

Families and Adoption

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. (Romans 8:14-17 NASB)

There are few subjects that I could say I am really well qualified to speak on than families and adoption. But, since you may not know me well, perhaps a short résumé of my qualifications would confirm this for you. Besides my own wife of 22 years, two kids, and in-laws, I have extensive experience with eleven families in more than 20 different geographic locations through high school. My natural mother was married seven times (and moved a whole bunch), and I spent time in five foster homes (one home twice). The relationship with my fourth set of foster parents (starting at age 13) developed to the point that adoption was mutually desired, and I was 14 when the adoption was finalized. It is extremely unusual for teenagers to find even a foster home for a while, much less find people who are willing to adopt them. I count myself among the fortunate few.

I asked both parents to relinquish parental rights, and without any fuss they signed off. In almost 30 years since then I have had no contact with my natural mother, except for one short conversation. I didn't know my natural father because he never wanted to see me, but he probably wouldn't have been a good influence anyway. As mothers go, my mom was pretty decent. She was (and I assume still is) a warm and tender person. She never abused me by some of the stomach churning things other children experience such as beatings or starvation. Affection was a standard part of her makeup, and my wife says I probably got a lot of the sensitivity I have from her (yeah, I know. You're thinking, sensitivity?). I suppose she tried in her own way to make a family, and sometimes she would retrieve us from wherever we had been sent (me and my four siblings) to try the togetherness thing when she felt like it. And that's the point. She had lots of "feelings" but did not lay it on the line to do what had to be done to raise her kids.

Okay, so much for the qualifications. I haven't been given any initials for a business card to impress anyone with my knowledge, but I think I make up in experience what I lack in formal education. I believe I understand the concept of family, and adoption, very well. When you long for it as much as I did, being somewhat envious of those around me who had a reasonable facsimile of it, and then experience tastes of it every once in a while, you pretty much figure out what it is and what it isn't. Which brings us to a discussion of what makes a family and how adoption applies.

One of the things that happened after my adoption was final was that my birth certificate was changed. The names of my natural parents were removed and replaced with the names of my adoptive parents, and my last name was changed (at my request). In all respects, legally and morally, my adoptive parents became my parents, and my natural parents lost all legal and moral rights to a family relationship with me (and my wife and kids and soon-to-be grand kids).

Adoption meant that my “new” parents took on all the legal and moral obligations for raising me. In every way I belonged to them and they to me. What I do (did) reflects on them, and what they do (did) reflects on me. If I had trouble, they had trouble, and if I did well, they shared the glory. When I learned to drive, they put me on their insurance and were responsible in case of an accident. They let me drive their cars, and let me treat their house as mine. When I was troubled and needed emotional help because of my messed up past, they paid the price by staying up long hours night after night (after night after night – I needed a lot of help) counseling me. They bought clothes for me, purchased a longer bed because I was tall, and paid for school activities or outings with the youth group. In short they put their time, money, and reputation where their mouth was. I wear my adoptive father’s name, and I have all the rights and privileges that go along with it. I can even inherit if they didn’t write a will and shut me out. I am “next of kin” for all intents and purposes. I confess to you that if it had not been for my adoptive family, their patience and trials and the effort they put in to help me, I believe I would have died in a gun battle with police before I was dry behind the ears. They pulled me out of a tailspin that would’ve had tragic consequences if allowed to continue.

And this, I believe, is the essence of family, especially the family of God. A family is a family because they ACT like family. Families do things for each other, they don’t just sit around looking at a birth certificate and “feel” like family or “believe” they are family. Actions speak louder than words. Either you are a family or you are not. Families are concerned for the best interests of each member (read: YHWH’s interests). They stand by one another and help in times of trouble. Day in and day out they are involved with each other, frequently when they would rather be doing something else. Oh it’s not perfect, and they may get mad at each other when they shouldn’t. It’s no proverbial picnic or bed of roses. But they share in the good and the bad, and stick with each other. Some families are able to do this naturally (birth alone), and some fortunate few can do it legally (adoption).

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1,2 NASB)

Love is the hallmark of families. True, Godly, love is reproduced whenever families do good to one another.

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (I Corinthians 13:4-7 NASB)

Of course its not always perfect; otherwise why would we have to “bear all things?”

The Christian Church has relationships that remind me a lot of the one I had with my natural mother. They are heavy on the “feelings” but light on the actions. They hug and cry and invite you to potlucks, but when it comes time to lay it on the line for you, in terms of personal cost, they recoil. They raise their hands and get tears in their eyes when singing to God (or, maybe it’s a personal hygiene issue), but if they get wind of an obligation or two suddenly it’s “I can’t, I have a thing.” Weekly meetings for them are sort of a cosmic coffee klatch without the commitment. Oh I know that some people in the Church don’t act like this, but distressingly few that’s for sure. The congregation I have been involved in for the last four or five years is a case in point. I gave a talk a few years ago about committing to each other as a family when we were going through some difficulties, and I asked all the people who wanted to do this to come forward. Everybody came forward. And some of those are actually still involved. Sort of. At least a whole ten or so out of 75 or more that responded.

There is no piece of paper anywhere that can make a family be a family. Whether it is a birth certificate; adoption papers; the wedding certificate of your natural parents; a church membership or baptism certificate; a legal form does not a family make. Don’t get me wrong, the documents and blood relationships are (usually) good things. They help us understand family because, let’s face it, most of us are just too darn stupid to figure out what family is without the aid of these “natural” arrangements. And even with blood and legality we STILL don’t figure it out very well. The legal documents and blood are on the same level because both our society and God place them there. To those who say blood is thicker than water (or more important than a document), I say then how could a marriage be a real marriage unless you were related by blood to the one you married?

