

# TOGETHERFORADOPTION

## Interview with Dr. Dave Garner

*Dr. Garner is Vice President of Advancement and Adjunct Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA.*

### **Dr. Garner, what do you cherish most about the doctrine of adoption?**

The doctrine of adoption, in its full biblical scope, is vast and rich. To answer this question about what I cherish most is like asking me to choose one thing I love most about my wife... not an easy task. However, you asked the question, so I guess I'll try to answer it. If forced to isolate the most cherished aspect of adoption, it would be how it divulges the extent to which God cherishes his children. The love of God for me is not abstraction; it is not intangible or unreachable. God's adoption love is real – determined in the infinite counsel of God's wisdom and incarnated in his own Son. His love for me is eternally determined, historically demonstrated, personally accomplished, and irrevocably certain. I cherish adoption as a doctrine, because it reveals the unfathomable: God actually cherishes us, his children. He has revealed this love over the course of history, and ultimately and most cogently, in his Son. My adoption is secure and binding in the Sonship of Jesus Christ.

### **Do you believe that the doctrine of adoption has received its due attention within the history of the church?**

While it is safe to say that adoption has suffered neglect in the history of the church, the answer must be nuanced a bit, because attention to adoption has varied throughout church history. We find an initial grasp of adoption in the writing of 2nd century church father, Irenaeus, who as the first biblical theologian, views adoption as a synonym for salvation. After Irenaeus, with negligible smatterings here and there, adoption endures an astonishing drought. This remains essentially true until the mid-17th century, when we find it for the first time in history set apart in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

This unprecedented expression of adoption by the Westminster divines served two discernible functions – first, to elevate the doctrine in the life of the church, but second, ironically (and unintentionally, I might add), to diminish it. As attested in the Puritan tradition, Chapter 12 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, entitled, "On Adoption," launched this doctrine into common pastoral consideration. Puritan pastors frequently included adoption in their writings, and preached the doctrine as the crowning component of redemptive benefits.

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However, while the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Puritans wonderfully explored and applied the familial privileges of adoption, the result of isolating adoption as an element of the *ordo salutis* (the application of salvation) was unwittingly to truncate the doctrine from its fuller redemptive-historical scope. Adoption found its home as a doctrine of redemptive benefit with marvelous privileges and assurances. But, by taking status as an element of redemptive privilege, its fuller character was eclipsed. Essentially we can say that adoption has been ignored both by its absence in theological discourse and by its pruned existence in theological discourse. To bring light on to the riches of adoption, the church is now beginning to carry out more careful analysis of adoption in Pauline literature; this growing attention divulges adoption's more expansive reaches, as it unfolds the loving purpose of God in salvation – from its pre-temporal foundation to its climactic consummation.

## Do you see a difference between the apostle John's model of entrance into God's family and Paul's?

As we consider both our finiteness and fallenness, and recognize our epistemological and psychological limitations for understanding the mind of God, we accept the fact that we only know "in part," as the apostle Paul puts it. This limitation doesn't mean that we don't understand truly, as some would assess the Creator/creature distinction (a perspective destined for unbounded cynicism), but it does mean that we cannot understand wholly. God alone possesses exhaustive knowledge, and this fact drives us to humility and gratitude for his self-revelation. A critical element of such posture is recognition that God has spoken decisively in his Word, and by using human language as his means of self-revelation, he has accommodated himself to us. Accordingly, the task of the disciple is to pursue the mind of God, to study his Word, and to live in obedience to his revelation by the power of the Holy Spirit. We know God truly because he has condescended, and revealed himself in human language; Law, prophets, history, narrative, and other literary forms in Scripture serve God's gracious purpose of self-revelation.

All of these background comments drive us to the question of how Paul and John perceive the filial character of our relationship with God in Christ. Neither author speaks exhaustively of the character of the Gospel, of the scope of God's love to us in Christ. But both authors assert the grace of God revealed in Christ as relational, indeed as familial. God's work in and through his Son accomplishes his sovereign and loving purposes: the securing of a people, a family for himself. The authors of Scripture convey this blessing, using differing terms, themes, metaphors, and models. However, Paul is the only biblical author to use the Greek word for adoption (*hiothesia*), and his use of this term communicates with extraordinary richness the redemptive-historical purposes of God in loving his people in and through his only Son. We are the sons and daughters of God, the select children of God, because we are

Spiritually (yes, the capital "S" is intentional) united to the unique Son of God. Adoption brings us before the face of the Triune God – from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4-5), in his elective grace when he chose Israel as his Son (Rom 9:4), in the historic work of Christ as messianic Son (Gal 4:4-5), in the Spirit's work of sanctification (Rom 8:15-17), and in the consummation of the ages when Christ returns (Rom 8:22-23). Paul uses the language of adoption to portray the full scope of God's familial grace to his chosen children.

The apostle John uses a different model of sonship, that of rebirth. We are born into the family of God by receiving the Son of God in faith (John 1:12, 3:1ff), a reality that is nothing short of staggering to John himself (1 John 3:1-3). John presents the critical need for new birth (John 3), a Holy Spirit wrought birth that grants us access to the Father. This regenerative work, creating our new life in Christ, launches us onto the pathway of transforming obedience and then, ultimately, brings us face to face with our Savior.

