BRITE DIVINITY SCHOOL

THE SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS:

CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH STORIES AND

PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

by

Ryan Noel Fraser

Bachelor of Arts, 1989
Freed-Hardeman University
Henderson, TN

Master of Ministry, 1991
Freed-Hardeman University
Henderson, TN

Master of Divinity, 2002
Abilene Christian University
Abilene, TX

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APPROVED BY

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE:

Nancy J. Gorsuch
Dissertation Director

Christie Cozad Neuger
Reader

Nancy J. Ramsay
Reader

Jeffrey Williams
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs

Nancy J. Ramsay
Dean

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Dedicated to the Memory of

Andy Lester

(1939-2010)

Beloved professor, mentor, encourager

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THE SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS:
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Ryan Noel Fraser, Ph.D. cand.
Brite Divinity School

Dissertation Advisor: Nancy J. Gorsuch

In this dissertation, I present the research findings of my interviews conducted with twenty Christian adoptive couples. I explore the narratives of their adoptive parenting experiences, primarily focusing on the ways that adopting children affects the parents' spirituality and theological understandings. Furthermore, I investigate adoptive parenthood as a spiritually challenging and formative experience. In this study, the broader descriptive notion of "narrative" is utilized as a hermeneutical approach that crosses disciplines. The primary lenses through which I view the adoption stories include canonical narrative theology and adoption literature from the social sciences in addition to narrative psychology. I delineate and discuss four central categories that emerge from the raw narrative data by means of grounded theory, including the following: (1) systemic evil that militates against adoption, (2) divine initiative and love, (3) spiritual struggles, and (4) faithful human response. Finally, I suggest pastoral theological reconstructions of adoptive parenthood as well as implications for pastoral theology, pastoral care and counseling, and the practice of ministry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The societal institution of adoption wields significant influence in North

American culture. Some researchers suggest that six out of ten people have a direct

and intimate connection to adoption (Carp, 2003). About 1.5 million children in the

United States are currently being raised by adoptive parents, representing

approximately two percent of all children below eighteen years of age in America

(Smit, 2002). The adoption process often comes with distinct psychological and

spiritual challenges for all those persons directly involved, including birthparents,

adoptive families, and adopted persons (Fraser, 2005). It seems to me that adoption is

a collision of joy and sorrow, celebration and sadness, consummation and crisis, hope

and anguish for all those involved.

Within the church and society there are many harmful myths about adoption.

Indeed, adoption rhetoric in political and religious circles often does more to conceal

than reveal any truths concerning this sociocultural and existential phenomenon.

Portrayals of adoption in the media and from the pulpit sometimes distort the

psychospiritual dynamics involved in being adopted or adopting or relinquishing a

child. It seems adoption is either glamorized as an altruistic act or portrayed as a

selfish and destructive societal practice. Matters are often confused more than

clarified by the legal battles regarding children whom both the birth and adoptive

parents claim as rightfully theirs; similarly, popular culture's news coverage of

international adoptions by celebrities such as Jamie Lee Curtis, Madonna and Guy

Ritchie, and Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt tend to further obscure reality. Issues such

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as attachment and bonding in adoptive families, adoption loss, personal identity formation, parental entitlement, psychological and spiritual processes, and politics concerning social justice in adoption practices are seldom given much thought. Besides the insightful work of a handful of pastoral theologians such as Ronald J. Nydam (1992, 1999), Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner (2003a, 2003b), Kang-Il Kim (2008), and pastoral care specialist Bob J. Chandler (1998), not many more contributions to serious scholarship surrounding adoption-related issues currently exist within our field.

While the social sciences have given much attention to issues related to relinquishment and adoption, they have directed far less attention toward adoptive parents' unique experiences. It is for this reason that the present study investigates questions such as: What about their challenges in adjustment to new and unpredictable circumstances regarding to receiving a child through adoption? How do Christian adoptive parents make meaning of their unique stories? What common themes, if any, link their respective adoptive parenting narratives together? Furthermore, what functions normatively and theologically for adoptive parents in their faith narratives? How is their spirituality shaped by the adoption stories they tell and retell, interpret and reinterpret? These types of inquiries highlight the need to begin the construction of a pastoral theology of adoptive parenting.

My central research question throughout the present study is as follows: Due to the undeniable intra- and interpersonal effects upon the lives of adoptive parents

resulting from the life-changing experience of adopting a child, how are their spiritual narratives both challenged and transformed?

Adoptive parenting may be viewed as a spiritual vocation replete with joys and challenges. I contend in this dissertation that adoption changes lives and transforms spiritual narratives. Though adoption is essentially a societal institution, it also holds religious and theological significance for many persons. In terms of the Judeo-Christian perspective, God has adopted each of us (cf. Eph 1:5). By being recognized and redeemed by God, we may understand our thrownness (or *dassein*) to be divinely alleviated, according to Heiddeger's (1962) view of human existence. The lack of scholarly research on the general experiences of adoptive parents and particularly their spiritual experiences has warranted this present study to explore the parents' unique experiences and to thematize as well as inform their theological and spiritual understandings. As the researcher, I have sought to gather new data concerning adoptive parents' spiritual experiences and processes of reconstructing faith to facilitate greater understanding and hope for both adoptive and nonadoptive families.

The present study is situated within the fields of pastoral theology and pastoral care. The purpose of this project is not to merely answer some psychological or sociological query concerning the general mental, emotional, or relational well-being of adoptive parents, although the findings have certainly shed valuable light on queries of this sort. The unique perspective through which the subject matter is investigated is overtly theological and spiritual in nature. With that perspective

established, pastoral theology and pastoral care are interdisciplinary fields that draw heavily from the social sciences as helpful cognate disciplines in the service of more effective and responsible practice. The fields of pastoral theology and pastoral care seek to promote an ongoing theory-to-practice spiral, whereby various relevant disciplines are invited into a conversation that facilitates the advance of theory as well as the development of reflective pastoral practice.

Synopsis of Chapters

The following is a brief synopsis of the specific content of each of the five chapters. This outline will help the reader more easily track the way my arguments are constructed and the foundations upon which they are built.

Chapter one begins by describing the background and purpose of the project. I provide a statement of the problem, a rationale for the study, and definitions of certain key terms. I additionally set forth a literature review related to research on adoptive parenting. After this section, I discuss my pastoral theological methodology that echoes the disciplines in the literature review. I also offer a description of my four primary sources which include the following: (1) adoptive parents' experiences, (2) the Christian faith tradition, (3) canonical narrative theology, and (4) adoption perspectives from the social sciences. I must clarify that canonical narrative theology represents one interpretive strand of the Christian faith tradition. In this study, I employ the broader descriptive notion of "narrative" as a hermeneutical approach that crosses disciplines and allows for adequate exploration of the larger topic. Next, I

explain the research interview procedures and precautions I have utilized, the adoptive parent narratives representing one of the sources in my methodology. Moreover, I describe my social location as well as my hermeneutical tendencies and personal biases. Finally, the chapter details my contextual experience and personal interest in the topic.

