A Theological Inquiry on the Practice of the Adoption of Children with Complex Disability

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Theology

To
Queen's University Belfast
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Institute of Theology

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17 September 2012

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Acknowledgments

Firstly, I will forever be grateful for the love of God the Father in welcoming me, even amidst my brokenness, as his beloved child.

Tanner, words cannot express how much your unending love and support in this process has meant to me! Not only did we enjoy many hot cups of tea and biscuits together during our countless study hours, but you also stood with me, or better yet kneeled beside me in prayer, on all those teary nights when I was certain I could not finish this project. Thank you for believing in me and helping me to complete something important to me. You are my best friend and I am eternally grateful for the love that we share.

Eiley – I am so thankful that God gifted Tanner and me with you on November 10, 2011. I did not know this depth of love resided in my heart until you came into our lives. Thank you for being the best study buddy a Mum could ask for!

Shaoey, Stevey, and Maria – How thankful I am that God brought you three into our family through the miracle of adoption. The privilege of being your sister has birthed a profound compassion within my heart for orphaned and vulnerable children both in America and abroad.

Thank you Mom and Dad for your countless prayers, generous support, and encouragement throughout this process. I am grateful for the many hours "Camp Grammy and Pop Pops" operated this summer – it proved pivotal in securing the completion of this dissertation.

Tim and Janie – Your joy in supporting Tanner, Eiley, and me in this process has been so appreciated. Thank you for being flexible this summer and willing to help with Eiley.

I am also thankful for the many prayers and kind words of support offered by my siblings and siblings-in-law throughout this process: Caleb, Julia, Will Franklin, Jillian, Tabby, and T.J. I made it!

I will forever be indebted to my supervisors, Jill Harshaw and Ian Dickson, for all their hard work and help in guiding me through this process. Your wisdom, insight, and passion compelled me to new depths in my work. It is humbling to know that throughout this process my supervisors have been holding me in prayer. May God richly bless you!

And finally, I owe my most sincere gratitude to Kathy McKinney and Sherri Chapman for their editing and proofreading endeavours. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Abstract

Over the past decade, American culture has witnessed an increased number of parents, particularly Christians, choosing to expand their family by adopting a child or children. While there has been some theological reflection on the topic at hand, the focus has largely remained on substantiating Christian involvement with adoption advocacy and orphan care efforts. This dissertation accepts the importance of Christian involvement with adoption. However, in combining biblical analysis with interpersonal dialogue, it moves beyond substantiating the initial adoption decision and investigates ways to support adoptive families in the ongoing, post-adoption experience. Unique among theological reflections on adoption, the biblical enquiry included here within is focused specifically on Johannine literature. As it is argued in this dissertation, to be adopted is to be invited into "being" and "becoming" someone's child. Adoption is therefore both static (the adoptive act) and dynamic (learning what it means to belong to a particular family).

Additionally, this research is informed by qualitative data gathered through semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with parents whom have adopted children with complex disabilities. The researcher approached this project believing that families undertaking the unique challenges involved in adopting a child with complex disabilities might feel better prepared for the post-adoption journey if they obtained a deeper theological understanding of adoption. However, as presented in the

concluding chapter, it may be argued that a more robust theology of church proves most beneficial for these families. In synthesising biblical analysis with interpersonal dialogue, issues such as contemporary understandings of ecclesiology and perceptions of Christian identity emerge. Realising that there is still much thinking to be done on the topic of post-adoption support, this dissertation highlights areas in need of further exploration so as to offer sustained support for adoptive families, particularly those welcoming in children with complex disabilities.

Chapter One

Research Introduction

Within this chapter, the rationale informing the research project will be discussed. Following the rationale, two research questions will be proposed, and, in an effort to help clarify terminology that may appear throughout the dissertation, this chapter closes with a brief definition of terms. One's attention is first turned toward an exploration of the researcher's reasons for undertaking this project.

Rationale

The rationale for writing a dissertation inclusive of a theological reflection on the experience of adopting children with complex disabilities is three-tiered: first, current cultural trends; secondly, a void in contemporary theological scholarship; and thirdly, the researcher's personal experience.

This research is focused specifically within the American context.[1] Over the past decade, American culture has witnessed an increased number of parents, particularly those ascribing to a Christian faith, choosing to expand their family through the adoption of a child or children. According to statistics released by the United

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[1] See Angela Harrison, "Adoption: David Cameron Vows to Cut Adoption Delays," *BBC.co.uk*, March 9, 2012. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17299828 (accessed on June 25, 2012). Although this research is focused on adoption in an American context, because it is being conducted in conjunction with a British university, it should be noted that the British government recently committed to increasing adoption awareness throughout the UK.

States' government, there was a 6% increase in total adoptions between 2000 and 2008.[2] Furthermore, Bethany Christian Services, the largest adoption agency in America, reported a 13% increase in the number of adoptions facilitated between 2009 and 2011.[3]

As the number of American adoptive families continues to grow, their presence has also become increasingly noticeable in churches across the country, subsequently encouraging an ecclesial ethos affording special recognition of adoption. For example, cognizant of the importance of Christian involvement in adoption efforts, the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest Protestant denomination, passed a resolution in 2009 challenging every "Southern Baptist family to pray for guidance as to whether God is calling them to adopt or foster a child or children."[4] Additionally, the past decade witnessed the establishment and growth of the Christian Alliance for Orphans, a coalition uniting "respected Christian organizations and a national network of churches [committed to] inspiring, equipping, and connecting Christians to 'defend the fatherless.'"[5] Every year, the Christian Alliance for Orphans hosts a national conference, The Orphan Summit, and since the inaugural conference held in 2003, attendance has increased each year

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[2] Child Welfare Information Gateway, "How Many Children Were Adopted in 2007 and 2008?" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: 8, http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/adopted0708.cfm (accessed June 13, 2012).

[3] Kathryn Joyce, "The Evangelical Adoption Crusade," *The Nation.com*, April 21, 2011, http://www.thenation.com/article/160096/adoption-commandment?page=full (accessed September 6, 2012).

[4] The Southern Baptist Convention, "On Adoption and Orphan Care," http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1194 (accessed June 13, 2012).

[5] Christian Alliance for Orphans, "About," http://www.christianalliancefororphans.org/about/ (accessed June 22, 2012). See Isaiah 1:17 (New Revised Standard Version). NRSV translation used unless otherwise noted.

by 20%.[6] Countless churches throughout America have now developed adoption and orphan care ministries with the specific intent to serve not only children around the world in need of care, but also the congregants who have committed to care for these children through adoption. Some of the work that is done by adoption and orphan care ministries includes sending mission teams globally to deliver needed supplies to orphanages, giving money to domestic or international orphan care efforts, hosting fundraising events to benefit prospective adoptive families, starting support groups for adoptive parents, and offering informational seminars on adoption-related topics.[7] This trend in American familial culture, therefore, provides an interesting contextual background for the research at hand, highlighting that it is both important and relevant.

Secondly, a probing of Scripture, specifically the writings of John, proves beneficial in stimulating further theological reflection on the American Christian adoption movement. The current void in theological scholarship regarding adoption and the Church's subsequent response further confirms the necessity of this research. It could be argued that by engaging in an in-depth biblical study, this research will be uniquely poised to offer helpful insight to churches interested in spearheading efforts in adoption advocacy.

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[6] Lawrence E. Bergeron, *Journey to the Fatherless: Preparing for the Journey of Adoption, Orphan Care, Foster Care and Humanitarian Relief for Vulnerable Children* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2012), xxxi.

[7] See Irving Bible Church, "Tapestry: Adoption and Foster Care Ministry," http://tapestryministry.org/ (access September 9, 2012).

Due to the relative newness of the Christian adoption movement, there are a limited amount of resources available guiding the discussion at hand. Of the current works, many are focused on connecting what is referred to as 'horizontal adoption,' the act of parents adopting children in need of a home, to that of 'vertical adoption,' God's adoption of sinners into his family by way of Jesus' atoning death on the cross. *From Orphans to Heirs*,[8] written by British theologian Stibbe, is predominantly focused on uncovering what he calls the "lost doctrine of spiritual adoption."[9] Stibbe believes that in revisiting this theological truth, Christians will be liberated to experience what it means to be embraced as children belonging to a living and loving God.

Cruver's book, *Reclaiming Adoption*,[10] highlights the fact that of the many Church creeds and confessions formulated over the past two thousand years of ecclesial history, only six contain sections regarding spiritual adoption.[11] Thus, in an effort to root the Christian adoption movement theologically, he explores the redemptive-historical importance of God's adoptive act of humanity. Cruver highlights that beginning with God choosing Israel as his corporate son, the divine adoptive activity continues by way of Jesus' soteriological expansion of the familial boundaries beyond the Jews to include all who are redeemed.[12]

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[8] Mark Stibbe, *From Orphans to Heirs: Celebrating Our Spiritual Adoption* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2005), 20.

[9] Ibid., 13.

[10] Dan Cruver, ed., *Reclaiming Adoption: Missional Living Through the Rediscovery of Abba Father* (Cruciform Press, 2011).

[11] Ibid., 8.

[12] Ibid., 11-15; 49-56.

Similarly, in *Adopted for Life,*[13] Moore explores a theological and biblical basis for adoption.[14] Moore's book encourages a Christian response favourable toward the adoption of children,[15] and he discusses the importance of cultivating an adoption culture within the Church.[16] These texts are all important beginning points for an exploration of the given topic. However, because this dissertation is focused on situations in which adoption has already taken place, the researcher accepts that 'horizontal adoption' is rooted in God's 'vertical adoption' of humanity, but seeks to push this analogy further. In doing so, families will be offered a deeper theological foundation underpinning adoption that might help in sustaining the adoption decision amidst difficulties that often arise post-adoption, specifically the unique challenges involved with complex disability.

In light of this, it is encouraging to note that a few scholars and authors have begun to probe deeper. Smolin's article regarding the Christian adoption movement sheds light on the inherent difficulty in reducing God's salvific adoptive activity of sinners to that of Christian families welcoming in orphaned children.[17] While such an analogy may work to bolster the initial decision to adopt, one might question how this informs the ongoing adoption experience? In this, Smolin's critique highlights some of the theological foundations of the Christian adoption movement in need of

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[13] Russell D. Moore, *Adopted for Life: The Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2009).
[14] Ibid., 24-84.
[15] Ibid., 85-114.
[16] Ibid., 167-188.
[17] David M. Smolin, "Of Orphans and Adoption, Parents and the Poor, Exploitation and Rescues: A Scriptural and Theological Critique of the Evangelical Christian Adoption and Orphan Care Movement," *Regent Journal of International Law* 8.2 (Spring 2012): 28, http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=david_smolin (accessed June 22, 2012).

further research and critical thinking. Arguably, however, Smolin goes too far in his

critique, calling the Christian adoption movement "exploitation in the name of

Christ,"[18] and stating,

> The term 'orphan' [is used within the movement] as a hook or
> inducement for promoting adoption, while demonstrating little interest
> in the actual circumstance and needs of . . . 'orphans.'[19]

He argues that a movement truly committed to caring for orphans would also fight to

reform the welfare systems and care facilities often responsible for looking after

vulnerable children.[20] Smolin fails to recognize that at least some individuals and

organisations involved with the Christian adoption movement are, in fact, doing this

work. For example, Show Hope,[21] an American-based Christian adoption advocacy

group, is working alongside the Luoyang Social Welfare Institute in central China to

increase the quality of life for many severely disabled orphans.[22] It is therefore a

misinformed argument that the Christian adoption movement is solely concerned

with adoption advocacy efforts at the expense of ongoing orphan care support

work.[23]

Another resource that has stimulated deeper questions regarding Christian

involvement with adoption is *A Guide to Adoption and Orphan Care*,[24] in which

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[18] Ibid., 28

[19] Ibid., 34.

[20] Ibid., 35.

[21] Show Hope, "About Us," http://www.showhope.org/AboutUs/WhoWeAre.aspx (accessed
September 11, 2012).

[22] Ibid., "Special Care Centres," http://www.showhope.org/OrphanCare/SpecialCareCenters.aspx
(accessed September 7, 2012).

[23] Christian Alliance for Orphans, "On Understanding Orphan Statistics," 2-3,
http://www.christianalliancefororphans.org/wp-content/uploads/Christian-Alliance-for-Orphans-_On-
Understanding-Orphan-Statistics_.pdf (accessed September 7, 2012).

[24] Kimber Graves, "Orphan Care Ministry – Becoming and Adoption Friendly Church," in *A Guide to
Adoption and Orphan Care*, edited by Russell D. Moore (Louisville, KY: SBTS Press, 2012), 64-69.

Graves discusses the importance of churches not only advocating for adoption, but also providing long-term support for families that choose to adopt. She encourages the education of pastors regarding adoption related issues, specifically behavioural science topics such as the psychology of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Reactive Attachment Disorder.[25] This suggestion, however, strikes at a core issue continually debated among pastoral theologians: how much multidisciplinary training (i.e. training in the behavioural sciences such as psychology) do pastors need in order to fulfil their vocation? Pastoral theologian Pattison finds great merit in incorporating behavioural sciences within the realm of pastoral care,[26] while Lyall[27] and Peterson[28] affirm the centrality of the Bible in informing Church leaders of their pastoral role.

Graves' insight also calls into question the degree of theological teaching on adoption that is currently being included within seminary education. If a theology of adoption is being taught, is it robust enough to journey with a family beyond their initial decision to adopt, encouraging them amidst the difficulties and growing pains that surface as a once-orphaned child learns what it means to become a son or daughter belonging to a new family? It is here that the importance of receiving care from one's local church comes into focus and will therefore also be explored in this dissertation.

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[25] Ibid, 68. See Appendix A for a glossary of medical terms used in this dissertation.
[26] Stephen Pattison, *A Critique of Pastoral Care* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993), 16.
[27] David Lyall, *The Integrity of Pastoral Care* (London: SPCK, 2001), 4.
[28] Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 5.

In another resource, *The Spirit of Adoption*,[29] Moessner includes a focused theological reflection on the book of Ephesians, prompting a discussion about the Church's role in accepting and supporting adoptive families.[30] She argues that in chapters one to three of Ephesians the adoptive nature of God's family is identified, while chapters four to six explore the ways in which the adoptive family lives together.[31] Moessner specifically highlights Paul's emphasis on mutuality (5:21) and the importance of the Church existing as a community that is accepting of differences. Her initiation of a much-needed discussion is to be welcomed and it stimulates further thought regarding the theological and ecclesial foundations for the Church's ongoing support of adoptive families.

The final source fuelling the researcher's interest in the topic at hand is her personal experience of the transformative nature of adoption. She has two biological brothers and three younger sisters who were adopted from China in 2000, 2002, and 2003, respectively. As a result of their own adoption experience, the researcher's parents began a non-profit organization that gives prospective adoptive families monetary grants to help them overcome financial barriers to adopting a child.[32] The researcher was involved with this organization prior to beginning her postgraduate studies. In working alongside this organization, she was in frequent contact with adoptive families and therefore exposed to a need within the Christian adoption community

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[29] Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, *The Spirit of Adoption: At Home in God's Family* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

[30] Ibid., 111.

