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The First Step in the Way Forward: A Response to David M. Smolin's "Of Orphans and Adoption"

By Dan Cruver

I am glad to say that David Smolin and I share much in common. We both care passionately about orphaned and vulnerable children, are grieved by and oppose all forms of exploitive practice, and seek an understanding of the theology of adoption that comes *out of* Scripture (exegesis) rather than one that is read *into* Scripture (isogesis). Unfortunately, we do not share a common theology of adoption that takes into account the full scope of the biblical story of redemption; hence my response to Smolin's critique of the Christian adoption/orphan care movement's theological foundations.

Smolin misunderstands the motivations of the movement because the foundation of his understanding is an imbalanced and inadequate interpretation of the Apostle Paul's use of adoption. Because Smolin misunderstands the theological *heart* of the movement, he misrepresents the *hands* of the movement. My response will first demonstrate his misunderstanding of the redemptive-historical significance of adoption in Paul's epistles and then conclude with an assessment of how this flawed understanding causes Smolin to miss the *key* connection between the theology of adoption and the practice of adoption.

Smolin's Interpretation of Adoption in Paul

Smolin's work on the importance of inheritance for our understanding of adoption is well-researched, insightful and edifying. But the theology of adoption which Smolin has constructed is too sociologically and culturally determined because it neglects the redemptive-historical reading of Scripture in general and of adoption in particular. Given Smolin's familiarity with the Reformed tradition, it is surprising that his theological work on adoption did not reflect (or at least interact with) Reformed scholarship's redemptive-historical approach or its recognition that adoption held a central place in John Calvin's understanding of salvation.¹ Smolin's

essay would have been greatly helped had he not neglected the Reformed tradition's recovery of adoption.

Dutch New Testament scholar Herman Ridderbos (who along with Geerhardus Vos² is largely responsible for the recovery of redemptive-historical interpretation) has persuasively argued that the chief interpretive framework in all of Paul's writing (both of the whole and of all its subordinate parts, including the five occurrences of "adoption" in Paul³) is God's redemptive activity within human history.⁴

Redemptive-historical interpretation recognizes that the metanarrative (i.e., overarching story) of God's redemptive activity within history, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, must inform our interpretation of every part of Scripture.⁵ Smolin's understanding of adoption, however, is overly reliant upon the research of Francis Lyall and Trevor Burke, who emphasize the sociological and legal strains of adoption with minimal, if any, recognition of Paul's redemptive-historical use of adoption.⁶ After thoroughly evaluating Francis Lyall's interpretive approach, New Testament scholar David B. Garner concluded:

Lyall's contributions are valuable in that he deciphers the Roman legal and cultural backdrop to [adoption], and unveils the

Howard Griffith, *'The First Title of the Spirit': Adoption in Calvin's Soteriology*, *Evangelical Quarterly* 73 (2001); JULIE CANLIS, *CALVIN'S LADDER: A SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY OF ASCENT AND ASCENSION* 123-39 (2010); B. A. GERRISH, *GRACE AND GRATITUDE: THE EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY OF JOHN CALVIN* 87-123 (1993). Gerrish argues that adoption is so central to Calvin's understanding of the Gospel that his presentation of the Gospel can be described as "the good news of adoption" (89).

² See GEERHARDUS VOS, *BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS* (1948); *THE PAULINE ESCHATOLOGY* (1979).

³ Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:4-5; Eph. 1:4-5.

⁴ See HERMAN N. RIDDERBOS, *PAUL: AN OUTLINE OF HIS THEOLOGY* 39, 197-204 (trans. John Richard DeWitt; 1975).

⁵ See MICHAEL SCOTT HORTON, *COVENANT AND ESCHATOLOGY: THE DIVINE DRAMA* 5-6 (2002).

⁶ I am indebted to Tim J. R. Trumper for this observation.

¹ See Tim J. R. Trumper, *An Historical Study of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition* (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2001);

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bearing that such factors might have on investigating the Pauline soteriological motif. On the other hand, while his strict denial of Jewish adoptive procedure is historically and theologically exaggerated, it is his pervasive failure to recognize the biblico-theological [i.e. redemptive-historical] perspective of Pauline theology, which ultimately undermines his conclusions regarding Pauline [adoption].⁷

The problem with Smolin's interpretive approach is not so much in what he does, but in what he fails to do. When interpreting any section of Scripture, we must take into account not only the historical and cultural setting (which Smolin does quite well), but also Scripture's metanarrative of redemption (which Smolin, Lyall, and Burke do not do). Both the setting and the metanarrative must inform our understanding of any text. Smolin's failure to consider the redemptive-historical significance of adoption is *the* fatal flaw in his interpretation.

Systematic theologian Tim J. R. Trumper has compellingly argued that adoption cannot be rightly understood apart from a redemptive-historical reading. The ease by which adoption may be read redemptive-historically is striking. Trumper observes, "With Paul's five-fold use of [adoption] we have a *sketch of the entire history of redemption*"⁸ (e.g., Eph. 1:4-5; Rom. 9:4; Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 8:15-16, 22-23). Elsewhere Trumper argues:

We may prepare the way for the exposition of the doctrine [of adoption] by arranging the apostle's five references to [adoption] *in their clear salvation-historical order* . . . Paul's usage of [adoption] strongly suggests he filled it with historical and theological content derived from the OT . . . All I can suggest here is that we first understand Paul's use of [adoption] in its biblical context. Only then may we begin to ascertain which, if any, aspects of the first-century practices of adoption coalesce with Paul's use of [adoption] and

are demanded by it . . . It is important to remember that for all Paul's awareness of the world he lived in, *closest to his thought, and most determinative of it, was the history and faith of God's people.*⁹