Chapter two begins with a discussion of the religious context in which I function as a scholar, pastoral theologian, and pastoral counselor. Next, I explain how I approach and utilize Scripture in this project. After this explanation, I discuss the sociocultural context of biblical passages related to the topic of adoption, followed by an exploration of a number of the actual passages. I then transition into an overview of canonical narrative theology as an interpretive lens for this study. Next, I proceed with a brief definition, history, and description of the canonical narrative theological approach and then draw upon the work of theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas to illustrate this approach. Finally, I discuss my own use of canonical narrative theology in this research endeavor.

Chapter three presents the various social science disciplines that undergird this project. I call attention to the cognate disciplines from which I explicitly draw. These sources include studies specifically regarding adoption from the fields of sociology and psychology in addition to narrative psychology theory, which conceptualizes how humans comprehend life experiences. While narrative psychology is clearly a discipline of psychology, I have chosen to address it separately from the other social science material with the purpose of examining the

mental processes involved in narrative thought, memory, and reasoning. Next, I describe the qualitative social science research protocol that I employed to collect, sort, and interpret the narrative interview data—namely grounded theory. The chapter concludes with implications from and conflicts among the social science sources.

Chapter four begins with a description of my approach to understanding and interpreting spiritual narratives. I then present the narratives of the adoptive parents' unique experiences, as revealed by the interview data. I additionally provide an in-depth account of the narrative material I gathered during my face-to-face interviews with the adoptive couples. I explore their unique stories and own individual interpretations of their spiritual/faith narratives and engage in a thematic analysis of the case material. Next, I offer a few personal remarks on Christian adoptive parents' personal experiences. Finally, I provide some methodological reflections regarding my work with the narratives.

Chapter five unites the entire project in a process that culminates in pastoral theological reconstruction. I suggest new constructions (or reconstructions) from narrative interpretations of theology and human experience. These suggestions are followed by a discussion on the specific implications for pastoral theology. I next provide several implications for the fields of pastoral care and counseling and the practice of ministry. Finally, the chapter concludes with my suggestions concerning important issues for future research.

Limitations of the Study

It must be acknowledged that the present study has certain limitations. First of all, my personal biases and prejudices resulting from my specific social location inevitably blind me to certain experiences of adoptive parenting. My social location will be described in detail in chapter one. It is sufficient, though, to simply acknowledge at this point that my cultural upbringing, education, and theological commitments likely subtly affected how I constructed questions and interpreted the participants' answers, as well as how the participants reacted to my assumptions. Despite my efforts to objectively construct an "interview guide" (see Appendix I) to facilitate asking the participants open-ended questions, there is indeed always the possibility that I unintentionally overlooked different, perhaps better, questions that I could have asked instead. In fact, the format of the questions themselves may have represented a limiting factor to the nature of the responses elicited. Also possible is that the research participants may have felt unobserved or unintended pressure from me or their spouses to safely or innocuously answer questions—thus concealing various facets of their own narratives—in attempts to avoid embarrassment or to resist uncomfortable feelings of pain, guilt, or shame.

While this study holds heuristic value, there is the danger of overstating its capability to be generalized. Perhaps the single greatest limitation is the narrow parameters of the sample population investigated. The research sample was restricted to heterosexual married couples that were defined as nonbiologically related adoptive parents (i.e., not stepparents adopting their stepchildren or grandparents adopting

their grandchildren). Moreover, this sample consisted of self-proclaimed Christians affiliated with the Church of Christ in the South. These particular factors have, no doubt, shaped the sociocultural and religious environment wherein these adoptive parents have been formed and in which they function. Having established these important restrictions, I will proceed to discuss the background factors leading up to this study as well as the specific purposes of the research.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

Statement of the Problem and Definition of Terms

To say that the adoption experience is varied would be somewhat of an

understatement. While a significant amount of attention is given to the various social

and psychological experiences of the other two members of the adoption triad—

namely adopted persons and birthparents (birthmothers in particular)—it seems

adoptive parents are largely glossed over in the literature. Neither does it appear that

until now much data has been collected on the subject of adoptive parents' spiritual

narratives, though researchers have focused significant attention more recently upon

the spiritual formation of adopted persons. In my view, cultural and religious

traditions significantly affect how adoptive parents interpret their experiences and the

spiritual and theological meanings of those experiences. In the present study, I seek

to explore how adoptive parents perceive and understand their own unique

experiences. A central focus of this study is to listen for the distinctive reshaping

process of adoptive parents' spiritual and faith narratives resulting from the

experience of receiving a child through adoption.

The general style of the study is exploratory in its attempt to discern any faith

difficulties and challenges as well as potentialities for healthy spiritual formation in

adoptive parents as relates to their varied experiences of adopting children. I hope

that, as a result of this study, creative and sensitive therapeutic and/or spiritual

interventions will be developed, which secular and pastoral counselors and caregivers may find helpful for addressing the unique issues adoptive parents face throughout the course of their preadoptive, adoptive, and postadoptive processes. Furthermore, it is my purpose to construct a pastoral theology of adoptive parenting that will allow for greater insight into the human condition as it relates to the narrative quality of human experience (Crites, 1971).

I hypothesized before initiating my research that there is indeed a significant faith narrative shift that occurs as adoptive parents love, accept, and struggle and grow with their adopted children, while simultaneously co-constructing new storylines and engaging in theological interpretations of the adoption experience. The study has sought to discover if and how the internalized schemas of faith and spirituality of adoptive parents evolve and are deepened as a result of the life-changing experience of adopting a child.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this project is basically fivefold: (1) to explore how adoptive parents construct their spiritual narratives as they relate to the adoption experience and to listen for what normatively functions for them spiritually and theologically; (2) to describe and thematize these narratives; (3) to correlate the selected social sciences with the parent narratives; (4) to focus on what appear to be implications for pastoral theology, care, and counseling; and (5) to explore a particular category of lived experience (namely adoptive parenting) to revise and advance how pastoral

theologians work with spiritual narratives and engage in interpretation of human experience.

Definition of Terms

I will now provide my operating definitions of key terms and then delineate my central thesis statement. As stated above, "narrative" is a hermeneutical approach that traverses many disciplines including—but not limited to—literature, history, philosophy, the social sciences, and theology. At the most basic level of understanding, a narrative is an entity that contains a collection of stories, each having a beginning, middle point, and ending. These stories may be linked to one another with common thematic threads or germane topics. Human beings are storytellers who make sense of their existence and experience through the vehicle of language. It may be argued that we become the stories we tell. But most of all, stories are a natural way to communicate various ideas, beliefs, values, and truths. It seems our neural pathways are designed to think, remember, imagine, and communicate in story form.

