

ADOPTED FOR LIFE

The Priority of Adoption
for Christian Families and Churches

RUSSELL D. MOORE

Foreword by C. J. Mahaney

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Adopted for Life

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Foreword

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.

And I didn't even realize it until my friend Bob began to share with me the good news that Christ died for my sins. As I listened, God opened my heart to understand and believe the gospel. I turned from my sin and trusted in Jesus Christ's sacrificial death for my sins. In that moment, I was adopted into a new family. God the righteous Judge became my merciful Father.

And if you are a Christian, if you have trusted in Christ's substitutionary sacrifice on the cross for your sins, you too have been adopted.

It would have been extraordinary enough for God simply to redeem us, to forgive our sins, to declare us righteous. But he does not stop here—he makes us his children (Gal. 4:4–7). Christian, if you have ever wondered whether God loves you, wonder no longer. God the Father has adopted you as his son or daughter through the person and work of Christ. Here you will find the richest proof of God's personal, particular, and passionate love for you.

I was reminded of my own adoption many times during the twenty-seven years that I had the privilege to serve as a pastor at Covenant Life Church. Covenant Life is filled with parents who traveled to distant (and sometimes dangerous) countries to adopt a child or who adopted a child in the U.S. Meeting these newly adopted children was a unique joy for me. Each time I felt God's presence. Each time I admired the adoptive parents' selflessness and compassion. Each time I was reminded of the Savior's death for my sins so

that I might be adopted by God the Father. Each time I was reminded of God's love for us, displayed in the gospel.

And I had a similar experience when I first read Russell Moore's story of adopting two boys from Russia. A mutual friend sent me the magazine article in which Russell first shared it, and it deeply affected me. I admired Russell and Maria's compassion and love for these children, their selfless willingness to travel such a distance to adopt these boys, their eagerness to welcome Benjamin and Timothy into their family. Even more than that, every time I read their story, I am poignantly reminded of God's love for his adopted children.

I've introduced many others to the Moores' story, and I've personally re-read it several times, but I've never read it in private or in public without tears. I don't think you can read this book without being moved. In fact, before you turn to the first chapter, you should make sure tissues are close by (or if you're a guy, get ready to use your shirtsleeve).

I am so grateful that my friend Russell has written the book you hold in your hands. I want many more people to read this story, to be amazed at God's love displayed in the doctrine of adoption, and to consider the possibility of adopting children themselves. You may not agree with all of Russell's conclusions, but his book will challenge you to carefully consider both the doctrine of adoption and its implications for your life.

So I commend to you my friend Russell Moore's example, and his book. In these pages you will not only encounter one couple's adoption of two Russian children; you will encounter your own adoption. May we all become freshly aware of the adopting grace of God toward undeserving sinners like us.

C. J. Mahaney
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Adoption, Jesus, and You

*Why You Should Read This Book, Especially
If You Don't Want to*

MY SONS HAVE A CERTAIN LOOK in their eyes when they are conspiring to do something wrong. They have another, similar look when they are trying to read my face to see if *I* think what they're doing is something wrong. It was this second look I could see buzzing across both of their faces as they walked up the steps to the old pulpit.

My boys were at a chapel service on the campus where I serve to train pastors for Christian ministry; they were there to hear me preach. They know better than to misbehave in church, and this seemed kind of like a church service. They also knew that I had warned them they could only sit up on the front row if they were still and quiet, with nothing distracting going on down there while I was preaching. But a friend of mine had other plans for them that day.

“Benjamin and Timothy,” he had whispered only a few minutes earlier to my sons, “will you help me introduce your daddy before he preaches?” I fidgeted with my uncomfortable over-the-ear microphone while I watched these two strong, vibrant, little five-year-old boys walk up the platform steps. They were peering at me the whole time to make sure they weren't breaking the rules that we'd agreed upon. I watched them stand behind the pulpit and listened to them answer questions from my colleague. “Who is going to preach today?” my friend asked. “Daddy,” Benjamin responded. “And

what's he going to preach about?" he continued. Timothy answered quickly, leaning into the microphone, "Jesus."

For a couple of seconds, my mind flashed back to the first time I ever saw these two boys. They were lying in excrement and vomit, covered in heat blisters and flies, in an orphanage somewhere in a little mining community in Russia. Maria and I had applied to adopt and had gone on the first of two trips, not knowing who, if anyone, we would find waiting for us. Immediately upon landing in the former Soviet Union, I wondered if we had made the worst mistake of our lives.

Sitting in a foreign airport, with the smell of European perfume, human sweat, and cigarette smoke wafting all around us, Maria and I recommitted to God that we would trust him and that we would adopt whomever he directed us to, regardless of what medical or emotional problems they may have. A Russian judge told us she had two "gray-eyed" boys picked out for us, both of whom had been abandoned by their mothers to a hospital in the little village about an hour from where we were staying.

