

Finding Your True Identity in Christ, Pt. 5

Lovingly Adopted

Galatians 3:26-4:7

**First Presbyterian Church
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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

I don't know about you, but I've been sleepy all week after the time change. But long, lovely days are the compensation for a week of drowsiness. One azalea-laden afternoon, I walked by our neighbor's house where all four of her young children were out playing. The older children came over to see my little beasties. Child number four, wearing only a diaper, also came running over, arms flapping. He went right past me and straight into the street. It's a quiet side street so there were no cars. His mother had him in a blink. But I marveled at his confidence. "Hey, I'm number four. I've got five other people looking after me. Someone's sure to pick me up if I need it." Though he's not consciously aware of it, the little guy has a deeply embedded sense of *home* inside him. He knows he has a place. He knows he's claimed. He knows people are looking out for him. So why not just go for it?

That reminds me of the happy days when my own children were so young. I remember when our first son, Micah, was little; he was a very compliant child. In the mornings he would play by himself in his crib for quite a while. Then he would call out, "Wake me up!" Obviously, he was already awake. In fact, given his agility at an early age, I'm pretty sure that if he was old enough to talk, he could have climbed out of the crib himself. But that's not what he wanted. He wanted his Dad to pick him up and get him out. He wanted the claiming of his parents to bring him into the new day.

So I'd go into his room and see him standing in his crib. In his little footed pajamas, he would start to dance. Then he'd hold out his arms with a huge smile, "Pick me up!" Could I possibly look at that cute boy and say, "No, not today. You just stay there." Of course the spirit of fatherhood would surge through me. I'd scoop him up and say, "Good morning buddy! Let's go get breakfast." What a privilege, what a joy that for those precious few years, we could play out the ritual. I could claim him as my beloved child every single day.

That's the Biblical identity theme for today. I John 3 tells us, "See what love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God.

And so we are!” We are the Father’s beloved children. He claims us every moment of every day. He always reaches toward us. He always wants to gather us to himself.

But that means that God our Father has overcome the distance that is between us. As we study identity in the Scriptures, we have seen that we are intentionally created by God, called into relationship with him. But at the very same time, we are separated from our Father by our sinfulness. Our own in-curved, self-exalting, life-defeating tendencies have estranged us from the God who made us and loves us. But God simply would not be without us. He devised a plan to redeem us and bring us home.

Paul said it this way in our passage:

For when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal. 4: 4-7).

The Son of God came to us as the Son of Mary. He brothered us, taking up a real humanity. And in our flesh and blood, he lived the life we could not live. On our behalf. He took the penalty for sin we could not pay. And returned his mercy. Jesus established the grounds for our adoption. And the Father sends his Spirit into our hearts, the Spirit of knowing ourselves beloved and adopted out of being spiritual orphans to being home in Christ.

I’ve recently discovered a reality about the ancient Roman world that stunned me. It horrified me to think that people in the great classic age could be so cruel. But it has set the news of our adoption in Christ in an entirely new, glorious light. In the Roman world, being the biological father of a child did not necessarily mean you had to acknowledge, raise, shelter, and care for the child. In a Roman family, the *paterfamilias*, or head male, had all authority. He decided whether or not the family would accept a new child.

The custom was that after a baby was born in a Roman household, the midwife would place the child on the floor at the feet of the *paterfamilias*. He would then make a determination about the child. If he picked the child up in his arms, that child was thereafter a member of the family. If he did not pick the child up, the baby would be set outside the home—even if the infant was his own flesh

and blood! Then the child would either die of exposure or be picked up by someone and likely sold to become a slave. This practice seems unimaginable in its barbarity to me, yet it continued until the first Christian emperor Constantine prohibited the abandoning of children.¹

This is the culture in which the first Gentile Christians came to know the blessing love of Jesus. No offspring was actually a member of the family until the head of the family adopted him as his own. Biology alone did not create the family. In that sense, *every* child was adopted. The choice of the father to take up his child from the floor created the family. He would become what was called in Latin the *susceptor*, the one who takes up. The *susceptor* had to take the child as his own, and then the baby could live as a beloved member of the family.

Think of this in relation to the words we read from Galatians about the love of God the Father for those he adopts in Christ. In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son...so that we might receive the adoption of sons. And he sent the Spirit of adoption into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” Paul was aware of the realities of the Roman world. The young Christians to whom he was writing had been raised as Gentiles. They lived in a culture with this practice in which every child’s life was precarious. So this passage spoke into the rule of the *paterfamilias* who had all power. Christ came to redeem us from under the laws of frail, fickle human love on which no one can depend, not even an infant. The true Father God determined to be our *susceptor*. Through the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit, the Father picked us up from the floor of abandonment and to take us into the arms of acceptance

When we were lying helpless on the floor, he saw us. When we were crying from breathing the toxic air of this world, he took pity on us. When we were helplessly wallowing about in the blood and water of our birth, crying out for food, for care, he saw us, nodded, and reached toward us. When we could have been left to die, when we could have been sold as slaves, the Father said, “Mine!” He took us in his arms and claimed us.

In the Roman world, a spirit of fear would have prevailed. Every mother would have trembled, “Will he take up our child?” Every older sibling would have worried, “Will he let my baby brother live?” In fact, we all know that soul fear. We realize our sin has cut us off from our Father in heaven. We feel abandoned down here on the dark planet. We feel cut off in the depths of our souls from the love we yearn for. The future seems precarious indeed. But Christ has brought peace. So Paul would write to the Romans, “For you did not receive

the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba Father!” (Rom 8: 15). Now when we cry “Abba! Father!” we know that God does not turn cruelly from our cries. He hears us. For he sent his Christ to claim us, and he sent his own Spirit into our hearts to bond with us.

