

Adoptees one and all: A letter to Derek

by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

Dear Derek: I wrote last time that being adopted makes you different, and so, of course, in an obvious way it does. But I also hinted that we still had one more thing to think about in order really to get the proper theological perspective on adoption.

Has it occurred to you that every Christian is adopted? That's what St. Paul says in Galatians chapter 4. God sent his Son Jesus, Paul writes, "so that we might receive adoption as sons." And because we have become God's children by adoption, he has "sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" Each one of us has been rescued from our natural state; each has experienced the love of a new and better father; each has become part of a new and better family. So you might think of your own experience of being adopted as an image—inadequate and hazy, to be sure—of what each of us can and must experience if we are really to flourish as human beings made to know the love of God. By God's grace, we're all adoptees.

Once we see this, we should realize that there's a sense in which every Christian father or mother is, in some respects, an adoptive parent—even of their own biological children. Think, for instance, of what we believe happens in baptism. Parents hand their child over to God in baptism, and the child becomes part of that new family, the body of Christ. In other words, parents acknowledge that, important and dear to us as our families are, it is even more important to be taken by adoption into that new family in which we learn to name as our Father the One whom Jesus called his Father. So we relinquish our children and then receive them back—not as our possession but as those God gives us to care for.

This, by the way, is why it's such a mistake when—as sometimes happens—Christians begin to think of baptism as primarily a family event. It's only natural, of course, that family members take special interest in the occasion. But if we begin to think of it as an event primarily for them, it's almost as if we're missing what baptism is really about for Christian faith. We're treating as essential what baptism itself teaches us is not the most important thing.

I think, in fact, that having you for a son has taught me this more clearly than years of theological study. If someone had asked me 20 years ago whether I could love a child who was not my biological child as much as one who was, I would have said that I doubted it. The biological tie seemed so important—and is so important—that I just couldn't imagine that the lack of it could be overcome. You have taught me that I was wrong, for I know that I love you every bit as much as I love Peter, Ellen or Hannah. So, thanks to you, I've learned something about myself.

But more important, I've learned a crucial theological lesson. We might say that biological parents are, in a way, obligated to love their children, while adoptive parents do not act from obligation. There's something to that, and—precisely because there is—we should remember that God is under no obligation to love us and does not love us because he must.

Why, then, does he love us? Well, how can I answer that question except with another? Why do I love you? Just because I do. And—likewise—just because God does. We have no claims on God. We cannot plead the importance of biological kinship. We can only learn to be grateful that, for his own mysterious reasons, he has adopted us as his children.

I like to think that this is a lesson you will not forget. It will, I think, make you yourself a better father some day. I hope I'm around to see that day, because I have every confidence that you'll be a good one.

Love,

Dad

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