



Adopted into the Family: Toward a Theology of Parenting¹

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The Jensen family is somewhat erratic when it comes to mealtime devotions. We say grace before dinner, most of the time, if we're not too hurried or harried at the end of the day. But usually we leave it at that. There have been seasons in our family's life when we have tried

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other things: a brief lesson from the Bible, a short prayer from a children's devotional, or some open-ended response time when each of us—Finn, Grace, Molly and I—have named something that we're thankful for or something that we need help with. But even if the day doesn't lend itself to family devotion, I usually experience the short time before we start eating as sacred. On many days, it's the only time that the four of us are together in the same room. As a parent, I look forward to that time together in the evening: where the people I love most of all in the world are gathered in the same place, even if for a moment. That short time after we sit down and before we lift our forks is an instant to give thanks for the people that I can't imagine living without.

What does it mean to be a parent? How is parenting related to Christian faith? Our age tends to romanticize the family moments I've just described, where the nuclear family offers a haven of refuge in a hostile world, a "domestic church" where faith gets imparted from generation to generation. Family is the place where I find welcome and affection when is no other place to go. The religious right, with its "Focus on the Family" has capitalized on this ideal. So, too, have Vatican documents that extol the function of family in an increasingly immoral world. But such sentiments about the family are hardly unique to the religious right or the Catholic magisterium. They permeate much of mainline Protestantism as well. Compare, for example, how new members are received in most mainline congregations. Does a seventy-five year old widow receive the same welcome as a young couple with two toddlers? In most cases not. Our panic over aging church members and jubilation over young families means that the

church routinely ignores the priority given to widows in scripture in favor of a romanticized ideal of the nuclear family that no one can live up to.

The earliest Christians, by contrast, were often suspicious of family because it could serve as an obstacle to the kingdom of God. Jesus, for example, ignores his parents' worries at a rather early age. The one canonical reference to Jesus' youth, the story of the boy in the temple, is hardly good news to parental ears. Bear in mind that Mary and Joseph have been missing their child *for three days*, an eternity for worried parents. Upon finding him, Mary asks, "Child, why have you treated us like this?" Jesus' response: "Why were you searching for me? (Lk. 2:48-9) The not-so-subtle message: "Mom, get a clue." As Jesus grows to adulthood, his avoidance of typical family ties continues: he avoids marriage and has no children to call his own. Jesus of Nazareth has no place to lay his head and refuses to settle down and start a family. Sometimes, moreover, Jesus seems outright dismissive toward families: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:26). So much for family values. These are hard words for parents to swallow, leading us to ask whether a Christian view of family necessarily entails the hating of one's children and parents. Should Christians, in the end, reject any and all family ties?

Most Christians, throughout the ages, have rejected the view that discipleship *necessarily* entails hating of one's kin. But some have suggested that our obligation to strangers is sometimes more important than obligations to kin. Garth Hallett, a Jesuit philosopher, has argued that Christian faith may impel parents to meet the urgent needs of a distant stranger even if it means the neglect of their child's less urgent need. Consider the case of money spent on a

child's college tuition versus the same money spent to alleviate famine in a distant land. If a mother were to send money across the globe to people whom she'd never met and not expend those same resources on her daughter's college education, most people would probably criticize her neglect of the daughter's education rather than extol her altruism. Hallett contends, however, that there may be instances when such actions are not only excusable, but preferable. The Christian view of the Reign of God, as recorded in the New Testament, consistently privileges our obligations to neediest despite ties of affection to our nearest kin. Though Hallett does not contend that parents ought *always* to give to the neediest instead of their own children, he does say that the witness of Christian faith claims that the neediest consistently come before the nearest in the Kingdom.² When family ties are too strong, they may prevent us from glimpsing the Kingdom and working on behalf of it.

Parenting and Kin Altruism

Most Christian treatments of parenting do not pose the dilemma between care for next of kin and obligations toward the poor as starkly as Hallett. Many theologians have seen in the fierce ties of parental devotion a reflection of God's love let loose in the world. God designs a world in which the ties of family are ordered for the common good: not simply for children and their parents, but for the sake of the world. The Christian command to love one another, in this read, does not look the same for my relationships with everyone. Rather, I love those nearest to me, whether in marriage or in parenting, with a different kind of intensity. It is "natural,"

² Garth Hallett, *Priorities and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 88-112.

according to this view, that I seek first the well-being of those with whom I share my daily bread—not to the exclusion of the poor, but so that my obligations to the poor might be seen in the wider circle of divine love. Altruism to the neediest, in this case, need not lead to neglect of the nearest.