[31] Ibid., 98-99; 111-114.

[32] Show Hope, "Adoption Aid," http://www.showhope.org/AdoptionAid/Miracles.aspx (accessed September 7, 2012).

for biblical foundations that do more than support an initial adoption decision, but journey with families if, and when, post-adoption difficulties surface.

Research Questions

The research that follows is therefore guided by two overarching questions. First, how might a theological reflection on adoption, specifically informed by the writings of John, offer deeper understandings that might enrich a family's experience of adoption? Secondly, in what ways might the Church support adoptive families in light of this theological perspective? This research will explore these questions in-depth in an attempt to gain informative insight benefiting adoptive families, congregations, pastors, and lay people alike.

Terminology

In an effort to add further clarity to the ensuing discussion, a brief definition of terms is necessary. Although the United Nations Children's Fund estimates that there are over 130 million orphans worldwide, not all of those children have lost both parents.[33] A majority of this population are considered "single orphans" meaning they have lost one parent, while 18 million have lost both parents and are therefore referred to as "double orphans."[34] Although a discussion regarding the factors determining a child's eligibility for adoption falls beyond the scope of this

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[33] United Nations Children's Fund, "Orphans," http://www.unicef.org/media/media_45279.html (accessed June 22, 2012).
[34] Ibid.

dissertation, it is important to note the researcher's awareness of the difficulty in identifying the exact number of orphans worldwide. For the purposes of this essay the term "orphan" therefore refers to a child identified as eligible for adoption by local authorities or the child welfare system.

Secondly, it is helpful to define the term adoption. The researcher recognizes that there are many different ways in which adoption may occur (i.e. step-parent adoption, inter-family adoption, etc.). This research, however, is specifically interested in what Smolin calls "non-related, full adoption," wherein parents and children legally become family who were not previously related via blood or marriage.[35] The researcher understands that adoption is not the only option, and sometimes might not be the best option in caring for orphaned and vulnerable children. Determining the best care option for an orphaned child should, as highlighted in an article published by the United Nations,[36] be centred on whatever is in the best interest of the child. The United Nations assumes the following position regarding child adoption; "The principle of safeguarding the best interest of the child is firmly established as the paramount consideration in all decisions relating to child adoption."[37]

According to the Christian Alliance for Orphans, another way to care for an orphaned child prior to placing him or her with a family through "non-related, full

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[35] David M. Smolin, "Of Orphans and Adoption, Parents and the Poor, Exploitation and Rescues," 4.
[36] United Nations, "Child Adoption: Trends and Policies,"
http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/adoption2010/child_adoption.pdf (accessed September 8, 2012).
[37] Ibid., 1.

adoption" is preservation of the birth family.[38] If, however, this is not possible or deemed not to be in the best interest of the child, a second option is for the child to be reunited with surviving kin in his or her country of origin. This helps in protecting the child's original familial identity. Family-based care is a third option, such as the foster care system or group homes. It is, however, this researcher's opinion that every child deserves to grow up within the comfort and security of a loving family. Adoption, when in the best interest of the child, is therefore a potential avenue to providing this gift for children who may otherwise never have a place to call home.

A third term requiring definition, harder to place children, is a phrase often used by those within the adoption community (i.e. adoption agency workers, adoptive families, child welfare advocates, etc.). This phrase refers to children who are eligible for adoption and have either physical, intellectual, or behavioural disabilities expected to make their transition into a family relatively difficult. Because this dissertation focuses specifically on the adoption of children with complex disabilities, phrases such as "harder to place children" or "special needs adoption" may be used interchangeably. This is particularly true given the American context of this research wherein terminology regarding disability is somewhat antiquated compared to phraseology endorsed within the UK.[39]

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[38] Christian Alliance for Orphans, "On Understanding Orphan Statistics," 2-3.
[39] See Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998). Stanley Hauerwas is a well-known American theologian who has written a significant amount on the theology of disability. His writings serve as examples wherein antiquated disability terminology, such as "retarded" and "mentally handicapped," may sometimes still be employed in the American context.

The final term demanding further clarification is complex disability. As it is used within this dissertation, complex disability refers to a person with long-term physical or mental impairments significantly restricting his or her functional capacity.[40] With regard to mental impairments, scholars and theologians in the UK often refer to this as intellectual disability while Americans still use terms such as "mentally handicapped" or "developmentally disability."[41]

This chapter has introduced the reader to the topic at hand and established the rationale informing the necessity and importance of this research. Additionally, two research questions have been suggested for the purpose of guiding the discussion included within the following chapters. Attention will now be given to the methodological approaches employed by the researcher to accomplish these tasks and the reasons why such tactics were chosen.

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[40] Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 44-48. Although much of Reinders' discussion is focused on people with profound intellectual disabilities, his differentiation between disability and impairment helped the researcher in arriving at a definition of what she means in saying complex disability.

[41] Ibid, 48.

Chapter Two

Methodological Approach

The first chapter outlined why the researcher believes this work to be pertinent and subsequently important for further study. In chapter one, two overarching research questions directing this study were proposed, and important terms were defined for the purpose of adding clarity to the work. It is now relevant to question the way in which the researcher plans to conduct her research.

Research Methodology

This dissertation falls within the realm of practical theology. It is interested in exploring the ways an individual's theology dialogues with his or her lived experience of adopting a child with complex disabilities. Swinton and Mowat understand the following to be true regarding practical theology:

> [It] works toward the unification of the Church's theological understandings and her practices in the world, and in so doing, ensures that her public performances of the faith are true to the nature and actions of the Triune God.[42]

Thus, biblical study, as well as an exploration of contemporary culture via various families' adoption experiences, proves beneficial for the research at hand. With regard to the way that knowledge received via revelation from God, namely through biblical and/or theological study, relates to other forms of knowledge, this

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[42] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SMC Press, 2006), 6.

dissertation is sympathetic toward Hunsinger's "Chalcedonian pattern."[43] In an effort to relate the two in a way that is mutually informative, yet protects the integrity of the Bible as the Word of God, Hunsinger believes that the relationship shared between theology and other forms of knowledge is characterized by indissoluble differentiation, inseparable unity, indestructible order, and logical priority of theology.[44]

While Swinton and Mowat undoubtedly agree with Hunsinger assigning *a priori* status to biblical and theological enquiry within practical theological research, they also highlight the human counterpart involved in such efforts. They state, "We cannot escape from the fact that doing theology is an interpretive enterprise within which divine revelation is interpreted by human beings."[45] It could therefore be argued that the appropriate methodology to be employed, so as to obtain the desired information, is necessarily two-fold. This dissertation will synthesize information gleaned from an in-depth theological exploration with knowledge gained through qualitative research, namely personal interviews with Christian families that have adopted a child or children with complex disabilities.

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[43] Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling: A New Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 62-76.
[44] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 85.
[45] Ibid., 89.

Theological Enquiry

Regarding the first methodological aspect, it should be reiterated that theologians and Church leaders alike have already facilitated discussion regarding the theological underpinnings substantiating a family's initial decision to adopt. Little scholarship, however, has been devoted to investigating the biblical basis supporting adoption beyond the initial event so as to include the post-adoption journey. Assuming that adoption has already taken place, the theological enquiry included here within will primarily explore a biblical basis informing, encouraging, and sustaining the adoption decision in light of challenges that may surface after the child is welcomed into his or her new family. This is of particular relevance for Christian families adopting children with complex physical, intellectual, or behavioural disabilities. One might contend that a deepened theology of adoption will help to sustain families on what may be a particularly difficult and challenging journey.

It is important to comment briefly on the epistemological assumptions carried into this study, as well as the reasons why the researcher thought it significant to include qualitative data. Contemporary research endeavours are highly influenced by modern philosophical thought wherein nomothetic information is often accepted as the best way of achieving true understanding. Similar to information ascertained through scientific experiments, nomothetic knowledge is considered accurate only if it is factual (non-falsifiable), able to be replicated, and remains true when

generalized beyond the experiment's sample and applied to the population at large.[46]
If one accepts this as the only mode of information transmission, knowledge gained
through subjective human experience is given little (if any) credibility. Swinton and
Mowat therefore argue for the imperative inclusion of ideographic information
within one's epistemological framework; knowledge that is gained by way of
"unique, non-replicable experiences."[47] This encourages research efforts to embrace
the intricacies inherent within the human experience, choosing to engage
dialogically with them for the purpose of gaining further informational insight.

Qualitative Research

Ideographic information is imperative to informing the research at hand. This
understanding influenced the researcher to include qualitative research within her
methodological approach. Commenting on the link between epistemology and
methodology, Swinton and Mowat state, "The choice of method [of enquiry] and
mode of analysis are deeply tied in with the epistemological positions that are
assumed within the general outlook of the researcher."[48] In order to effectively
gather information pertinent to answering the research questions driving this study,
interpersonal dialogue with Christian adoptive families willing to share their
experience proves particularly beneficial.

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[46] Ibid., 41-42.
[47] Ibid., 43.
[48] Ibid, 55.

There are lessons to be learned from those who have chosen to adopt and are currently journeying through the outworking of such a decision. Therefore, this study combines a biblical exploration with ideographic knowledge uncovered by the qualitative data to create a theological reflection on the experience of adoption. It is the intent that this theological reflection will provide a foundation upon which conclusions and recommendations can be made to enhance the Christian family's adoption experience.

Choosing the Research Sample

With regard to the interviews conducted, the researcher purposefully chose a sample[49] reflective of the various experiences Christian families might have when adopting a child or children with complex disabilities. The target population for this research therefore consisted of families who had adopted a disabled child or children, and who were involved with a local church at the time they processed their adoption(s). The participants were chosen purposefully to represent various geographic locations throughout America and different denominational backgrounds. This was done with the intent of stimulating a wide variety of answers, and for the purpose of exploring different ways churches may support these families amidst the ongoing adoption journey. The level of care these families received from their churches is of particular interest, and hopefully any insight gained from this research project will help churches better support adoptive families in the future.

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[49] See Appendix B for a detailed description of the research sample used in this study.

The research was premised on the following assumptions: first, the adoption of a child (and especially one with complex disabilities) creates stresses, in relation to which a family with a Christian faith background might seek support from their church community. Secondly, interviewing members of families involved in such adoptions is one method of identifying support needs and ways these might be addressed.

Data was collected by way of semi-structured interviews with nine adoptive parents.[50] Prior to conducting these interviews, the researcher carried out one pilot interview to test the quality and clarity of the interview questions. Further detail about the research sample as well as the data analysis from the interviews conducted can be found in chapter four.

Prior to shifting one's attention to a theological reflection on the Christian believer's adoption experience, one final methodological note must be made. With regard to the dynamic nature of qualitative data, Swinton and Mowat remark, "[it has] a significant liberatory dimension which has the potential to give a voice to the voiceless and offer important challenges to the practices and faithfulness of church communities."[51] The dynamism of qualitative research and the dissemination of information gathered within such studies is a result of the interaction between two

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[50] See Appendix C for the information packet each interviewee received prior to agreeing to be interviewed. The packet includes a participation information sheet, participation consent form, and the interview questions.

[51] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 253.

parties - the interviewee and the researcher. Not only does the interviewee bring his or her unique life experiences into the research, but so too does the researcher. The previously argued importance of ideographic information gained by way of unique life experiences applies to both she who conducts the research and the individual who participates.

The Role of the Researcher

The researcher plays an integral role in conducting the study and presenting the resultant data. A realization of this helps to protect the integrity of qualitative data because it exposes and protects against the element of power inherent with the interviewer/interviewee relationship. What does this mean? In addition to the interviewee, the person conducting the research also has personal biases informed by his or her unique life experiences. The researcher's own experiences are valid; however, they must be kept in balance against that of the interviewee's so as to protect the integrity of the research. On this topic, Swinton and Mowat discuss the importance of a researcher being aware, prior to engaging in any study, of the power inherent within qualitative research endeavours. The researcher is in a position of power because he or she has the interviewee sign a consent form, trusting that the researcher will present the data accurately. When this is successfully accomplished, the researcher does, in fact, give her interview participants a voice to be heard by theologians, Church leaders, and fellow lay people.

Arguably the most crucial element in qualitative research, Swinton and Mowat suggest that researchers remain committed to reflexivity so as to protect the integrity of their research.[52] Reflexivity is more than an awareness of personal biases; it is an active process accompanying research efforts wherein a researcher continuously and critically reflects on his or her personal biases and where, if at all, they may have influenced the data description and analysis. Particularly true for this dissertation, given the researcher's personal experience with adoption and individual interest in further theological exploration on the topic at hand, an awareness of and commitment to exposing such natural biases remains paramount. While the theologian embraces the fact that her unique life experiences produce a certain framework for thinking and theologically reflecting, she also commits herself, in light of the importance of the research at hand, to remain accountable to whatever the qualitative data may reveal.

It has therefore been determined that synthesizing a biblical exploration and theological enquiry with qualitative data collected by way of personal, one-to-one interviews will be the most effective way of gathering the desired information. As this chapter has highlighted, participatory research is both exciting and dynamic. This is because the conclusions and recommendations emerging from the data are informed by knowledge ascertained through the lived human experience as opposed to exclusively being based on neutral information. Having therefore highlighted the 'why' (rationale) and the 'how' (methodology) informing this research, the focus of this dissertation now shifts to a theological and biblical exploration of the topic at

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[52] Ibid., 59.

hand. It is intended that by doing so, a foundation will be established upon which the data emerging in chapter four maybe interpreted and analysed.

Chapter Three

Adopted into the Family of God: A Biblical Inquiry into the Christian Experience of

Becoming a Child of God

Given the theologically reflective nature of this dissertation, it is imperative that this

research be well-rooted in a biblical exploration of the act and continual unfolding of

a believer's adoption into the family of God. This chapter will discuss what it

means for a Christian believer to be welcomed into the divine family by way of

adoption, and how this affects his or her lived reality.

Introduction

Having been enveloped into the family of God as a result of the Father's great love

in sending Jesus to reconcile humanity unto himself,[53] there are theological truths

that underpin and substantiate the growing interest, particularly among American

Christians, in adopting children. The purpose of this chapter is to establish a biblical

foundation, specifically focused on the writings of John, informing the ongoing,

post-adoption journey. Scriptural considerations of Johannine literature are

specifically aimed at answering the following question: what does it mean to be

adopted into God's family and exist alongside other children of God? Three themes

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[53] Eph. 1:5 (English Standard Version).

that emerge and are therefore the focus of the following, in-depth exploration includes identity, security, and community.

Adoption in the Writings of John

Concurrent with the recent rise in the number of American families choosing to expand their family through adoption[54], there has been an increase in the volume of literature on this topic; albeit, the total resources containing theological reflections on the biblical basis for adoption and orphan care still remain small in number.[55] Regarding Scripture, Paul is the only New Testament author to explicitly use the Greek word for 'adoption' (*huiothesia*) in his writings; therefore, his works are often cited in this context.[56] However, in an effort to cultivate fresh theological input regarding the idea of adoption, an exploration of the writings of John proves insightful.[57] One could argue that the most pressing evidence for this appears at the very centre of the prologue of John's Gospel, John 1:12b. John often uses chiastic structure as a literary device to stress the importance of the message located at the

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[54] Child Welfare Information Gateway, "How Many Children Were Adopted in 2007 and 2008?"

