be accomplished here, the “new perspective on Paul” offers fascinating possibilities for rethinking these various references to adoption.¹⁵ As a more limited undertaking, we might consider briefly the practice that lies behind Paul’s references and its similarities to and differences from our own.

There exists a small but significant body of literature on this point.¹⁶ In particular, a question arises as to whether the adoption of which Paul speaks was in fact a practice uniting those who were not biologically related, or was it a reaffirmation and perhaps elevation of the relationship to one’s own biological child? Timothy Jackson helpfully summarizes and takes a stance that is midway between some other New Testament scholars. Jackson concludes that “from a historical perspective, adoption in Greco-Roman culture might signify either the adoption of one who was not a natural son or the affirmation of a relation to a natural child, so that there is a question as to whether “the ‘adoption’ referred to by Paul in Ephesians, Romans, and elsewhere [is] the production of a new identity or the affirmation of an old one.”¹⁷

¹⁵ In comparison with an older view that interpreted Paul as sharply contrasting a dependence on good works with salvation by faith alone, the new perspective on Paul focuses more on continuity, and insists, in particular, that Paul should not be understood as leaving Judaism behind.

¹⁶ James M. Scott, “Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of *Huiiothesia* in the Pauline Corpus” (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

¹⁷ Timothy P. Jackson, “Suffering the Suffering Children,” in *The Morality of Adoption*, 191-2.

In short, the distinction between sonship-created and sonship-recognized is not always clear-cut, in either Roman society or biblical theology. Rather than lamenting this complexity, however, we can and should appreciate its implications for contemporary adoption. Even as the 'sacred' adoption of individuals through Christ is partly God's affirmation of them as already made in God's image, so the 'secular' adoption of individuals through the courts should be seen as having two sides or moments. On the one hand, secular adoption as currently practiced is the bestowing of a new legal identity on someone.... On the other hand... [it] is the recognition of the shared humanity of the one adopted.¹⁸

Indeed, a brief review of Paul's employment of adoption language seems to suggest that both realities are in play. In some cases, his language could be taken as establishing a new connection to God where there was none: (1) Romans 8:15: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption;" (2) Romans 8:23: "[W]e ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies;" (3) Ephesians 1:5: "He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will..." (NRSV).

In other cases, he describes the Jews, *God's own people*, as experiencing "adoption" in Christ: (1) Romans 9:4: "They are the Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises;" (2) Galatians 4:4-5: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (NRSV).

Of course, one of these two forms of adoption, the adoption of a child by the child's own biological parent, is unknown in our culture. What, then, can we make of Jackson's reading of these Pauline texts? Perhaps, given that we tend to think of adoption only as initiating something quite new, there is a broad sense in which Jackson's interpretation might inform our thinking. Taking *all* of the Pauline texts together at least challenges the assumption that what precedes adoption must necessarily be erased by it. For the purposes of this essay, it is most helpful to note a simple point. Adoption can be understood as creating something new, but not necessarily in a way opposed to that which came before.

What would it mean to take account of the new reality created by adoption without discounting biological kinship and larger communal realities? Below, I take up more fully the question of whether and

¹⁸ Jackson, "Suffering the Suffering Children," 191-3.

how these differing approaches may actually find certain points of profound convergence. First, however, it will be helpful to note briefly a particularly influential form of the second approach to adoption.

RECENT DEPLOYMENT OF THE SOTERIOLOGICAL ANALOGY

Very recently, there has been a notable development in this second way of seeing adoption, as an expression of agapic love. It might, in fact, be helpfully termed a “movement” in which the Pauline language of salvation as adoption has been taken up in particular and powerful ways, especially among evangelicals. The quotation from J.I. Packer, above, suggests the conceptual center of this new movement. It claims adoption as a central way of understanding salvation itself. There is, then, a profound sense of a theological priority for adoption. It is an imitation of the very action by which God draws humanity into relationship through salvation. On the other hand, it sees salvation itself as a lens for understanding and embracing adoption.

