THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF ADOPTION:
An Introduction to Adoption and Foster Care (Week 2)

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to week two of our class on theology and practice of adoption. Last week, we looked at the theology of adoption. In particular, we learned about God’s adopting love for his people. For the rest of the class, we’re going to be more applied. This morning we’re going to learn about the need for adoption and foster care and the process of adoption and foster care. We are also going to try to answer the question, “How can I know if I’m called to foster or adopt?”

I want to start off this morning by telling you the story of Katie Davis. Some of you may have heard the story about Katie Davis or even read her blog, “Kisses from Katie.” Katie Davis grew up in Brentwood, Tennessee, a wealthy suburb of Nashville. She was homecoming queen at her high school and planning on going to nursing college, but after graduating high school in 2007 moved to Uganda to teach kindergarten at an orphanage. In 2008, less than a year removed from homecoming, she became the mother of three orphaned girls. Today, she is the mother of 13 formerly orphaned girls. She also runs a ministry that provides food, medical care, and Bible studies to more than 1600 children every week. Her ministry is planning on opening a school soon. Her story is amazing.

I mention it because it’s helpful to have examples before us of obedience and faithfulness. Remember, James 1:27 tells us, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” The keeping oneself unstained from the world part is pretty familiar. We talk about that a lot. But what about visiting the needy? What about caring for orphans? That is clearly something that God expects his people to be involved in.

ORPHANS, ORPHANS, EVERYWHERE
In the roughly two-thousand years since the closing of the biblical canon, a lot has changed. Far fewer people die of disease or starvation, although many still do. In many parts of the world the state provides for basic needs of children. But there is still a great deal of need. The statistics on orphaned children can be overwhelming, but it is worth taking a few minutes to try to get a sense the numbers and circumstances of children in need of homes.

_Globally._ The United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF) around 13 million children have lost both parents. Most orphaned children are cared for by their extended family or local communities, but many children worldwide have lost both parents and have no one to care for them.

Moreover, for every child that has lost both parents, there are other children who have living parents who are unable or unwilling to care for them. AIDS, drugs, violence, and poverty mean that many children are essentially orphans, even if they still have living parents. Most of Russia’s 700,000 orphans are so-called “social orphans.” Something like 200,000 of these orphans live in state institutions.

One family that recently adopted from Uganda is a good example. Both of their daughter’s birth parents were living, but they were sick with AIDS and so had surrendered her to the orphanage at birth. They showed up at the court hearing to explain to the judge that they could not parent their daughter and so were supporting the adoption.

The life outcomes of children who grow up in orphanages lag far behind those of children who grow up in families. Child development experts say that for every three months a child spends in an orphanage, a child loses one month of development. So a two year old who has spent all his life in an orphanage might not even be crawling yet. A six year old who has spent her whole life in an orphanage might be as physically, intellectually, and emotionally developed as a four year old. Children who grow up in institutions are also far more likely to become the victims of physical and sexual abuse. After children age out of orphanages, many of them turn to crime or prostitution to provide for themselves.
Children with special needs are even more bleak. Take for instance the case of HIV. With modern retroviral drugs, HIV has become a manageable illness.

Children born with HIV can look forward to a normal life span. They can even marry and have children. But in some parts of the world, the stigma is still powerful. In Colombia, children with HIV are told that they are unadoptable and will never have a family. In Chinese orphanages, children with HIV are kept in rooms by themselves and not allowed contact with other children. Orphanage caretakers wear masks and gloves anytime they come near them. Toddlers are made to wash their own clothing. This despite the fact that there has never been a documented case of HIV transmission under normal household circumstances. The risk of physical contact with an HIV+ child is essentially zero, but the stigma persists.

Given the great need, you might assume that overseas adoption is relatively easy. However, you can’t just pick a country and adopt from there. Most countries don’t allow for international adoption. In fact, more than 70% of children adopted by Americans in 2011 came from just five countries: China, Ethiopia, Russia, South Korea, and Ukraine.