Trumper is not the only one to recognize the importance of understanding adoption redemptive-historically. In his classic book on Paul, Herman Ridderbos writes, "The term [adoption] stems from the Hellenistic world of law; its content, however, must not be inferred from various Roman and Greek legal systems, nor from the adoption ritual of the Hellenistic mystery cults, but must rather be considered against the Old Testament redemptive-historical background of the adoption of Israel as son of God."¹⁰

This redemptive-historical interpretation of adoption is not a modern development either. For example, so central a role did the second-century church father Irenaeus see adoption playing within redemptive-history that he understood it as essentially synonymous with redemption. Irenaeus' understanding of adoption was decidedly redemptive-historical.¹¹

Smolin's neglect of Paul's redemptive-historical use of adoption predisposes him to surprisingly argue that the Gospel writers never employ "either the word [adoption] or the concept."¹² While it is true that the Gospels never use the term adoption, Paul very clearly and intentionally connects two of his adoption texts (Rom. 8:14-15; Gal. 4:4-6) with the climax of Jesus' redemptive work as recorded in Mark's Gospel (Mark 14:32-36), the first of the four Gospels to be written. Significantly, many scholars have found strong exegetical evidence to conclude that Mark's Gospel was influenced by Paul's theology.¹³

According to Mark, Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his crucifixion, cried, "Abba, Father."¹⁴ Paul points us back to that climactic moment in the accomplishment of

⁷ See Garner, *Adoption in Christ* (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2002), 35-36.

⁸ TIM J. R. TRUMPER, WHEN HISTORY TEACHES US NOTHING 85 (2008) (italics added).

⁹ Trumper, *A Fresh Exposition of Adoption I: An Outline*, 22 SCOTTISH BULL. EVANG. THEOL. 1, 60-80 (Spring 2004) (italics added).

¹⁰ RIDDERBOS, *supra* note 4, at 197-98.

¹¹ See MICHAEL REEVES, THE BREEZE OF THE CENTURIES 43-54 (2010); Garner, *supra* note 7, at 4, 272-81; DONALD FAIRBAIRN, LIFE IN THE TRINITY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY WITH THE HELP OF THE CHURCH FATHERS 33-36 (2009).

¹² Smolin, at 12, italics added.

¹³ See D. A. CARSON, DOUGLAS J. MOO, AND LEON MORRIS, AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT 175, 209 (2d ed, 2005).

¹⁴ See Mark 14:32-36.

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our redemption unto adoption by writing, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”¹⁵ Because of the work of Jesus on our behalf we find ourselves caught up by grace to participate in his personal relationship with the Father.¹⁶ Clearly, both Mark and Paul firmly ground our experience of adoption within the very climax of redemptive-history. For whatever reason, Smolin entirely misses this significant connection between Paul and Mark’s Gospel.

Connecting the Theology of Adoption with Practice

Smolin’s neglect of this redemptive-historical reading of adoption and his overdependence upon its sociological and legal strains effectively strips adoption of both its profound theological significance and its far-reaching horizontal implications. Adoption is so important to redemptive history that David Garner persuasively argues that Paul’s use of adoption gives us strong warrant to speak of “redemptive history as *adoptive* history, where in the unfolding of the Father’s revelation he carries out his *adoptive*-historical plan for his fallen created sons.”¹⁷ God’s work of adoption within human history, therefore, is a drama of cosmic proportions. From adoption’s pre-temporal foundation in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3-6) to its climactic consummation in the New Heavens and New Earth (Rom. 8:23), adoption is God’s comprehensive redemptive activity to free the created order from its bondage to decay, once and for all time (see Rom. 8:18-23).

Smolin’s understanding of Paul’s use of adoption misses entirely the strong Exodus imagery that surrounds the three occurrences of adoption in Paul’s letter to the Romans (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4). God’s deliverance of Israel out of Egyptian bondage is *the* echoing story behind the cosmic story of adoption in Romans 8. We find Exodus imagery all throughout Romans 8: “set you free” (v. 2); “led by the Spirit of God” (v. 14; cf. Exo. 13:21); “the spirit of slavery” (v. 15); “subjected to futility” (v. 20); “will be set free” (v. 21); “bondage to corruption” (v. 21); “obtain the freedom” (v. 21); “groaning together” (v. 22; cf. Exo. 2:23); “redemption” (v. 23); and “firstborn” (v. 29; cf. Exo. 4:22). The evidence is overwhelmingly compelling: God intends for us to

understand his work of adoption as his redemptive-activity to free us and all of creation from every effect of the Fall.

How should the climax of adoptive-history as told in Romans 8 inform our understanding of James 1:27 (“visit orphans and widows in their affliction”)? The story of the Bible is the story of God visiting us in our affliction, like he once visited Israel (Exo. 4:31), in order to deliver us from it. So, how should this play out with James 1:27? To visit orphans and widows in their affliction means that we work for orphan prevention through family reunification and preservation, and when reunification is not possible, we actively support indigenous adoption efforts. For some children, though, adoption becomes the way we “visit” them.

Smolin misrepresents the *hands* of the Christian adoption/orphan care movement because he misrepresents the *heart* of its theology. This misrepresentation does not serve orphans well.

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¹⁵ See Gal. 4:4-6.

¹⁶ See CANLIS, *supra* note 1, at 131-33.

¹⁷ Garner, *supra* note 7, at 248 (italics added).