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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 exploitative 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.  

Accordingly, given Smolin’s misunderstanding of the redemptive-historical interpretation of the Apostle Paul’s use of adoption, his misunderstanding of the motivations of adoption, 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.

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

Howard Graff, ‘The First Title of the Spirit’: Adoption in Calvin’s Soteriology, Evangelical Quarterly 73 (2001); Jürg Canis, 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).


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


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.

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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].

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 and cultural setting (which Smolin does quite well), we must take into account not only the historical and theological content derived from the Old Testament redemptive-historical background of the adoption of Israel as son of God. 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.

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.” 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.

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

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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.
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.

Dan Cruver and his wife, Melissa, are parents of a multi-ethnic family of three children. Dan is the director of Together for Adoption, an organization that exists to provide gospel-centered resources that magnify the adopting grace of God the Father in Christ Jesus and mobilize the church for global orphan care. Dan is a frequent conference speaker and writer. He has a M.S. in Counseling and 90+ hours toward a Ph.D. in Theology. Prior to directing Together for Adoption, Dan was a college professor of Bible and Theology and a Pastor of Family Ministries. He is the editor of Reclaiming Adoption: Missional Living Through the Rediscovery of Abba Father (2010).

15 See Gal. 4:4–6.
16 See CANLIS, supra note 1, at 131–33.
17 Garner, supra note 7, at 248 (italics added).