A story can often take on a life of its own because it carries within itself the power and meaning of language. It is also important to recognize that our individual stories are not formed in isolation but are embedded within the contexts of broader surrounding narratives and sociopolitical environments. We constantly evolve "a set of meanings about life that reflect the stories of the individuals and institutions in our environment" (Lester, 2003, p. 95). Each of us lives at the intersection of culture,

tradition, community, and institutions—both religious and secular—that wield considerable influence upon the way we think, feel, act, and express ourselves in language. As we are exposed to new stimuli and interpersonal transactions, according to narrative psychology, our experiences are formatted and restructured through neural processes into story form, whereby our lived experiences are also attributed uniqueness, resulting in our own personal stories. In this way we are enabled to make personal meaning of our lived experiences, remembering and interpreting events in a coherent fashion. Following the hermeneutical tradition of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, pastoral theologian Andrew Lester (1995) asserts not only that we ourselves are informed by our past stories, but also that we have the capacity to project our stories into the future. We thus have the unique capacity to hope. As Christians, our hope in God's faithful promises serves "as an anchor of the soul" (Heb 6:19). Without a future story, our hope in Christ is eroded. Our personal narratives, including our faith narratives, are temporal, consisting of all three dimensions of time—past, present, and future.

Theologian Stephen Crites (1971) expresses the idea that all narratives possess a common language and rationality. Crites posits that human experience itself contains a narrative quality, resulting in a similarity between a story's plot structure and our life experiences. Various events are connected by the causality of plot in a story, just as our various events and experiences of life seem cohesive and connected rather than arbitrary or haphazard. This dimension of our lived experience brings a basic intelligibility and unity to it. Furthermore, it is Crites' thesis that the

phenomenon of narrative is precultural and common to all cultures and languages. It is apparent that all people tell stories, some of them depending more heavily than others upon an oral tradition. Part of the allure of storytelling is the way stories are able to transcend time and place. It is Crites' belief that narrative language possesses a transcendent quality. Crites argues that by its very nature and construction, theology is itself narrative. When I employ the term "narrative," I am referring to the storied nature of human experience and self-understanding.

The idea of "narrative" may be understood in two distinct ways. The first simply concerns the concept of a story's narration or sequence of events. It therefore relates to the manner in which persons convey accounts about their own and others' experiences with the intent to be understood descriptively. The second refers to the more radical notion of the narrative metaphor understood by the late poststructuralist narrative theorist Michael White (1990). This perspective views narrative in a constitutive manner. In other words, narratives literally form or create one's life and sense of self. In the present project, I employ the term "narrative" more with the former understanding (i.e., descriptively) rather than the latter (i.e., constitutively). Since humans are storied creatures—existing as the sum of not only their genetic endowments and personal memories, experiences, and imaginations, but also the larger religious and cultural traditions wherein they function—their individual identities are intricately woven together in a living human web (Miller-McLemore, 1996; cf. Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern, 1999).

Faith is another key concept in this study. My own faith perspective has been shaped by a lifelong association with the conservative (noninstrumental) branch of the Churches of Christ, a religious stream of the Restoration Movement that took root in the early to mid-1800s in America under the leadership of such key figures as Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell. Primarily following in the tradition of this doctrinal and ecclesial legacy, my conviction is that Christian faith is not merely an intellectual assent of belief in God but is grounded and rooted in a vibrant and obedient relationship with the resurrected Christ. When I refer to faith, I am defining it not only doctrinally or theologically, but also relationally and proactively. Christian faith may be viewed as constructed by persons who seek Truth at the intersection of many spiritual and theological narratives related to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Faith itself is also understood by many Christians to be a spiritual gift we receive directly from God's Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:9). Other believers point to how this faith is made possible by hearing the gospel message that originates from the word of Christ (cf. Rom 10:17).

The believer's ongoing faith narrative is understood as being co-constructed with the Spirit in continuity with "the faith" (i.e., the gospel story and Christian doctrine) within the context of the community of faith. Christian faith may be described as an internalizing conversation whereby "the faith" and individual trust in Jesus Christ are personally integrated within the psyche (or soul) of the believing person. It involves an ongoing, internal, and interpersonal dialogue about what is believed and, more importantly, Who is believed and trusted as the eternal lifegiver

and lover of one's soul. By "faith narrative" or "spiritual narrative," I am referring to a distinctly Christian way of life and a storyline that is noticeably unique due to a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, this way of life is also characterized by meaningful fellowship with other Christian believers and by communal worship. Pastoral theologian Charles Scalise (2003) states, "Narrative provides a natural connection for linking an individual's story with the master stories of the Christian faith" (p. 91). Narrative holds the power to build a bridge between the temporal and the eternal, the finite and the infinite. Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley (1998) state that our autobiographical faith stories are "privileged and imaginative acts of self-interpretation" (p. 5). We discover who we are and what our purpose is in relation to the Divine Story. In this light, the act of telling our story becomes "a morally charged activity because our stories interpenetrate with life stories of others, their worldviews, and God images. Listening and retelling our stories alter our understanding of self as well as effectively shapes [*sic*] our relationships to others, the world, and God" (Manternach, 2009, p. 2). In this project, I am mostly interested in listening for what functions normatively for Christian adoptive parents in their faith narratives and how by retelling their stories their self-understanding is affected. I have hoped to discover how they theologically and spiritually interpret their experiences.

For the purposes of this project, the term "spiritual" refers to Christian spirituality, despite the fact the term is used variously in our North American culture to describe all manner of notions concerning mystical union, religious practices,

and/or subjective claims to connections with the natural and unseen world. In other words, in my use it relates to traditional spiritual disciplines such as reading and meditating upon Scripture and/or God and singing of Christian hymns as well as prayer, fasting, participating in the Lord's Supper, Christian service, and any other means whereby Christian persons seek meaningful connection with God and the community of faith. In this dissertation, spiritual narratives or faith narratives connote the subjective and intersubjective stories of Christian persons, including the core spiritual and/or theological ideas and beliefs they articulate concerning their experience of God.

I will now review current research related to my topic and draw from several disciplines, including the following: philosophy, pastoral care and theology, psychology and counseling, family studies, social work, and sociology. Each of these scholarly sources adds valuable information and broadens perspectives in a manner that functions to enrich my own descriptions of adoptive parenting.