This extension of the second approach might be said to intensify two of its chief characteristics: (1) a profoundly ennobling account of the practice of adoption and (2) a de-emphasis of the importance of biological kinship. *Adopted for Life* (2009), by Russell M. Moore, sits at the center of this new movement and is paradigmatic of its emphases. Moore affirms the theological priority of adoption, and the aims of his work are practical as well as theoretical. Here, appropriation of the central soteriological analogy serves above all as a potential source of profound empathy on the part of adoptive parents toward adopted children. Moore emphasizes the way adoptive parents are themselves, in a spiritual sense, adopted; on that basis, he argues, they should be drawn to identify with those in need of adoption. Early in the book, Moore offers a personal confession: “I was adopted when I was eighteen years old. I wasn’t an orphan, the way most people think of that term. I wasn’t an abandoned child. But I was in a condition far more serious: I was a stranger to the family of God, a slave to sin, and an object of the justified wrath of God.”¹⁹

Seeing themselves as those who have been in need of adoption and have been granted welcome into God’s family serves to relativize the response of adoptive (or potential adoptive) parents to any negative elements in an adopted child’s past. These negative elements, Moore argues, are no worse than those that exist, in spiritual analogy, in the life of the adopting parent.

¹⁹ Russell D. Moore, *Adopted for Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009), 13.

Imagine for a moment that you're adopting a child. As you meet with the social worker in the last stage of the process, you're told that this twelve-year-old has been in and out of psychotherapy since he was three. He persists in burning things... He 'acts out sexually'... She continues with a little family history. This boy's father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather all had histories of violence... Think for a minute. Would you want this child? If you did adopt him, wouldn't you keep your eye on him as he played with your other children? Would you watch him nervously...? Well, he's you. And he's me... That's why our sin ought to disturb us. The 'works of the flesh'—jealousy, envy, wrath, lust, hatred, and on and on—ought to alarm us the way a tightness in the chest would alarm a man whose father and grandfather had dropped dead at the age of forty of heart disease.²⁰

Moore is clear that the analogy expressed in these negative terms has the corresponding positive implications. Just as God has graciously reached out to sinful individuals through "adoption," so God's adopted children should do likewise. This new appropriation of the soteriological analogy exists in the form of scholarly analysis, but it comes in even stronger form in a practical call to adopt. Moore issues an energetic call that notes, again, the way in which adoption can be a witness to, and participation in, a particular form of generous love: "Adoption is about an entire culture within our churches, a culture that sees adoption as part of our Great Commission mandate and as a sign of the gospel itself."²¹ It is clear that he means to stir his readers to action when he asks, "What if we as Christians were known, once again, as the people who take in orphans and make of them beloved sons and daughters?"²²

The soteriological analogy has profound power to relativize a negative past, to create empathy in an adoptive parent toward her adopted child, and, indeed, to encourage the practice of adoption. Implicitly—and perhaps instinctively—Moore has aimed a theological laser beam at exactly what is unnerving about adoption. He has laid bare the deep discomfort that many people feel at the idea of parenting children "not their own." Especially disconcerting, Moore knows, is the possibility of parenting children who have a troubled past. His incisive approach insists that "trouble" is already a part of every Christian's story.

It is worthwhile to ask whether Moore has not, in fact, identified a significantly more powerful and empowering account of adoption

²⁰ Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 29.

²¹ Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 19.

²² Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 20.

than is offered with reference to natural law or the common good. When considering the task of adopting—especially, perhaps, in a situation that is challenging—will the opportunity to step into the shoes of absent biological parents, or to contribute to the common good, be enough to move Christians to adopt or to sustain them through the challenges of forming and nourishing an adoptive family? Isn't Moore's use of the Pauline soteriological analogy an appropriate way to inspire his readers to see that adoption can indeed function as a particular form of loving as they have been loved? Isn't he rightly inspiring courage to believe that it *can be done*?

Many are in fact hearing this call to adopt—from Moore and from others—and taking action as a response to, and an embodiment of, what they experience as God's own adopting love. There are growing numbers of books, conferences, and other gatherings focused on the theme of adoption. In November of 2010 and November of 2011, hundreds of evangelical churches participated in "Orphan Sunday," an event intended to create new awareness of children without parents, including a concrete call to adopt. In February of 2011, Bethany Christian Services "announced that its adoption placements had increased 13 percent since 2009, in large part because of the mobilization of churches."²³

The strengths of Moore's approach are clear, and it seems difficult to object to the possibility of needy children finding new homes. However, at the same time that this appropriation of the soteriological analogy motivates adopting parents by pointing to the hopeful "newness" of adoption, it can also render other realities of adoption invisible. In particular, this appropriation of the soteriological analogy leaves little room for recognizing—and thinking through theologically—the personal, cultural, national, and racial context connected to an adopted child's birth.