[55] Lawrence E. Bergeron, *Journey to the Fatherless* (2012); Dan Cruver, ed., *Reclaiming Adoption* (2011); Tony Merida and Rock Morton, *Orphanology: Awakening to Gospel-Centered Adoption and Orphan Care* (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope Publishers, 2011); Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, *The Spirit of Adoption* (2003); Russell D. Moore, *Adopted for Life* (2009); Stephen G. Post, "Adoption Theologically Considered," *Journal Of Religious Ethics* 25.1 (March 1, 1997): 149-168, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001023555&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed August 18, 2012); David M. Smolin, "Of Orphans and Adoption, Parents and the Poor, Exploitation and Rescues" (2012).

[56] Rom 8:18, 23; 9:4; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5.

[57] Trevor J. Burke, *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 26; G. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 13; John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2002), 219; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); 152; Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 175.

centre of the chiasm (A-B-**C**-A'-B'). Scholars agree that the prologue of John's Gospel (John 1:1-18) contains a chiasm; however, there is some discrepancy as to what verse should be deemed the centre of the chiasm.[58] Culpepper compellingly argues that the message of adoption in John 1:12b runs throughout the entirety of John's writings and is therefore to be seen as the centre of the chiastic prologue.[59] Agreeably, Kasemann states,

> The establishment of sonship to God through the Son of God is the eschatological end of all of God's dealings with the world, the goal of the creator and creation. John 1:12 is therefore pre-eminently suitable to serve as the conclusion of a Christian hymn.[60]

Not only are the writings of John concerned with the act of adoption, becoming a member of God's family (salvation), but they are also interested in the ongoing process of a believer learning what it means to belong to this new family (discipleship).[61] What is promised in John 1:12 comes to fruition in Jesus' "hour" – his death on the cross (John 19). Unique to John's account of Jesus' crucifixion, the following is recorded:

> When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.'[62]

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[58] Colin G. Kruse, *John* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 66; R. A. Culpepper, "The Pivot of John's Prologue," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981), 4; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 30.

[59] R. A. Culpepper, "The Pivot of John's Prologue," 1. It should be noted that the phrase "children of God" only appears twice in the gospel (John 1:12; 11:52) and three times in John's epistles (1 John 3:1-2, 10; 5:2). However, the theme courses throughout John's writings.

[60] Ernst Kasemann, "The Structure and Purpose of the Prologue of John's Gospel," in *New Testament Questions for Today,* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 151-152.

[61] Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 87. Morris writes, "While the New Testament portrays God as the Father of all, paradoxically it does not speak of all as sons of God. God's attitude to all people is that of a Father. All are his sons in the sense that he made them and that he provides for them. But people are his sons in the full sense only as they respond to what he does for them in Christ."

[62] John 19:26-27.

According to Carson, "The words Jesus uses, 'Here is your son . . . Here is your mother,' are reminiscent of legal adoption formulae."[63] From the cross, Jesus not only made provision for his biological mother to be cared for temporally amidst his physical absence, but he also inaugurated a new family, the ecclesial community, to which one belongs on the basis of belief, not race, shape, size, or surname. This familial expansion to include all who believe is confirmed by Jesus' post-resurrection words spoken to Mary, wherein he refers to the disciples as "my brothers" and calls God "my Father and your Father."[64] For those who come to the Father through Jesus, there is an ontological shift in their identity – through the gift of adoption they have now been "born of the spirit" and belong to an eternally existent family.[65]

Furthermore, John explores the ways that God's children grow in love to increasingly portray the characteristics of belonging to this new family. Vanier offers the following insight into what this journey for the believer, as recounted by John, entails: "This gospel is about growing in trust, growing in a relationship of love with Jesus."[66] Confirmed by the promise given to his disciples just prior to his arrest, "'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you,'" the journey of learning how to live as God's children is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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[63] D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England: IVP, 1991), 616.

[64] John 20:17. R. A. Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 101.

[65] John 3:6. See Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus in John 3:1-31 for a full discussion on being born again in the Spirit. Also see 1 John 3:1-10.

[66] Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 84.

Witherington offers a way of viewing this that supports an unfolding sense of revelation:

> What we find in this Gospel is a plethora of people on the way to becoming full-fledged disciples . . . but they have not yet fully arrived . . . Only [after Jesus' resurrection] was a fuller understanding possible, and only then was the Paraclete sent that could lead one into all truth and empower believers to *be* children of God.[67]

The Holy Spirit negates believers' felt orphanhood and confirms in them this notion of filial love.[68]

Read in light of Jesus' death, resurrection, and an understanding that the gift of the Holy Spirit has already been given to believers, one may contend that a number of the narratives in John's Gospel serve as vignettes depicting that which transpires in learning what it means to be a child of God. This journey is both challenging and rewarding; it includes learning of the Father's great love (I John 3:1-2), growing in trust in Jesus (John 4), becoming increasingly aware of God's provision and the sense of security this fosters among believers (John 6; John 11), accepting God's mercy in light of one's wrongdoing (John 8), and extending similar grace and compassion to others (John 13). Emerging from this understanding, identity, security, and community are three essential characteristics informing the adoption experience of those who believe in Christ and belong to the ecclesial family.

Identity: I John 3:1-2

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[67] Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 1995), 57.

[68] Mark Stibbe, *From Orphans to Heirs*, 97.

Prior to chapter three of his first epistle, John only mentions the believers' mode of belonging to the divine family in being born of God.[69] However, in I John 3:1, John refers back to the important statement made in the prologue of his gospel. What was promised in John 1:12 ('But to all who received him, who believed in his name, *he gave power to become children of God*') and fulfilled through Jesus' death and resurrection (John 19:26-27; 20:17), has now become the actualised existence of the community of believers to whom John is writing this letter. One might contend that John is employing a nuanced understanding of adoption to depict the relationship shared between God and his children.[70] Understood at its most basic level, adoption (in both theological and practical terms) is becoming someone's child, and this consequently results in an alteration to one's former identity. This is both static and dynamic; it is static in that a child assumes the familial identity upon entry into the adoptive family, and it is dynamic because the more the child learns about the family, the more fully he or she understands what it means to be a child of that particular family.

John begins this chapter of the epistle by emphatically stating, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." Although at first glance the affirmative phrase, "and that is what we are," seems to be an odd addition to an already complete thought, deeper exploration highlights John's purpose in doing so in order to emphasize the believer's

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[69] I John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18.
[70] See John Painter, *1, 2, and 3*, 219; Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 175.

ontological shift in identity.[71] The Greek word used at the end of the phrase for "are" is *eimi*. This word means "to be or to exist."[72] John uses the word *eimi* quite frequently in his writings, and it is most noticeably employed in Jesus' self-revelatory "I Am" (*ego eimi*) statements confirming his Messianic identity.[73] There is undeniably a difference between the two as the use in I John 3:1 is not preceded by the noun *ego,* crucial in linking the "I Am" statements to Old Testament tradition.[74] However, this insight raises the following question: is there a connection between Jesus' use of *eimi* to reveal his true, ontological identity as one with the Father, and John's employment of the word in this context to reveal the believer's true identity? Bruce reflects, "The words 'and such we are' . . . reminds us that when God calls, His call is effectual; people and things *are* what He calls them."[75] Thus, to be adopted as a child of God means to embrace a new identity that is both a present reality and, as I John 3:2b denotes, a trajectory toward something greater. Brown argues,

> God is love (14:8, 16c), and such a God can no more be static than can his children: His love did not terminate when He bestowed upon Christians the status of being His children.[76]

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[71] Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 391. Regarding the interesting and intentional use of the affirmative phrase, Brown states, "Most scholars, however, see this interruption in the indicative as underlining the reality of the filiation. And despite its grammatical awkwardness, it has an oratorical flair . . . 'To be called God's children' in 3:1b really means to be God's children."

[72] See "1639: Eimi" in William D. Mounce and Robert H. Mounce, eds., *Greek and English Interlinear New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 1085.

[73] A. M. Okorie, "The Self-Revelation of Jesus in the 'I Am' Sayings of John's Gospel." *Currents In Theology And Mission* 28.5 (October 1, 2001): 486, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001407524&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed August 9, 2012).

[74] Ibid., 486-487.

[75] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 85.

[76] Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 423.

Therefore, as believers continue to experience God's love anew, they will further learn what it means to be identified as a child of God. This includes changing one's behaviour and treatment of others to reveal the way in which the heavenly family operates (3:3).

According to Yarbrough, John uses the words *agape* (love) and *agapao* (to love) more so than any other New Testament author, thus serving as evidence of his "preoccupation with [God's] divine love."[77] For John, God's love is paramount in his theological construction because it is as a result of this love that the believer is brought to life (I John 4:9) and enabled to love (I John 4:19). The Greek word *agape*, denoting divine love, appears in both I John 3:1 (noun: *agape* meaning love) and in 3:2b (adjective: *agapetos* meaning beloved). In both 3:1 and 3:2b there is mention of *agape* love followed by a confirmation of the believers' identity as children of God. The Greek word John uses in I John 3:1, "See *what love (protapen)* the Father has given us," insinuates a love that is foreign. Stott states, "It is as if the Father's love is so unearthly, so foreign to this world, that John wonders from what country it may come."[78] One could therefore contend that the previously discussed shift in identity is enabled by an overflow of the eternal love shared between God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. On this point, Thompson reflects, "By God's creative act of love, we belong to God as surely and permanently as children belong to their parents."[79] By being called children of God, believers are

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[77] Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 174.
[78] John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 122.
[79] M. M. Thompson, *1-3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 88. Emphasis original.

invited to experience the "inner dynamism within God's being, [God's own 'Being-in-love], that can never be adequately expressed."[80] This experience of the Father's great love is therefore utterly enormous and entirely transformative.

Security: John 6:1-15

In addition to experiencing a change in identity as a result of the Father's insurmountable love for his children, a second aspect of the believers' welcome into this new family is their subsequent security as children of God. This concept is present in John's writing about Jesus feeding the five thousand. In contrast to the synoptic records, John's gospel is not primarily concerned with factually documenting the events of Jesus' life; rather, John is interested in his reader experiencing Jesus.[81] For that reason, John's account is often referred to as the "spiritual Gospel."[82] Different than the synoptic accounts of Jesus feeding the hungry crowd, John spiritualizes this temporal story by following it shortly thereafter with the "Bread of Life" discourse.[83] It also differs in that it includes distinct details, such as the miracle occurring near the time of Passover and identifying Philip and Andrew by name in the story. These observations provoke the following question: what do these seemingly miniscule details communicate about God's provision and the subsequent felt security of his children?

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[80] Mary L. Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 164.

[81] Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, 11.

[82] See David J. Hawkin, *The Johannine World: Reflections on the Theology of the Fourth Gospel and Contemporary Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 27. Clement of Alexandria was the first to dub John the "spiritual gospel."

[83] The "Bread of Life" discourse following the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, as recorded by John, does not appear in the synoptic gospels.

With regard to the first observation, it is interesting to note how human beings associate accessibility to food with feeling secure. For example, particularly true of children who experience early institutionalization in developing countries (i.e. the orphanage setting) wherein food can be scarce and feeling hungry all too familiar, it is not uncommon for these children, even after being adopted into a family, to display interesting eating habits.[84] This includes hoarding or hiding food at meal times to prevent experiencing future starvation.[85] Despite a family's continued efforts in assuring their children that they will not go hungry, it often takes time for adopted children to develop trust in their new parents' commitment to provide, and to accept their parents' identity as care-givers. On what happens psychologically with adopted children and food related issues, Purvis writes,

> If a child feels threatened, hungry, or tired, her primitive brain jumps in and takes over [shutting down the] more advanced areas of the brain – particularly those that handle higher learning, reasoning, and logic . . . [Contrarily] when a child feels genuinely safe, the primitive brain lets down its guard and allows trust to blossom and bonding to begin.[86]

For children from troubled backgrounds, a new environment wherein felt security has been established allows for deeper truths to be communicated, received, and understood. These truths confirm their identity and security as children belonging to

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[84] See Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Orphanages," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, http://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/types/orphanages.cfm (accessed August 21, 2012). In developed countries in the West, namely the United States, Canada, and the UK, the orphanage system is no longer used to care for children in need of families. The idea is that children, as they wait for a permanent adoptive family, should be in a similar setting and learn how to build bonds of familial attachment. Therefore, the foster care model is the preferred method of care and has largely replaced the orphanage system.

[85] Lillian Hudson, "And What About Food?" *Rainbowkids.com,* July 1, 2010, http://www.rainbowkids.com/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=437 (accessed August 16, 2012).

[86] Karyn B. Purvis, David R. Cross, and Wendy Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007), 50.

their new family, and also affirm their parents' roles as provider and nurturer. In light of this, the John narrative might be used to explore the link between Jesus' provision of food, his self-revelation as the one who provides for all his children's needs[87], and the subsequent experience of a Christian feeling secure in the divine family.

John's reference to Passover in the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand proves insightful. The annual celebration of Passover is a time in which the Jews remember God's great provision in delivering the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. Despite their subsequent forty-year pilgrimage in the desert, the Israelite children remained secure during that time by way of God the Father's provision of manna as sustenance (Exod. 16).[88] Regardless of seemingly insurmountable difficulties such as bread falling from the sky or feeding five thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two fish, God's nature is one of concern for the needs of his people.[89] Morris comments, "This 'sign,' then, shows Jesus to be the supplier of people's need . . . What the manna in the wilderness foreshadowed is perfectly given in Jesus."[90] Jesus first shows this to be true by physically feeding five thousand hungry people, and secondly by utilizing this meeting of a need to further reveal his identity as the one who also provides for his children's spiritual needs.

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[87] John 6:47-48.

[88] Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 301.

[89] One must be careful not to strictly associate God's provision with a lack of hardships in life. Perhaps this message is communicated by the short story that unfolds between Jesus feeding the five thousand and the bread of life discourse. Here, in John 6:16-21, Jesus is seen calming the disciples' fears only after they have experienced the uncertainty of being caught in a storm by themselves while in a boat on the Sea of Galilee.

[90] Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John,* 301.

Typical of Johannine literature, John spiritualizes this miracle with the following "Bread of Life" discourse (v. 26-58).[91] Painter argues that the sign Jesus performs in John 6:1-15 "sets the stage for a discussion about the identity of Jesus" that unfolds in John 6:26-58.[92] Jesus reveals to his followers, "'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'"[93] Yes, Jesus provides for a physical need by feeding in abundance the hungry crowd; however, this action also facilitates a discussion regarding his true identity – the giver of eternal life. Witkamp argues that the purpose of Jesus' miracle is for teaching or "catechesis;" that Jesus might be able to "let himself and to let his gifts be known and to reveal his concern for the people given to him."[94] One might therefore contend that what happens in John 6 is reminiscent of the cycle advocated for in *The Connected Child* aimed at assuring a child of his or her familial security - a meal or provision of food is given and this allows for bonds of attachment between Jesus and his twelve disciples, his children by merit of their belief in him, to become further solidified.