My parents had one natural son, and they adopted one other son. They also continued to take in other boys to foster, so that we usually had about seven teenage boys in the house at any one time. The other adoptive son disappeared when he was 18 and we haven’t heard from him since, except for a couple of chance encounters. Apparently he returned to his natural family (socially, but legally our parents are still the same set). Some of the foster kids were only there for a few days, and some stayed much longer. I think my parents had a total of around 30 or more boys (and a couple of girls) through their home in the 10 years or so they took foster kids. You would not believe some of the trials and tribulations they went through to provide a home, even for a little while, to some of those kids. Between the emotional problems of the kids, the problems of the natural parents,

and the social services bureaucracy they took quite a pounding. I asked my mom one time why they did it. She just said that even when she was a young girl she thought she would like to help kids who were less fortunate than she was. Go figure, huh?

Natural (birth) and legal (adoption or marriage) arrangements are a “shadow” of the Real Thing. And no, I’m not talking about Coca Cola. The Real Thing is our family relationship to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to those others of us who have been adopted into His Household. These relationships are among the things that will last for eternity, and one of the few things that really count.

Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 4:6-8 NASB)

In some ways I suppose you could say that all people are “children” of YHVH, because we are all made by Him and according to His Image (Jesus?). But some of the kids in the household are just “foster” kids, and some are true sons though adopted. None of us are “natural” sons or daughters. Some may have been adopted but return to the natural family at their earliest convenience, out of a preference for self-indulgence. Some never acknowledge the Head although He continues to provide for them like a Father (sun, rain, health, etc.). Just because we are “in the house” does not mean we are truly part of the Household. True sons (and daughters) join themselves to the Head of the Household and conform to the Ways of the Household.

They take on His Name, follow His example, and act like He does. Just because we are born with a vague resemblance doesn’t mean we actually belong to Him (although ownership is a debatable concept still). We have to look like Him AND act like Him in order to be His kids. Have you ever been called a “chip off the old block?” I know you have caught yourself doing what your parents did, even though when you were young you thought you would never act like that. Have you ever said, “Oh no, I have become my parents?” Shouldn’t the same things be said concerning our Heavenly Parents?

By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. (1 John 2:3-6 NASB)

Fortunately an accident of birth, or any other accident, is not the final word on where you end up.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: “THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED.” That is, it

is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. (Romans 9:6-8 NASB)

Any person can get adopted into God's family anytime they desire. Get on your knees and thank the Father for that (I know I have). We can choose our family and become a member by acting like it. We stay in the family by continuing to choose, even though our Father is the initiator and sustainer of the relationship(s), and nothing anyone can do will remove us from His Love.

"But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. John 10:26-29 (NASB95)

So why do those of us who wear His Name keep acting like strangers? How can we cut each other off from family relationships, not speak to each other, and carve up groups of people like a Thanksgiving turkey? Is this Love? Is this Family? Can we truly say to each other "I Love You" and at the same time exclude each other from our gatherings like so many homeless waifs?

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Romans 12:4,5 NASB

You people who believe in the Two House teaching: does your doctrine really encourage family unity? And you who think the Two House teachings are wrong: do you underscore what is right by your acceptance of the others? You Jews who think the Torah is for you alone, are you angry when the Father celebrates the return of a licentious son, killing the fatted calf and dressing him in the same type of clothing you never took off? And you, those Gentiles who regard the Word of our Father as dead so you can spend your inheritance on loose living and the lusts of the flesh: is your self-indulgence a mark of family love or a mark of something else? Why do some of us keep sacrificing family unity for the sake of doctrinal purity? What does that concept mean, anyway? What are we all doing, acting like people who have no heavenly Father, or a family that is not rooted in the Messiah and His works?

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. James 4:1-3 NASB

My desire is for everyone to realize YHVH's version of family, and act like it. Our present condition, however, makes my natural family look like the Cleavers. I am painfully aware of how some families can let you down, and turn into poster children for

what a family should not be. Unfortunately I am also all too painfully aware of my Spiritual Family's candidacy for the same poster. We seem intent on "one-upping" ourselves into chaos and shame, bickering, backstabbing and cutting till we are weak with loss of blood. STOP IT! Like my dad used to say, "You can pick your nose, and you can pick your seat, but you can't pick your family." Now that we are in His Spiritual family, we have to learn to love each other anyway. We are going to be spending thousands of years together, but right now I can just hear the Father saying, "If you don't stop it I'm going to turn this car around and we aren't going anywhere!" I was fortunate to be able to pick one earthly family, but once I picked them they were mine and no two ways about it. One might have a partial excuse with a dysfunctional natural family because one did not make that choice, but when you choose your Spiritual Family you are stuck with them.

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. I Corinthians 12:26,27 NASB

Since we become part of YHVH's family by trusting obedience to His Word, then all our actions should be predicated on that fact. We are in His Family because we act like it, not because of what we believe. If what you think does not modify what you do, then your brain is sterile and what you believe means nothing; like a song never written or like labor that gives birth to wind. What's important is not so much what somebody else in the family does wrong, as it is, are we going to do what's right?

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Galatians 5:3-6 NASB)

Don't make me get the hose.

Bruce Bertram

Won't Make It To Mainstream Ministries