

# RECLAIMING ADOPTION

*Missional Living through the Rediscovery  
of Abba Father*

Dan Cruver, Editor

John Piper | Richard D. Phillips

Scotty Smith | Jason Kovacs

Cruciform Press | Released January, 2011

To my son Daniel, who through his three years of unrelenting suffering and his untimely death taught me not merely how to care for the weak and vulnerable, but how to care for others in and through my own weakness. Together, my son Daniel and I eagerly await our adoption as sons, that is, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).

-Dan Cruver

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“Jesus protects the fatherless and the widow. And Jesus isn’t dead anymore. The Spirit of Christ is afoot in the churches of the Lord Jesus all over the world, pulling us into Jesus’ mission for the orphan, the stranger, the marginalized. This book is part of that pull. The authors writing here are some of the most fearless thinkers and activists in the Christian orphan care movement. Read. Be empowered. And then join Jesus for the orphans of the world.”

**Russell D. Moore**, Author of *Adopted for Life*

“There is no greater need in our day than theological clarity. We live in a pragmatic, hype-driven, emotionally manipulated spiritual landscape. We need the ancient wisdom of the Bible, not another business book or glory story from some cool church. Dan has brought us near to the heart of God, who by His Spirit cries out in our hearts, ‘Abba, Father.’ As you read this book, you will sense the need to embrace your own acceptance as God’s adopted child.”

**Darrin Patrick**, Author of *Church Planter*

“*Reclaiming Adoption* captures the heart and soul of what it means to be a child of God, walk as the feet of Jesus on this earth, and live for eternity with our loving Savior. Make no mistake, this isn’t simply a book on adoption. It’s about the reason we were created and how we are to spend the rest of our days loving others.”

**Tom Davis**, Author of *Fields of the Fatherless*

“*Reclaiming Adoption* is the best kind of theological work: it sings and it sends! As I read, I wanted to praise the Triune God for his great love. Then I felt the urgency of the call to live that love among the world’s orphans. Completely accessible, *Reclaiming Adoption* is thoroughly grounded in Scripture and flows from the great heart of the Church’s

historic understanding of the Word. The authors have uncovered new depths and fresh passion in expressing how adoption clarifies the meaning of our union with Christ. *Reclaiming Adoption* expands our vision to the fuller glory of the whole narrative of Christ's work. Thus, this book can transform the worship, education, and mission of any church bold enough to explore its truth."

**Gerrit Dawson**, Author of *Called by a New Name*

"A stirring call to be involved in the ministry of adoption for Jesus' sake. Gospel-centered. Prophetic. Practical. *Reclaiming Adoption* addresses an issue that has transformed our church as much as any other."

**J.D. Greear**, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, NC

"Many Christians today would not invest much time toward thinking about adopting an orphan. It is not unrelated that the doctrine of adoption is sadly one of the most overlooked doctrines amongst Christians today. It is into this void that *Reclaiming Adoption* speaks so powerfully and reclaims the central place that adoption must take in the thinking of any child of God. *Reclaiming Adoption* is a must read; it will tell your head who you are and move your heart to live in response."

**Steve Chong**, Director, Rice movement, Sydney, Australia

"I am grateful for the work that Dan has done to lift our eyes to the grand story of adoption. With spiritual insight and effective teaching, *Reclaiming Adoption* will help believers better understand our place with Christ and work in His kingdom."

**Ed Stetzer**, President, LifeWay Research

“I can’t recall ever hearing about, much less reading, a book like this before. Simply put, this remarkable volume fills a much-needed gap in our understanding of what the Bible says both about God’s adoption of us and our adoption of others. I highly recommend it.”

**Sam Storms**, Author of *The Singing God: Discover the Joy of Being Enjoyed by God*

“If you want your church to be a church for the great commission and for the orphan, reading *Reclaiming Adoption* is where you need to start.”

**Matt Carter**, Lead Pastor, The Austin Stone Community Church

“The wonderful good news of our adoption by God is such an important truth for Christians today. Too many of us live as slaves, distanced from God because we do not embrace him as our loving Father. As a result our obedience is reduced to mere duty instead of being animated by joy. How can we put this right? This book is a great place to start. Enriching theology and missional application are beautifully interwoven. The result is a book that will warm your heart and might just change your life.”

**Tim Chester**, Author of *You Can Change* and *Total Church*

“*Reclaiming Adoption* consistently reminds the evangelical orphan care movement that it always must be the love of Christ that compels us. Any lesser motivation will ultimately run dry. It is the gospel alone that can carry us forward to ‘defend the fatherless’ through adoption, foster care, and orphan care across the globe.”

