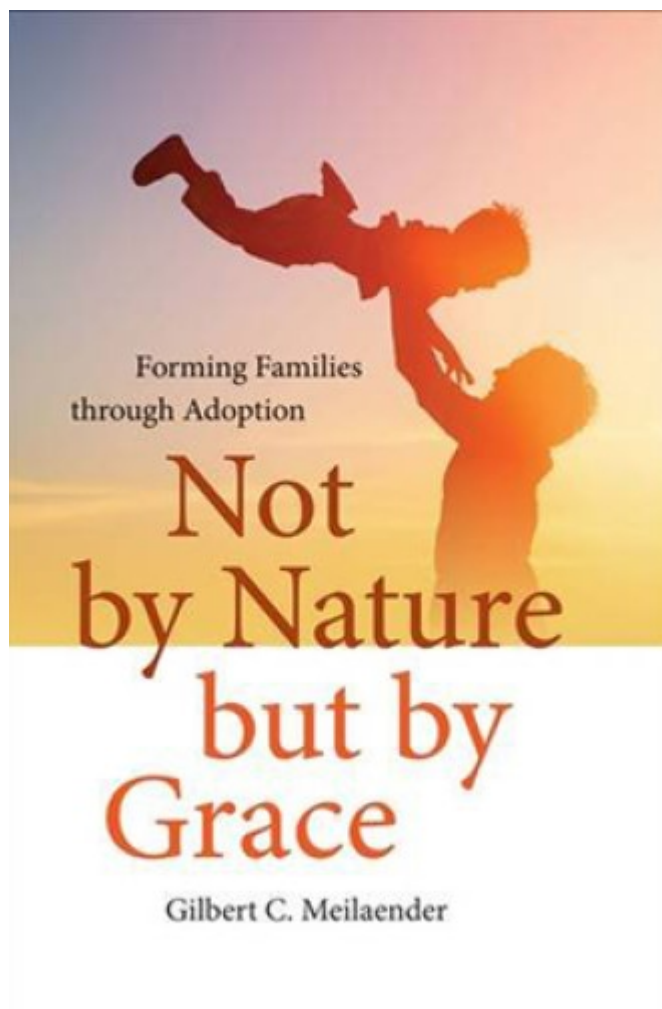


What makes a family?

We tend to think biology matters, and matters very much—except when we don't.

by [Thomas D. Kennedy](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Not by Nature but by Grace

Forming Families through Adoption

By Gilbert C. Meilaender
University of Notre Dame Press

While having breakfast at a hotel recently I overheard a couple, apparently a little older than most of their parent-peers, commenting to the breakfast manager on their young twin boys, who were making a mess, “We always wanted children, and now here we are.” It struck me how commonplace and ordinary the conversation about forming families through some means other than sex seemed.

Around 135,000 children are adopted in the United States every year; around 64,000 births are conceived through use of assisted reproductive technologies. Given these numbers, there was nothing particularly surprising about the couple’s openness about their children not being biologically theirs.

But a second thought also occurred to me. The couple spoke of their children and their desire for children much as I might speak about a car: “Well, I’ve always wanted a Tesla, and last month I finally got my Model S, and now here we are.” Again, this way of speaking about children is not unusual. No doubt it’s the same way my wife and I spoke about our nascent family some 30 years ago.

Having children and forming families is, as Oxford theological ethicist Michael Banner has put it, part of “the ethics of everyday life.” It’s one of the basic practices that give shape and meaning to human life. Lutheran ethicist Gilbert Meilaender is interested in how such practices may or may not cohere with God’s creative, sustaining, and redemptive activity.

Meilaender locates questions of family and adoption within the larger theological and ethical question of the relation of nature and history. Meilaender points out that most people’s ordinary beliefs about the importance of nature are incoherent. We think nature matters, and matters very much—except when we don’t. Sometimes we think nature determines our identity. At other times, we think we should transcend natural identities. When it comes to racial identity, for example, we think that nature should be respected and that we should not pretend an identity untrue to nature. But when it comes to national identity (and, perhaps, gender identity) we think our natural origin is a mere accident, of no more consequence than we choose to grant it.

How does nature matter when it comes to practices of forming families? Meilaender proposes that we start with the biblical teaching of *huiothesia*, or adoption. As

Ephesians 1:5 has it, we have been destined in love for adoption, for a relation to God that is not given by nature but is given only in redemptive history, a “history that does not ignore the significance of our created nature, but [that] also sees us as people on the way toward the greater destiny of God’s new creation.”

Meilaender appeals to Karl Barth in understanding the complexity of redemptive history and God’s threefold action in creation, reconciliation, and redemption. We go wrong, he argues, when we isolate any particular point in creation, reconciliation, and redemption and treat it as fully determinative.