Moore suggests, in fact, that this disconnection is an essential, not accidental, part of living out the soteriological analogy in adoption. "Adoption," he writes, "would become a priority in our churches if our churches themselves saw our brotherhood and sisterhood in the church itself rather than in our fleshly identities."²⁴ In other words, Christians must first learn to leave behind whatever preceded their own adoption into God's family. Then, they must foster the reenactment of that leave-taking in the adoptions they undertake.

In the best-case scenario, the circumstances, cultures, and people related to a child's birth are regarded, by analogy, as something to be

²³ Kathryn Joyce, "The Evangelical Adoption Crusade," *The Nation* (April 21, 2011), <http://www.thenation.com/article/160096/evangelical-adoption-crusade>.

²⁴ Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 39.

ignored. “[T]he flight from one’s old identity is part of the gospel itself. That’s what repentance is, which is why the adoption passages of the New Testament spend so much time warning against finding one’s identity in ‘the flesh.’”²⁵ Or, as he says elsewhere, “In Christ, we find Christ. We don’t have our old identities based on race or class or life situation.”²⁶ Encouraged to teach his sons, who were adopted from Russia, “about their cultural heritage,” Moore and his wife responded by teaching them about the heritage of their adoptive family. As he says, these two sons “share our lives, and our story. They belong here. They are Moores now, with all that entails.”²⁷ For practical purposes, their children’s culture of birth does not exist.

In the worst-case scenario, Moore reveals the other side of the relativizing of a negative past. What relates to a child’s birth is related analogically to evil itself. In encouraging all his readers to consider their own “troubled past,” he writes, “Our birth father has fangs. And left to ourselves, we’ll show ourselves to be as serpentine as he is.”²⁸ The problem, of course, is the question of what this means for actual birth fathers. In brief, Moore’s account sees what existed prior to adoption either as irrelevant or as evil. An adopted child’s country and culture of birth, race, his or her birth parents—indeed everything preceding his or adoption—is seen as an occasion for potential idolatry or, indeed, simply as sin itself.

We might say that in this particular turn to a soteriological paradigm, the common realities highlighted in the first approach to adoption—including some of the most fundamental of created realities—have been left completely behind. This way of reading the Pauline soteriological analogy assumes that any reality existing for human beings prior to their adoption into God’s family is either nonexistent or evil. Post has speculated regarding the influence of Barth on current evangelical thinking; perhaps this influence is at work here. As is well-known, Barth makes central to his theological project a refusal to refer to any account of “nature” standing before or behind salvation.

In the concrete practice of adoption, however, a turn away from these “fleshly” matters can cause deep pain. The report of one Christian, adopted transracially, points specifically to the absence she has experienced in church settings. Karis Thompson centers her brief but poignant reflection on memories of singing “Jesus Loves the Little Children.” She notes that as an Asian child with white parents, she

²⁵ Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 28.

²⁶ Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 38.

²⁷ Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 36.

²⁸ Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 29.

was immersed in an ecclesial culture that “evolved out of the questions and certainties, the experience and worldview of the white children whom Jesus loved, with little curiosity about or interaction with the identities, ideas, or insights of any red or yellow or black people.” For Thompson, this had a profound effect. Such a culture “did not engage my most fundamental questions about who I was, why I was considered part of a tribe I had never met, whether I would ever experience more than conditional acceptance within the world at large. At church, I could be partly myself, but never whole.”²⁹ Thompson is only one of many adoptees who report suffering and loss at having the details of their genealogical, racial, cultural, and personal history erased.³⁰

ADOPTED FROM WHERE? ADOPTED FROM WHOM?

We might begin by asking whether this erasure of all that precedes adoption reflects the complexity present in the Pauline texts themselves. Moore certainly does not draw on Jackson’s more nuanced account of the central Pauline texts. We might return to Jackson’s interpretation in order to recall the possibility that the cultural practice of adoption to which Paul appeals, at least in some passages, includes a profound reaffirmation of what came before.

