

Are all Christians adopted?

Paul's metaphor can be harmful to those of us who have experienced adoption—and the abandonment that is usually central to it.

by [Haley Hudler](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue



Illustration by Agniya Papadatos ([agniyat.com](http://agniyat.com))

When Harry and Bertha Holt founded Holt International in the 1950s, the American couple saw international adoption as a new kind of Christian missionary work. The Holts themselves adopted eight Korean orphans during the Korean War. In her 1956 book about Harry—*The Seed from the East*, written with David Wisner—Bertha offers this quote from Harry, in which he contrasts the ease of his American life with the suffering of children in Korea:

I've been thinking I'd like to go to Korea. Every night when I go to bed, I see those pictures all over again. It doesn't make any difference where I am or what I'm doing. I think about those kids over there. I look out here at this beautiful playground God has so generously given us, and something inside of me cries out at the thought of those poor little babies starving to death or being thrown into dumps to be gnawed on by rats. I think we ought to adopt some of the GI children.

As Holt International became one of the largest adoption agencies in the world, Harry and Bertha Holt helped to set the stage for a US Christian adoption movement that involved tens of thousands of children getting adopted out of their countries in overseas closed adoptions.

Harry's description of the United States as "God's playground" and his description of Korean children as perpetually in a state of poverty and existing in "dumps" speaks volumes about the roots of this movement. This contrast drove his need to adopt and save Korean children. He felt responsible for them and felt the burden of his own privilege. Holt's rhetoric constantly underscores the belief that God calls people to save and rescue children through adoption because the adoptive families and their culture are superior to the child's birth family and culture.

His views helped create international adoption as a form of colonialism. The theological underpinnings of these adoptions have not often been scrutinized. Even more rarely have the voices of adoptees themselves been heard in these conversations.

In October 1997, when I was just over a year old, I was adopted by a White Christian American woman who was single by choice. I arrived from Jiangxi, China, through a closed adoption. Growing up in a mainline Protestant church, I repeatedly heard from members of my faith community that I was loved, I belonged, and my adoptive

status within my family did not matter. They also told me I was lucky to have been adopted because if I hadn't, my quality of life would be worse—and I might even have died. They taught me that my adoption was God's will: through an act of divine providence, I'd found my adoptive mom (and she'd found me). They emphasized that adoption is beautiful and that blood does not make a family. As a result of these messages, I grew up with a positive outlook rooted in two fundamental beliefs: God wanted my adoption to happen, and conversely, my adoption does not play a significant role in my life.

But the truth is that I was struggling with my adoption. On the surface, I sought to assimilate and embrace what I thought it meant to be American. I did not view myself as Chinese; I thought I was White. In denying my genetic heritage, I avoided thinking about my first mother, my first family, and the conditions that created my adoption. On another level, however, I questioned why I had been unwanted and where I belonged.

My adoptive mother explained that the cause of my adoption was China's one-child policy, which was in place from 1979 to 2015. She said my birth family loved me but could not keep me because of this policy. As I processed this reality, I became angry with the Chinese government. It was easier to blame a government policy than to think about my birth parents as people who gave me away under duress.

A vital element of adoption is the relinquishment of the child. Whether voluntary or forced upon the birth family, nearly all adoption is predicated on abandonment. Although I cannot recall the moment of relinquishment from my birth family, it still happened to me—and this experience of infant abandonment affected my ability to be authentic in my relationships. In order to feel safe in my new environment, I needed to act happy and prove I was a well-adjusted child. I buried any emotions of sadness or anger about my adoption, fearing that they might lead to abandonment by my adoptive family.

It wasn't until I was in seminary that I began to unravel the logic of adoption that was given to me. If my adoption happened through divine providence, does that mean that God wanted the one-child policy to happen? It's easy to see God's will at work in the new relationship between the adoptee and the adoptive family. But was God's will being done in my birth parents' abandonment of me too? That is a painful idea to sit with.

Many churchgoers call themselves adoptees, using the metaphor of adoption into God's family by their belief in Jesus. The problem with this understanding comes when it is used to downplay actual adoptees' experience. When non-adopted people claim that "everyone is adopted in God's family," this denies the root experience of abandonment, an experience not everyone has.

The scripture most often referenced on adoption is Romans 8:15-16: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Paul describes our relationship to God in terms of adoption elsewhere as well: Romans 8:23, Galatians 4:5, Ephesians 1:5. Paul wrote these letters in the first century, in the context of the Roman Empire. To understand what Paul means, we have to consider how adoptions in his context were different from adoptions in the United States today.