Literature Review

In this section, I identify the various categories of literature I engage for my purposes and position my project in relation to these categories. The first category may be described as pastoral theological in nature. These sources provide a background for the usage of "narrative" and cultural context in the fields of pastoral theology and pastoral care. The second category of literature concerns philosophy, particularly the narrative concepts of Paul Ricoeur. The third category of literature

originates from psychology and counseling. This section presents relevant research in

regards to adoptive families and their competencies, challenges, and needs. I also

bring the discipline of narrative psychology into the larger discussion. The fourth

category of literature concerns sociology, including a number of the legal issues

within America's history of adoption, and social concerns pertaining to adoptive

parenting. This body of literature delves into the larger question of how "family" is

defined and understood. Adoptive parents' spirituality may only be correctly

understood within the context of both the Christian faith tradition and the surrounding

culture, which informs that spirituality.

Literature from Pastoral Theology and Care

　　　　While employing a narrative pastoral theological approach, I draw upon the

helpful narrative ideas and principles that have been advanced by pastoral

theologians, including Carrie Doehring (2006), Andrew Lester (2003), Charles

Scalise (2003), Christie Neuger (2001), and Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley

(1998). Each of these scholars has creatively embraced "the turn to the narrative" to

further our understanding of the human condition, while carefully exposing vital

theological themes emerging from religious and sociocultural narratives such as evil,

sin, power, injustice, suffering, violence, liberation, empowerment, responsibility, and

the image of God. In Foley and Anderson's (1998) view, "Parabolic narratives show

the seams and edges of the myths we fashion. Parables show the fault lines beneath

the comfortable surfaces of the worlds we build for ourselves. Myth may give

stability to our story, but parables are agents of change and sometimes disruption" (p.

14). Anderson and Foley argue that both myth and parable are necessary story forms

because in the absence of the parabolic, our stories and rituals stand to become

dishonest. However, lacking the mythic aspect, our stories will be eroded or

vandalized of any hope of ultimate peace.

Pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring (2006), in describing the contextual-

narrative approach, states, "Besides religious sources and norms of authority, pastoral

care draws upon narrative sources and norms of authority, in that both the

careseeker's and the caregiver's stories are valued as creative ways in which persons,

families, and cultures construct meaning" (p. 8). In other words, the embodied

experiences of the storyteller and the listener uniquely contextualize each person's

story. The postmodern approach has, as one of its hallmarks, a focus on the

particularity of stories (Lartey, 2003). In this study, I attempt to immerse myself in

the details of adoptive parents' unfolding narratives to avoid missing inherent

narrative complexities and ambiguities. For instance, at times, the narratives have

seemed to give witness to a perspective that posits a God who is merciful,

compassionate, and kind; while at other times, they evoke unsettling images of a God

who is cruel, capricious, and seemingly callous and uncaring. It has been a challenge

to avoid reconciling these contradictory images, so that everything makes sense and

represents a more benign understanding of God's personhood and divine sovereignty.

While the parents spoke during the interviews of experiencing great joy when

receiving a child through adoption, the reality of the pain and sufferings of the

birthparents was always present (though unspoken) as a parallel narrative. Moreover, parents' descriptions of relational conflicts with spouses and adopted children and struggles with God over unresolved personal and relational issues as well as their depictions of racism, nationalism, and materialism within the church and society all persisted in many of our conversations.

Linda L. Baratte (2005)—director of the Center for Theological and Spiritual Development at the College of Saint Elizabeth (Morristown, New Jersey) and an adoptive mother of four children—explores the faith development and pastoral care of both adopted children and their parents. She discusses meaning making from the perspective of adoptive experience. Baratte explores the topic of adoptive "parental entitlement" that she frames as occurring "only when role ambiguity and vulnerability have been successfully negotiated" by adoptive parents (p. 37). According to Barratte, parental entitlement refers to the idea that one is truly a parent with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of such a title. She, furthermore, describes how insensitive adoption language harms adoptive parents and their sense of parental entitlement. Baratte reveals the potential spiritual stumbling block presented by childlessness due to traditional Christian beliefs regarding the purpose and vocation of marriage, namely that of procreation. She offers helpful suggestions regarding the ability of various religious rituals and the liturgical and communal life of the congregation to afford opportunities for meaning making in adoption. She also provides advice about how to give adoption a voice within the community of faith.

My sources are not limited to only those of theology. I have also learned from research undertaken in philosophy and the social sciences, both of which are helpful cognate disciplines and conversation partners. While it is important to acknowledge and respect the academic and practical integrity of fields such as philosophy, marriage and family therapy, social work, child welfare, psychology, and sociology, each of these fields contributes valuable data that frequently calls into question both secular and religious culture. They serve as a corrective to privatized theological or ecclesial claims, allowing the topic of adoption and adoptive parenting to become more accessible to public dialogue. I employ these cognate disciplines to pastoral theology to benefit from large-scale, qualitative research conducted to-date on adoptive families that touches on relevant questions and concerns of both secular professional helpers and pastoral caregivers.

I divide the material to follow into three general categories, namely, philosophy, psychology and counseling, and sociology. The first category brings into the conversation philosophical perspectives of narrative identity and story formation. The second category highlights a number of findings regarding psychological processes, emotional struggles, and evidences of personal strength and self-efficacy related to the adoptive parenting experience. The third category addresses recent research findings among sociologists, social workers, and welfare workers with reference to the larger context of multisystemic ecologies concerning the practice of adoption in secular society.

Literature from Philosophy

This section addresses the philosophical underpinnings with regard to my use of narrative. I discuss how narratives are formed and how they function for human persons. My narrow focus here is exclusively on the narrative concepts and principles set forth by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005). Recognized as one of the most influential philosophers of the past century, Ricoeur has written on a wide range of anthropological and ethical issues. He argues in his anthropology in favor of the possibility of self-understanding but rejects the Cartesian claim for an absolute self-transparency to oneself which would amount to possessing a self-knowledge independent of any external knowledge of the world. During Ricoeur's developing of his anthropology, he makes a significant methodological shift away from existential phenomenology (pre-1960). Ricoeur arrives at the conclusion that, to adequately investigate human reality, it is necessary to combine the description of phenomenology with hermeneutic interpretation. As such, Ricoeur's ideas are closely linked to those of hermeneutic phenomenologists Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Ricoeur strives to set forth the basic components of all actions and to demonstrate that action is intelligible and represents the proper focus of the social sciences. In attempting to do so, he expands upon his conception of discourse, namely—language in use. He sees language as holding within itself particular resources that permit it to be employed in a creative fashion. Two of these resources include: (1) the coining of metaphors, and (2) the fashioning of narratives. Therefore

Ricoeur (2004) posits a linguistic imagination that "generates and regenerates meaning through the living power of metaphoricity" (p. 129). In his view, new metaphors reveal new ways of comprehending their referents and these fresh metaphors creatively transform language. In the field of hermeneutics, Ricoeur maintains that we have access to anything intelligible to us through the vehicle of language and that any usage of language requires an interpretive process. Furthermore, he argues that "there is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts; in the last resort, understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms" (emphasis his, Ricoeur, 1991, p. 15).

