

Paul and Hilary Johnson have both professional and personal experience of adoption

ADOPTION

– not just a calling for the childless

Photo: Al Photos

key points

As paediatric surgeon and child and adolescent psychiatrist, Paul and Hilary Johnson are involved professionally with the adoption of children. They have also adopted two children who are now teenagers.

They believe the wider concept and practice of 'adoption' is at the very heart of the Christian message, and share their personal testimony. Current challenges include international adoption, adoption by single parents and gay couples, and prejudice against Christians.

After words of encouragement and general advice for the 'childfree', they challenge all Christians that it is a central calling for God's people to look after those who have no family of their own.

In the UK, at least 72,000 children and young people are looked after by the state on any given day.¹ Of these, 51,000 (71%) live with temporary foster families (often moving from placement to placement), and in England alone, 6,500 children are living in children's homes which include secure homes and hostels.

Only 4% of children taken into care in England in 2008 were placed for adoption. The average age of those being adopted was 3 years 11 months. Despite over 60% of children in the care of the state being over ten years of age, only 5% of those adopted were within this older age-group. Many children in care face a future of extreme under-achievement, instability, and poverty compared to their socio-economic counterparts.² Only 15% of children in care will achieve more than 5 GCSEs grade A-C, compared to 60% of all children.¹ A report in 2006 by the Centre for Policy Studies highlighted that of 6,000 young people who left care, 75% did so without any qualifications, 50% were unemployed within two years, and 20% were homeless (these figures are slowly improving).³ Of adults in prison, 26% have been in care as children, as opposed to 2% of the non-prison population.⁴

These statistics make desperately sad reading. Although in Christian circles there is much said and written about abortion, there seems to be disproportionately little discussion or action on these 'injustices of childhood' and the need for Christians to address them radically. A number of studies have clearly demonstrated that adoption significantly improves the outcomes for these children in terms of social, emotional, and educational outcomes when compared to both foster care and residential settings.^{5,6}

The aim of this article is to highlight the importance

of 'the calling' of adoption, and to suggest that this needs to be a consideration for all Christian families rather than just the childfree. We write this as a couple who are both involved professionally in the care of adopted children. We also have the personal experience of having adopted two children who are now in their teenage years. We both agree wholeheartedly with the statement of Barnardo's that 'every child has a right to family life'. We also believe passionately that God's people have the resources to help make this ideal a reality.

Biblical precedent for adoption

Although there are clear examples of childhood adoption in the Old Testament (Moses, Esther, and Genubath), the wider concept and practice of 'adoption' is at the very heart of the Christian message. This is seen in three broad ways:

1. God's adoption of us is central to our salvation

In addition to the analogy of 'new birth', we find many references in the New Testament in which our salvation is described as 'God's adoption of us into his family'.^{7,8,9} Indeed, we reflect on this truth in our musical worship each time we sing songs such as:¹⁰

*Father God, I wonder how I managed to exist
Without the knowledge of Your parenthood
and Your loving care
But now I am Your son,
I am adopted in Your family
And I can never be alone
'Cause Father God, You're there beside me*

We are also reminded in Ephesians 1:3-6 that God's adoptive plans for us were integral to his original purposes before the beginning of time.

We read that: '...[God] chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace.' In other words, this was not just a 'back-up' plan that God developed once he saw that mankind had fallen. It was at the very heart of his creative order. God has adopted us 'in love' so that his grace could be put on display most clearly. John Piper, a leading Bible expositor and strong proponent of Christian adoption, has put it like this: 'Adoption was God's idea...He created the world so that there would be a space, a place, a dynamic, and a people in which he could do this thing called adoption.' A key biblical foundation for the adoption of children therefore is that God's adoption of us is at the heart of our salvation.

2. God's adoption of us has many parallels with our adoption of children

While the heart of adoption is central to our salvation, there are also a number of practical ways in which God's adoption of us mirrors the act of us adopting children. These include the facts that adoption has a personal cost (to adopter and adopted); it often involves rescue from very sad and difficult situations; it involves changing the legal status of the adopted; it makes the adopted into heirs of the person adopting; and it often still involves some suffering in the present with the promise of a fuller glory to come. These parallels (and more) have been helpfully discussed in an article we would recommend entitled 'Adoption: the heart of the gospel'.¹¹

3. Scripture clearly calls God's people to look after the 'orphan'

There are many references in the Bible that remind us of the priority God places on the 'widow and the orphan', and also his ideal design and purpose for the family unit. In James 1:27 we are told that 'religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress...' If our faith is to reflect the heart of God, we need to ensure that we care for those in our society who are 'in distress', with a special emphasis on children who have lost their birth parents. We must remember that the main priority of parenting is raising and looking after children, rather than obtaining pleasure and satisfaction for the parents. Indeed, the biblical perspective of parenting is to enable children to be led into maturity, and – through God's grace and aided by loving, godly, parental example – into a personal relationship with Christ Jesus.

A personal testimony

Like many couples, we spent the first few years of our married life carefully planning when the 'perfect' time would be to have our own children. In our naivety, this timing obviously had to fit carefully with

our different career pathways (one of the biggest distortions of true Christian parenting), and we had also thought we needed to keep a careful eye on the ever ageing ova! We both loved children and our main debate was whether to have three or four.

