

Adoption embodies the biblical theme of the covenant

This is the first in a series of six articles PPL will be posting to highlight Adoption Month in November. The series is reprinted from “Partakers of the Grace: Biblical Foundations for Adoption,” written by June Ring and published by PPL in 1997.

More Than Legal

Adoption in strict terms is a legal process. But it is important to see that adoption is more than a legal contract—it is a relationship of promise. In fact, this distinction can be made of all family relationships. The relationship between God and his people is always covenantal and never contractual, and God intends that family relationships mirror his covenant relationship with us. The adoption process goes through the courts and is made legal, but as in all parent/child relationships it becomes much more than that. Law and promise are different in principle, the one pivoting on recompense for conduct, the other on acceptance of an unconditional gift.

Families Formed by Covenants

John Calvin wrote of God’s example for us in forming families by covenant:

... [T]he Lord, who adopted his people, promised that he would be their God... [T]he chief part of the word [covenant] consists of promises, by which he adopts and receives us as his own people.¹

Authors Ray Anderson and Dennis Guernsey wrote about the connection between covenants and families, saying:

Covenant or commitment is something you give to another that cannot be taken away once it is given.... [T]his irrevocable deposit of affect we theologically call covenant and sociologically call commitment is the linchpin for a theology of the family.²

God’s Covenant Family

The significance of this permanent promise relationship was not lost on the apostle Paul. In the time that Paul was using the adoption analogy in his writings, his likening of the Christian faith to “adoption as sons” made sense to his contemporaries. Christians were adopted into God’s family, a privilege originally bestowed exclusively on Israel but through Christ made available to all through faith in him. Interestingly,

according to a Roman-Syrian lawbook, a man might be able to disown his biological son if he had good reason, but he could never disown his adopted son. The adoption analogy used by Paul was a strong one indeed.

This is not to say that children adopted into families today have a greater standing than children born into families. But this should clarify any misconception that somehow adopted children are second-best, or not *really* members of the family. A true understanding of adoption gives us an overwhelming sense of permanence; God's permanent relationship to his children, and the permanent relationship of adopted children in their families.

Paul teaches that the gift of justification brings with it the status of sonship by adoption [A]doption is the crowning blessing and belongs to all who receive Christ. The adopted status of believers means that in and through Christ God loves them as he loves his only-begotten Son.

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