The underlying principles of Ricoeur's philosophy supply us with a number of helpful concepts to situate the embodied actions and initiative of adoptive parents that comprise their personal narratives within their religious and cultural setting. According to Ricoeur, the self is essentially a fiction whereby persons, as agents, understand their lives and lived experiences as coherent stories. This narrative identity points to how we are the stories about ourselves, which we inhabit and tell. For Ricoeur (1981), plot is "the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in a story . . . A story is made out of events to the extent that plot *makes* events *into* a story" (emphasis his, p. 167). Plot thus binds a story together, giving it a sense of authenticity and intelligibility.

Ricoeur proposes that human speech and action evince not only a freedom from natural processes but also a reliance on them in order to be effectual. Words and actions would lack coherence if they failed to fit into some preexisting structure

or pattern of language and behavior. In this manner, words and actions achieve meaning only with regards to response to local and broader sociocultural contexts. On occasion, these same contexts result in our performances being afforded unintended values and meanings. With that in mind, our expressions of freedom in our sayings and our actions can only have worth and efficacy by virtue of their specific natural and sociocultural settings that exist largely independent of our own power and action (Ricoeur, 1974, "Nature and freedom" in his *Political and social essays*, pp. 23-45).

Ricoeur (1995) conceives of self-understanding as only possible through "the signs deposited in memory and in imagination by the great literary traditions" (p. 16). Dialoguing with the ideas of structuralism, Ricoeur engages in an in-depth study of psychoanalysis that is explained in his *Freud and philosophy* (1970). This study fortifies his belief that there is no such thing as unmediated self-understanding. Although he acknowledges the heuristic value of the structural analyses of specific categories of experience, Ricoeur opposes structuralist thought that attempts to posit language as little more than a system of signs or symbols with external reference beyond itself. He defines discourse as taking place when a person says something that makes sense about something else to an audience, while adhering to certain phonetic, lexical, syntactic, and stylistic rules. Ricoeur frequently uses the term "discourse" but he does not understand it in the sense of a metanarrative but more simply in the context of communication (i.e., dialogue), often in the sense of the written word of literature. Discourse can only exist when there is a speaker or writer

and a hearer or reader and when there is an articulation about a particular topic. To interpret a discourse, there must be both an objective kind of assessment as well as an appreciation of the self-understanding of both the conversation partners (cf. Ricoeur, 1991, "The hermeneutical function of distanciation" in *From text to action*). Ricoeur states, "We can say, in this sense, that the instance of discourse is self-referential. The eventful character is now linked to the person who speaks; the event consists in the fact that someone speaks, someone expresses himself or herself in taking up speech" (pp. 77-78).

Ricoeur (1994) argues that action refers to "saying inasmuch as it is a doing, ordinary action inasmuch as it is an intervention into the course of things, narration inasmuch as it is the narrative reassembling of a life stretched out in time, and finally, the capacity to impute to oneself or to others the responsibility for acting" (translated in Dauenhauer, 2008). He feels his view of action is equivalent to Heidegger's conception of care as the basic way persons exist and inhabit the world (Ricoeur, 1998). The implications of Ricoeur's paradigms for discourse and action coalesce in his notion of the narrative unity of a person's life that he refers to as "narrative identity" (Ricoeur, 1992, pp. 113-168). By construing Heidegger's care in terms of action, and in situating care-action at the center of every narrative, Ricoeur (1992) selects a few key resources for setting forth the central themes of his anthropology, including: (1) discourse and action; (2) selves as agents; (3) the temporality of action; (4) narrativity, identity, and time; (5) memory and history; (6) ethics; and (7) politics.

In Ricoeur's (1992) anthropology, the self is viewed as an essentially embodied entity (cf. pp. 33-35). While the self is made possible by its material and cultural situation, in principle, it also possesses the capability of taking initiative, and thus of bringing into existence something new. The counterpart to the agent's embodied existence with its sense of efficacy is her or his environment. The agent's situation contains the various aspects, happenings, and other persons that establish the context of possibilities as well as obstacles to the agent's ability to initiate action. Through the vehicle of action, persons not only possess the capacity to change their material situation, but also can form new meaningful relationships with other persons. Adopting a child is illustrative of this phenomenon. In this specific circumstance, the adopter initiates a lifelong commitment to an enduring pattern of conduct that will require much perseverance to maintain. Ricoeur (1991) asserts "meaningful action" (p. 189) or initiative is the endeavor whereby persons, as agents, relate themselves to those persons and things around them and, by these means, alter the situation and its future course.

In and by their embodied nature, persons as agents have the capacity to initiate and sustain a new thing in the world, while remaining subject to situational causal sequences that bind them to the world (Ricoeur, 1992). Each action has a purpose and is causally linked to other actions. Moreover, action always takes place in a context of meaningfulness. For this reason, it is at least partially a response to past action, and it also anticipates future responses and reactions. Ricoeur (1985a) states, "Historical time is justified in the sense that it brings about the conjunction of lived

time as mortal time and cosmic time, whose immensity escapes us" (p. 265). "Cosmic time" is the undifferentiated unfolding of collective moments in the world, whereby all change occurs together. "Lived time" refers more specifically to our individual lives in which certain moments hold more meaning and significance to us than others (for instance, one's wedding, the birth or adoption of one's child, or the death of a loved one). Ricoeur thus conceptualizes in his philosophy the "temporality" of action (Ricoeur, 1985b, p. 34). Elsewhere he states: "I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity, and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate reference" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 165).

When action is taken in the present, it maintains the experience in a dialectical tension with the expectation of potential consequences. If this were not so, action would not be feasible or workable. Agents are unable to completely determine their action, because they are affected by a past that they could not completely control and by a projected future that the sociocultural context sets forth. However, human agents through personal initiative do, in fact, create history while simultaneously affecting themselves in the very process of action. Ricoeur (1988) further argues, "The notion of narrative identity also indicates its fruitfulness in that it can be applied to a community as well as to an individual" (p. 247). He continues, "We can speak of the self-constancy of a community, just as we [speak] of it as applied to an individual subject" (p. 247). Individual and community identities are created by their internalization of narratives that come to be accepted as their own unique histories.