Secondly, one could contend that Jesus' inclusion of Phillip and Andrew in his act of provision also addresses this idea of security. On what grounds may this be

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[91] Adam C. English, "Feeding Imagery in the Gospel of John: Uniting the Physical and the Spiritual," *Perspectives In Religious Studies* 28.3 (September 1, 2001): 214, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001381860&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed August 17, 2012).

[92] R. Jackson Painter, *The Gospel of John: A Thematic Approach* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 124.

[93] John 6:35.

[94] Leonard T. Witkamp, "Some Specific Johannine Features in John 6:1-21," *Journal For The Study Of The New Testament* 40 (October 1, 1990): 50, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000842262&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed August 16, 2012).

argued? Phillip and Andrew are the two disciples named at the beginning of John's gospel; therefore, presumably they had travelled with Jesus for a longer time than the other disciples. They had witnessed him performing miracles and they had heard his teachings, even a teaching regarding the subject of food. Shortly after his encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, Jesus gave the following response to his disciples' urging him to eat: "'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.'"[95] Philip and Andrew, assumed to be present at that moment, "do not seem to have learned from that encounter . . . [of] their master's attempt to draw them beyond the limitations of their expectations."[96] Thus, prior to feeding the five thousand, Jesus asks Philip, "'Where are we to buy bread for these people?'" Jesus already knew how he would provide for the hungry crowd; however, instead of becoming frustrated with the disciples on account of their fledgling faith, Jesus involves them in the miraculous event. Once again, Jesus invites his disciples to watch him provide for the crowd and come to trust him anew. One could therefore contend that as a child of God, in the same way that one's identity is an overflow of God's love, so too is one's security.

Community: John 13:1-20

Thus far, two elements of what it means to be adopted into the family of God, viewed through a Johannine lens, have been explored. However, one would be remiss not to address the ever-so-prevalent theme of community in the Johannine

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[95] John 4:34.
[96] Francis J. Moloney. *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), 197.

writings. One could contend that, at various points, John probes the thought that each believer exists as a child of God alongside other children of God. Particularly challenging for a Western culture embracing post-modernity and its emphasis on individualism and self-autonomy,[97] the Johannine perspective on what it means to conduct oneself as a member of God's family cannot be divorced from the ecclesial community. Howard-Brook denotes the "relentlessness" of John's writings in using plural references when speaking of believers, therefore "rejecting the pursuit of a personal relationship with God that remains content simply within that relationship as an enclosed spiritual place."[98] Falling in line with the Old Testament understanding of God calling a collective people, Israel, unto himself, the New Testament church (*ecclesia*),[99] understood itself to be a community journeying together as the children of God.

Although John does not overtly use the Greek word *ecclesia* in his writings, Alf Corell highlights, "In individual passages and also in the Gospel as a whole the reality of the existence of the Church is clearly implied."[100] One such instance is Jesus' "farewell discourse" given to his disciples and recorded in John 13-17. What surfaces here are details regarding Christianity's collective nature, and what it means for the Church to be a community of believers. A full discussion and analysis of the

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[97] Peter S.C. Pothen, *Unpacking the Family*, Grove Ethical Studies 87 (Nottingham, England: Grove Books Limited, 1992), 18.

[98] Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994), 25.

[99] Edward Shillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 42. The Greek word often used in the New Testament for church is *ecclesia*. Interestingly, when first translated into Greek, the Hebrew word used to denote Israel, or God's chosen people, was replaced with the Greek word *ecclesia*.

[100] Alf Correl, *Consummatum Est: Eschatology and Church in the Gospel of St. John* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), 12.

theme of community as it appears in John 13-17 is too vast a topic to be discussed here. What follows, however, is a reflection on this question; what does Jesus' action of washing the disciples' feet, as recorded in John 13:1-20, communicate about being a child of God within the family of God?

First, John informs the reader that the inaugural event of Jesus' "farewell discourse" takes place during supper (v. 2). In light of the important events about to unfold now that Jesus' "hour had come to depart from this world,"[101] of what significance is it that John mentions this event occurring over dinner? Different than the synoptic gospels, John's account of Jesus' final days does not explicitly mention a Last Supper at which Jesus institutes the Eucharist;[102] therefore, scholars have argued whether this is or is not John's recollection of the Last Supper.[103] This may be one reason informing the significance of the foot-washing event happening during dinner; however, of more interest to the discussion at hand, Hawkins offers a different understanding as to why John denotes this detail.[104] In light of John's frequent use of long narratives, resulting in his account of Jesus' life unfolding at a slower pace than that of the synoptic gospels, could this episode have been included to further emphasize the importance of the ecclesial family existing in community and enjoying fellowship with one another? In a highly individualized Western culture increasingly enamoured with and dependent upon technology, "human

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[101] John 13:1.
[102] Matt. 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-39.
[103] Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 453-457.
[104] David J. Hawkin, *The Johannine World*, 122.

relationships [have become] governed by efficiency, utility, and pragmatism."[105] Made in the image of the Triune God, who has eternally existed in community with himself (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), human beings are created to exist in mutually self-informing and self-giving relationships with one another.[106] On the importance of fellowship within the ecclesial family, Vanier centralises the role of community in human development; "We do not discover who we are, we do not reach true humanness, in a solitary state; we discover it through mutual dependency, in weakness, in learning through belonging."[107] How can the ecclesial family foster a sense of belonging among its individual members if they do not slow down and enjoy fellowship with one another?   Therefore, one might contend that in mentioning what seems to be a miniscule detail, John is helping believers understand the importance of creating time and space to be with other believers.

Furthermore, John 13 records another downward journey of Jesus; having already descended from heaven to earth, the Messiah is now pictured kneeling and serving his disciples.[108]   In the Jewish tradition, foot-washing serves as the "epitome of hospitality,"[109] symbolizing for the guest an inclusive welcome into being a part of the household he or she is entering. Making himself vulnerable by stripping off his

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[105] Ibid.

[106] Thomas J. Scirghi, "The Trinity: A Model for Belonging in Contemporary Society," *Ecumenical Review* 54.3 (July 2002): 335, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001412182&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed August 21, 2012).

[107] Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: Anansi, 1998), 41.

[108] Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, 225. John 13:3 makes notes of that which made Jesus' downward journey possible – his sense of true identity. Jesus was fully aware of where he had come from, to where he was going, and the mission he was sent to earth to accomplish. Interestingly, self-awareness plays an important role in the service of others. Having a sense of self that is neither too high nor too low encourages genuine service of others and protects against the temptation to discover one's own sense of personal significance through self-sacrifice.

[109] Mary L. Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God,* 133.

outer garments and assuming the position of a household slave, in washing his disciples' feet, Jesus communicates a profound truth to his disciples – they have been warmly welcomed into his Father's household. Additionally, the foot-washing episode gave the disciples a tangible picture of the way they were to exist alongside one another as children of God.[110] Returning to the table after washing their feet, Jesus tells his disciples, "'If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example,[111] that you also should do as I have done to you.'"[112] Jesus is not calling the ecclesial community to achieve some level of moral perfection;[113] rather, he is asking them to journey together into a greater awareness of his Father's love for them (13:34). This subsequently compels believers to share within the ecclesial collective a similar love, resulting in mutual self-sacrifice and the radical welcoming of one another into each other's lives. When the family of God exists as community, or "communion," according to Vanier, what results is "the accepting [of] the presence of another inside oneself, as well as accepting the reciprocal call to enter into another."[114] As previously explored, the Father's overflowing love, resulting in a believer's experienced alteration of identity in becoming a child of God, is the same love that

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[110] Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 242.

[111] R. A. Culpepper, "The Johannine Hypodeigma: A Reading of John 13," *Semeia* 53 (January 1, 1991): 133-152, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000844736&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed August 20, 2012). The Greek word used in John 13:15 for "example" is *hypodeigma*. According to Culpepper, the other times this word is used in the Septuagint it not only means example, but it insinuates an exemplary death. Therefore, can the act of foot-washing be interpreted as symbolic of Jesus' death? Culpepper argues in the affirmative; "The close association of love with the foot-washing and Jesus' death conveys the implication that Jesus was charging his disciples to love one another even if such love requires that they lay down their lives for the community."

[112] John 13:14-15.

[113] Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 376.

[114] Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 28.

secures a child's sense of belonging to the ecclesial family. Furthermore, one could

argue that this love is also the source of inspiration and empowerment for each child

of God to exist alongside other believers as the collective children of God – the

Church.[115]

Conclusion

Although more nuanced than Paul's adoption theology, John's written expression of

the Christian identity and experience of existing as children of God, in both his

gospel and epistles, is similarly dynamic and inspiring. Perhaps Sunday school

repetition of John 3:16 has jaded the life-altering truth encapsulated within; "This is

how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is

why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a

whole and lasting life."[116] For those adopted into the family of God, the Father's

love is of paramount importance. Ontologically, the love that God has for his

children enables an identity shift among Christians; no longer are believers called

children of darkness, but they belong to the light and are God's children.[117]

Secondly, the Father's love not only fuels the adoptive act, but also cultivates among

newly welcomed children of God a sense of security regarding their belonging to the

ecclesial family. This is not because of merit, but it is the result of God existing

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[115] Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John,* 466; I John 4:7-21.

[116] Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), John 3:16.

[117] I Thess. 5:5.

eternally as love and enveloping his children into this Trinitarian affection.[118] In addition, and frequently discussed in the Johannine writings, God's adoptive act applies to a collective people - the Church. Therefore, a believer is not left to exist as a child of God in solidarity but rather alongside other children of God; a community inspired, directed, and defined by the same identity-altering, security-establishing love. Reflecting theologically on the topic of adoption in the writings of John has highlighted these important themes.

These ideas will be revisited in the concluding chapter; however, the next chapter includes a description and analysis of the qualitative data gathered by way of personal interviews with adoptive families. As it will be highlighted, unique themes also emerge out of the qualitative data. In the conclusive chapter, ideas surfacing by way of personal interviews will be compared to and combined with some of the themes emerging within this chapter. Bringing the two together will provide helpful insight regarding ways churches may best support adoptive families, particularly those adopting children with complex disabilities.

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[118] Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*: *How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2010), 62; 95.

Chapter Four

Research Findings: Description and Analysis

The purpose of chapter three was to outline a biblical framework informing a Christian believer's adoption experience. What follows, therefore, in an effort to bring together theological exploration and the lived human reality, is an investigation of the various experiences Christian families have had in adopting a child or children with complex disabilities. This chapter begins with an explanation of how the researcher chose her sample for the interviews that were conducted. This is followed by a summary and analysis of the participants' answers to the eight interview questions.

Data Description

Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher faced the task of identifying an appropriate, yet variegated, sample that might yield useful answers to the pre-identified interview questions, as well as shedding helpful insight on this project's overall guiding research questions. As previously mentioned, given the nature of this research, it made most sense to first narrow the interviewee sample to focus specifically on the experience of Church affiliated Christians who have adopted children with complex disabilities.

Choosing the sample for this study was purposive,[119] meaning interviewees were selected intentionally with the objective of achieving a wide scope of answers. Appendix A includes a glossary of terminology defining all complex disability diagnoses specifically impacting the lives of the participants chosen for this research. In Appendix B, a description of the research sample can be found. The informational packet, interview participation consent form, and interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

All nine adoptive parents interviewed were married. Seven of the participants were interviewed separately; however, Participants 6 and 7 were interviewed jointly as a married couple. Of the seven participants interviewed individually, six were married mothers and one was a married father. The low number of adoptive fathers interviewed for this research was not intentional; in fact, interview requests were sent to other adoptive fathers. Time constraints, however, did not allow for their participation.

The research participants represent a wide variety of Christian denominations including Church of Christ, Southern Baptist, Baptist, Methodist, Bible Church, Non-Denominational and Roman Catholic. Additionally, the sample was chosen intentionally to represent different geographical locations throughout the United States of America. Finally, special attention was also given to the structure of each family chosen for the interviews. For example, some families were asked to

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[119] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Data*, 69.

participate because they had biological children prior to adopting, while others were chosen because they adopted a child first or only have adopted children.

Data Analysis

Listed below are the interview questions that were used to guide the researcher's discussion with the nine participants. For each question, the researcher has summarised and analysed the interviewees' responses.

Question One – What prompted your decision to adopt a child?

Of the nine research participants, three referred to infertility and the potential inability to become pregnant as the reason for first considering adoption. Three participants cited exposure to adoption through extended family as largely influential in their decision to adopt. Additionally, three interviewees mentioned the impact short-term, overseas mission trips and first hand exposure to the orphan crisis[120] had on their desire to adopt.

A majority of the participants referred to their Christian faith, at least to some degree, as an influential factor in their decision to adopt. Expounding upon this idea, Participant 4 commented by reflecting theologically on the nature of God's

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[120] See Johnny Carr, "A Comprehensive Approach to the Orphan Crisis," http://www.qideas.org/blog/a-comprehensive-approach-to-the-orphan-crisis.aspx (accessed August 23, 2012). It is not uncommon for those involved in adoption and orphan care advocacy efforts to refer to the ever-increasing number of orphans worldwide as the 'global orphan crisis.'

love and how that further confirmed their decision to adopt a child. Regarding their love for whatever children God might entrust to her and her husband's care, Participant 4 remarked:

"You know, God is love. Love, as we understand it, is not a genetic thing . . . it really isn't. It is a gospel thing, a Jesus thing."

Participant 4's adoption decision and journey have been informed by an understanding of the unique nature of God the Father's love for his children. Due to the individuality of her response, one might ask, "What, if not the love of God, motivates and subsequently sustains a Christian's involvement in adoption?"

Contrasted with the unique perspective offered in Participant 4's answer, a theme emerging from Participant 1, 4, 5, and 9's answer was the idea of feeling "called by God to adopt." The interviewees seem to perceive this call differently; Participant 1 and 9 alluded to a level of spiritual sensitivity in feeling ushered by God into adoption. For example, Participant 9 stated that both of their adoptions were *"just very spirit-led."* Participant 4 linked together time spent in prayer with feeling called by God to adopt, while Participant 5 believed God's call to adopt came as a result of various life experiences (i.e. her and her new husband's multiple miscarriages). Outside of the answers given directly in response to this question, Participants 2, 3, and 8 also referred to this idea at different points during their interviews. The frequency with which this phrase appeared indicates a presumed ability among the interviewees to recognize and discern God's call. However, this very subject, God's call and the way in which his people perceive and respond to

this call, is a theological enigma that continues to cause much debate and discussion within the Christian community. What this observation leads to, therefore, is the raising of some important questions. What exactly is the nature of God's call? Does God issue calls that are collective in nature and subsequently apply to the Church at large, or are they solely individualistic? How do Christians discern God's call and what role, if any, does the body of Christ and its appointed leadership play in helping in this endeavour?

Question Two – Did you initially intend to pursue the adoption of a child with complex disabilities?

