

Being adopted: A letter to Derek

by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

Dear Derek: I've written you four letters already, and it occurs to me that, although I've talked about how we adopted you, I haven't said all that much about what being adopted actually means. We should think together about this before I finish these letters.

It's natural, I think, that you should wonder about that—about why you're adopted, whether it makes any difference, and whether it makes you a different sort of person. Obviously, we don't plan or intend that children should be adopted. We expect that children can be cared for by their biological parents, and usually they are. That's a good thing. Those biological ties are important, because human beings are bodies. We're connected to each other by bonds of kinship and descent, in which a child is a kind of bodily image of the marriage of a man and woman. If we pretended this was not important, we'd be thinking of ourselves as more like angels—bodiless spirits. But we're not made like that.

Children are a gift God gives parents, and usually this gift turns out to help both parents and children. Parents begin to learn what it means really to love and care for someone else. They learn that their own plans and desires must often be interrupted or even set aside because of the needs of their children. And children learn what it means to have someone love them unconditionally—not because they have certain abilities or talents, but just because parents love their children.

Sometimes this doesn't work out, though. Then we have to remember that we are not just bodies who have to accept whatever happens, but we are also free to step in and try to help when things go wrong. That's what adoption is for, and that's why you are adopted. Your parents just couldn't take care of you, and so you needed to be taken into another home where you could have a mother and a father. You needed to have parents who could and would love you unconditionally, for without that kind of love no child can flourish (as, indeed, you have flourished).

So the “natural” connection of parents and children is important, but human beings are not only “natural” but also “historical” beings. I was not your biological father,

but after you'd been living with us for a few years—after we'd shared that much history—I had nevertheless become your true father.

How long does that take? Who can say? Probably it only dawns upon us gradually that it is happening or has happened. But at some point it became clear to Mom and me that—without any biological connection at all—you had nevertheless become our son, and we had become your parents. This too is a gift God gives, even if it's not given in the natural, biological way. So adoption goes beyond biology—but also mimics it. When you were adopted you were given not just two people who would care for you, but a new mother and father, from whom you yourself could gradually learn what it means to be part of a family.

Does it make any difference that you're adopted? Well, of course it does. How could it not? It means you have a special history that's a little different from that of many other people. It means, I hope, that as you grow older you will appreciate just how important is the bond of parents with their children and will be able to help others appreciate it as well. And certainly I hope you'll know—with an absolute certainty—that you have received love without condition and are therefore now able to give such love as well.

This is finally a theological point, and I think I'll need one more letter to do it justice. That'll give you something to look forward to!

Love,

Dad

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