Thomas Aquinas championed this view in the Middle Ages, seeing in parental affection a created good that redounds to wider love for creation. Human love, when rightly ordered, extends first and foremost to God. But this love of God is witnessed and reflected in all of our earthly loves, which are also ordered. Our earthly loves are good, Thomas argues, because they also partake in the love of God. As long as our earthly loves direct us to the love of God, they ought to be celebrated as reflections of God’s love for us. Only when they lead us *away* from God are they suspect. Interestingly, Thomas mentions self-love first in the order of earthly loves, suggesting that we cannot love another truly if we do not love ourselves. Rightly ordered love is not the self-surrendering *agape* that has so often characterized Christian theology, a love that idealizes the loss of self in love or the ceaseless giving in love so that there is no self left to give. Rather, for Thomas, our love for ourselves “is the model” of our “love for another.”³ From self-love, Thomas proceeds to love of neighbor. Christians love their neighbors as themselves, but also recognize an order to neighborly love. For him, it is good that we “love those who are more closely united to us more, both because our love for them is more intense, and because there are more reasons for loving them.”⁴ Thomas considers it “natural” that parents love their children more intensely than other neighbors. In parental love for children, parents reflect some of God’s

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1948), II-II, Q. 26, Art. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II-II, Q. 26, Art. 8.

love and learn to be schooled in love of neighbor. Parental love for children does not necessarily conflict with other loves, but may allow other loves to nurture and grow.

Thomas' theology has been developed further by Don Browning, practical theologian and founder of the Religion, Culture, and Family Project at the University of Chicago. By combining Thomas's theological wisdom with insights from modern developmental psychology, Browning develops a case for "kin altruism" that considers parental affection and attention toward children as a "pre-moral good."⁵ Parents know love and care for their kin as a good because they find it rewarding and satisfying. Even in the midst of struggle and sacrifice, parents experience joy when children flourish under their care. Parents delight when they hear children say "mama" for the first time, or when children learn to write their name, or when children graduate from high school. Browning knows that care is not a one-way street, an endless reservoir of giving that only flows from parent to child. Providing care for children can also become a source of delight for the caregiver.

Browning also claims that parental affection for children offers instruction in sympathy. As parents and children live together, they learn how their actions and behaviors have a direct impact on others, for good and for ill. The mundane struggles and little joys that occur under one roof enable family members to extend sympathy to wider social circles, and can become the foundation of "more generalized social reciprocity."⁶ We learn as parents and children to be better neighbors and to show hospitality to others beyond the family circle.

⁵ Don S. Browning, *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 353.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 357.

Affection for one's kin is not an absolute moral good because affection can be twisted for immoral ends. Just as kin altruism can foster the development of neighborly love, it can also feed "nepotism and tribalism,"⁷ the obsessive focus on the needs of the nearest to the exclusion of the wider human family. Most American middle-class parents know well the tempting thought that "nothing is too good for my kid." I experience this temptation every day, as I fret about whether Molly and I are providing enough "good opportunities" for our children so that they grow up happy, well-adjusted, and smart. Many days seem like an endless parade of gymnastics, guitar lessons, Girl Scouts, and church choir. "Are we doing enough for Grace and Finn?" we ask ourselves. Even education has become a consumer-parenting obsession in our time. With magnet schools, private schools, and neighborhood schools aplenty, parents begin to view education as a marketplace where they must purchase the finest product. Meanwhile, as white middle class parents fret about the "best" school for their children, public schools in most American cities have become increasingly segregated economically and racially, erasing educational gains made over the past several decades.

In the midst of trends that favor the nearest at the expense of the neediest, it is worth remembering how suspicious the early Christians were of some family ties. Consider these words from the Acts of Thomas: "If you produce many children, you will become greedy and avaricious because of them, robbing orphans and defrauding widows..."⁸ I don't want to suggest that we swallow this argument from a quasi-Gnostic source hook, line, and sinker. I agree, along

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Acts of Thomas," in David G. Hunter, ed., *Marriage in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 61.

with Thomas Aquinas and Browning and contrary to the Acts of Thomas, that parenting can be a school for teaching us to love our neighbors. The mundane acts of changing diapers, teaching children how to ride a bike, and helping with algebra homework can set patterns for acts of care that extend beyond the immediate family circle. But so, too, can they become focused only upon that circle. When turned in upon themselves, acts of care-giving can become obsessive and destructive. The Acts of Thomas is correct in noting not that parenting children leads *necessarily* to greed and neglect of others, but that parenting *can* lead to greed and neglect. Thus, parents obsess about their own children's education but wind up caring little about other children's schools. Kin altruism alone is not enough to promote a Christian vision of parenting. What is needed is a recovery of a New Testament image that many treatments of parenting neglect: adoption. When we do so, parenting becomes an act of hospitality that teaches us to extend grace even to strangers.