If we are to plunge more deeply into the Pauline account in order to understand adoption—as Moore himself does—the work of Mary Foskett will also be helpful. Foskett takes up the question of exactly how the Pauline language can be applied to the contemporary practice of adoption. It is clear, she says that Paul’s emphasis is indeed directed toward a new reality and a new identity that is created by God’s adopting actions. On the other hand, she points especially to those passages in which God is described as “adopting” Israel in order to emphasize what Jackson would call “sonship-recognized.” “Yet neither is Paul completely unconcerned with history and the accidents of being... If God’s promises are faithful and reliable, then Israel’s identity and covenant relationship with the deity are yet relevant.”³¹ Unlike Jackson, she goes on to make completely clear what she sees as the implication for contemporary adoption practice.

²⁹ Karis Thompson, “Race and Church: A Matter of Identity,” *Word and World* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 195.

³⁰ David Brodzinsky, *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Julia I. Myers, *Coffee and Cake: An Adoptee in Search of Her Past* (Morley, MO: Acclaim Press, 2001); Patrick McMahon, *Becoming Patrick: A Memoir* (San Diego: Deep Root Press, 2011).

³¹ Mary F. Foskett, “The Accidents of Being and the Politics of Identity: Biblical Images of Adoption and Asian Adoptees in America.” *Semeia* 90-91 (2002): 142.

“Paul’s use of adoption imagery erases neither ethnicity nor race nor other sources of identity.”³²

In the erasure of ethnicity, race, and other sources of identity, Moore, however, is not completely alone. At the very least, we must say that what Foskett calls “accidents of being”—what in a context of adoption we might more precisely call “realities of birth”—have been largely ignored in theological exploration. What can we say about them, then?

HEARING BOTH ACCOUNTS

The first approach to adoption considered above, a broadly human, communal perspective, gives relatively more weight to biological kinship and can, in fact, be connected to the second model, which emphasizes the dignity of the love shown by adopting parents. In this way forward, however, two important corrections of the second approach are required.

First, the most central positive claim of this essay, and the most crucial correcting nuance to the soteriological analogy, is this: Realities of birth cannot possibly, on a Christian account, be treated as nonexistent, and certainly not as evil. These, then, are not simply the “realities of birth,” but, more precisely, the “goods of birth.”

The temptation is to see these “goods of birth” as existing in competition with the realities of adoption. The danger is to imagine a zero-sum game, in which “adoptive” and “natural” are in competition, and this raises the possibility, again, of a simple opposition between the two approaches described above—now reconceived *after* an adoption has taken place. In this case, birth threatens adoption. Pursuit of the culture of one’s birth would crowd out pursuit of the culture of one’s adoption. To name one person as “mother” would rule out the possibility of seeing another as “mother,” as well.

This direction of thought, however, need not necessarily be taken. Competition need not be the final word. We might well grant that adoptive parents are in some sense “standing in the place of” biological parents. They do assume responsibility for their adopted children in a way that is virtually unknown outside of biological kinship. Any notion of replacement, however, must be nuanced. First, adoption should not be seen *simply* as standing in the place of biology. The soteriological analogy rightly suggests a unique way in which adoption enacts and witnesses to love. Insofar as they are seen as something more than simply substitutes for biological parents, then, adoptive parents and adoption itself have their own dignity. Second, adoption should not be seen as *completely* standing in the place of

³² Foskett, “The Accidents of Being and the Politics of Identity,” 142.

biology. The realities of birth that preceded adoption are not simply erased by it, and adoptive parents do not, even in extravagant and self-giving love, become biological parents. The “goods of adoption” are, in other words, both more than and less than the “goods of birth.”

The focus of theological considerations of adoption is, as noted above, often the adoptive parents and their connection to their adopted children. What then, we can ask, would such a model mean for adoptive parents? At the least, these realities of birth would be treated as goods which come, with the child, into the immediate ken of the adoptive family. The question, then, attending such an encounter is: what does it mean to love these goods?

The answer to this question begins to appear in a second, more practical claim. While an invocation of agapic love has its place, it must be enriched and expanded by other accounts that take account of finitude and other complexities of human love. *Agape* is, above all, the supreme, sacrificial love of God for humanity; it can only be approximated in creaturely circumstances.³³ Creaturely realities, in fact, condition human love in a way that divine love is not qualified. In the complexities of adoption, this cannot be ignored.

For articulating such a particularly *human* account of love, we find many resources within the Christian tradition.³⁴ Here, I very briefly refer to two. First is an account deeply influential with western Christianity—an Augustinian ideal of love in a particularly human frame. Amidst a created world of multiplicity, the Augustinian call is for *well-ordered* love. Augustine begins with the claim that love, in an absolute and unqualified way, is directed only to God. Love for any created thing is relative. Love for these created things, furthermore, must be ranked according to their relative goodness. Indeed, for Augustine, to be virtuous is precisely to order one’s loves properly.³⁵ This is a simple claim, and in much of moral theology it is simply taken for granted.