Of the nine participants, six adopted a healthy, able-bodied individual first. However, the need for families willing to welcome in children who would otherwise be harder to place was cited as the reason why these families chose to adopt again and specifically pursue children with complex disabilities. Expressing a sentiment shared among interviewees, Participant 2 made the following remark regarding the disparity between families desiring to adopt healthy children and the number of children with disabilities currently awaiting adoption:

"The fact that everybody [adopting at the time we did] wanted the perfect baby [and yet] there were so many children with special needs who needed a home is what motivated us to say, 'Who's going to adopt these kids who are just as worthy in God's sight and who need a home?'"

Three participants cited previous exposure, predominantly by way of family members who are disabled, as part of what influenced their decision to pursue the adoption of a child with complex disabilities.

Two interviewees, Participants 3 and 8, began their families by adopting a child with complex disabilities; of these two families, Participant 3 and her husband were aware of the child's disabilities prior to meeting the child. Participant 8 and his wife, however, did not know that the child they adopted had disabilities. Although their daughter appeared healthy throughout infancy, as she has grown older, she has been diagnosed with various intellectual and behavioural disabilities.

Prior to adopting their son with significant medical needs, Participant 9 and her husband had two biological children and had adopted one child, all of whom are healthy. Therefore, given that they had never parented a child with complex disabilities, they certainly felt stretched in their faith in considering adopting a child who is paraplegic as a result of his medical condition, Spina Bifida. However, they intentionally chose to adopt this specific child because they felt strongly that he was *"[their] son and his Spina Bifida came with him!"* Participant 9 and her husband considered their child's medical condition as secondary in comparison to what they believed to be primarily important – the familial love they had for him.

As opposed to embracing the attitude Participant 9 has about her disabled child, Participant 7 believes that her church has glamorized families adopting more severely disabled children. Regarding this perceived status awarded to such families, Participant 7 remarked,

"Unfortunately, in the church . . . special needs adoption has become the 'in' thing to do and it's kind of like – I know this sounds horrible, but it's like a clique you know . . . and you can't go into adoption, and especially a special needs adoption, just because that's what the cool kids are doing."

She, however, does not count herself as being of this same mindset because her special needs adoption was influenced by exposure to the harsh reality disabled orphans from developing countries face if they are not adopted into a family. These two responses highlight a dangerous chasm in thought; growing one's family as a result of genuine, familial love, or doing so in order to maintain, or perhaps even improve, one's own image. This difference calls into question the way Christians perceive people with disabilities and stimulates some important questions demanding further exploration. What are the potential ramifications of adopting a child to acquire popularity status? What role, if any, does Church leadership play in regulating the congregational mindset regarding complex disability? Is it enough for disabled children to be the focus of Christian charity? What, if anything, do churches miss out on if people with disabilities are not integrated into the life of the body of Christ?

Question Three - To what extent did you involve your church/faith community (leaders and/or members) in your decision to adopt your child?

In choosing whether or not to adopt, Participants 3 and 4 had intentional conversations with other adoptive families to ask questions and gather further information about the realities and dynamics involved with adoption. Participants 1, 6, and 7 felt that the staff members of their churches did not know enough about the adoption process or adoption-related issues to be of any help. Three interviewees,

Participants 4, 6, and 7 relied on a small group of close friends, whom they met through their local church, to provide helpful advice and encouragement regarding their impending adoption involvement. Additionally, Participants 2 and 9 mentioned sharing a conversation with their pastors, not necessarily to confirm the validity of their decision to adopt, but to ask for prayer and support. Participant 9 and her husband found it particularly helpful to confide in their pastor and his wife because they too were adoptive parents. Participant 9 said,

"[Our pastor and his wife] . . . were really understanding and supportive without pressuring us one way or another."

A majority of the interviewees, five participants in total, seemed to be resolute in their decision to adopt prior to, or regardless of, seeking counsel. The following words extracted from Participant 3's interview highlight this common thread:

"[We consulted our church] very little because we knew we were going to [adopt] regardless of what our church had to say."

Similarly, Participant 8 stated:

"The decision to adopt had very little to do with our faith community. It was kind of like either they like the idea [of us adopting] or they don't. But, we don't care, we are doing it."

These two responses raise some significant issues within contemporary ecclesiology. One might ask to what extent has Christianity become a privatised experience and how legitimate is this within a theologically faithful ecclesiology – what are the

potential dangers in such an attitude? Secondly, how does decision-making occur within the Christian community?

As explored in chapter two, God has called a collective group to be his children – the Church. Any group consists of many individuals; therefore, what is the relationship between individuals and the ecclesial community? As indicated by their responses, Participants 3 and 8 seem to embrace a privatized expression of their faith. This raises questions regarding factors encouraging a privatized Christianity - is it endemic of certain cultural persuasions or is it informed on a more personal level by one's unique ecclesial experience? What, if anything, does Christianity forfeit in distancing itself from its communal roots and embracing a self-enclosed spirituality? If individuals do not feel involved in their church community, what will they gain in consulting their churches regarding decision-making? Is this distance felt within congregational relationships something church members impose upon their ecclesiology, or is it an attitude fostered by the way in which their local church is structured and functions?

What must first be explored is the foundation and nature of decision-making within community. Vanier, the founder of L'Arche,[121] faith-based communities that exist internationally to care for intellectually disabled adults, is well aware of the dynamics that exist between the individual and the collective within given communities. Vanier believes that there is a link between communal decision-

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[121] L'Arche, "Welcome to L'Arche International," http://www.larche.org/home.en-gb.1.0.index.htm (accessed September 11, 2012).

making and the obedience and trust of an individual.[122] Vanier offers the following

insight regarding this relationship:

> [Obedience] is an internalised support of legitimate authority, of the
> structures of decision-making and of the communal conscience of the
> community; it is a search for a communal vision . . . if this communal
> conscience is rejected, there will be division. We create division when
> we believe that we are the only ones to see the truth, when we set
> ourselves as saviours against authority . . . when we want to prove we
> are right.[123]

One could contend that issues in decision-making are ultimately rooted in trust; for

Vanier, obedience is trust, trust is fostered through belonging, and "the essence of

belonging is a sense of community."[124] This proves to be a double-edged sword; if a

church is not fostering a sense of community, why should individuals feel compelled

to consult their seemingly distant congregation regarding personal decisions? On

the other hand, how do churches expect to foster a sense of community when

surrounding culture encourages individuals to privatize their faith, cautioning them

against the personal vulnerability and humility communal involvement often

demands?[125] Particularly challenging for churches that are embedded in highly

individualized cultures such as the West, one might contend that it is time for the

body of Christ[126] to embrace its prophetic role and creatively communicate to a

watching world how to exist within community. Made in the image of God, who

has existed eternally within the community of the Trinity, man and woman are

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[122] Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth: Our Pilgrimage Together* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979),
232.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 16.
[125] Ibid., 7.
[126] I Cor. 12.

created as unique individuals designed for 'being' human alongside others within community.[127]

Question Four: How did your church respond to your decision to adopt your child and to the child's arrival – attitude and level of support (practical, spiritual, emotional, for example)?

All nine interviewees gave a similar *initial* answer to this question; they all expressed that their church was generally supportive. The following interview excerpts from Participants 3, 5, and 8, respectively, portray this common sentiment:

"The church was very supportive of our decision to adopt, and the decision to adopt children with needs."

"Everybody from the pastor on through to everybody in the congregation has been so welcoming, so supportive, so encouraging."

"There was a group of people that were excited and happy for us. They were cheering for us."

Of these nine participants, four quickly followed this initial answer by alluding to feelings of loneliness with regard to the unfolding journey of learning to function as an adoptive family. The sense of initial celebration alluded to by Participant 8 raises some interesting matters for further reflection.

Celebration, as argued by Foster, is primarily a corporate spiritual discipline and is therefore integral and beneficial for the shared life of those belonging to the

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[127] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 208 - 215.

Christian Church.[128] One could therefore contend that the communal celebration of the arrival of a child into a congregation by way of a family's decision to adopt is important, not only for that family, but also for the ecclesial community. What might this mean for the nature of such celebration and the perceived identity of these children? Is a church's happiness for the adoptive family enough? What about the church being excited for itself? Vanier gives the following description of the essence of celebration within Christian community: "Celebration is a shout of love, and of openness, not a feeling of power and superiority."[129] Could it therefore be argued that true celebration of the adoption of a child, particularly a child with complex disabilities, is in essence an ecclesial openness? If so, this would result in adopted children being welcomed into a mutually, self-informing community – the Church – and included as integral, not peripheral, to the spiritual development of the collective. As a family prepares to bring home a child through adoption, perhaps it would behove their church to ask, "Do we have any sense of what we might be gaining by the arrival of this child, with all his or her complex needs, into our community?"[130]

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[128] Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Harper & Row, 1978), 169.

[129] Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 316.

[130] See Jill Ruth Harshaw, "Prophetic Voices, Silent Words: The Prophetic Role of Persons with Profound Intellectual Disabilities in Contemporary Christianity," *Practical Theology* 3.3 (December 1, 2010): 320-322, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001818955&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed August 29, 2012). What is discussed in this article is the "prophetic role" of people with disabilities within the church community. Harshaw writes, "In disregarding the constraints by which we bind ourselves, [people with intellectual disabilities] open to us the possibilities of liberation from pretensions to self-sufficiency, expose our meaningless attempts to impress God and others by what we are and can achieve in ourselves and hold before us the promise of the obliteration of our loneliness by inviting us to join them in admitting our need of one another."

One final observation pertains to the way churches might transition from excitement for the adoptive family to a commitment of support for the family post-adoption. A majority of the interviewees, Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 all referred to an element of practical support they received from their churches to illustrate their congregations' supportive response regarding their decision to adopt. This indicates that one way for churches to enable this transition is by offering to help in very practical ways. Some of the examples of support received by the interviewees included the church throwing the family a baby shower, providing meals for the family at the time of the child's adoption, being present at the airport to celebrate the child's arrival, offering child minding services, and building wheelchair ramps onto adoptive families' homes.

Question Five: In what ways, if any, has your church's pre-adoption attitude and support for you changed?

Six of the nine participants stated that their church's pre-adoption attitude and support remained constant and did not change following the adoption of their child. For Participants 3, 5, and 9 this was a positive consistency because their respective church's pre-adoption attitude was one of great support and encouragement. Shedding light on the degree of support these interviewees felt they received from their respective churches, Participant 5 responded,

"I'd say [this question] is pretty not applicable . . . people rallied and just made everybody part of the family right away. We're very blessed. We have an awesome church."

Participants 1, 6, and 7 said that their church's pre-adoption unawareness of the issues involved in adoption translated into an aloofness and disinterest regarding post-adoption support. For example, Participant 1 said that her church's unawareness of adoption-related issues and lack of sensitivity toward difficulties and differences unique to adopting as opposed to birthing a child did not change after they adopted. She commented,

"My church did not change their support, but in some ways I've shifted to think that's my fault because I haven't asked them to change."

Participant 2 answered this question in the affirmative, stating that her respective church's attitude changed, and that their post-adoption support has been different than what her and her family received pre-adoption. Participant 2's first adoption was seven years ago, therefore time has passed and her church's increased awareness of the unique needs involved with adopting a child with complex disabilities has encouraged a pro-active response from her congregation. Participant 2's church has taken action by creating an adoption and orphan care ministry program specifically aimed at supporting these families.

The final two interviewees, Participants 4 and 8 provided different, individual answers to the question at hand. Participant 4 moved to a new State two months prior to adopting her child; therefore, she compared her new church's attitude and level of support to that of her previous church. She experienced a change that was likely due to moving away from a city and a church with a significant adoptive community to a small town with very little exposure to adoption. On the other hand,

Participant 8 felt that his church's pre-adoption attitude changed and became more excited once his daughter was adopted into their family. He stated,

"When they met her and she became a real person to them and not just a story, I think that they did get more excited for us."

Understanding pre-adoption fundraising efforts as the primary way his church supported his family, Participant 8 clarified that although the church's attitude changed positively, the support for them decreased because fundraising for the actual adoption expense was no longer necessary.

On reflection, it became clear that this question provoked many different responses, and is therefore fertile ground for further exploration. Why did the experience of receiving support from their churches differ so vastly among the participants? How does this example challenge one's ecclesiology – on what basis is the church to be a giving community? Is this answer universal and therefore applicable to all Christian denominational expressions? Are congregants' expectations for the support they feel they need valid, or are they too high? What should the basis be for giving and receiving support within the Christian community, both in terms of the Church's role and the individual's?

What is to be considered first is the impact a church environment may have on whether or not a family feels supported in their adoption journey. Participant 5 felt entirely supported by her church, citing their welcoming of her children and making them feel *"part of the family right away"* as an example of this support. Accepting

that Church as family is a valid ecclesial expression, what encourages the growth of such familial relations? Regarding support shared and received within Christian community, Volf states, "Every word and every deed, every thought and every gesture, even the simple act of paying attention can be a gift and therefore an echo of God's life in us."[131] What specific aspects of God's life inspire and sustain familial expressions of Christian community? Are there connections between familial bonds being established within a given community, and its individual members feeling safe to openly share about needs they may have? How might an understanding of Church as family support adoptive families?

Secondly, as highlighted in Participant 2's response, what role do individuals play in making their needs known to their local congregations? What is the relationship between Church functioning as family and the individual feeling secure in approaching his or her church and asking for help? How might this influence the needs of individual congregants being made known to their respective church? Does an inclination toward the privatization of faith, as discussed in question three, create barriers to congregants asking for or receiving help? For churches interested in enhancing their support of adoptive families, wrestling with these questions will produce deeper roots grounding and sustaining such care.

Question Six: In what ways, if any, have you found your church to be supportive in the post-adoption phase (practically, spiritually, emotionally, for example)? To what extent have your expectations been met/unmet?

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[131] Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 53.

Taking into consideration the responses given by all nine participants, Participants 2, 3, 5, and 9 either explicitly stated, or alluded to, the church meeting their expectations as a supportive network. Interviewees 2 and 3, for example, said that receiving practical support from their church demonstrated an interest in their families' wellbeing. The various examples of practical support given included facilitating post-adoption support groups, respite care and child minding services, and initiating a "buddy system" wherein an assistant accompanies the disabled child to Sunday school. Only one interviewee, Participant 5, directly addressed the spiritual element of this question by stating simply,

"Spiritually, my church has been really supportive."

She further explained that amidst a particularly difficult situation with their eldest adopted child, in which they even felt discouraged by their own extended family, their church faithfully supported them with prayer and encouragement.

In contrast, Participants 1, 6, 7, and 8 thought that their churches did not meet their expectations. For example, Participant 1 stated,

"[My church] was kind and helpful, but they did not actually meet the needs of an adoptive family."

Similarly, Participant 8 commented,

"Regarding my expectations, I want to say that my expectations were unmet in that we don't have a church home right now because there is not really a church set up to be able to receive our daughter as she is."

The difference in responses given by Participants 2, 3, 5, and 9 compared to Participants 1, 6, 7, and 8 raises questions about expectations. With regard to adoptive families and churches knowing what to expect with the adoption of a child, Participant 6 shared,

"Everybody [in the church] supported us, but I don't think everybody understood or knew what all goes into [adoption] . . . and I'm not sure we even understood what all went into it."