Parenting as Adoption

In Ephesians, the image of adoption portrays the church's relationship to God in Christ. The Christian church, which is made up primarily of gentiles, is not a child of God or an heir to the covenant by birthright or biology, but in virtue of its adoption through Jesus Christ. Christians become partakers of the covenant extended to Israel because God adopts us as God's own. In the new family inaugurated in Jesus Christ, adoption—not biology—makes the difference. The imagery of adoption does not suggest that Christians are any more—or any less—children of God than Jews are. Adoption neither maintains that the church is a second-class

family in comparison to the synagogue nor ensures that this new family supersedes the original family of covenant. But the image does suggest that God is working something new in adopting the church, that God is expanding the family circle that begins in a covenant with Abraham, extends to a people who journey out of slavery into the promised land, and is offered to the whole world in Jesus Christ. Christians become participants in this family story not because they can trace their family lineage to Abraham, but because Christ extends the hospitality of God, the loving and gracious Parent, to us. Thus the Hebrew story of covenant, Exodus, prophets, and priests becomes the church's story as well through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We become children, in other words, not because we are born into the covenant family, but because we have been incorporated into it. In this story of adoption, moreover, both the adoptive parent, God, and the adoptive child, the church, experience grace.

This pattern of adoption offers much for a theological understanding of parenting. I am not interested in comparing parents to God, a temptation that has occasionally plagued Christian theology. Rather, I am interested in reflecting on the experience and image of adoption more generally, because it speaks to the gift of each child, regardless of age, ability, or condition, and has the potential to move the understanding of parenting beyond a narrow concern with the people under my roof.

Christian parenting regards all children—whether they share parental DNA or not—as adoptive children. One of the problems with many contemporary attitudes toward parenting is that they consider children as possessions or investments: children belong to parents and parents have to ensure that children have enough opportunities in order to guarantee a return on that

investment. This attitude has been around for a long time. Having many children was a sign of wealth in ancient societies; a bevy of kids ensured a steady supply of workers for the family farm in generations past. But in our day the attitude presents itself with renewed fervor. Even if children no longer guarantee a solid financial return for parents, they are celebrated for their emotional return. Children, we are told by various studies, make us happier, make us live longer, and make us more productive in society. Note how these arguments consider children chiefly in terms of what they supply for the parent. The message of this line of thought is clear: funnel as much investment in the child as possible—piano lessons, ballet, summer camps—in order that both child and parent emerge happier and better-adjusted.

I'm not here to argue against these activities, of course. There's nothing wrong with piano lessons, Little League, and ballet; in fact, they constitute great goods for children and parents inasmuch as they open children and parents to a world beyond hearth and home. But there is something theologically suspect with construing children as parental investments, because it eclipses the gift that children are to parents, and the gift that parents are to children. In a recent work, feminist theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore criticizes what she calls an "economy of exchange" that reduces children to commodities or even nonentities.⁹ The image of adoption moves us away from an economy of exchange—where children represent an investment on the part of parents—into an economy of grace—where children and parents are gifts to one another. What we learn from the Christian story—from Table to scripture to the Savior—is not an economy of exchange, where tit is exchanged for tat, where we invest in order to reap a

⁹ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood From a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 102.

return. What we learn from that story is that God gives generously, gratuitously, and that when we are caught up in receiving the gift of Jesus Christ, we are driven to become a giving people. God doesn't give so that some might have more and others less; rather, God gives out of abundance, so that all might have life abundantly. Children come to parents and parents come to children as gifts, drawing from the abundance of God's life.

Parents who wait for an adoption—often for years—know well that the appearance of a child into their lives is nothing short of a gift. But so, too, do mothers who labor in childbirth and fathers who hold the mother's hand in the agony of labor. As gifts, children surprise parents with their uniqueness; but, so too do parents surprise children as they begin to live in the household with each other. Such is the nature of gifts: however much anticipated, they surprise us with grace. When we receive them, we in turn become giving people.

The giftedness of adoptive parenting means that for parents children are “wholly unearned, they are ours ‘only in trust,’ ...coming from and ultimately returning to God.”¹⁰ Because all children are adopted by their parents, they are not “ours” by right. They come to us from God, and are directed back to God. At least Jesus seems to have thought as much: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mk. 9:37). When conceived as adoption, parenting becomes both an act of hospitality *and* a reminder of the gift of life itself. A gift shared with others, a gift that transforms both giver and receiver, so that both become gifts to one another and we receive the gift of God. The economy of exchange that permeates U.S. market economies

¹⁰ Ibid.

views children as possessions that are meant to be hoarded. The economy of gift that saturates the Christian story fosters gift-giving so that our lives might be shared with others.