In Roman society, stranger-based adoption was uncommon. Children were usually adopted by close relatives, and it was generally for the purpose of continuing a family's lineage and inheritance rather than to meet the needs of a vulnerable child. There were two forms of adoption in Roman society, called *adoptio* and *adrogatio*. *Adoptio* was child adoption, in which a child is placed under someone else's authority. *Adrogatio* is adult adoption, in which the adoptee is an independent adult and can choose to place themselves under the authority of another. Biblical scholar Kyu Seop Kim argues that Paul's adoption metaphors refer primarily to *adrogatio*.

Adoptions in ancient Roman society are not comparable to infant adoptions in the United States. The power behind Paul's unorthodox message is that he is asking people to care for others who are not related to them by blood. He wants to expand his society's understanding of what that care means. In this vision, God's radical and extravagant love through Christ animates the expansion of a family of faith by adoption.

If we want to base our adoption practices on Paul's vision for society, we need to structure them to benefit the child. While my transnational and transracial closed adoption provided immediate care for my basic needs and safety, I question whether it offered adequate care for my psychological needs, such as belonging and self-esteem.

It is also essential to keep in mind how Paul's metaphor functions. Biblical scholar Michael Peppard explains: "Jesus is God's son for the purpose of making other sons of God, of gathering up the rest of humanity into a divine family under the paternal God." This gathering process recruits all into the Christian family: Jews and gentiles, free and enslaved people, and people of all backgrounds and identities.

What's absent from this metaphor is the relinquishment inherent in contemporary adoption practices. Those who are new converts to a religion are not abandoned by someone, as I was in my infancy. Of course, new believers experience loss: they may lose family members, friends, practices, geography, and the sense of belonging they once knew. But a convert chooses to give up an old identity in favor of a new one. An adopted child experiences the trauma of separation without any choice. The distinction between religious and infant adoption is the child's lack of will to join a new family. Our current religious language around adoption does not allow this difference to be explored. Often it is not even mentioned.

Paul was a Jewish apostle to gentiles. While spreading the gospel of Jesus and creating churches in various places, he did not insist that gentiles convert to Judaism through rituals like circumcision. Other Jewish Christians disagreed. They believed that to become a part of the church, gentiles must first submit to Jewish law and Jewish rituals. This debate raised questions about who was included in the Christian family and what the gospel required for social identity.

Brad Braxton offers this interpretation of Galatians:

For Paul, the submission of Gentile Christians to the law constituted a form of slavery. This submission implied that the Galatians could not enjoy the blessings of God's covenant unless they abandoned their ethnic identity and assumed another. If Gentile believers adopted another ethnic identity, they would deny God had saved them as *Gentiles*.

In Paul's view, Jewish Christians and gentile Christians are equals in God's family. When people convert to Christianity, they do not forget their religious background; nor do they lose their ethnicity. If a person were required to abandon their previous identity, Paul would consider that experience something close to enslavement.

To follow this line of thinking in our understanding of child adoption, we could begin with naming and honoring the place, the people, and the culture from which the

adoptee comes. Then we could underscore the difficulty and trauma of entering a new family. We could create rituals of remembering the birth family. These practices would help us view adoption for what it truly is: not a replacement of identity but the addition of a new family to the child's life.

The modern-day practice most in line with Paul's understanding of religious adoption is fostering. A foster child receives all the gifts foster parents provide, including economic resources, attention, care, and learning new traditions. But the child does not take on a new social identity by changing their name, nor do they lose their ethnic and cultural roots or their connection to their birth family and genealogy.

Open adoptions can offer some of these benefits; closed adoptions are designed not to. While many closed adoptions are created intentionally, others are caused by larger events: war, natural disaster, human trafficking, or unjust government policies (from China's one-child policy to family separation at the US-Mexico border). In each case, adoptees are denied access to their biological roots and cultural origins.

When Paul spread the gospel to gentiles, he never intended for them to have to change their existing identity. Modern adoption practices emphasize the legal separation between the child and the first family. This erasure of ties replaces the first family with the adoptive family—legally, culturally, physically, and emotionally. This should not be the intended outcome for child adoption or adoption of a new faith.

Evangelical Christians have often promoted cultural superiority in their adoption models. As for progressive Christians, we have tended to under-theorize what adoption means for our faith. As a result, I continue to hear echoes in my progressive church community of cultural superiority and American exceptionalism on the subject of adoption. Our failure to do the theological work of offering alternatives means this particular understanding of adoption dominates the wider Christian narrative.

It's an understanding that makes adoption a colonial project. This theology sounds like, "We have to rescue those children from that poor country and godless culture." In my own experience, this kind of theology has burdened me with the expectation of feeling grateful for being saved. It has caused harm to me and other adoptees raised in all kinds of Christian environments. No one wants to be a charity project.

Instead we need to develop a robust theology of adoption, one that sees it in its complexity.