Second, St. Thomas Aquinas, as is well-known, takes up an Augustinian tradition of ordered love and offers his own specifications. For our purposes here, we might consider a claim in Aquinas’s ac-

³³ The New Testament clearly uses the term *agape* not only to characterize God’s love, but also human attempts to love in the same way. Cf. especially the highly influential work of Anders Nygren, *Eros and Agape*. In the treatments of adoption considered, especially Moore’s, however, the love taken as informative is precisely God’s own.

³⁴ If we consider the Christian tradition broadly, there is tremendous potential for resources to be drawn on, including not only various accounts of love, but also friendship, specifically.

³⁵ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), Bk. 15.22.

count of charity: “It is written (I Timothy 5:8): ‘If any man have not care of his own and especially of those of his house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel’... Therefore charity regards those who are nearer to us before those who are better.”³⁶ Aquinas, then, insists that loves for various goods must be conditioned not only by their own objective good, but also by the subjective situation of the one who loves. Again, unlike God, human beings love with creaturely limits. Unlike God, they must consider to whom they will direct love and in what ways.

The implication here is a fairly simple one. The love of adoptive parents for the goods of their children’s births does not constitute ascribing absolute value. These goods must be understood relatively: ultimately in relation to God, but also in relation to other goods and other loves. This call to love, then, is not a call for absolute love for the goods of birth. It is not an endorsement of the specter feared by some: the supremacy of the goods of birth as the singular and the “real” source of identity for an adopted person. It is not, in other words, an endorsement of Post’s “genealogical essentialism.” Nor does it suggest that these “goods of birth” take precedence over everything.

Adoptive parents must nurture adoptive families and may, in certain cases, make difficult choices. A family stretched in terms of time or money may choose not to enroll a child in a particular program that would foster continued engagement with her birth culture. Parents who might otherwise pursue connections with members of their child’s birth family may confront circumstances, such as dependency on drugs, that lead them to choose differently.

Ordering our loves does not necessarily make our task easy. Welcoming the goods of birth may require stretching, or even forms of suffering. Just one example is parents who adopt transracially and discern that supporting the goods of their child’s birth—and fully living out their family’s new multi-racial reality—will require fundamentally new forms of living, working, and making social connections.

Here, in order to give fuller context for this essay, I note my personal connection to this topic. All three of my children came to my husband and me by way of adoption. In our lived engagement with adoption, we have experienced a wide range of the realities hinted at here. We have seen firsthand the way in which adoption can be valorized, sentimentalized, and misunderstood, and we have been the recipients of sympathy, condescension, and genuine admiration

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II q. 26, a. 7, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981).

along the way. Within this rich web of our experience, it is our encounter with the goods of birth that we have found to be most foreign—and, often, most baffling—to those not immediately involved in adoption.

There are many goods that could be identified as the “goods of birth.” In each of our children’s cases, these have appeared strikingly in the form of people, that is, members of their birth families with whom we have ongoing relationships. As we have built, fostered, and negotiated these relationships, two things, above all, have proved true. First, these connections have been deeply enriching to our family. I count members of my children’s birth families among the kindest, smartest, most courageous, and most intriguing people I know. The good we have encountered, however, goes beyond the particular strengths and virtues of these individuals. It is in the complex interconnectedness of these relationships that we have begun to see one sense in which the two approaches to adoption described above can come together. Individual attempts to love can indeed draw those who love into a good larger than themselves.

Catholic social thought insists that an individual good is connected to a larger good in a way that does not negate, but deepens, that individual good. The “good of the whole person” is *the very same good* as “the good of all people.”³⁷ When one sees one’s own child flourishing in relationship with his birthmother, when one is able to share with that same birthmother pleasure in seeing her child flourish in one’s adoptive family—there are very particular ways it becomes clear that individual good is, in fact, a matter of deep interdependence.

Second, it must at the same time be said that these connections in our family have been complicated. We are navigating what sometimes seem like deep waters, using what tools we have, but without a map. Over and over, we are confronted with our own limitations. There is no question that this lived experience informs this essay and its emphases in both ways. This call for an embrace of the goods of birth comes from the conviction that this undertaking is both difficult and valuable.