God's plans were different! In 1995, we discovered we were unlikely to be able to have our own children. This was devastating news. After the initial shock and sense of loss (and we would not underestimate this), we slowly found ourselves being moulded by 'the potter' and being brought into his plans and timings for our lives. We had both had a conviction from the very early days of planning our family that we should adopt a child, although we had always thought this would be in addition to our birth children. Therefore, the transition to adoption for us was not as hard as it might have been.

However, the richness of the journey we had to take to reach the point of eventually adopting a sibling pair was something we can honestly say (in retrospect) we would not have wanted to miss out on. We had to learn first hand what God meant when he said in Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts" declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."¹² The whole adoption process made us reliant on God in a way that we weren't before. It opened our eyes to needs in the UK, and further afield, that we would not have encountered purely in our professional roles. Most importantly it taught us that parenting is primarily about the children. The splendour of being adopted into God's family has taken on a new meaning. Yes, adoption has been hard and costly at times; yes, it has required sacrifices. However, it has been a calling we would highly recommend and encourage other couples to consider.

Current challenges and controversies

In a short article, it is impossible to do justice to many of the challenges and controversies in adoption today. However, we feel it important to highlight a few:

International adoption

In the search to adopt babies or small children, many couples are now looking to adopt from overseas. However, this can present new and different challenges. While adopting babies overcomes some of the early behavioural challenges involved in adopting an older child, the potential problems with cultural identity when the child is older must not be underestimated. In addition, there is increasing recognition that it is important in many situations to maintain some contact with the birth family. Clearly this can be difficult if the child has been removed from their country of birth. God's calling to adoption will be different for different couples, and meeting the needs of children from all different backgrounds is all part of God's overall purposes.

Adoption by single parents

Although society would try to persuade us differently,



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at the centre of the biblical concept of a human family is the stable and loving marriage relationship between male and female. In the UK however, potentially anyone is now eligible to adopt if they are over 21, as long as they can provide a permanent, caring, and stable home. This eligibility is regardless of marital status, sexuality, race, religion, and whether the individual is in work or has a disability. In 2008, 9% of all adoptions were allocated to single parents. Although single parent adoption does not provide the biblical two-parent model of family, it can provide stability for a child who has moved from foster home to foster home, or has been placed in an institutional setting. Further, in cases of severe sexual abuse etc, it may occasionally be the preferred option.

Gay adoption

Since 2005 it has been possible in the UK for gay people to be considered as adopters. Indeed, the legislation now states that gay adopters must be assessed equally with heterosexual couples. While this is clearly at odds with the biblical view of family, it must be remembered that the alternative for many children is institutional care. There is currently no good data confirming outcome differences between adoptions by heterosexual or homosexual couples. Interestingly, our own two adopted children were at odds with each other when asked whether they would have preferred to have been adopted by a gay couple or placed in a care institution.

Prejudice against Christian adoption

Over the last few years, there have been increasing examples of Christians being prejudiced against in terms of adoption and fostering, as a result of their desire to affirm their Christian beliefs in the home. As Christians we need to ensure that the Godly principles of family life are maintained, and that Christian couples are not subject to unacceptable anti-Christian prejudice or bias.

A message for the childless

We are aware that some reading this will be undergoing assisted fertility treatments, or having to come to terms with the major heartache of infertility. These are difficult times. We are very cautious about offering specific advice that can easily be misinterpreted as unhelpful platitudes. However, as people who have experienced this situation first hand, we would simply want to reassure and encourage you that there is 'light at the end of the tunnel'.

The words from Jeremiah 29:11, although originally intended for a nation, were particularly helpful for us as a couple during those initial dark days: "For I know the plans I have for you" declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give hope and a future". When you are ready, and have come to terms with your loss, we would really encourage you to find out more about adoption.

Although it is not a replacement for having your own children, it can be a wonderful alternative.

We would also argue that it is more acceptable ethically than some (though certainly not all) of the fertility treatments you might be offered. On the other hand, we are also very aware that for some of you, childlessness (or 'childfreeness' as Hilary prefers to call it), might well be part of a specific calling to enable other avenues of Christian service.

A message for all Christian families

We believe strongly that the calling for adoption is for all Christian people, not just for those couples unable to have their 'own' children. That is not to suggest that all Christians should actually be undertaking adoption. However, it recognises that the calling to care for the parentless is something we should all be engaged in. We must not forget that all children (whether our birth children, or those we have adopted or fostered) belong to God rather than to us, and have been temporarily given to us with the principal aim of demonstrating God's love and to bring him glory.

We can all pray for, and support practically, couples in our fellowships who have adopted children. We can recognise that these children will not always fit the stereotypes of Christian children in middle England, and can remove the burden and stigma for adopting parents by showing unconditional love and Christ-like acceptance to their adopted children regardless of any behavioural difficulties they may have!

We can follow the example of churches such as Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis in which adoption is increasingly emphasised as something for all Christian families to consider doing. We can support and establish further initiatives such as the MICAH Fund (Minority Infant and Children Adoption Help)¹³ and the LYDIA Fund (Let Youths be Delivered from Institutions by Adoption)¹⁴ that facilitate adoption by Christians. We can encourage all those strongly opposed to abortion equally to champion adoption as the 'pro-life' alternative. Indeed, we would argue that any anti-abortion policy must have within it provisions for the many children who would then be born.

A central calling for God's people

We have tried to highlight the importance of adoption. We believe it is a central calling for God's people to look after those who have no family of their own. It is our prayer this article will have informed many, but will also have encouraged some to pursue this vital ministry personally.

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