Theologian Russell Moore has written about adopting two boys from a Russian orphanage. The bleak existence of the orphans shook him to the core. And their fears were not easily overcome. The entire experience taught Moore so much about how we learn to trust our adoption through Christ. He recalls the day they could finally pick up the children:

We nodded our thanks to the orphanage personnel and walked out into the sunlight, to the terror of the two boys. They had never seen the sun, and they’d never felt the wind. They had never heard the sound of a car door slamming or had the sensation of being carried along at 100 miles an hour down a Russian road. I noticed that they were shaking, and reaching back to the orphanage in the distance.

I whispered to Sergei, now Timothy, “That place is a pit! If only you knew what’s waiting for you: a home with a Mommy and a Daddy who love you, grandparents, and great-grandparents and cousins and playmates...and McDonald’s Happy Meals!” But all they knew was the orphanage. It was squalid, but they had no other reference point, and it was home.

We knew the boys had acclimated to our home, that they trusted us, when they stopped hiding food in their highchairs. They knew there would be another meal coming, and they wouldn’t have to fight for the scraps. This was the new normal...I still remember, though, those little hands reaching for the orphanage, and I see myself there.²

It took years for the boys to trust their adoption. The legal action took place the day Russell Moore signed the papers and drove them away from that bleak nightmare. But the joy of adoption had to grow through years of patient love given and received. Trust had to be won. The glorious truth of their belonging had to be integrated moment by moment into daily thoughts and habits.

So I get to tell you the wondrous news: if you trust in Christ, you have been adopted in him. You are now a restored son or daughter of God. This is who you are. Redeemed out of lostness and wrath into the peace of your true home. Christ

Jesus is your savior and he is your brother. And the Spirit lives in you. He breathes through you, lifting you towards your Father. We share blood with the Son and breath with the Spirit. By circulation and respiration, we belong in the Triune life. You belong to the Father. The proof is the impulse that is in you to cry out “Abba, Father!” You can’t make that up. That’s the Spirit of adoption working in you. Like a child holding up his arms, we plead, “Pick me up!” And discover that our Father longs to do just that. He has made a way to legally adopted us and he has set out on the long term project of teaching us to trust his love and live from it.

Yes, it takes time to live into this identity. It takes the hard work of prayer and study, of trust and practice, to come to know our true identity as adopted daughters and sons of our heavenly Father. But claiming this identity is the path to freedom and joy. We don’t need to hide food in our high chairs anymore, hedging our bets in case the Father rejects us. We don’t need to cling to the old destructive ways of protecting ourselves. We don’t need to live haunted by fear. Rather, as the community of the adopted and redeemed, we rehearse over and over the good news: we have been adopted through Jesus Christ into our Father. We sing this news in praise; we enact it in the way we love our brothers and sisters and welcome others into this family.

Today, let’s give the final word to Martin Luther. He struggled mightily to move from fear of condemnation to the trust of adoption. To move from law to grace. From self-trust to faith in Christ. He writes,

It is a very great comfort when Paul says that the Spirit of Christ, sent by God into our hearts, cries, “Abba, Father!” For in his trial, a man feels only the power of sin, the weakness of the flesh, and his doubt; he feels the fiery darts of the devil, the terrors of death, and the wrath and judgment of God. All these issue powerful and horrible cries against us, so that there appears to be nothing left for us except despair and eternal death. But in the midst of the terrors of the Law, thunderclaps of sin, tremors of death and roarings of the devil, Paul says the Holy Spirit begins to cry in our heart, “Abba, Father!” And his cry vastly exceeds, and breaks through, the powerful and horrible cries of the Law, sin, death and the devil. It penetrates the clouds and heaven, and it reaches all the way to the ears of God.³

The screech of “You are not...” shatters our peace. You are not enough. You are not desirable. You are not chosen. You are not wanted. Not smart enough, good enough, far enough along, or holy enough. Despair. But through the grating noise, we hear the soft cry of truth. “Abba, Father” cries the Spirit. He

breathes through us. He prays through us, bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. We are accepted in the Beloved Son. Nothing can separate us from his love. The *susceptor* has picked us up off the floor and claimed us. This quiet prayer is the deepest truth of our identity: “Abba, Father. In Christ, we are your children.”

¹ See Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Baylor University Press, 2016), pp. 144-148. Thanks to my friend Dawn Eden who uncovered this insight from history, especially in relation to the Ignatian prayer “Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will,” in her fine book *My Peace I Give You: Healing Sexual Wounds with the Help of the Saints* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2012), see p 20. See also <https://www.thoughtco.com/roman-exposure-of-infants-118370>. Also, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/300867>. And: The paterfamilias had the right to decide whether to keep newborn babies. After birth, the midwife placed babies on the ground: only if the paterfamilias picked it up was the baby formally accepted into the family. If the decision went the other way, the baby was exposed – deliberately abandoned outside. This usually happened to deformed babies, or when the father did not think that the family could support another child. Babies were exposed in specific places and it was assumed that an abandoned baby would be picked up and taken a slave (<http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/family.html>).

² Russell Moore “The Brotherhood of Sons,” *Touchstone*, May 2007; quoted and discussed in Dan Bush, *Live in Liberty* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016), pp. 123-25.

³ As quoted in Bush, *Live in Liberty*, p. 125.