How legitimate is it for lay people to expect churches to meet their needs when they themselves are not entirely sure of all the issues involved with adoption? Whose role is it to inform adoptive families of these issues – the adoption agency, the church, the individual research of prospective adoptive parents?

Secondly, questions surface regarding the relationship shared between families feeling as if they belong to a church and how that, in turn, informs their expectations of the ecclesial support they believe they should receive. Is there a link between the degree to which a congregant participates in the life of the community and how he or she perceives the church to have successfully met his or her expectations? Additionally, are there creative ways to incorporate families, like Participant 8's, into the life of the ecclesial community during times in which they may not be able to attend church?

In his book *The Contemplative Pastor*,[132] Peterson discusses a "vocational reformation" he hopes takes place primarily among American pastors, wherein pastoral work is rediscovered as "the cure of souls"[133] as opposed to "running a church."[134] Until a century ago, Peterson denotes that what a pastor did on Sunday from the pulpit was not separated from the work he did Monday to Saturday in the homes of individual congregants. Peterson writes,

> The manner [of the pastor's work] changed: instead of proclamation, there was conversation. But the work was the same: discovering the meaning of Scripture, developing a life of prayer, guiding growth into maturity.[135]

Could a rediscovery of pastoral work as "the cure of souls" be one way for adoptive families to feel more supported by their local congregation, particularly those with severely disabled children often making the attendance of church difficult?

This therefore leads one to reflect on the way the research participants perceived their church leadership, namely their lead pastor, as supportive in the post-adoption phase. Participant 2 shared that after severe issues surfaced with their third adopted child, ultimately resulting in the disruption[136] of the child's adoption, she and her

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[132] Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

[133] See Stephen Pattison, *A Critique of Pastoral Care*, 7. The phrase "cure of souls" comes from a Latin phrase, *cura animarum*. Although the Latin word *cura* primarily means, "to care," it also includes notions of "healing." Gregory the Great, a Benedictine monk who became the bishop of Rome in 590 AD, wrote a treatise on pastoral care and was the first to establish methods of soul care, or the cure of souls.

[134] Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 56-65.

[135] Ibid., 57.

[136] See Melanie Chung-Sherman, "The Impact of Disruption/Dissolution," http://tapestryministry.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/The-Impact-of-Disruption-MCS-Article-in-AT.pdf (accessed August 27, 2012). The term "disruption" refers to a failed adoption attempt wherein a child is placed with a family for adoption, but for whatever reason, the family decides to not keep the child as part of their family.

husband approached their church leadership about the importance of helping such families. Regarding her decision to speak with her senior pastor, Participant 2 said,

"I went to my pastor and I said, 'If we don't provide [support] for other [adoptive families] who are struggling, they are going to suffer in silence.'"

Her pastor responded by encouraging and supporting her in starting a post-adoption support group that continues to meet regularly at their church. It has been largely successful and is a helpful resource for families wrestling with all the unique challenges involved in parenting an adopted child with complex disabilities. This example elicits questions about the ways in which a pastor "cares for the souls" of his or her congregants. To what extent did Participant 2's pastor fulfil the role of "carer of souls" by placing the responsibility to meet the needs of his adoptive congregants back onto Participant 2, encouraging her to form an adoption ministry? Is this response understandable in light of the many pressures on a pastor's time, as well as an understanding that the Church is to be a mutually caring community – a body of those who suffer and rejoice together – as opposed to a one-person ministry?

In contrast, Participant 7, whose church currently has a large population of adoptive families, approached her senior pastor, who is himself an adoptive father, regarding post-adoption support. She stated,

"I kept saying we need post-adoption [support] . . . but you come to a certain point that you can only get so far until the head of the church, which is your lead pastor, will allow you to move on with stuff."

This reflection stimulates a number of questions. What role does pastoral involvement in the lives of his or her congregants play in cultivating a sense of community? Do congregants feel as if they know their church leadership well enough to trust them and therefore communicate their own needs? How do pastors positively use their influence within congregations to cultivate supportive networks for those in need?

Question Seven: What has been most beneficial about the support you have received from your church?

All nine participants identified at least one beneficial element of support that they have received from their local church. In summarising these responses, two main areas of support emerged: practical and relational. In general, Participants 1, 8, and 9 cited their congregations' efforts in practically supporting them as most beneficial. Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 believed that the relational support their churches provided them with was most helpful.

Practical Support

What follows are examples of the practical support various interviewees received. Participant 1 referred to the gift of a children's book about adoption, given to her by a fellow congregant, as the best support she received from her church. Regarding what some may consider a small gesture, Participant 1 commented,

"It was actually an acknowledgment of [the fact that] my child's birth was different and the fact that it was an adoption . . . [and] that we were experiencing something different because of that."

This example encourages Church leaders and congregants alike not to overlook the seemingly insignificant gestures in providing support and encouragement for adoptive families.[137] How can this encourage a communal, church-wide support of families adopting? What does this example say about the various ways to support an adoption beyond fundraising for the initial adoption cost? Additionally, as hinted at by the latter half of Participant 1's comment, what is the importance of identifying and accepting adoption as different? How do churches do this in a way that respects the difference of the adoption experience without it becoming alienated?

Participant 8 praised his church for establishing an adoption fund within the church budget.[138] This allowed for prospective adoptive congregants to house their adoption fundraising account there, making it possible for monetary gifts given in support of the family's adoption to be tax-deductable. Participant 9 said that having one designated person at the church in charge of caring for and tending to the needs of adoptive families was particularly helpful. This person helped link their family to other ministries affiliated with the church, particularly those that could be of assistance with regard to their child's specific needs. For example, Participant 9 was unaware that her church had connections with a local carpentry ministry. The

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[137] Matt. 10:42; Mark 9:41. Jesus himself recognized the importance of small acts of kindness such as giving a glass of cool water to those in need.

[138] Participant 8 technically offered this answer in response to question eight during our interview together; however, the researcher felt it a more appropriate answer to this question and thus has included it in the description of responses given to question seven.

adoption point person knew of this relationship and introduced the family to the ministry, ultimately resulting in wheelchair ramps being built on their home at no cost to her family.

This example, however, questions the way fragmenting Christian support into various, speciality ministries, such as this carpentry ministry, could potentially obscure the sense of ecclesial community or even prohibit the actualisation of it. On the other hand, the benefit of these ministries in supporting and enhancing a family's post-adoption experience cannot be ignored. What emerges, therefore, are the following questions. First, where does *a church* stop and *the Church* begin? Should there be a differentiation between *a church* and *the Church* within Christian theological thought or should they be seamlessly related?

Relational Support

The other six participants stressed the benefit of receiving relational support. Participants 3 and 5 answered this question in light of the relationship shared between their church and their adopted child or children. The following words extracted from Participant 3's interview poignantly summarise the feelings of both participants,

"I just love that our church loves our children without judgment. They see the value in our children . . . they respect our children and value their lives."

Participants 2, 4, 6, and 7 responded similarly; however, they referred primarily to their own personal relationships within their local congregations, as opposed to the interaction between the church and their children. Representative of this overarching idea, Participant 2 stated,

"I think what's been most beneficial about the support that we've received and that our church has afforded us is our church has said we want to make it safe for everybody."

For Participant 2, the Church is considered a safe place for adoptive families when it fosters an environment wherein families can be totally honest about their adoption experiences, whether it is triumph or nightmare, without the fear of judgment. Participant 2 said that families can come to the adoption support group her church facilitates *"rejoicing that they haven't had a hard time"* or they can arrive *"bawling and saying, 'Why did I ever adopt?'"* Both Participant 3 and Participant 2's statements highlight how important the lack of judgement is in fostering genuine community among individuals. By being accepted, individuals are reassured of their value in belonging to the collective. In contrast to this sense of belonging within the ecclesial community, Participant 8 and his wife found that their greatest support was networked through blogs and social networking websites connecting them to other adoptive families (i.e. blog websites, Facebook, Twitter). When speaking with friends that are considering adopting a child, Participant 8 tells them,

"Start a blog. You are going to get way more support from the blog world and the Facebook world than you will from your local church because that is truly where all the adoptive families are."

What surfaces in comparing the responses of Participants 3 and 2 with Participant 8's are issues of community and belonging. As highlighted above, it is important to recognize the differences involved in adoption. However, how do congregations do this in a way that affirms the value and worth of these families in belonging to the congregation, while at the same time, discouraging differentiation and the passing of judgment? Also, to what degree (if any) do social networking websites help or hurt community as it is experienced within the Church? Can online interaction ever substitute for interpersonal, flesh and blood relationships? Finally, to what extent does a church's capacity to offer appropriate practical support depend on the quality of the relational support within the community?

Question Eight: What additional support (if any) do you feel would have been beneficial?

Only two interviewees, Participants 3 and 9, felt that this question was non-applicable to their situations because of the excellent and thorough support their families continue to receive from their respective congregations.

In response to this question, the seven remaining respondents gave examples of practical support they felt would be helpful in their adoption journey. Offering child minding services, hosting adoption support groups, training adoption mentors and family transition coaches, equipping Sunday school teachers in how to best engage their disabled children in the classroom, providing financial assistance for ongoing medical needs, being sensitive to the difficulty of certain holidays such as Mother's Day and Father's Day, and employing a church staff member specifically in charge

of looking after the care of adoptive families were some of the examples given of additional services that churches could offer to better care for adoptive families.

A dominant theme in the respondents' answers was the need for the Church to promote awareness of adoption-related issues among prospective adoptees, as well as congregants interested in supporting families adopting children with disabilities. Issues demanding further exploration and better understanding span a wide range of topics, many of which may require input from an educated professional. Some of the topics needing additional exploration, as highlighted by Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8, include biblical foundations for Christian involvement in orphan care, the importance of the bonding and attachment process in adoption, issues in parenting children from troubled backgrounds, education for Sunday school teachers regarding how they can best support and promote disabled children's religious education and spiritual development,[139] and awareness of appropriate adoption language (i.e. using the term "biological mother" instead of "real mother").

Given the wide spectrum of answers elicited by this question, what emerges is an exploration of how communicating adoption-related information affects the degree to which adoptive families feel supported by their ecclesial community. Although the answers Participant 2 and Participant 4 gave resonated with the rest of the respondents, they each added something unique to their answers deserving further

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[139] Participant 3 felt as if her church has provided this for her family; however, she mentions that they were not providing this service when they adopted their first child, diagnosed with both Down syndrome and autism, five years ago. She states, "One thing that they maybe weren't doing in the beginning, but they are doing now is that they're actually trying to get the children's teachers more educated in special needs issues."

comment. Participant 2 highlighted the need for churches to promote and encourage

a more thorough theological reflection on the idea of adoption. She stated,

"God did not intend for children to be born and have to go through the trauma of being abandoned and separated from families . . . I think churches need to do more than just the cheer-leading . . . additional support comes when churches have to do more than just quote James 1:27."

To what degree has proof-texting Scriptural references regarding God's care for the

orphaned and vulnerable child hurt or harmed the American Christian interest in

adoption? In what ways does a developed theology of adoption challenge the

current ways churches are responding to adoptive families? How might theological

training on the topic at hand be offered to Church leaders (i.e. seminary training,

theological conferences, sermon series, etc.)?

Participant 4 discussed the importance of congregants asking intentional questions

and committing to pastorally listening to families with this unique adoption

experience. After listing seven helpful questions that could be asked of families

who have adopted children with various complex disabilities, Participant 4 stated,

"You know, it is helpful when any of those questions are asked, those that demonstrate a willingness to walk with someone into their difficulties while also trusting God and simultaneously asking, 'Ok, God, what are you doing here?'"

This comment resonates with the idea of pastoral care mentioned in the analysis of

question six. In *Listening for the Soul*,[140] Stairs argues that the essence of pastoral

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[140] Jean Stairs, *Listening for the Soul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

care is the unique journey embarked upon by soul companions – those who are "in relationship in order to listen for God's presence in [one another's] lives."[141] Listening is closely linked with pastoral care, and for Stairs, it is a two-tiered listening; paying attention to a friend as he or she shares his or her story, while also maintaining a position of silent prayer open to hearing from the Holy Spirit what God may be doing in the life of that person.[142]   Soul companioning means vulnerability; an inner self-exposure resulting from a commitment to ask questions that go beyond superficiality. Relationships based on trust encourage an individual toward vulnerability because he or she feels safe, accepted, valued, and is not afraid of being judged. In light of this reflection, the following questions surface. To what degree are modern day congregants, particularly in the American context, 'soul companioning' one another? Why, in the case of Participant 2's experience, is there a lack of intentional questions being asked?   What does the absence of these questions say about the depth of current relationships among contemporary American congregants? Are they too busy to sustain a conversation beyond the usual, 'How are you,' or do congregants not know one another well enough to even ask these questions?   Should congregants be challenged to re-evaluate the importance that they assign to creating silent and still spaces for the purpose of reflecting on God's work amidst their daily lives?

What this chapter has sought to contribute to the overall research project is to engage dialogically with the real, human experience of adopting a child. As the data

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[141] Ibid., 141.
[142] Ibid., 17-25.

summary and analysis has shown, there were both commonalties and variances in the data received, and the researcher gained great insight from these interviews. It is now the task of the scholar to bring together the insight of chapter three with that of chapter four, and to present conclusions and recommendations helping to enhance and sustain what can, at times, prove to be a challenging experience – adopting children with complex disabilities.

Chapter Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

This dissertation has combined biblical analysis with interpersonal dialogue to shed further light on the nature of a Christian believer's adoption experience, and how that understanding influences churches in their support of adoptive families. The following two questions have guided the work at hand. First, how might a theological reflection on adoption, specifically informed by the writings of John, offer deeper understandings that might enrich a family's experience of adoption? Secondly, in what ways might the church support adoptive families in light of this theological perspective?

In an effort to answer these questions, the researcher first explored biblically and theologically what it means to be adopted into the family of God. It has been argued that to be adopted, as uniquely presented in the Johannine perspective, is to be invited into 'being' and 'becoming' someone's child. Adoption is therefore both static and dynamic; the adoptive act secures a child's identity as a member of this new family, while the unfolding of the adoptive reality entails a child becoming increasingly aware of the implications of his or her new identity. Similarly, for Christians adopted into the family of God by believing in the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus Christ (salvation), as they become more aware of the depth of their Father's love for them, they too experience change and increasingly emulate characteristics of belonging to God's family (discipleship). This same love reassures Christians of their security in belonging to the ecclesial community; God will always provide for his children just as he did for the Israelites during their forty years in the desert and as Jesus did in feeding the five thousand in Galilee. The final element of a believer's ongoing adoption experience, as highlighted by the biblical exploration included here within, is the communal nature of a believer's adoption. God is an adopting Father who identifies all who believe in him as his children; however, it does a disservice to the fullness of a believer's new identity if one fails to recognize that God adopts believers into an ecclesial family.[143] For John, therefore, adoption, or the "power to become children of God,"[144] cannot be divorced from the Church – 'I become a child of God alongside other children of God.'