Americans have for decades been adopting children from overseas. In 2008, 17,438 children were adopted internationally by Americans. In 2009, 12,753 children were adopted internationally by Americans. In 2010, it was 11,058. Last year, in 2011, Americans adopted 9,319 children from abroad. The downward trend is unmistakable. That means that over the last four years, the number of children adopted has dropped by almost 50%.

Why the drop? There are likely many reasons. Political turmoil and concerns about child trafficking have led to changing regulations which have made it more difficult to adopt. Countries can change their requirements or close entirely with almost no notice. For instance, in 2008, Guatemala was the most popular country for international adoption. Today, Guatemala is not accepting applications for overseas adoption.

Still, the need is great.
Domestically. America has orphans too. There are, of course, some children who lose both parents. But the large majority of children available for adoption in America have living parents who are unable to parent. According to the most recent date, there were about 408,000 children in foster care in America. The average child in foster care is 9 years old and will spend a total of about two years in care. Most will be reunited with their birth family. About 20% will be adopted (Source: acf.hhs.gov).

Most children available for adoption or foster care in the U.S. come from serious poverty. Many have experienced abuse or neglect. Many have developmental or physical disabilities. Older children and African-American children in particular have a difficult time finding adoptive parents.

Adoption through the foster system typically happens after a judge has terminated the rights of birth parents. Private adoptions are typically arranged between a birth mother and an adoptive couple, usually with the help of a lawyer or local adoption agency. Sometimes, those adoptions are open—the child grows up knowing and spending time with his or her birth mother. Other times they are closed and there is little or no communication between the adoptive family and the birth family.

Durham. There are needy children very close to home. According to Durham Social Services, there are more than 150 children in foster care in Durham County. About one-third of these children will end up adopted. The rest will either be reunited with their birth families or will age out of the foster system. Some children are available for adoption immediately at no cost. Durham Social Services currently have several older children available for adoption.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

The need is tremendous, but so is the opportunity. **What are some of the different ways Christians can respond?**

Prayer. You can certainly pray for children without parents. You can also pray for families that have adopted or fostered or are in the process. Foster and adoption
parenting is different than traditional parenting. It’s not better or worse, but it
does come with unique challenges. Pray for families involved in this ministry.

Giving. As we’ll talk about in a few minutes, the cost of adopting is generally very
high. Moreover, the families most likely to adopt are younger families who may
not be earning a great deal. FBC has started accepting donations to help families
adopt. That would be one great place to give. You can also give to good
organizations that help vulnerable and orphaned children around the world.
There are good sponsorship programs that provide children with food, medical
care and education.

Learning how to talk about adoption and foster care. Adoption and foster care is
unfamiliar to a lot of people. Learning what words to use might seem like a small
thing, but it really isn’t. We’ll be talking about this more in future class weeks.

Adopting or fostering. This is of course the main thrust of this class. One great
way to obey God’s command to look after orphans is to actually make them not
orphans. Consider adopting or fostering. I think adoptive and foster parents
would be the first to tell you that they’re not extraordinary people. God uses
ordinary people to accomplish his will.

AM I CALLED TO ADOPT OR FOSTER?

So how can you know if you’re called to adopt? What do you think? How would
you advise someone struggling with that question? In one sense, we don’t need
to even ask the question. You are. All of us are. Last week, we learned that God
is an adoptive God. That is the way he has chosen to love. Every Christian is
called to love like God loves. God has made his will clear to us. The exact way we
display that love can vary. Not every Christian is called to go through the legal
process to foster or adopt a child.

I think it is important to recognize that there are many different paths to
adoption. Some people have a burning desire to adopt or foster from a young
age. Others come to it older. Some feel a strong impression that this is what God
wants them to do. Others reason it out more. Some families that pursue
adoption or foster care have struggled with infertility. Others came at it from a
different direction. I want to stress that these are all good paths. God leads in many different ways and he is always pleased when we seek to love others and bring him glory.

