

Not
by Nature
but 
by Grace

Forming Families through Adoption

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Introduction

The first chapter of Luke's Gospel tells us that on the eighth day after Zechariah and Elizabeth had been blessed in their old age with the gift of a son, they gathered with neighbors and kin for the circumcision and naming of the boy. Those gathered assumed that he should be named Zechariah after his father, but Elizabeth said, "Not so; he shall be called John." But, responded the others, "None of your kindred is called by this name." So they turned to Zechariah, who had been unable to speak since his encounter in the temple with the angel Gabriel. Handed a writing tablet, he wrote, "His name is John."¹

John, after all, was an unexpected gift of grace to his parents, hardly to be expected by anyone who understood the givens of our natural condition. But John was not born to them simply to continue a line of kinship and descent. Rather, he was to play an essential role in a decisively new historical event, one that far surpassed anything that might seem naturally possible. Perhaps it is no surprise, therefore, that he warned those who came to listen to him not to place their confidence in ties of flesh and blood (thinking themselves secure as descendants of Abraham).² Yet, the connection to Abraham remained important; for, as

St. Paul puts it, gentile followers of Jesus were simply branches grafted onto that Abrahamic root.³

Nature counts. So does history. Both play important roles in the chapters to come, but it is essential to keep in mind that adoption is a work not of nature but of grace. Within theological ethics the last several centuries have seen an increasing turn to history; indeed, that might be said to be a characteristic emphasis of the modern period. It may be, though, that we can illumine the importance—and the limits—of history at least as much by focusing on a particular question as by developing a theory. That, at any rate, is my aim here.

This little study takes adoption as its focus. I do this, first of all, simply because adoption raises for us questions of great practical importance. But it is also true that directing our attention to adoption is a way of bringing into focus the problem of relating nature and history within Christian faith. Consequently, the chapters that follow may seem, I grant, to be a rather idiosyncratic discussion of adoption. Although I try to pay attention to many of the issues that are regularly part of adoption discussions (especially in chapter 3), the center of my concern is the meaning of adoption for Christian theology. That may help to explain why I devote two chapters to thinking about how best to relate adoption to technologies of assisted reproduction and to what has come to be called embryo adoption. The heart of the matter is that adoption is a work not of nature but of grace.

In the first chapter I use literature, theological reflection, and several religious traditions to think through—and puzzle over—the complicated ways in which nature and history work to form families. The second chapter develops what I take to be the basic Christian understanding of adoption, which, as it happens, is an important concept in the New Testament. I recognize, of course, that the practice of adoption in our society raises a wide range of questions and concerns. Hence, while the heart of my interest is theological, I examine some of these other concerns in chapter 3, offering the best response I can to a number of questions that often puzzle us. The fourth and fifth chapters ex-

plore particular questions that arise for people, like us, who live in a world where both adoption and assisted reproduction are common. In their—by my lights, appropriate—concern about many uses of new reproductive technologies, Christians can too easily develop arguments that might almost seem to undermine the legitimacy of adoption. I try in chapter 4 to do justice to their concern without losing the central importance of adoption for Christian thinking. The increasingly widespread use of reproductive technologies has also produced a world in which there are thousands of frozen embryos. Whether we should think of those embryos as suitable candidates for “adoption” is a puzzling question, taken up in chapter 5.

After I had begun to think about this project and read around in the literature about adoption, I realized that these matters had actually been fermenting in my mind for decades. Years ago, when as a much younger man I used to coach boys’ baseball teams in the summer, I had a team that practiced on a field adjacent to a home where troubled boys and girls, removed from their homes, lived for a time. When my team practiced, it was not uncommon for boys from the home to come out and engage me in conversation. It didn’t matter to them that I was trying to keep order among fifteen or so young boys, that I was trying to pitch batting practice, that I was organizing drills. They would stand out there talking to me and asking me questions.

One day I went home and mentioned to my wife how frustrating this was, how much of my (rather scarce) time they were taking. “You have to remember,” she responded, “that you may be the only adult who’s really talked politely to them today.” I tried to keep that in mind, and I hope I did better at future practices. These were boys who needed a family, a place where they belonged. I was far from providing that, but their eagerness to talk with me was a sign of how much they needed what they did not have and what we did not seem able to provide.

A few years later I published in *The Christian Century* six short letters written to a son whom my wife and I had adopted. But it would be wrong to characterize him as an “adopted son.”

He is simply our son, for adoption is not a status that clings to one forever. Hence, the dedication of this book is to two different sets of brothers. In each case one or more is adopted, another is not. But they are simply brothers, as I hope this little book makes clear. Because those letters still seem to me to provide a useful way to think more colloquially about some of this book's themes, I have included four of them as brief interludes between chapters.

I am grateful to two anonymous readers who offered helpful observations and suggestions for the final form of this book. The work of writing it has for the most part taken place under the auspices of the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture. I have enjoyed the congenial support it has provided and am especially grateful to its director, Carter Snead, with whom I have had many helpful discussions about the topics taken up in the pages that follow.