It is Ricoeur's fundamental argument that "between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity" (1984, p. 52). In seeking to clarify the above statement, he asserts, *"[T]ime becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence"* (emphasis his, Ricoeur, 1984, p. 52). Later, Ricoeur (1984) maintains that, "Causal explanation occurs in two major forms: explanation in terms of sufficient conditions (why did this type of state of affairs necessarily occur?) and explanation in terms of necessary conditions (how was it possible that . . . ?)" (p. 140). In the task of understanding and interpreting the narratives of adoptive parents, Ricoeur's insights shed valuable light on matters of causality, temporality, action, and sense of personal agency.

Adoption Literature from Psychology and Counseling

The fields of psychology and counseling provide us with valuable information regarding adoptive families as systems and, more specifically, the adoptive parental subsystem. The current section proceeds as follows: First, it compares the basic psychological well-being of average biological families with adoptive families, while also identifying the deficit model regarding adoptive families. Second, it addresses the various psychological dynamics inherent to the adoption process. Third, it uncovers the known psychological factors contributing to why certain adoptive parents seek assistance from various helping professionals. Fourth, it suggests the

need for adoptive family support and offers a few strategies for care. Finally, it introduces the contributions of narrative psychology to the current study.

Comparison of psychological well-being of biological families with adoptive families. Research from the last decade has provided data that indicates that the experiences regarding well-being are similar among adoptive families and other families (Borders, Black, & Pasley, 1998). However, the data also indicates the need for adoptive family counseling services (Brooks, Allen, & Barth, 2000). Psychologists Rosario Ceballo et al. (2001) point out that, historically speaking, research on adoptive families has been "grounded in a deficit model, depicting adoption as a deviant family form and focusing on adoptees' risks for maladjustment. The resulting literature offers mixed and contradictory evidence regarding the psychological and behavioral adjustment of adopted children" (p. 87). The authors expose earlier research myths related to the emotional hurdles typically expected for adoptive parents. Their findings appear to contradict more popular cultural myths in reference to adoption.

Another study conducted by Ceballo et al. (2004) utilizes a subsample of 204 families from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to compare the particular experiences of biological parents, adoptive parents, and stepparents. The psychological implications for parents in each of these categories are compared and contrasted. The NSFH study investigates the "psychological [well-being], marital quality, family relationships, and work roles in three different parent groups" (p. 38). The study uncovers several advantages for adoptive families, including

positive adjustment to parenting, effective "coping strategies, more financial security, and better developed marital communication skills, all of which could buffer marital relationships from the demands of parenting" (p. 39). The authors explore the dominant culture's views regarding adoptive parenting, disclosing some of the negative understandings that exist in Western culture resultant from myths, misinformation, and biased views regarding this particular category of lived experience. Resulting from their effort to uncover alternative adoption perspectives, more hopeful narratives emerge from the data.

Sociologists Laura Hamilton, Brian Powell, and Simon Cheng (2007) compile relevant adoption material. They conclude that in comparison with other divergent family structures, adoptive parents generally display a greater level of "parental investment at the bivariate level" (p. 108). In their interpretation of a comparative analysis between stepparenting and adoptive parenting, they use compensatory theories to uncover the paradox that, "Individuals who are not granted the title of 'parent' via biology may actually fulfill (and even exceed) the accompanying expectations better than those who have been accorded this title" (p. 110). Furthermore, these researchers outline a number of poignant reasons why adoptive parenting and stepparenting are not exactly comparable.

Psychological dynamics of the adoption process. A consistent theme in the psychological adoption literature is that the process of adoption seems to evoke added stress for a number of parents (Smith & Howard, 1999). Judith Daniluk and Joss Hurtig-Mitchell (2003), educational and counseling psychologists, employ a

qualitative research methodology to explore the experiences of receiving children through adoption after unsuccessful infertility treatments. Their research includes thirty-nine narrative interviews with couples who share their stories regarding how they came to see adoption as a viable option and who describe the difficulties of the adoption process and their individual experiences of becoming adoptive parents. Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell discern three overarching themes from these interviews that include the following: (1) *revisioning family:* the decision to adopt; (2) *the crucible:* the process of adoption; and (3) *coming full circle:* parenting. The researchers argue that their findings demonstrate the importance of the sociocultural context wherein couples undergo this process. Furthermore, the researchers disclose the spiritual perspective inherent in the adoptive couples' views about how they were predestined to parent particular children. This discussion parallels my interest in the revisioning of family and the re-creation of faith narratives.

Italian psychologists Alessandra Santona and Giulio Cesare Zavattini (2005) utilize John Bowlby's (1988) intergenerational model of attachment transmission that "describes a process where the interactive, repeated experiences that the parent had with his [or her] care giving figures in childhood contribute to creating internal working models (IWMs)" for better understanding adoptive parents' experiences (Santona & Zavattini, 2005, p. 310). This research focuses on the prospective adoptive couples' "representations of relationship in the context of their psychological sense of loss owing to infertility" (p. 309). These psychology researchers state:

IWMs consist of representations of the self, of the other and of the self-other relationship. The parents' IWMs influence the *caring behavior* that the individual shows towards his offspring as well as *representational functions*, such as attention, language and memory, which are related to the attachment system. In these ways they influence the quality and sensitivity of a person's parenting capabilities, and through this the *attachment styles* of their children (p. 310).

In comparison to biological parents, Santona and Zavattini uncover several dynamics involved in the transition to adoptive parenthood, all being linked to certain influential factors. First, most couples who apply for adoption have generally had a background of sterility or infertili*t*y, implying a deep psychological wound and a related grieving process. Second, there is the need for adoptive couples to deal with prolonged "institutional evaluation procedures, which includes a sequence of steps, often of a bureaucratic nature, which are a source of anxiety and stress" (p. 311). A third stress-inducing factor "is the uncertainty about both the practical implementation of the adoption plan and the time necessary before the adoption can take place, especially when this remains undefined and largely governed by external and uncontrollable agents" (p. 311). The fourth factor includes the additional parenting responsibilities that adoptive parents are required to embrace following the legal finalization of an adoption. In addition to the usual duties and tasks required of biological families, such as nurturance, care, and education of their children, adoptive parents also have to:

— manage and deal with information about children's previous
experience that was not shared with them;

— understand their particular physical and psychological needs
(including special needs) and the reasons for negative behavior;

— help them to face and overcome the pain connected with the trauma of
abandonment. (p. 312)

The negative factors may lead to compromised bonding between adoptive parents and their children or, alternately, undeveloped "secure attachments" between the children and their adoptive parents.

Santona and Zavattini (2005) conclude that adoptive parents generally hold a secure model of attachment (76%), suggesting an elevated level of affective investment and, more specifically, one which supersedes that of the normal population (that is, 55% secure/autonomous among biological mothers and 62% secure/autonomous among biological fathers). By matching the individual married adoptive parents' attachment models, Santona and Zavattini discover "a prevalence of Secure/Secure and Secure/Insecure types of pairing; there was an absence of subjects where both partners exhibited insecure models" (p. 318). It may be plausible that following a period of psychological suffering related to the physical inability to naturally bear children, the decision to adopt suggests that the spousal partners are competent in appropriately expressing affect (an indicator of secure attachment) but are more stressed about viewing themselves as "parents in-waiting."