That being said, let me run through a few things you should think about before you pursue adoption or foster care.

First, you have to desire to adopt or foster. If you really don’t want to do this, it’s a pretty good sign that you’re not called to adopt or foster at the present. There are many ways to obey God’s command to visit orphans and widows in their distress. Adopting or fostering a child is just one way. It may not be the way for you. You have to want to do this. Along that line, both spouses need to be on board with the adoption.

Now, that does not mean that our hearts are an infallible guide. They’re not. It may very well be that adoption is for you, but you don’t want to do it. If that is the case, you need to think and pray about this and your heart needs to change. But that may take a little time. It can take a lot of time and a lot of money to adopt a child. Parenting that child is a much bigger investment. Fostering is a challenging, consuming endeavor as well. You should desire to do this.

Second, you should have the ability to adopt or foster. If God calls us to do something, he gives us the means. Do you meet the standards set out by the agency, state, and country you want to adopt or foster from? If not, that probably means you’re not called to adopt or foster right now. Do you have the money—or can you raise the money—that it costs to adopt? You might be surprised by how possible it is to raise money. People will probably be eager to help you. Do you have the character and time to parent a child? Do you have a home that can accommodate a child or are you willing to move? These are some of the questions you should ask yourself. A good adoption agency can help you answer some of them.

Family dynamics is another issue affecting your ability to adopt at . Adoption agencies strongly discourage families from adopting near the birth of another child. There are good reasons for that. Having some spacing between children
can be very helpful for adoptive families and for children new to the family through adoption. It’s difficult for a child to come into a family of strangers and bond. Having to compete for attention with a newborn can make it a lot more difficult.

Third, you should have affirmation from Christians who know you well. In particular, I would encourage you to talk to two groups of people—the elders of our church and families that have already gone through the process. If you don’t know any of these people, you should get to know them. Let them ask you tough questions. It may be that you have the desire to foster or adopt and have the finances to do it, but really shouldn’t do it. Maybe your home life isn’t what it should be. Maybe you have wildly unrealistic expectations or poor motivations. For instance, some people look at adoption as a way to get a designer baby. Others refuse to even think about the unique challenges that come with parenting a child who has come in to your family through adoption or fostering. Proverbs tells us “in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (11:14). That is particularly true if you get the right counselors! Some people may try to discourage you because of ungodly fear or racism. But if wise, godly people consistently say you’re not in a place to pursue foster care or adoption, you should take that to heart.

Any questions about how to make this kind of decision?

HOW DO I ADOPT?

How do you actually go about adopting or fostering? The process is different for everyone. You should go into the adoption process expecting the unexpected. Things will almost certainly change. Some families begin and complete an adoption in a matter of months. [Brad, you can insert your family’s story here, and how quick of a timeframe it was to bring Ben home.] Others find it takes years. The Crattys started in the Uganda program in early 2011 thinking they would have brought their child home within a year. Now, due to serious changes and slowdowns in the process of Uganda, they’ve had to switch to Ethiopia and they’re expecting to complete their adoption in 2013.
• **Educate Yourself.** This Bible For Life class is a great start, but it’s just a start. There is a lot to learn about both the biblical theology of adoption and the practice of adoption and fostering. Let me give you a few suggestions about how to educate yourself.
  
  o **Read a book on adoption.** I can recommend several good books on the subject. Russell Moore’s book *Adopted for Life* is very good. We listened to parts of it last week with Andy Lynch. It has helped mobilize a new generation of Christians to care for orphans. Tony Merida is a Southeastern professor and an adoptive father; his book *Orphanology* is another excellent resource.

  o **Talk to an adoption agency or Durham Social Services.** If you are interested in adopting through the foster system, you can talk to Durham County or Wake County social services. If you’d like to adopt internationally or domestically but not through the foster system, contact an adoption agency. Most adoption agencies have good websites you can learn from.

  o **Talk to some families that have adopted.** You can learn a lot from the internet, but you can’t really replace face to face conversations with families that have adopted. Grab coffee and ask them about their experience. Ask them about their struggles and joys. Get advise on the process.