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Despite the persistent use of John 1:12 and 1 John 3:1-3 as proof texts for adoption in systematic theologies, it is far from self-evident that John shares identical concerns with Paul. To force John into an adoptive sonship model blurs the richness of Johannine concept in its own right, and obviates the unique Pauline perspective of Gospel reality in adoption. Scriptural unity is not compromised by suggesting differing familial ideas between these two authors; on the contrary, we only begin to understand the fullness of God's familial grace to us as we consider the nuanced ideas among biblical authors, as they rejoice in the astounding revelation of God in Christ: his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

**Paul's references to adoption (Eph. 1:4-5; Rom. 9:4; Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 8:15-16; 8:22-23) seem to serve as markers along the path of redemptive history. Would it be a fruitful exercise to view redemptive history (i.e. creation, fall, redemption, consummation) through the lens of the doctrine of adoption?**

You have hit the nail on the head. Not only is it fruitful, but it is essential. This is precisely the way Paul puts the term to work. As I responded to question #3, adoption is not a static notion of redemptive benefit (though it indeed embraces the elements expressed in a statement like that in the Westminster Confession), but a richer, more dynamic term that unfolds the character of God's love from before time to the end of time and beyond. Only when adoption is grappled with in these more expansive terms will we capture the essence of God's adoptive love.

**What difference should the doctrine of adoption make in a Christian's spiritual life on a daily basis?**

Love of a parent for a child is mysterious, powerful; it is edifying and restorative; it is securing and enabling. Likewise but in divine splendor, grasping God's love is always invigorating and encouraging. When we begin to ponder the fact that God's adoptive grace is rooted in his pre-temporal decision to love us, typified in his elective love of Israel in the Old Covenant, brought to us fully in the loving obedience of his Son, applied to us in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and consummated in us at the consummation of the ages, we can only be drawn to worship, gratitude, and awe.

God's adoptive love then is motivation for us to love Him, serve Him, and to emulate Him. As hymn writer Isaac Watts put it, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

**More and more couples are considering adopting transracially adoption. What might the doctrine of adoption**

**contribute to our thinking on the issue of transracial adoption?**

I would actually like to answer this question two ways. First, because all of us are descendants of Adam, we are actually all one race. Language, cultural, or ethnic distinctions do not trump the central truth of our common heritage. The sons of Adam are alone those who become the sons of God in Christ.

Scripture attests, however, that the ethnic divide between Jew and Gentile dominated the historical landscape. Many became convinced that biological connection with Abraham sealed divine favor. Jesus' ministry and the book of Acts confirm the work of the Gospel in clarifying the blessing of Jewishness, and then proclaim this Gospel reality: God's promise - not genetics - serves the evangelical purposes of God.

It is not surprising then that the relationship between Jews and Gentiles plays a central role in Paul's thought. In keeping with the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12, Paul recognizes that God's purposes for blessing the world are realized in Jesus Christ, the eternal and messianic Son of God. All those who are in Christ are Abraham's children (Gal 3) and are true Israel (Rom 9). God's elective grace is manifest across ethnic lines.

With this in mind, trans-ethnic adoption is reflective of the heart of God, who has set aside for himself people from every tribe, tongue and nation (Acts 2; Rev 5-6). From the promise to Abraham (Gen 12), to the commission of Jesus (Mt 28:18-20), to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), and then to the consummation of God's purposes (Rev 4-7), we discover that God's people are extraordinarily diverse. The singular voice of God's people in Rev 7:10 divulges how the glorious diversity of God's people finds powerful unity in the worship of the Lamb. International and/or trans-ethnic adoption provide a visible, tangible representation of Christ's Church in action. Trans-ethnic adoption is, in this way, a living, Gospel sermon.

**Many who will read this interview have adopted children, are considering adopting a child, or are just interested in adoption. What implications might the doctrine of adoption have for couples who have adopted or are interested in adopting a child?**

Created in God's image and restored to that image by the redemptive work of the Son of God, we, as God's children, are privileged to emulate our Father. Imitating our Father is truly a form of worship, and the decision to adopt a child is a crisp Xerox of our Father's love for us. What a great blessing to seek out a child, whose life is charted for misery, and to bring that child into the warmth, security, and discipline of a Christian home. What a privilege to intervene – to reverse inevitable circumstances of abuse, neglect, or worse – and to transfer a child from darkness to light. What a clear picture of God's adoptive grace to us: to propel our own adopted child on the pathway of holiness, to bring blessing to our own heavenly Father!

A further reflection might also prove helpful. I have heard through the years, and indeed

witnessed at times, how married couples begin to look like each other the longer they are together. The force of love produces features of likeness. It is noteworthy that the apostle describes the goal of our adoption in Christ to be holiness (Eph 1); divine elective love has as its goal God-likeness. This fact is further developed in Rom 8:29, where Paul uses the same verb of "predestined" in terms of the believers' conformity into the image of the Son.

In a mysterious way, human adoption is similar. The adopted child never receives new genetics, but his life is so impacted, so directed, so influenced by his adoptive parents that he assumes parental and sibling likeness. When he takes on his new name, he takes on new love. When he takes on new love, he never looks the same because he never is the same. Adoption is not merely a legal contract; it possesses irreversible conforming impact.

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