When children are conceived as gifts by their parents, some notions of parental sacrifice begin to shift as well. It has become a truism in our time that the wide bulk of parenting is marked by sacrifice. Parents are those who sacrifice, whether in the form of sleepless nights with colicky babies or in sacrificing money and time for children that could be lavished on oneself. Parents, according to this wisdom, heroically give up time, resources, and sleep—often to their immediate detriment—in order to give to their children. Self-sacrifice becomes what is expected of parents. Of course much of this is true. No parent I know admits to joy over sleepless nights. Most parents would usually rather be some place other than the carpool line. Some tasks of parenting are boring, others taxing, and many sacrificial. Most parents know, too, how their good intentions and sometimes their good gifts are rejected: “I don’t want that, Dad.”

Feminist theologian Christine Gudorf is parent to three children, two of whom are adopted and mentally handicapped. Both of these developmentally disabled children had trouble walking and acquiring language skills; one had difficulty feeding himself. These are children who tried patience and demanded much time. During the initial years of parenting of these children, Gudorf and her husband heard much praise about their selfless, heroic sacrifice as parents. The problem with this widespread perception, however, was that Gudorf’s experience as parent to these children did not mesh with the heroism that others were attributing to her. She and her husband did not experience parenting, and the gift of these children, as an endless chain of self-giving, but also that these children’s achievements and growth—however small—became

sources of pride, satisfaction, and happiness for them as parents. In the midst of sacrifice, they also found fulfillment and experienced their children giving to them as well.

Gudorf places sacrifice within a wider scope, in which sacrifice is not an end in itself. If adoption is a primary image for family, and if adoption is a practice that enables us to give and receive gifts, then parents may find themselves as the receivers of gifts even in the midst of some of the most radical acts of self-giving, such as those of Gudorf and her husband, as they tried to help their five year old learn to walk. Gudorf doesn't want to rid ourselves of the idea of sacrifice. Of course, parents sacrifice immediate needs and gratifications in order that children might thrive more fully. The problem is with seeing parental love as *ultimately* sacrificial. In her analysis, "sacrifice is essential in the furthering of the kingdom. But we need to be very clear that self-sacrificing love is always aimed at the establishment of mutual love. An act is only a loving act if it has the potential to provoke a loving response, however far in the future."¹¹

Parenting anticipates mutual love, but it doesn't yet embody it. Parents love infants and younger children in ways that children simply cannot. Gudorf notes that mutual love rarely begins mutually. But love is fulfilled as it grows, as others are invited to love in return, and as we are moved by love to love one another. This is the case whether we are talking about God's love for the world, our love for another person, or a parent's love for a child. Parents of children—even the youngest of children—know well that love often gets returned, whether in a hugs, words, the movement of an eye. The return of love, of course, is not a guarantee. Parenting entails the risk

¹¹ Christine E. Gudorf, "Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice," in Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer, eds., *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 190.

of love that's never received, let alone returned. But the possibility of turning from the gift does not negate the gift of love, neither for children nor for parents. When parents adopt, they respond to a God who adopts us and who equips parents and children to receive the gift of God's love.

Our son Finn is four years old and attends pre-school across the street from the seminary campus. He is beginning, I think, to understand the shape of giving that characterizes a graced life. Some of this he may have learned from his parents and older sister, but much of it he has learned at chapel. Twice a week, at the beginning of worship, the children of this school give offerings of food that are collected for an Austin food bank. Before they sing, before they pray, they give. Finn calls this his "chapel food." He first told me that it's "food that God eats." Now he tells me that it's food that other people eat. Finn lets me know if his "chapel food" is running low. He tells me, "Dad, it's time to get my chapel food," and I've noticed how he gets a sparkle in his eye whenever we bring cans of beans and bags of pasta to his school. He tells me that we need to bring this food so that others can eat. What's fascinating to me is how Finn experiences giving not primarily as an act of sacrifice or of giving up something. He'll grow into this attitude, I'm sure. But right now, Finn experiences the act of giving as a joy; and in seeing him give, I have caught some of that attitude as well. The dynamic of the Christian economy of grace encourages us to view parenting as adoption: where parents experience giving not only as sacrifice, but as occasions of joy; where children not only learn from parents, but teach them as well; where care for our children, the nearest, results in greater attention to the neediest.

Parenting is neither a requirement nor an expectation for the Christian life. But parenting is a gift of that life: a gift made possible because of the gift of God's own Son to us, a gift that makes us heirs to the covenant by adoption. All who parent care for adoptive children because children are given to parents. Parents offer hospitality to children for a time so that they, in turn, might provide hospitality to others. Children belong not first and foremost to parents, but to God. Children come to parents as surprises, even anticipated surprises, and teach parents part of what it means to be giving people. And, because children rarely stay the length of their lives under a parent's roof, they, too, might even become adoptive parents themselves when the time comes.