Looked at from the perspective only of creation, adoptive families can appear at most as second best, lacking an origin in the biological relation of husband and wife. But when viewed from the more complex perspective of reconciliation and redemption as well as creation, natural kinship is displaced and relativized.

In baptism, the church proclaims that “the baptized person is destined for a greater family than the one into which he was born—a destiny that comes not through natural bonds but through *huiothesia*. Hence, all Christian parents must relinquish their children for adoption [in baptism], and we are (one and all) adoptees.” In biological and adoptive families, God provides for children “a place of belonging—a place that looks back to the created good of the family, a place that offers an intimation of the redeemed community promised by God.”

Meilaender’s wrestling with nature and history throughout this short work is deft. He is provocative in pointing out how Christian ways of thinking about the family may be at odds not only with secular culture but with other theistic faiths.

Adoption is a complicated issue in both Islam and Judaism, and neither tradition regards adoptive ties as on a parity with blood ties. While not discouraged in Islam, adoption establishes no new relationship that rivals the blood tie. History, as Meilaender puts it, cannot efface nature. In Judaism, the most important question in thinking about the relation of nature and history is that of Jewish identity, an identity established by biology much more fundamentally than by history (although a Jewish identity may be achieved through conversion). Both Islam and Judaism share with Christianity a resistance to viewing children as products.

Meilaender punctuates and illuminates his theological discussion of adoption with a series of four lovely letters to his son, Derek, which were [published](#) in the *Century* in 2003. He addresses not only practical questions of adoption— adoption by single

and same-sex parents, transnational adoption, and transracial adoption—but also assisted reproductive technologies and embryo adoption, neither of which is unproblematic, according to Meilaender. The best interests of the child, not the parents, should always guide our decisions in these hard cases, he argues.

Meilaender holds a traditional, Catholic view of same-sex marriage. For him, adoption by same-sex couples will force an unacceptable division in “the child’s loyalties.” The child will be called upon to love those who care for him while rejecting their way of life. That problem is not present in the same way in single-parent adoptions, but the absence of the complementarity of male and female makes single adoption less desirable than adoption by a husband and wife.

If a family is formed not by nature or biological ties but by a grateful embrace and welcoming of another, we might conclude that we should invite and welcome those whose creation is assisted by new reproductive technologies. Not so, Meilaender maintains. The problem he identifies here is the severing of the relational and procreative goods of marriage that occurs when donor gametes are used in assisted reproduction. The conceived child inevitably becomes a product, not a gift, a product subject to the same quality control considerations we normally apply to things we exchange and consume. In this case, Meilaender contends, parents inescapably come to see children as less than and different from an expression and fruit of self-giving love. In the process, marriage itself is misunderstood and devalued.

Since he believes that a human life worthy of respect and protection is present at conception, one might expect Meilaender to be a hearty supporter of embryo adoption (even if he does not think new embryos should be created with donor gametes). Not so. Given the equal claims upon us of frozen embryos and the millions of orphans who are spread throughout the world, Meilaender argues that our priority should be the orphans. This priority is established by the harms those children will experience if they are not welcomed into families—harms that frozen embryos cannot experience. This claim is surprising since Meilaender does not believe that an individual’s dignity and worth is a matter of consciousness, based on what he or she can experience. I agree with Meilaender that, all things being equal, we have greater obligations to orphans than to frozen embryos. But I question whether he offers a compelling explanation of why this is the case.

Meilaender’s guiding assumption is that nature makes claims upon us that should never be denied even as they are “markedly qualified.” The denial of the claims of

nature is a part of the everyday ethics of almost all individuals in the developed world from adolescence on. We interfere with nature in using artificial methods of birth control, for example. Christians may take this to be not a denial of nature, but rather an appropriate transcending of it: a looking back at the created good of the family with a constrained openness to a limited intimation of the redeemed community promised by God.

Most Americans are unlikely to understand why it is even important to talk about tension between the claims of nature and the claims of history. When they do engage in such talk, it is generally in the context of conversations about global climate change and environmental issues.

Meilaender speaks about these issues only on the scale of individual family units. That is no fault; no book can do everything. But readers may wonder about the implications of Meilaender's robust Christian affirmation of adoption and the good of family for national policies. How might Christians speak to power given these affirmations?

As Meilaender points out, current estimates are that, worldwide, 17–18 million children are orphans. What should that mean for Christians who, like Meilaender, want to understand children and families in the light of redemptive history? What do we do and ask others to do? What should our affirmation of the good of adoption and family mean not only for our personal lives, but for our public witness? Meilaender's fine and accessible book is an important start in thinking about forming families and the implications of our commitment to them.

A version of this article appears in the March 29 print edition under the title "What makes a family?"