Having explored biblical foundations that might undergird an enhanced post-adoption journey for Christian families, the focus of this research shifted toward the analysis of qualitative data. Belonging to the realm of practical theology, it was important to include firsthand, personal insight from adoptive families. This helped to further bolster arguments and shed light on helpful ways to sustain and enhance the Christian family's post-adoption experience. The interviews produced a range of

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[143] Could it be argued that the communal identity of the believers is further confirmed by the way Jesus taught his disciples to pray? As recorded in Matt. 6:9-13, Jesus instructs his disciples that, when praying, to address God as "Our Father," instead of "My Father."
[144] John 1:12.

answers; some participants experienced great care and concern from their churches, while others felt unsupported at best and disregarded at worst. If understood as integral to the way in which believers are welcomed into the household of God, then why was there such a wide spectrum of experiences revealed in the participants' responses? The researcher contends that lying underneath issues in post-adoption support, there are larger themes that demand comment so as to inform a succinct and dynamically supportive ecclesial response to adoptive families.

This research, therefore, culminates in the raising of some important issues with which Church leaders and lay people alike must wrestle. Two core issues emerge out of this research: contemporary understandings of ecclesiology and perceptions of Christian identity. What follows is an exploration of these themes and related recommendations for both adoptive families and churches as to how they may participate together in supporting a sustained and enhanced adoption experience.

Ecclesiology

In the opening chapter of this dissertation, the researcher contended that in developing a more deeply rooted theology of adoption, a Christian family's experience of adoption might be enhanced. Upon conclusion, however, the researcher wonders if it is not a more robust theology of Church (ecclesiology) that would prove most beneficial? The researcher found herself asking the following question throughout the course of her study: what does it mean to be the Church? Regarding the foundation upon which the ecclesial collective is built, Kung states,

"The Church begins, not with a pious individual, but with God."[145]   Arguably then,

the mode of God's existence is inextricably linked with the nature of the Church; the

Church has its ontological basis in the person of God. What must logically follow is

an exploration of the nature of God. One's attention is directed back to the writings

of John wherein the author reveals, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love

is from God . . . for *God is love*."[146]   It is this enormous, otherworldly love of the

Father, as argued in chapter three, that initiates and secures a believer's identity as a

child of God. If the Church therefore begins with God, and God is love, then can it

be argued that the essence of Church is the relationship of love embodied within the

Godhead? Volf argues this very fact and highlights that ecclesial comm*unity* results

from Trinitarian communion-in-love.[147]   Moving toward recommendations that will

positively benefit congregants' adoption experiences, particularly those adopting

children with complex disabilities, further comment is needed on the mutuality

characteristic of this Triune love.

God existing as one-in-three persons is helpfully described in using the New

Testament Greek word *perichoresis,* meaning that the individual members of the

Godhead are informed by their being in relationship with one another.[148]   The

personhood of God the Father is therefore inextricably linked to that of the Son and

the Spirit. This has the following relational implication; "The dynamic activity of

exchange [informs] persons [of] who they are because of their relation to each

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145 Hans Kung, *The Church* (Kent, England: Burns and Oates, 1995), 128.
146 I John 4:7-8. Emphasis mine.
147 Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness,* 41.
148 See Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 175; Miroslav Volf, *After our Likeness,* 208-215.

other."[149]   Humanity, as recorded in the creation account, has been made in the image and likeness of God.[150]   One can therefore argue that by nature of bearing the *imago Dei*, humanity is also created to exist within relationships of mutuality.[151] Further affirming that relationship cannot be divorced from human existence, Harshaw highlights, "The creation narrative tells us that when God spoke His creation into being He adjudged all of it to be good[152] except for one aspect - the aloneness of the first human being."[153]   God's response to Adam's solitude was the creation of Eve, Adam's partner-in-relationship.

If one therefore accepts that the Church is a collective of human beings all bearing the image of God, how does a conception of love in mutuality impact the integrity of the Church truly existing as the Church? On this topic, it is helpful to reference the Apostle Paul's use of body imagery in describing the nature of the Church.[154] Although a full discussion of the function of imagery in the New Testament falls far beyond the boundaries of this research, it should be noted that the biblical authors' use of the "You are" formula (i.e. "You are the body of Christ") is intentional for the purpose of communicating that "the assigned function [of the image] is essential to [the church's] existence as God's people."[155]   Just as a body is a continuous whole

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[149] Thomas Scirghi, "The Trinity," 334.

[150] Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6.

[151] See Molly C. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 88. To be human, according to Martin Buber, is to be engaged in mutually, self-informing "I-Thou" relationships as opposed to removed, "I-It" encounters.

[152] Gen. 1:31.

[153] Jill Ruth Harshaw, "Prophetic Voices, Silent Words," 320.

[154] I Cor. 12.

[155] Paul Minear, *Images for the Church in the New Testament* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2007), 29.

wherein all parts are inextricably linked, so too are members of the Church interrelated. Minear states, "Each person is not only a member of the one body in Christ; he is also, within the same body, a member of all the other Christians and all of them are members of him."[156] How is valid support and care of family members within the congregation to be expected if there is not an understanding of the basis of such care? To exist as the Church is to be in relationship with one another - relationships informed by the mutuality of the love of God. To not embrace mutuality harms the sustained support and ongoing care of congregants.

Having recommended a re-envisioning among Church leaders and lay people regarding this fundamental, ecclesial essence, practical implications inherent within, namely the role of adoption ministries in caring for adoptive families, should now be explored. One of the assumptions carried into this research was that the degree to which an adoptive family felt supported in the post-adoption journey would correlate with the presence and vitality of an adoption ministry within their local church. Of the nine participants interviewed, five generally felt well-supported by their churches; however, only two of those five participants belonged to churches with adoption ministries. Although the other three participants did not attend churches with adoption ministries, their congregations were small, wherein relationships were presumably more easily fostered, and, as expressed in the words of Participant 5, *"We just felt like we always had family there."*

The relational aspect of ecclesiology is likely not a new message; however, the

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[156] Ibid., 194.

uniqueness of what has been raised here, and is pertinent for churches seeking to support adoptive families, is the mutual, self-informing nature of these relationships. If the congregational essence is found in the members of a given community indwelling one another, to what degree does a programmatic response actually hinder the Church from being the Church? To what extent do various Church programs, aimed at meeting specific needs among congregants, dialogue with a body ecclesiology? Does the size of a church determine the helpfulness of an adoption ministry? For example, Participant 2's church had over 1,500 members, yet she found great support and solace through the affiliated adoption ministry. Perhaps in being involved with the adoption ministry, Participant 2 experienced a sense of community that ought to be an essential aspect of her church's way of being in support of every congregant.

A tension therefore arises: how might a body ecclesiology be retained while also implementing an adoption ministry? It is not the researcher's goal to disregard or deny the validity and importance of adoption ministries as helpful resources for adoptive parents. However, in light of remaining faithful to the theological perspective of this dissertation, what has been raised is the importance of an adoption ministry emerging out of the Church *existing as* the Church, and not as a *substitute for* it. This is similar to the Johannine perspective on the welcoming of believers into the family of God. God's love initiates, secures, and sustains a believer's new identity as a child of God. This is opposite from individuals being required to believe prior to having access to the love of the Father. It could therefore be argued that adoption ministry is most beneficial when it is an overflow of the

mutuality of love shared between congregants.

Christian Identity

Congregants' awareness of mutuality as integral to informing ecclesial relations therefore occupies an important role in enabling the Church to functionally actualise what it was created to be. In accepting this, what must further be explored is the common human experience that unites and solidifies this collective interconnectedness. The following question therefore emerges: what does existing within a web of mutually self-informing relationships reveal about a believer's own identity?

Questions of identity have plagued scholars, theologians, and philosophers since the beginning of time. What does it mean to be human and how does being human alongside other human beings affect one's own identity? Contemporary culture, highly influenced by modern philosophy wherein the ability to reason is correlated with the essence of human existence,[157] views humanness through the lens of ability and capacity. Those in the 21st century achieving material wealth, success, and knowledge are highly esteemed while the disabled, frail, and impoverished are often pitied.

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[157] See *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "cogito, ergo sum," http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/124443/cogito-ergo- (accessed September 4, 2012). This idea is succinctly stated in the following words of Enlightenment philosopher, Descartes, "I think, therefore I am."

Standing in stark contrast to what culture identifies as central to humanity, Reynolds argues that the only 'normal' human experience is one of vulnerability.[158] Volpe offers the following summary of Reynolds' Christian anthropology; "The key to grasping our humanness is seeing our own vulnerability before God, and embracing that vulnerability as God does by becoming human and undergoing suffering and death."[159] God, incarnated in the person of Jesus, did not escape the human experience of vulnerability; rather, he embraced it "by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."[160] In choosing to journey from heavenly glory to human vulnerability, Jesus created a way wherein believers could be radically welcomed into the divine family. As recorded in John 13, Jesus stripped himself of his outer garments, bent to his knees, and washed the disciples' feet so as to give them a tangible example of the dynamic interplay between vulnerability and hospitality at work within the divine family. For the disciples, Jesus' washing of their feet was "a gesture of welcome into '[the] Father's household.'"[161]

Volf discusses the degree to which an awareness of one's own vulnerability enables interpersonal hospitality in what he terms "the drama of embrace."[162] An embrace always begins with the vulnerability of open arms: a gesture wherein an individual

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[158] Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 29. Reynolds states, "For all humans are only partially and temporarily able-bodied."

[159] Medi Ann Volpe, "Irresponsible Love: Rethinking Intellectual Disability, Humanity and the Church," *Modern Theology* 25.3 (July 1, 2009): 495, http://search.ebscohost.com.queens.ezp1.qub.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA 0001727862&site=ehost-live (accessed September 2, 2012).

[160] Phil. 2:8.

[161] Mary L. Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God*, 142.

[162] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 139-145.

subjects himself or herself to either being accepted or potentially rejected by the other. Regarding the level of relational hospitality communicated through the vulnerability of open arms, Volf recalls the following about Jesus' death on the cross; "The arms of the crucified are open - a sign of a space in God's self and an invitation for the [other] to come in . . . God will not be God without humanity."[163]

One therefore returns to the previously posed question regarding the relationship between ecclesial interrelatedness and the individual believer's identity. As it has been argued, mutuality and human identity are continuously related. Relationships of symbiosis reveal to an individual his or her own vulnerability, and an individual embracing his or her vulnerability relationally welcomes others regardless of their state of brokenness. Each individual, therefore, becomes at home within a vulnerable, ecclesial communion. This protects individuals from imposing their unique life experience on their human identity. Instead of merely attending a church as the adoptive parent, divorced husband, disabled child, or bereaved mother, each person finds belonging in the Church as an individual loved by God and therefore empowered to love others. What therefore becomes of lesser importance is an individual's specific life experience. This is not the same as ignoring, as if they are unimportant, the unique hardships life presents various individuals; rather, it encourages a rearranging of identity emphases, positively influencing an individual's perception of himself or herself and therefore enabling a hospitable acceptance of others.

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[163] Ibid., 126.

Understanding Christian identity in this way gives rise to two practical implications for the ongoing support of adoptive families. The first implication involves the adoptive family and their perception of identity within the church. Given that difficult circumstances often accompany the experience of adopting children, particularly those with disabilities, it might be tempting for adoptive families to focus solely on their extraordinary circumstances, therefore, perceiving themselves solely as receivers of support, and not givers also. This can negatively result in adoptive families removing themselves, albeit often subconsciously, from the interconnected web of ecclesial care. Following the example given by Jesus, believers are encouraged to embrace their own brokenness and minister to other congregants from that place of vulnerability.

An individual aware of his or her own brokenness is less likely to pass judgment on other broken congregants. Embracing vulnerability and rejecting judgment fosters an environment wherein congregants are enabled to pastorally care for one another. Exceeding Peterson's boundaries wherein "the care of souls" is work reserved for the pastor,[164] Stairs argues that pastoral care is the "function of the entire congregation."[165] Pastoral care envisioned as "soul companioning"[166] demands more than friendship. "Human friendship," as Vanier argues, "can very quickly become a club of mediocrities, enclosed in mutual flattery and approval preventing people from seeing their inner poverty and wounds."[167]

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[164] Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 55-65.
[165] Jean Stairs, *Listening for the Soul*, 135.
[166] Ibid., 141.
[167] Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 31.

Contrasted against human friendship, companions of the soul are committed to journeying together, regardless of the messiness human vulnerability introduces into relationship, for the purpose of discovering God amidst one another's lives.[168] As an adoptive parent, Participant D is aware of the level of support that can come from intentional relationships guided by pastoral listening:

"The most beneficial support is just a genuine heart that maybe doesn't know quite what to ask or say but asks . . . 'How are you doing,' 'What is most challenging about adoption,' 'Is it hard to love a child that you did not know previously,' . . . while also trusting God and simultaneously asking 'God, what are you doing here?'"

As it has been highlighted, however, pastoral care is not a one-sided effort. It is not wrong for adoptive families to look for the ecclesial community to meet some of their unique, post-adoption needs. What is important, however, is that these families also create the space to engage in relationships with other congregants, listening to the needs of the other and for the presence of God within the other's given circumstances. In an effort to draw a practical example, brief comment may be made regarding meals being brought to families in times of need. The provision of a meal is undoubtedly helpful; however, perhaps for every meal delivered, the individual taking the meal could be challenged to, at some future time, invite that same family over for dinner. By welcoming a family into the vulnerability of one's own home, the space and time needed for congregants to relate intentionally is created. This may subsequently foster a relationship that journeys beyond superficiality to engage in caring for one another's souls.

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[168] Jean Stairs, *Listening for the Soul*, 141.

The first implication discussed, therefore, specifically challenges individuals within a congregation to recognize and accept their role in the communal "care of souls." The second suggestion, however, challenges the Church on an operational level. Do current Church structures successfully incorporate all congregants, regardless of their level of vulnerability, into mutually, self-informing spiritual development? This question is particularly pertinent for families adopting children with complex disabilities. The following comment extracted from Participant 8's interview emphasizes the seriousness of this issue:

"We don't have a church home right now because there is not really a church set up to be able to receive our daughter as she is."

Why is Participant 8's church seemingly unable to accommodate a certain expression of human vulnerability? Churches cannot afford to disregard the value and importance of the human experience of disability as it sheds light on some important characteristics informing the shared life of the ecclesial collective. Harshaw offers the following insight regarding the necessity of involving particularly intellectually disabled individuals within the life of the Church:

> [The disabled] challenge the over-intellectualizing of faith that can undermine spiritual experience and the over-reliance on words to mediate our understanding and experience of God, causing us at times to forget that words are merely signposts to the reality to which they refer.[169]

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[169] Jill Ruth Harshaw, "Prophetic Voices, Silent Words," 322.

Individuals with complex disabilities must, therefore, be accepted as equally integral to ecclesial spiritual formation as those that are "temporarily able-bodied."[170] Efforts in fostering a church that is inclusive of these children will, as encouraged above, venture beyond programmatic responses by integrating their human expression into the very fabric of the ecclesial identity. Perhaps an initial response by churches, as Participant 3 has experienced, could be to provide assistants to attend Sunday school alongside these children. This allows for disabled children to remain part of a church's overall spiritual formation and religious education, as opposed to be separated into a special education class.

