

Adoption is not a "second-best option"

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[National Organization for Marriage](#) board chair John C. Eastman recently called adoption a “second-best option” for children. He was [speaking to the Associated Press](#) about Chief Justice John Roberts’ position on the rights of same-sex couples: “Certainly adoption in families headed, like Chief Roberts’ family is, by a heterosexual couple, is by far the second-best option.”

The comment reveals less about adoptive families than about Eastman’s willingness to jettison religious tradition for political gain. He places adoptive children a step below biological offspring in a hierarchy of optimal results for married couples who choose to have children. This denigrates those who form families through adoption.

The Christian tradition, on the other hand, suggests that everyone who belongs to God’s family does so not through birth, not even the well-known “second birth” from the Gospel of John. It’s by adoption.

The Bible presents adoption as a graceful and loving act of God, the primary means of becoming a part of God’s family. In the book of Ephesians, God chooses us in love as adopted children, “according to the good pleasure” of God’s will (1:5). Theologian Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner [calls adoption](#) “the overarching Biblical image for the invitation and inclusion of Gentiles in the Judeo-Christian lineage as family of God.”

Augustine indicates that God’s children are made, not born: “If we are made children of God, we are also made gods; but this is done by grace of adoption, and not by generation.” And the Westminster Confession of Faith includes a chapter on adoption that states,

All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption; by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; . . . receive the Spirit of adoption . . . and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting

salvation.

Does this sound like something that's second best?

Undoubtedly, many people adopt children because they cannot conceive their own. But others, like me, choose adoption first. Still others both adopt and have biological children. In my tradition—the Presbyterian Church (USA)—the “birth and nurture of children” is one purpose for marriage. The others are “the well-being of human society” and “the ordering of family life.” Eastman, however, seems to be working from a theology that posits reproduction as marriage’s singular purpose.

But this can lead to idolatry of the biological family. A more adequate vision of marriage’s purpose is that proposed by ministers, theologians and marriage therapists John Patton and Brian Childs: the care of generations.

From this perspective, it’s not the structure of marriage that matters—woman and man, two men, two women. It’s the relationship’s ability to fulfill the God-given function of care for the generation that came before (a couple’s parents and elders), for the generation after (those younger than a couple, including their children) and for the partners themselves.

There is no second-best option when forming a family, especially a Christian family. Any option that fulfills God’s call to care, with relational justice, for three generations—whether they are connected through biological reproduction, adoption, or other means—can be a valid choice. In this understanding, families link with families across time to ensure a continuity of care across the lifespan.

Adoption is God’s graceful means of uniting people called to care for one another. For me and for many others, adoptive families anticipate the commonwealth of God. And there’s nothing second rate about that.