**Jedd Medefind**, President, Christian Alliance for Orphans

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**CruciformPress.com**

Published by Cruciform Press, Adelphi, Maryland | [info@CruciformPress.com](mailto:info@CruciformPress.com) |  
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One

# **ADOPTION OF THE PRODIGALS**

Dan Cruver

One of my dreams is that when Christians hear the word *adoption*, they will think first about their adoption by God. I am far from alone in this dream. I share it with the co-authors of this book, with those who have attended *Together for Adoption* conferences, and with innumerable other Christians, beginning with the Apostle Paul.

The word *adoption* is rooted in an ancient Greco-Roman legal practice, and until Paul everyone understood it as referring to human adoption, what we might also call *horizontal* adoption. But Paul gave the concept a theological underpinning by grounding it in *vertical* adoption—God’s adoption of sinners. Paul knew something that much of the Church today seems unaware of—if we learn to first think vertically about adoption, and only then horizontally, we will enjoy deeper communion with the triune God *and* experience greater missional engagement with the pain and suffering

of this world. That's what this book is about. We believe:

- the doctrine of adoption has been widely neglected within the Church historically;
- it remains neglected within much of the evangelical church today;
- a proper theological grounding of horizontal adoption *within* vertical adoption has profound implications for our understanding of both aspects, and therefore;
- to the extent we can recapture theological balance regarding adoption, the Church will be transformed and our witness to the world will be radically redefined.

Why is the theology of adoption so neglected? It's a matter of where Christians have put their attention. It is generally believed that the Church has created thousands of creeds and confessions, with more than 150 being created during the Reformation period alone. Yet in scouring almost 1,900 years of Church history, Philip Schaff found only six creeds that contain a section on theological adoption.

To be fair, there are some good reasons for this. The early Church was primarily concerned with defining and defending the doctrines of Christ and the Trinity. Similarly, the Reformation and post-Reformation Church focused largely on defending the doctrine of justification. We can be eternally glad and grateful these battles were resolutely fought and won. At the same time, the tight focus on a relatively small number of doctrines



unintentionally prevented the Church from developing thorough scriptural teaching on vertical adoption.

This is largely why Christians tend to interpret the word *adoption* first (and often only) in terms of adopting children. This is also why vertical adoption is not on the Christian community's radar to the extent it ought to be; why God's Fatherhood and our status as his beloved children are not a regular part of our vocabulary; and why the Church's missional engagement in the world is not informed and shaped—to the extent it can and should be—by Scripture's teaching on our adoption by God. Our prayer is that this book will contribute to changing all that, for God's glory and our good.

## **Our Prodigal Race**

Few stories have the ability to pierce us as deeply as Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15:11-32 (I suggest you read the passage now unless you are already very familiar with it). In recent years, Tim Keller's teaching on this parable has served the Church well by rightly focusing our attention on the father and his relationship, not merely with the younger son, but also with the older son.<sup>1</sup> As Jesus makes clear at the start, this parable is about both sons, and both are estranged from their father.

The younger son manifests his estrangement by breaking the rules, and the older son manifests his by keeping them. The older son may have been “on mission” with the father *externally*—doing what he was “supposed” to do—but he certainly wasn't on mission with him *internally*. His heart was not aligned

missionally with the heart of the father. Once it became clear to him that the father dealt with his sons according to grace and not according to merit, his emotional capital and missional commitment evaporated. No longer was he capable of “serving” the father. Nor did he have any interest in aligning himself with the father’s agenda of welcoming home lost sons. Thus, *both* sons are prodigals, neither one living in loving communion with the father.

Deep underneath the differing externals of these two sons’ behaviors is the fact that both were “sons of disobedience” and “children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:2-3). But the beauty and wonder of the Parable of the Prodigal Son(s) is that it puts the father’s love on display—a love that embraces the younger son with uninhibited joy (Luke 15:20) and goes out to entreat the older to come join the celebration (v. 28). In both cases, the father comes to the rebels to bring them into *his* joy, his *home*. This father loves prodigals.

We are the prodigals whom Jesus, the true and eternal Son, came to bring home. Some of us are more like the younger brother, and some the older. Look closely enough, however, and most of us from time to time can resemble either one.

All of us were created in the image of God so that we could participate in the communion of love between the Father and the Son (as we will explore at various points in this book), but we were cut off from that communion because of our sin and rebellion. We became an entire prodigal race, sons of disobedience and children of wrath. As a result, all of us have what C.S. Lewis calls a “longing

to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always only seen from the outside.”<sup>2</sup>

The door that seems so impenetrable is the eternal communion of love between the Father and the Son. The story of the Bible is that God the Father sent his only true and eternal Son on a mission, and that mission was to bring many wayward and rebellious sons home to glory (Hebrews 2:10). *That* is the Story behind the story of the Prodigal Sons. That is the only story that gives our stories any meaning or significance.