Santona and Zavattini suggest further studies be undertaken to discover how change is fostered in the couple's relational structure on account of the various challenges that surface during the time between potentially having a biological child and resorting to an alternate means of parenting. To fail to acknowledge the inherent risks related to adoptive parenting during the transition to parenthood could result in a missed, unusual opportunity to bolster the relationship between the married partners. Santona and Zavattini promote the importance of focusing on the adoptive parents' relationship as a couple, particularly "the quality of their interaction and their reciprocal capacity as a unit" (p. 310). This assertion supports those who advocate counseling programs and other services for those couples that seek to become parents through adoption (Levy & Orlans, 2000, 2003).

Factors contributing to adoptive parents seeking professional help. Barth and Miller (2000) maintain that the most prevalent reason adoptive parents seek support services is their adopted children's "special needs." Thus these adoptive parents may require more information, educational materials, and/or clinical assistance. Gloria W. Bird, Rick Peterson, and Stephanie Hotta Miller (2002) study the factors associated with distress among support-seeking adoptive parents. Their findings indicate the following factors that may contribute to adoptive parents' distress: (1) background factors, (2) adoptive strains, (3) coping resources, and (4) emotional distress. I will now discuss each of these sequentially.

Regarding *background factors*, research findings show it is more difficult for adoptive parents to care for those children adopted at a later age. Underlying the

stress could be the tendency of many adoptive parents to assume a sense of personal "responsibility for solving problems that originated in the adopted child's previous placement history" (Bird, Peterson, & Hotta Miller, 2002, p. 215). Regarding international adoptions, additional stress may occur due to an inability to gain access to information regarding a child's prior history or trust existing records, including medical documents. When adopting older children, there are oftentimes various medical, developmental, and educational needs requiring significant attention (Barth & Miller, 2000). First-time parents may especially be unprepared for a number of the additional demands of adoptive parenting. Even those who have previously adopted and have acquired some experience with the process may find themselves facing new challenges by adopting additional children. It is my own research finding that these unique challenges often translate into spiritual struggles for adoptive parents.

Concerning *adoptive strains*, adoption requires "a restructuring of the social and economic conditions of family life and, as a consequence, produces secondary stressors" (Bird, Peterson, & Hotta Miller, 2002, p. 215). A few of the ongoing adoptive strains include such things as worrying over the ability to bond with the child, dealing with the stressors of instant parenthood, stressing over the child's future developmental or psychological issues, and handling the financial burdens of adopting a child. Other common strains include such things as concern that birthparents may attempt to legally reclaim parental rights to the child, difficulty with issues surrounding infertility, and anxiety about how to appropriately communicate to the child information regarding his or her adopted status.

Coping resources relate to personal character traits and the thought patterns and behaviors persons activate for self-preservation and self-protection in distressing situations. Two of the personal characteristics or psychological coping resources available to adoptive parents as they cope with stressful life circumstances include self-esteem and sense of mastery (i.e., understanding/expertise, skill, control, and self-efficacy). Bird et al. (2002) predicts adoptive parents who possess lower levels of self-esteem and mastery will indicate increased emotional distress. Research also indicates that those persons with less supportive families are at risk of increased distress.

Regarding *emotional distress*, Bird et al. (2002) state, "Symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, negative affect, and emotionality, are typical indicators of emotional distress. Research in the area of adoptive parenthood most often has relied on measures of self-concept, depression, and quality of marital relations as indicators of psychological adjustment" (p. 216). These researchers decry that, despite the large body of literature pointing to the process of adoption as a potentially stressful life event, there remains a lack of theory-based literature regarding adoptive parents who seek support services. As a result of their research study (encompassing eighty-nine female and ten male adoptive parents), Bird et al. propose that two background factors—the "most recent adoptee's age at adoption and number of adopted children in the family" (p. 218)—contribute significantly to the parents' levels of distress. The older the most recently adopted child, the more potential exists for emotional difficulties and behavioral problems resulting from their prior placement history.

This factor often translates into increased stress and potential spiritual challenges for the adoptive parents as struggling caregivers.

Another issue regards the amount of adopted children in the household. There is a positive correlation between the amount of children and the stress-level parents experience in trying to provide adequate attention to each child, while also paying attention to the quality of sibling relationships. The data is the same for biological parents. In their study, most of the adopted children had previously resided in at least one foster home. Bird et al. argue, "If that nurturing experience was inadequate, intermittent, or traumatically interrupted, then the adoptive parents had to deal with problems originating from the child's placement history" (p. 218). Difficulties such as these may result in a lowered sense of personal and relational well-being for the adoptive parents.

According to Bird et al. (2002), "emotion-focused coping" are particular strategies internally activated to regulate unpleasant emotional reactions aroused by the problem or stressful situations. This factor represents the third greatest contributor to parental distress. Emotion-focused coping includes such strategies as wishful thinking about how things might turn out, hoping the situation will simply go away, naïvely resorting to prayer, or waiting on a miracle. Alternately, "distancing" refers to detachment and avoidance, surrender to fate, and escape (using work or some other activity). Approaches such as wishful thinking and distancing, used for the purpose of handling negative emotions aroused in stressful times, have "less

positive psychological outcomes if used over long periods without [the] supplement of problem-focused approaches" (p. 218).

Bird et al. (2002) believe their findings suggest that stress and coping theory provide a helpful "framework of examining adoption as a potentially stressful life event that triggers stress reactions and also encourages engagement of protective coping responses that promote resiliency" (p. 219). On the positive side of things, in contrast to previous stress literature, in which support groups are viewed as therapeutic options for those persons whose coping skills and relational networks are inadequate, Bird and her colleagues argue that adoptive parent support groups attract a diverse population of participants who often report effective adaptation to adoptive challenges. Their study sample reveals the promising findings of lower levels of stress and strain and higher levels of self-esteem and mastery.

Need for adoptive family support and strategies for care. Social work and child welfare activists Anne Atkinson and Patricia Gonet (2007) report on results regarding in-depth interviews conducted with 500 adoptive families. These families had received postadoptive services through Virginia's Adoptive Family Preservation (AFP) program. These interviews provide a detailed understanding of the distinct challenges faced by adoptive families as well as the resources they need to sustain the adoptions long after the legal finalization process in court. The researchers document findings that reveal the need for a variety of forms of support, including respite, adoption-competent counseling, adoptive support groups, and information. Also, the

authors suggest a number of implications for enhancing adoptive practice through both effective training and technical assistance.