A step beyond this, however, challenges churches to re-envision the ways in which their worship services might better include people of various abilities. For example, how inviting is a cognitively based worship service, wherein the sermon is of central focus, for families with children who are intellectually disabled? Is there space, particularly within Protestant churches, to re-envision the role of symbols and sensory-based elements as expressions of worship?[171] If, as Swinton suggests, Church members embrace one another's vulnerability and accept "that their disabilities are our disabilities and our disabilities are their disabilities,"[172] how

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[170] Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 29.

[171] See John M. Mulder, "Symbols as Teachers," *Theology Today* 42.2 (July 1, 1985): 190-200, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url= http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000948915&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed September 4, 2012); Mark U. Edwards Jr., "The Power of a Picture: How Protestants Imaged the Gospel," *Christian Century* 122.2 (January 25, 2005): 31-32, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001456980&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed September 4, 2012).

[172] John Swinton, "The Body of Christ has Down's Syndrome: Theological Reflections on Vulnerability, Disability, and Graceful Communities," *Journal Of Pastoral Theology* 13.2 (September 1, 2003):

might a searching world perceive differently the boundless love of a God who radically envelops within himself a broken humanity?

The growing enthusiasm surrounding adoption, particularly among American Christians, proves an exciting time for both adoptive families the Church. As indicated in the many questions emerging out of this research, however, there is still much thinking to be done on the topic of post-adoption support. This dissertation has been, however, for the researcher a fruitful endeavor, serving as the beginning of more theological study to come and highlighting important areas demanding further attention. The participatory nature of this research was intentionally employed so as to give adoptive families a voice and challenge the Church regarding its current support endeavors. It is the researcher's hope that the voices of these families have been heard and that the Church will answer. This, of course, will not be without difficulty; an embrace of mutuality and vulnerability will, at least at some level, clash with cultural norms and therefore prove trying. However, churches serious in their commitment to respond to 'the James 1:27 mandate' will seek to foster ecclesial community. In doing so, these congregations will be caring for orphans by integrating them, and their families, into the very fabric of the Church identity. It is the hope that one day Participant 2's words regarding her church's support may ring true of all families and congregations travelling the post-adoption journey together:

"[As the Church,] we're going to say to you go [adopt] those babies. Then, when you get those babies or those older kids home, if you're stumbling, if you're falling

77, http://ehis.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=7e36fe80-871a-43a0-b2f1-285ce614ac42%40sessionmgr12&vid=5&hid=3 (accessed September 4, 2012).

down, we're going to be picking you up. We will be holding onto you for dear life the way you are holding onto those children for dear life."

Appendix A

Glossary of Medical Terms

Alfi's Syndrome: This is also known as Monosomy 9P or 9P-. It is a rare chromosomal anomaly that causes intellectual and physical disabilities. Its symptoms are very similar to that of Down syndrome.

Anal Atresia: Anal Atresia is a congenital absence of a hole at the bottom end of the intestine. This is a birth defect, also called imperforate anus, resulting in the malformation of the rectum. Surgery can usually help correct this; however, depending on the severity of the malformation, ongoing treatment may be necessary.

Autism: Approximately one out of every eighty-eight children is diagnosed with Autism. Autism is a developmental disorder that affects communication, social interaction, and behaviour.

Cerebral Palsy: Cerebral Palsy is an abnormality of motor function and postural tone acquired at an early age, even before birth. Signs and symptoms of Cerebral Palsy usually show in the first year of life. Often people with Cerebral Palsy depend on a wheelchair for increased mobility.

Clubfoot: Also known as Talipes Equinovarus, Clubfoot is a malformation of the foot and is typically evident at birth. In most cases, both feet are unusually positioned; however, they can oftentimes be corrected through surgery followed by intense physical therapy.

DiGeorge Syndrome: This is a genetic disorder that causes congenital heart disease characterized by low calcium levels in the blood. Babies diagnosed with DiGeorge Syndrome usually die by the age of two; however, if they do survive, they become highly susceptible to infection.

Down Syndrome: This is one of the most common birth defects. Children that are born with Down syndrome are intellectually delayed and have certain, distinct physical features. Similar to Alfi's Syndrome, Down syndrome is a chromosomal disorder. Individuals with Down syndrome have three copies of the 21st chromosome. This is why sometimes Down syndrome is also called "trisomy 21."

Hepatitis B: Hepatitis B is an inflammation of the liver that may be triggered by a virus or a toxin. Hepatitis B, caused by the Hepatitis B virus, primarily results in severe liver damage as a response to the body's immune system working to eliminate the virus. Each year, an estimated 620,000 deaths occur worldwide due to Hepatitis B.

Laryngomalacia: This is an abnormality of the larynx (voice box) that leads to airway obstruction. Also termed Laryngeal Stridor, Laryngomalacia typically

resolves on its own during the child's first two years of life; however, some cases develop into severe respiratory problems requiring medical intervention.

Microcephaly: Caused by exposure to harmful substances during foetal development or problematic genetic disorders, Microcephaly results in a child being born with an abnormally small head. This usually results in the child having a small brain and subsequent intellectual disabilities.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): PTSD is a debilitating condition prompting fits of anxiety due to a physical or emotional event. People of all ages, including infants and adolescents, can develop PTSD. Among a variety of physical symptoms, some of the common effects of the disorder include depression, flashbacks of intrusive images, losing touch with reality, and regressive behaviours.

Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD): RAD is most likely to develop in an infant or child who fails to establish healthy bonds with parents or caregivers at an early age because of neglect, abuse, or orphanhood. The absence of comfort and affection can have a detrimental impact on the growth of the child's brain, and therefore influence his or her ability, or inability, to develop and maintain healthy relationships.

Sensory Processing Disorder: Commonly found in conjunction with developmental disorders such as Autism, this condition is characterized by a fundamental

miscommunication between the brain and the senses. Receptors in the brain may fail to receive information from just one sense or multiple senses.

Spina Bifida: Spina Bifida is a birth defect in the spinal cord and in the bones of the backbone. In some cases, there is a protrusion of membrane and bone through gaps in the vertebrae. Myelomeningocele, the most common form of Spina Bifida, may result in paralysis, bowel and bladder disorders, seizures, and orthopaedic problems.

Appendix B

Description of the Research Sample

***

Participant 1 has five children; the youngest two are adopted. Of her biological children, one has Down syndrome. Their first adopted child has no special medical needs; however, their second adopted child has a mild heart condition that has resulted in surgery and ongoing medical supervision. This child has also been diagnosed with Anal Atresia. (Interview Date: June 27, 2012)

Participant 2 is the mother of three children. Her eldest child is biological, and her two youngest are adopted. Of her two adopted children, one is healthy and the other has a cleft lip and palate, as well as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Additionally, Participant B and her husband adopted a third child diagnosed with Hepatitis B, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Reactive Attachment Disorder; however, that adoption was disrupted and the child no longer lives with this family. (Interview Date: June 25, 2012)

Participant 3 has four children; the three eldest children are adopted and the youngest is biological. All three of her adopted children have complex disabilities. Her eldest child has Down syndrome as well as severe Autism. The second child has a rare chromosomal disorder called Alfi's Syndrome. Her and her husband's third adopted child has Spina Bifida. Their biological child is healthy. (Interview Date: June 27, 2012)

Participant 4 has three children; the eldest two are biologically hers and the youngest is adopted. Although her and her husband's two biological children do not have physical or mental disability diagnoses, they both have severe food allergies that must be monitored closely. Their youngest child is adopted and has been diagnosed with Microcephaly, severe hearing loss, and Clubfoot. He also has the genetic markers for a connective tissue disorder. (Interview Date: June 26, 2012)

Participant 5 and her husband have four biological children from previous marriages, and they have adopted six children together in their current marriage. Five of their six adopted children are disabled; their diagnoses include Reactive Attachment Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, profound intellectual disabilities, and DiGeorge Syndrome. (Interview Date: June 28, 2012)

Participants 6 and **7** are married to one another and were jointly interviewed. They have seven children; their first four children are biologically theirs and the other three children are adopted. Of their three adopted children, the two youngest are disabled. One child was diagnosed with Laryngomalacia, and their other child has only one kidney, has brain damage, underwent heart surgery, has a cyst on the back of her brain, Anal Atresia, and Cerebral Palsy. (Interview Date: July 5, 2012)

Participant 8 and his wife have one adopted child. They chose to begin their family with adoption; however, they were unaware of any of their child's disabilities prior to the finalisation of the adoption. Although their daughter appeared healthy during

infancy, she has been diagnosed since then with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Reactive Attachment Disorder, and Sensory Processing Disorder. (Interview Date: July 9, 2012)

Participant 9 has four children; her two eldest are biological and her youngest two are adopted. The child her and her husband adopted first does not have a disability; however, the second child they adopted has Spina Bifida and resultant paralysis in his lower limbs. (Interview Date: June 26, 2012)

Appendix C

Interview Information Packet

Research Participants Information Sheet

Study Title: A Theological Inquiry on the Practice of the Adoption of Children with Complex Disability

Personal Introduction

My name is Emily Richards, and I am studying to obtain my Masters of Theology degree with Queen's University Belfast. This dissertation is being undertaken as part of the fulfilment of this degree. My supervisors are Dr. Ian Dickson and Jill Harshaw in the Practical Theology department. This study will be finished at the end of the year (2012) and upon completion you are free to request a copy. All organisations involved will receive pseudonyms that only I will know to maintain confidentiality, also all records of interviews and associated information will be password encrypted.

Invitation Paragraph

Over the past decade, there has been a growing interest among evangelical Christians within North America regarding the practice of the adoption of children. Within the Christian religious tradition, the term adoption carries particular significance, as it is the term utilized by the Apostle Paul to explain the way in which human beings are invited into God's eternal family via Jesus' atoning death on the cross. I am therefore interested in researching the ways in which Christian doctrine and theological thought inspire and inform one's experience of adopting children – particularly children with physical, intellectual, or behavioural disabilities. I am also interested in further discovering the ways in which the adoptive family's local church can be a hospitable community during the adoption journey. Because of your unique position as a Christian who has had experience with adoption, I am interested in interviewing you to gain a bit of your perspective to help with my current research project. I would greatly appreciate if you would take a few minutes to read this information sheet and decide whether or not you would be willing to help with my research.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between the theology of adoption and the subsequent practice thereof. The desired outcome is that the research will be used to encourage and sustain healthy adoption experiences among adoption advocates, adoptive families, and the surrounding faith communities that offer support to such families. By examining the role of theology in influencing and informing adoption experiences, the desire is that this research will be a valuable resource particularly for Christians.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary. You are receiving this letter because I believe your participation could make an important contribution to the research as you have unique insight to offer from your life experience. If, however, you do not wish to participate you do not have to do anything in response to this request.

What will I do if I take part?

If you are willing to participate in this research, I ask that you please read this information sheet, sign the consent form and return it to me. After receiving your consent form, I will contact you to confirm your participation and arrange a time for an interview at a location of your choice. I will send a copy of the interview questions to you before the interview and you are free to decline answering any you do not feel comfortable with.

What are your possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

By nature of the topic at hand, the questions asked in the interview will focus on your personal experience of the interface between your theology and your experience with adoption. All information provided by you will be kept confidential at all times, and at any point in the research process you may withdraw information shared. All responses to questions and information provided by you will be anonymised in the publication of the results.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your participation is beneficial because the information you provide can contribute to the future development of theological thought underpinning the practice and experience of adoption.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. All information you provide will be kept confidential. The research methods used will comply with the principles of the Data Protection Act 1998 and the EU Directive 95/46 on Data Protection. Under no circumstance will identifiable responses be provided to any other third party. In the event of my research being published, information you have provided will only be included in a completely unattributable format to ensure that no participant can be identified. I must, however, inform you that if you disclose information that may result in you or anyone else being put at risk of harm I may have to inform the appropriate authorities. If this situation arises we will discuss all possible options for ourselves

(me and my research team) and you before deciding whether or not to take any action.

What will happen to the results of the research study?
The results from the interview will be used in my dissertation submitted to Queen's University Belfast in partial fulfilment for my Masters of Theology degree. The information could potentially be used in one of the following sources should the opportunity arise: personal writings, peer reviewed academic journals, presentations at regional conferences, and/or local seminars. The findings will also be made available to you in the form of a copy of the final dissertation should you wish to read the results of my study.

Who is organising the research?
I, Emily Richards, am undertaking this study in conjunction with the Institute of Theology at Queens University Belfast.

Supervision: For further information, my supervisors Dr. Ian Dickson and Jill Harshaw can be contacted at: idickson@belfastbiblecollege.com and jharshaw@belfastbiblecollege.com; +44 (0)28 90301551; postal address: Glenburn House, Glenburn Road South, Dunmurry, Belfast, BT17 9JP, N. Ireland, UK.

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Belfast

Participation Consent Form

Study Title: A Theological Inquiry on the Practice of the Adoption of Children with Complex Disability

I wish to participate in the above named project: (Please circle your answer)

YES   or   NO

I have read the participant information sheet for the above research project and understand the following: (Please indicate with a check (√) mark)

1. I am free to withdraw at any time. _____

2. All information I provide will be dealt with in a confidential manner. _____

3. I agree that the researcher may contact me. _____

Signed: _____

Address: _____

_____

_____

Telephone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Date: _____

Please return your signed participant consent form to Emily Richards.

Queen's University Belfast

Study Title: A Theological Inquiry on the Practice of the Adoption of Children with Complex Disability

Background Information (To be filled out on your own prior to the interview)

1. What are your name, age, and occupation?

2. What is your marital status?

3. How many children do you have?

4. What is the name(s) and age(s) of your child/children? Please specify if he/she is your biological child or is adopted.

5. Please explain the nature of your child's disability. If you have multiple children with disability, please list information about each child.

6. Were you aware of your child's disability prior to the finalization of the adoption?

7. How long has it been since the adoption of your child took place?

8. To what Christian denomination do you belong? What is the name of your home church?

9. Does your church currently have an adoption/orphan care ministry?

Exploratory Questions

1. What prompted your decision to adopt a child?

2. Did you *initially* intend to pursue the adoption of a child with complex disabilities?
   a. If yes, what factors (your pre-existing experience/your faith/the influence of others, for example) informed that decision?
   b. If no, what factors influenced your decision to proceed in this direction?

3. To what extent did you involve your church/faith community (leaders and/or members) in your decision to adopt your child?

4. How did your church respond to your decision to adopt your child and to the child's arrival – attitude and level of support (practical, spiritual, emotional, for example)?

5. In what ways, if any, has your church's pre-adoption attitude and support for you changed?

6. In what ways (if any) have you found your church to be supportive in the post-adoption phase (practically, spiritually, emotionally, for example)? To what extent have your expectations been met/unmet?

7. What has been most beneficial about the support you have received from your church?

8. What additional support (if any) do you feel would have been beneficial?

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