## **The Story of Adoption**

If we consider the Parable of the Prodigal Sons within the larger context of Scripture, we find that it is really the story of adoption—the adoption of humanity as a prodigal race (Genesis 3:6). Maybe you are thinking, *Jesus’ parable in Luke 15 can’t be about adoption. The two brothers were already the father’s sons; they were just estranged. Adoption is for orphans, not sons.*

That would be a reasonable response, but a misguided one, because the logic starts from human adoption. It takes adoption as we understand it horizontally and tries to force the definition of vertical adoption into the same mold. Yes, the Apostle Paul borrowed the term *adoption* from the Greco-Roman horizontal practice, but he altered and expanded the word, filling it with rich redemptive-historical meaning. When Paul says *adoption*, he does *not* mean it the same way we usually do. We should not try to export the attributes

of human adoption to divine adoption, because that is not what Paul was intending to communicate. Instead, we should import into our view of human adoption Scripture's teaching that those who are outside the Father are without hope or home. Let us allow Scripture to remold our concept of adoption, so we can take on a God-centered view rather than a man-centered one.

Paul is the only writer in Scripture to employ the term *adoption*, and he does so in four separate passages.<sup>3</sup> Looking at each passage in turn transports us to four crucial events in the grand story of redemption. Together, these events reveal the adoption of sinners to be God's ultimate purpose. They also have the power to completely overhaul our understanding of adoption.

**Before Time: Ephesians 1:4-5** In this passage, Paul states that God the Father “chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.” Thus, we see that God's first work of adoption happened even before he created the universe. God did this, Paul emphasizes, “in love.” Before the first molecule was formed, God marked us out with incomparable care—he predestined us—for the great privilege of being his beloved children through adoption. Adoption was not a divine afterthought. It was in God's triune mind and heart before the first tick of human history's clock. Adoption therefore predates the universe itself. Only God and his triune love are “bigger” than adoption.

**Israel: Romans 9:4** Here, Paul identifies adoption as

one of the great privileges Israel enjoyed as God's chosen people: "They are Israelites, and to them belong *the adoption*, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises." Scholars believe that Israel received adoption—that is, officially became God's *corporate* son—when God declared them a nation at Mt. Sinai, three months *after* he delivered them from Egypt. Thus, God redeemed them *before* he adopted them. He redeemed them *in order* to adopt them.

Of course, Israel repeatedly failed in its sonship by rejecting the Father's love, replaying the story of Adam's rebellion. God's mission to bring many wayward and rebellious sons home to glory seemed doomed. Yet through Israel, God's corporate son through adoption, the eternal and perfect Son would be sent to redeem humanity, thereby preserving God's perfect plan.

**Jesus: Galatians 4:4-6** "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, *so that we might receive adoption as sons.*" Here, Paul identifies adoption as the grand purpose or objective of redemption, and he could not have written it more clearly: "...*so that we might receive adoption*"! Once again, adoption shows up at a watershed moment within the unfolding story of redemption. Just as God redeemed Israel in order that he might adopt them, so also has God redeemed us in order that he might adopt us! Redemption is not the end of God's work. Adoption as sons is.

**New Heavens & New Earth: Romans 8:15,22-23**  
Finally, adoption is central to the *end* of redemption's

story. In verse 23, Paul writes, “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for *adoption as sons*, the redemption of our bodies.” Paul identifies the glorification of our bodies as a final outward manifestation of our adoption. When the story of redemption reaches its intended goal, the Bible calls it “adoption.” On that climactic day the heavens and the earth will be transformed into our Father’s house. The renewed earth will become the place where we forever enjoy our Father’s love as his sons and daughters. Paul’s use of adoption in Romans 8 teaches us that missional living is not directionless living. Missional Christians daily fix their eyes on the climax of God’s work of adoption—God’s renewed heavens and earth.

So we see that Paul teaches that God does not merely redeem us—through adoption he brings us into the warmth, love, and gladness of his own family. Redemption was never intended to be God’s “be-all and end-all” work of grace. God redeemed us *in his Son* so that he might love us and delight in us even as he loves and delights in his eternal Son. As we shall see, adoption is God’s act of making room within his triune love for prodigals who are without hope, and providing them with homes in this world and the world to come. This is the story of adoption.

Now it is easier to see why the Parable of the Prodigal Sons is truly about adoption. From God’s perspective, adoption is not essentially about orphans at all. It is essentially about estrangement. Adoption is about God taking into his home those who have rebelled

against him. All humanity is naturally estranged from God. We are all rebels, all disobedient sons, for we are all made in his image and created to worship him, yet we have rejected him—as did Adam, as did Israel. Adoption is about the reconciliation of the rebellious. Our confusion comes when we look at human adoption and end up focusing on the fact that a child needs parents. God focuses on the fact that a lost person needs saving.

