

Up for adoption: Romans 8:12-25

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by [Verity A. Jones](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

Last Sunday's family conflict story in Genesis 25 offers preachers an opportunity to talk about family conflict in their own communities. This is risky business for preachers. As they gaze out on worshipers and prepare to begin a sermon, they know—and see—individuals who are currently embroiled in a family dispute or who have been scarred by a family battle.

In this Sunday's epistle reading, Paul's use of the word "adoption" offers preachers an opportunity to discuss how children become part of families. Again, this is risky business. Pastors know that the mere mention of the word "adoption" or "childbirth" will cause many in the congregation to recall their own infertility problems, adoptions, loss of children or parents. But reckoning with the genuine depths of God's grace compels us to speak a word of hope.

Most scholars agree that Paul borrowed the concept of adoption from Greek or Roman law. The Jews did not practice adoption, and the word never appears in the Hebrew scriptures. In *The Epistle to the Romans*, Leon Morris says adoption is "a useful word for Paul, for it signifies being granted the full rights and privileges of [belonging to] a family [in] which one does not belong by nature." One is not born a Christian; one becomes a Christian. This reminds me of my three-year-old friend Grace, who was not born a Roberts, but became a Roberts when her parents adopted her.

Morris continues, "This is a good illustration of one aspect of Paul's understanding of what it means to become a Christian. The believer is admitted into the heavenly family," a family to which the believer has no rights of his or her own. Not only did the concept of adoption help Paul explain how gentiles and Jews could be part of the

same family of God, but it also allowed him to emphasize that salvation is not achieved through birthright but through God's act of grace alone.

An adopted child is received as a gift by her new family, just as the adopting family is a gift to the child. In the same way, the spirit of adoption that Paul commends to the reader is one of gift. It is Paul's way of describing the gift God gives to us in Christ.

David and Sandra Roberts know this gift well. They have adopted four children. One was born with cerebral palsy. Another came from an abusive home. Each, in his or her unique way, is a gift to the Robertses, and the Roberts family a gift to each of them. Their experience of adoption has given the Robertses a special understanding of what it is like to receive God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

The intimacy with God the parent is apparent in the use of the name "Abba." When we cry "Abba! Father!" says Paul, the Holy Spirit is bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. His use of "Abba" recalls Jesus' use of the word in Mark's Gospel. Morris explains that "the word is from the babbling of a little child (like 'papa') and is the familiar term used in the home." Jesus probably used this word in the Lord's Prayer and, when he did so, he was giving his followers "the privilege of being in the heavenly family and of addressing God in this warm and friendly way."

We are brought near to the heart of God through the spirit of adoption, and not shut in the back room to make way for the "real" children, whoever we think the real children may be. Sometimes we think the elders in the church, pious Christians, pastors or other brave souls who make sacrifices for their faith are the real Christians, the real children of God. But Paul says "we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." Through the spirit of adoption we become part of the family, and are invited forward to whisper "Mommy" or "Daddy" into the ear of our great parent, the one true God. We don't have to wait in the back room.

If our relationship with God is in the spirit of adoption—if God is the gracious parent who freely and lovingly chooses to parent us—might this concept then challenge our own cultural assumptions about "real" parenthood? The modern American legal system favors the rights of biological families, and tends to try to keep biological families intact. In recent televised legal battles, juries returned an adopted child to a

biological parent years after the adoption had been finalized. Does that action fit with a Christian understanding of God's family, where all of us are adopted and none has a birthright? If we say God's love for us is like that of a parent and Christian community is like family, aren't we saying that adoptive relationships are as worthwhile as biological relationships?

If our families of origin invoke pain and suffering in our hearts (our experience of the flesh, as Paul would say), we can be comforted by the knowledge that we are adopted into another family—literally, as is the case for the Robertses, or spiritually and ultimately, for everyone who becomes a Christian and is redeemed by God in Christ. Whatever our experience of family loss and brokenness, we will always belong to God.