CONCLUSION

The first approach to adoption described above—drawing on natural law and on the common good—begins with structures of family and society, insisting that adoption must be understood against these structures. The second sort of approach, challenging the notion that

³⁷ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), no. 165.

adoption should be understood only in relation to and as a substitute for biological kinship, insists rather that it can have a unique power to embody and witness to God's own generous love. The call of this paper, insisting that birth and adoption are not strictly competitive, is to affirm a model of adoption as a form of generous love but to do so in ways (1) that embrace the goods of birth and (2) that do so using paradigms not only of divine love, but also of specifically human love.

More nuanced treatments of adoption, of course, would have to take into account the radically varying nature of the "goods of birth." A situation in which a child is not raised by her teenage mother, but rather adopted by her aunt and uncle is very different from one in which a child is adopted internationally and transracially.³⁸ A fuller treatment would not shy away from larger questions of whether and when it is prudent to adopt—and when not.³⁹

Furthermore, even in the limited way in which it has been introduced, the call to love the "goods of birth" raises very practical questions. What form, exactly, will this ordered, nuanced love take? When and how does it properly take adoptive parents into discomfiting and demanding forms of love? When does creaturely love find its necessary limits?

Finally, there are very important questions regarding adoption that go beyond a focus on the adoptive parents and their relationship to an adopted child. What theological resources exist, for example, to assist an adopted person herself to understand her relationship to the goods of her birth? How should those who have voluntarily relinquished children see the goods of their child's adoption?⁴⁰ What does

³⁸ Transracial adoption, in particular, carries a host of complex theological and moral questions. Cf. Ivor Gaber and Jane Aldrich, *In the Best Interest of the Child: Culture, Identity, and Transracial Adoption* (London: Free Association Books, 1995); Sandra Patton, *Birthmarks: Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America* (New York: NYU Press, 2000); Hawley Fogg-Davis, *The Ethics of Transracial Adoption* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), Jane Jeong Trenka, *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006). On race considered more broadly in theological perspective—but with particularly important implications for this discussion, cf. J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁹ The realities are complex. One issue that must be confronted is the way in which adoption of children from developing countries can have damaging, unintended consequences, and here an engagement with notions of the common good would be a crucial complement to accounts of individual love. Cf. Michele Bratcher Goodwin, *Baby Markets: Money and the New Politics of Creating Families* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ There have been some attempts in this direction. Stephen Post considers the relinquishment of one's child as "a reasonably free *agapic* act" (*More Lasting Union*, 120).

Christian theology say to those whose children were adopted by others after having been removed from their care?

There is important theological work on adoption yet to do. **M**

We decided that adoption was the best route for us but going into the process, we didn't think we could adopt a baby. We read online forums that said gay adopters were normally only put up for the harder to place children. However, when we chatted to the social worker we'd been allocated, she reassured us there was no difference in the process for same sex couples. Being a parent through adoption is about what you can offer to the child: giving them a loving home and helping them grow into fully-rounded adults. Lew (left) and Rich (right) and their two children. Learning about attachment. Ea Looking to address adoption and other child welfare issues, authorities revised the Child Welfare Act in 2016 to strengthen the functions of child guidance centers in preventing child abuse and bolster their role in providing advice and support for adoptions. The welfare ministry as part of a new plan released in the summer of 2017 set a target for doubling the number of special adoptions to over 1,000 within the next five years. In June 2017, a ministry expert committee released a report on promoting the use of special adoption, which sets out specific steps for amending related provisions in "Adoption is not about finding children for families, it's about finding families for children. ~ Joyce Maguire Pavao, founder of the Adoption Resource Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Child adoption is the process whereby children deprived of a family get people they can call their own and childless couples don't remain deprived of the joys of parenting. Every child has a right to grow in a healthy environment. And this is exactly what adoption endorses. Adoption is a legal procedure that makes the birth child of a couple, the legal child of someone else. It is a process involving three pa Adopting a child, adopt US & international kids, adoption agencies, photolisting, unplanned pregnancy, forums, registry, records, fostering, foster care, open, domestic, private, embryo, transracial, process and costs. We whole heartedly believe in open adoption, and feel that the more people who love a child, the better! Janie & Jay from Texas. We will love your child unconditionally and will respect and honor them for all that they are and will be.