As we shall see later in this book, the *ultimate* purpose of human adoption by Christians, therefore, is not to give orphans parents, as important as that is. It is to place them in a Christian home that they might be positioned to receive the gospel, so that within that family, the world might witness a representation of God taking in and genuinely loving the helpless, the hopeless, and the despised.

## **Adoption and Mission**

Today, God seems to be awakening his people to the importance of Scripture's teaching on this subject. The authors of this book are convinced that such an awakening will strengthen the Church's involvement in God's mission in the world. When Christians rediscover God's extravagant love for and delight in them, they begin to live differently. They begin to live missionally. Our goal here is not to define or explain the mission of God in any detail. We want to further equip you for sustained, joyful engagement and participation *in* that mission. These first four chapters, therefore, explore the interwoven stories behind God's work of adoption in the world and its implications for Christian mission. The

chapters by Scotty Smith, Rick Phillips, Jason Kovacs, and John Piper then focus on various implications of adoption for missional living.

*To live missionally means to live each waking moment in light of the gospel so that it increasingly affects every part of our lives for the glory of God's grace in our fallen world. Our hope for this book is that Scripture's teaching on adoption will better equip you to live daily in the good news of the gospel.*

As believers, particularly in the West, it is easy for us to look at the decline of Christianity's cultural influence, the spread of a secular mindset, a volatile political climate globally, and our own internal struggles with sin, and conclude that the sky is falling. It's easy for us to look at the world and ourselves through the narrow lens of what's wrong with both, rather than through the wide-angle lens of what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world for his glory and our good. The narrow lens hinders Christian mission. The wide-angle mobilizes and serves it.

Making sure that we are looking at our world and ourselves through the proper lens is critical for Christian mission. I would contend that adoption is the proper lens through which to view the entire story of redemption.

Few things hinder action within the Christian life more than being unsure of God's love for us personally. Returning for a moment to the story of the prodigals, in *Children of the Living God*, Sinclair Ferguson sheds a particular kind of light on the prodigal son who left home. As he was returning to his father, the prodigal planned to say that he was no longer worthy to be called a son, which



was certainly true. Convinced that, in the depth of his rebellion and rejection of the father, he had lost all hope of receiving the father's love, he intended to offer himself as a slave, hoping merely to survive. Little does the prodigal know, however, that his father eagerly awaits his return.

Ferguson sees something in the prodigal's thinking that parallels how we as Christians often think of God and his fatherly love for us:

Jesus was underlining the fact that—despite assumptions to the contrary—the reality of the love of God for us is often the last thing in the world to dawn upon us. As we fix our eyes upon ourselves, our past failures, our present guilt, it seems impossible to us that the Father could love us. Many Christians go through much of their life with the prodigal's suspicion. Their concentration is upon their sin and failure; all their thoughts are introspective.<sup>5</sup>

When the prodigal son says, “I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants’” (Luke 15:18-19), he is thinking in terms of wages earned rather than extravagant love and grace received. It's as if he is thinking, “I ended up in the far country by squandering my father's wealth, so maybe I can *earn* my way back into his house.”

When we as believers relate to God the Father as this prodigal son relates to his father, we are slow to return to

God after we sin. We don't anticipate—let alone expect—his fatherly embrace. And when we do return to him, we think of him primarily as our master and not our Father. As a result, real Christian joy is absent, passionate Christian living is lacking, and Christian mission is severely hindered.

Christians who doubt God's love for them will not mobilize for mission. Unless we know the Father delights in us even as he delights in Jesus, we will lack the emotional capital necessary to resist complacency and actively engage in missional living. The only people who can truly turn their eyes outward in mission are those who knowingly live within and enjoy the loving gaze of their heavenly Father.

I believe that a biblical understanding of God's Fatherhood will cause us to be better able to look outside ourselves in service to others. If we are not confident of his love, our eyes will turn inward, and our primary concerns will be *our* needs, *our* lack, *our* disappointment, rather than the needs of those around us. As a result, we'll be afraid to take risks or do the hard things even if they are necessary. Or we will do the externals of missional living as an attempt to earn God's acceptance or to keep him and our fellow-Christians off our backs. We will relate to him as if we are wage-earners rather than as his dearly beloved children, the ones in whom he delights.

The logic of wage-earning does not flow out of the gospel of grace. The gospel is joyful news because it speaks to us of the Father's love that has come to us freely in Jesus Christ.