• **Complete a homestudy.** A homestudy is a series of interviews with a social worker. They’ll make sure that you have the resources to adopt and have a safe living environment. To complete a homestudy, you’ll also need to have background checks done on any adults living in your house. You can’t really move forward in the adoption process without a homestudy.

• **Apply to an agency.** Every international country has a different process. The procedures for domestic adoption can vary a lot too. Your agency will coach you through the steps and make sure you have everything you need. If you’re adopting internationally, you’ll need to apply for clearance from
US Immigration. Your agency will also compile a dossier that will go to the country of origin.

- **Assemble the money you’ll need.** Adoption can be expensive. International adoptions typically cost $25000-50000. Domestic adoption can range from free, if done through the foster system, to tens of thousands of dollars. The good news is, there are lots of ways to raise money. Some foundations offer grants to help adoptive families. FBC has a new adoption program you’ll be hearing about in future weeks which can help too. The other piece of good news is that expenses are generally due in installments, so you don’t have to have it all at once.

- **Receive a referral.** Toward the end of the process you’ll receive a referral. Sometimes it’s just the picture and name of a child. Sometimes you’ll get more information. Once you accept a referral, you’ve been matched with your new son or daughter and it’s just a question of waiting until you can finalize the adoption.

- **Meet your child.** International adoptions require you to fly to the country of origin where you will stand before a judge and finalize the adoption. Some programs require two brief trips.

**HOW DO I FOSTER?**

Brent and Amanda Aucoin have just gone through the process in Wake County. I’m sure they’d be happy to talk to you more about it. Andy Winn and Flynn Cratty met with Durham Social Services recently to learn more about fostering in Durham County. Durham is eager to have more foster parents.

Fostering is a little bit simpler than adoption. It’s also a lot cheaper. If you foster, the state will give you a stipend to cover the expenses of raising a child. With foster care, a child could be with you for weeks or for years.

*First, register for the class.* In order to be licensed as a foster parent, you need to take at 30 hour class. The class will cover the program, unique needs of children in foster care, and parenting.
Second, have a home study. You’ll need to have a fire inspection and a background check done. As I understand it, the requirements for foster care are reasonable. They’re not looking to get rid of prospective foster parents, they’re just wanting to make sure that the home is a stable and safe place. Once you’ve finished the class and had your home study, you’re licensed.

Third, receive a referral. You can accept or decline a referral. But you can be matched with a child almost immediately.

One thing to keep in mind is that the mission of foster agencies is to reunite children with their birth families. When that isn’t possible, the state terminates parental rights permanently and tries to find an adoptive home. Foster care sometimes ends in adoption—and that’s great—but it doesn’t always. You’d need to prepare your heart for the possibility that a child who has become a part of your family for months may leave. But there is no doubt that fostering is a wonderful ministry.

CONCLUSION

Like most things that are really worth doing, adoption and foster care are a lot of work. This process is generally not an easy one. One of the most difficult things about it is the waiting. Once you make the decision to adopt, you naturally start thinking of yourself as a father or mother to a child you haven’t even met. But it can be months or years before you get to meet that child. The reward is great. Not only do you get to welcome a child into your family, you can know that you are imitating God in his love for orphans. After all this discussion on process, it’s worth circling back to the theological foundation.

Listen as I read 1 John 3:1: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” Once we were not God’s children, but through Christ we really and truly are God’s children now. What a beautiful truth. It may be that there is a child two continents or two city blocks away from you who will one day be your child. I pray that God will give all of us the wisdom and love we need to imitate him.

Any questions before we close in prayer?