Sure enough, the orphanage authorities, through our translators, cataloged a terrifying list of medical problems, including fetal alcohol syndrome for one, if not both, of the boys. We looked at each other, as if to say, "This is what the Lord has for us, so here we go." The nurse led us up some stairs, down a dank hallway, and into a tiny room with two beds. I can still see the younger of the two, now Timothy, rocking up and down against the bars of his crib, grinning widely. The older, now Benjamin, was more reserved, stroking my five o'clock shadow with his hand and seeing (I came to realize) a man most probably for the very first time in his life. Both the boys had hair matted down on their heads, and one of them had crossed eyes. Both of them moved slowly and rigidly, almost like stop-motion clay animated characters from the Christmas television specials of our 1970s childhoods. And we loved them both, at an intuitive and almost primal level, from the very first second.

The transformation of these two ex-orphans into the sons I

saw behind the pulpit that day and see every day of my life running through my house with Lego toys and construction paper drawings motivates me to write this book. The thought that there are thousands more like them in orphanages in Russia, in government facilities in China, and in foster care systems in the United States haunts me enough to sit at this computer and type.

I don't know who you are, reading this book. Maybe you're standing in a bookstore, flipping past these pages. Maybe you're reading this book a few minutes at a time, keeping it in a drawer so your spouse won't see it. Maybe you never thought you'd read a book about adoption. Maybe you're wondering if you should.

Well, okay. I never thought I'd write a book about adoption, as you'll see soon enough. Like I said, I don't know who you are. But I know that I am writing this to you. I invite you to spend the next little bit thinking with me about a subject that has everything to do with you, whoever you are.

Whenever I told people I was working on a book on adoption, they'd often say something along the lines of, "Great. So, is the book about the doctrine of adoption or, you know, real adoption?" That's a hard question to answer because you can't talk about the one without talking about the other. Also, it is not as though we master one aspect and then move to the other—from the vertical to the horizontal or the other way around. That's not the picture God has embedded in his creation work.

The Bible tells us that human families are reflective of an eternal fatherhood (Eph. 3:14–15). We know, then, what human fatherhood ought to look like on the basis of how our Father God behaves toward us. But the reverse is also true. We see something of the way our God is fatherly toward us through our relationships with human fathers. And so Jesus tells us that in our human father's provision and discipline we get a glimpse of God's active love for us (Matt. 7:9–11; cf. Heb. 12:5–17). The same truth is at work in adoption.

Adoption is, on the one hand, *gospel*. In this, adoption tells us who we are as children of the Father. Adoption as *gospel* tells

us about our identity, our inheritance, and our mission as sons of God. Adoption is also defined as *mission*. In this, adoption tells us our purpose in this age as the people of Christ. Missional adoption spurs us to join Christ in advocating for the helpless and the abandoned.

As soon as you peer into the truth of the one aspect, you fall headlong into the truth of the other, and vice versa. That's because it's the way the gospel is. Jesus reconciles us to God and to each other. As we love our God, we love our neighbor; as we love our neighbor, we love our God. We believe Jesus in heavenly things—our adoption in Christ; so we follow him in earthly things—the adoption of children. Without the theological aspect, the emphasis on adoption too easily is seen as mere charity. Without the missional aspect, the doctrine of adoption too easily is seen as mere metaphor.

But adoption is contested, both in its cosmic and missional aspects. The Scriptures tell us there are unseen beings in the air around us who would rather we not think about what it means to be who we are in Christ. These rulers of this age would rather we ignore both the eternal reality and the earthly icon of it. They would rather we find our identity, our inheritance, and our mission according to what we can see and verify as ours—according to what the Bible calls “the flesh”—rather than according to the veiled rhythms of the Spirit of life. That's why adoption isn't charity—it's war.

The gospel of Jesus Christ means our families and churches ought to be at the forefront of the adoption of orphans close to home and around the world. As we become more attuned to the gospel, we'll have more of a burden for orphans. As we become more adoption-friendly, we'll be better able to understand the gospel. This book calls us to look forward to an adoptive-missional church. In this book I want to call us all to consider how encouraging adoption—whether we adopt or whether we help others adopt—can help us peer into the ancient mystery of our faith in Christ and can help us restore the fracturing unity and the atrophied mission of our congregations.

It is one thing when the culture doesn't “get” adoption. What

else could one expect when all of life is seen as the quest of “selfish genes” for survival? It is one thing when the culture doesn’t “get” adoption and so speaks of buying a cat as “adopting” a pet. But when those who follow Christ think the same way, we betray that we miss something crucial about our own salvation.

Adoption is not just about couples who want children—or who want more children. 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. This book is intended for families who want to adopt and wonder whether they should. It is also intended for parents with children who’ve been adopted and who wonder how to raise them from here. It is for middle-aged fathers and mothers whose children have just told them they are thinking about adoption.

But this book is also, and perhaps most especially, for the man who flinches when his wife raises the issue of adoption because he wants his “own kids”—and who hates himself a little for thinking like that. It is for the wife who keeps the adoption application papers in a pile on the exercise bicycle upstairs—as a “last resort”—but who is praying fervently right now for two lines of purple to show up on her home pregnancy test. It is for the single twenty-something who assumes that he will marry after a couple of years in the post-college job force, find a nice girl, have a honeymoon for three or four years, and then they’ll start thinking about getting pregnant. It is for the pastor who preaches about adoption as an alternative to abortion on a Sanctity of Human Life Sunday but who has never considered how to envision for his congregation what it would mean to see family after family after family in the church directory in which the children bear little physical resemblance to, and maybe even don’t share the skin color of, their parents. It is for the elderly couple who tithe their Social Security check, dote on their grandchildren, and wonder how they can tangibly help the young couple who ask for prayer every month that they might be parents—and who never seem to show up for Mother’s Day services.

Before we begin, though, let me tell you what this book is *not*. It is not a step-by-step guide to navigating the adoption process, complete with legal advice and agency recommendations. There are good resources available on those things. Second, even if I set out to write a book like that, the whirl of change in this area is such that it would probably be out-of-date by the time you read it. In the United States, state laws change sometimes month to month. Around the world countries authorize international adoption and then close down, only to reopen later. Those logistical issues are much easier than you think. Finding out the reputation and competency of an adoption agency, whether Christian or secular, is not much more complicated than a Google search. And the process itself is mapped out, in as much detail as possible, by a good agency.

Instead I want to ask what it would mean if our churches and families were known as the people who adopt babies—and toddlers, and children, and teenagers. What if we as Christians were known, once again, as the people who take in orphans and make of them beloved sons and daughters?

Not everyone is called to adopt. No one wants parents who adopt children out of the same sense of duty with which they may give to the building fund for the new church gymnasium. But all of us have a stake in the adoption issue, because Jesus does. He is the one who tells us his Father is also “Father of the fatherless” (Ps. 68:5). He is the one who insists on calling “the least of these” his “brothers” (Matt. 25:40) and who tells us that the first time we hear his voice, he will be asking us if we did the same.

I don’t know why, in the mystery of God’s plan, you were led to pick up this book. But I know this: you have a stake in the adoption issue, even if you never adopt a child. There’s a war going on around you—and perhaps within you—and adoption is one crucial arena of that war. With that in mind, there are perhaps some changes to be made in our lives. For some of us, I hope this book changes the makeup of our households. For some of us, I hope it helps change our monthly bank account balances. For all of us, I hope it changes

something of the way we say “brother” and “sister” in our pews next Sunday and the way we cry out “Father” on our knees tonight.

This book is less about a dogmatic set of assertions (although there are some of those) than it is a conversation with you about what I have seen and what I’ve been taught through adoption and what I hope we can all learn together.

And as we start this conversation together, I can’t help but think again of the image of my sons standing behind that pulpit. I’ll admit I was proud of them that day, as I am every day. I don’t idealize them. They are sinners, like all of us. They deserve to be in hell forever, like all of us. And sometimes they are selfish, whining brats—just like their dad.

That day in that chapel, though, I managed to forget about my fatherly pride for a few minutes—and certainly to forget about adoption and orphanages and the events that led to our becoming parents. I just stood up and preached. When I finished, prayed, and walked down the steps from the pulpit, one of my sons, Benjamin, stepped out to the front of the chapel to shake my hand. Where did this little man come from, who stood with such dignity to tell his daddy he loved him and was proud of him? That probably didn’t seem to anyone in the room like an act of warfare—but, oh, how it was.

As I knelt down and hugged him, I realized how small and shallow and needy I had been when, only a few years ago, I had refused to go with my wife to an adoption seminar. I’d been “too busy” to go. “My life’s a whirlwind right now, you know,” I’d said to her at the time. But, really, the idea of adoption left me cold. Now, I was pro-adoption, of course, as a social and political matter (hadn’t I been saying that in my pro-life writings and speeches for years?). But why couldn’t we wait and exhaust all the ethically appropriate reproductive technologies before thinking about adoption? I told my wife, “I don’t mind adopting a few years down the road, but I want my first child to be *mine*.” I can still hear my voice saying those words—and it sounds so small and pitiable and hellish now.

How could I have known what it was like to hold this little boy

in my arms, and his brother with him, knit together with them by a fatherhood that surpassed my genetic code? How could I have read and preached and lectured on Ephesians and Galatians and Romans, how could I have lectured through classroom notes on the doctrine of adoption, without ever seeing *this*? I wasn't evil—or, at least, I wasn't any more evil on this score than any other redeemed sinner—but I was as theologically and spiritually vacuous as the television “prosperity gospel” preachers I made fun of with my theologically sophisticated friends.

Some of you are in the place where I was several years ago. Some of you are where I am now. Some of you are where I will be, by God's grace, when I pronounce one of my sons husband to a godly woman or when I hug one of them as he receives his high-school diploma or, best of all, when I baptize one of them as my brother in Christ.

This book isn't, first of all, a theological treatise on adoption in the abstract, although I hope it helps some of us to see how adoption pictures something true about our God and his ways. This book isn't primarily a book about the practical joys and challenges of adopting children, although I hope it helps many more moms and dads to know firsthand something of why I am wiping away tears as I type this right now. Ultimately, this book isn't really about adoption at all. It's just what my son Timothy probably would tell you it is about, if you asked him. It's about Jesus.