British psychotherapist Angie Hart and social worker Barry Luckock (2006) provide a helpful paradigm for more integrated clinical decision-making in counseling with adoptive and permanent foster families. Their conclusions are based upon current knowledge from theory and outcome-based research derived from clinical practice, in addition to insights into family life. Hart and Luckock highlight the goal of facilitating parents and children in the management of and accommodations to the uniqueness of foster and adoptive family life. They propose five objectives toward this end that include, "explicitly promoting resilient family practices and narrative; enhancing emotion regulation and reflective functioning; enhancing behavior management skills; opening family communication; and facilitating social participation" (p. 40).

Contributions of narrative psychology. The discipline of narrative psychology is a helpful dialogue partner for my study. This newer branch of psychology proposes the storied nature of human personality and identity. It offers an alternate model to conceptualize how persons think, make decisions, and act (Sarbin, 1986). Psychologist D. P. McAdams (1993) indicates that narrative is connected to signs and language from a very young age, which infers the imaginative reconstruction of memory. Habermas and Bluck (2000) use the term "autobiographical reasoning" to describe how memories are formatted and ultimately serve to create a conscious sense or awareness of self. Fireman, McVay, and

Flanagan (2003) argue that personal narrative is a key component to understanding human consciousness. These researchers theorize that narrative links past memories with present experience and future desires. I will expound upon these psychological concepts later in the dissertation.

Adoption Literature from Sociology

In the current section, I address sociocultural and political issues pertaining to current adoption law and practice in the United States. Related to this discussion is the ongoing challenge of the social stigmatization of adoption. This challenge is partly due to the deficit model that I have already introduced. Furthermore, adoption will be framed as a societal force as I unfold the social history and politics of adoption. I present the practice of adoption through the perspective of its simultaneously being a social and a legal process. I also point out that the very definition of "family" within our culture is changing because of adoption. Furthermore, I include in the discussion the controversial issue of transracial adoption, particularly of black children, as it is understood within the broader context of systemic racism.

The social stigmatization of adoption. In her writings on adoption, sociologist K. Wegar (1997) argues that social scientific research on adoption has largely "neglected the impact of social stigmatization upon adoption" (p. 60) on the members of the adoption triad. Wegar (2000) suggests mental health practitioners in the past were inclined to view adoptive families through a deficit lens rather than a

strengths or competency-based perspective. Until recently, adoption-related research has often perpetuated this unhelpful deficit model and societal myth.

Sociologists Dawn Esposito and Frank Biafora (2007) argue that the growing corpus of scholarly literature generally views adoption from the limited perspective of the "epistemological position of individual actors in a related triad (i.e., adopted persons, adoptive parents, and biological parents)" (p. 17). Among the handful of exceptions to this one-dimensional and limiting approach are Berebitsky (2002), Fisher (2003), and Pertman (2000). While it is necessary to explore adoption-related issues with close attention to the individual actors, the negative consequence is that our "current tapestry of knowledge is framed and informed primarily by the research and expertise of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and adoption professionals" (Esposito & Biafora, 2007, p. 17). The findings of this body of research are often skewed because many of these studies base their conclusions on clinical populations. They are, therefore, prone to focus on pathological aspects of adoption and on developmental problems that relate to the individual actors of the triad, rather than studying broader population samples of average adoptive families and attempting to understand them systemically (Fisher, 2003).

The social history and politics of adoption. From the sociological paradigm, the history of adoption in America is a multifaceted enterprise with numerous stakeholders. On the surface, adoption may be viewed through the perspectives of charity, justice, and hope for children needing a loving home and for infertile adults wishing to have a child to love and nurture. While this perspective

certainly forms a portion of the picture it is incomplete. Berebitsky (2002) states "adoption is a public site to thrash out meanings" (p. 3). While adoption is most importantly a vehicle for providing permanent homes to children who need them, "[t]he tension between children's needs and social forces permeates the history of adoption. The [rhetoric] on adoption is an evolving one, yet when read across its history certain tendencies emerge, which have direct bearing on the present day" (Esposito & Biafora, 2007, p. 18). Esposito and Biafora provide us with an overview of the history of adoption in America. They tell the story that is both old and new, tracing adoption practice through the following various key periods in American history: colonial times (1750-1800); the early asylums (1800-1840); the orphan trains (1850-1900); the progressive era: Save-the-Child campaign (1900-1920); the social work era (1930-1960); the introduction of transracial adoption (1970s) and the black social worker response to it; and social welfare reform (1990s until the present).

We should recognize that "Adoption is both a social and legal process. The legal process of adoption in the United States has evolved over time from a largely informal process to a process that is now regulated by the states and the federal government and that is internationally regulated by the Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption" (Javier, 2007, p. 44). While there have been a number of favorable developments in both domestic and international adoption laws, serious concerns remain regarding many legal aspects of adoption practice. In my research, adoptive parents I interviewed often communicated disillusionment and frustration over the complex legal issues involved in adopting children.

Esposito and Biafora (2007) explore "the charitable as well as the surreptitious side of adoption, with its policies that have been handcrafted to maintain a specified social order" (p. 18). In their view, "underlying America's story of adoption is a complex posturing of social, cultural, political, economic, and religious forces in a continual convergence and struggle" (p. 18). They contend "Adoption is a social practice, a solution to a social problem, and an act of making a family at a particular moment in time" (p. 18). They argue that as with any other social practice, adoption too is "intertwined with the production of social order. Adoption is also a public phenomenon determined by social and cultural forces that transcend individual actors" (p. 18). The parameters of the practices concerning adoption have always been influenced by the philosophical and ideological conversation regarding how families are constructed and what "family" actually means.

Esposito and Biafora (2007) point out, "Historically, the image of the typical American family, especially the White Anglo family, has been of a rather fixed, nuclear unit" (p. 18). The practice of adoption as a social force has managed to simultaneously uphold certain traditional familial constructs and challenge others. In other words, the institution of adoption in America has shown that partners unable to have biological children may still create nuclear families through adoption. The practice of adoption has expanded "the view of the American family as a conventional model of a racially homogeneous and heterosexual nuclear unit" (p. 18). Family is now understood to encompass far more diversity and flexibility due to the many configurations it may take.

The purpose of any sociological analysis is to expose the various tendencies and contradictions inherent in a particular social practice. The heated political battle to define "family" and determine what represents the children's best interests continues in North American culture. Prospective adoptive parents in their legal battles to adopt particular children are often the ones newly defining the meaning of family. Moreover, merely because structural racism has impacted policies and practices pertaining to adoption, it is unfair to infer that prospective adoptive parents wanting children that share their racial heritage are racist. By and large, most adoptive parents in-waiting continue to be driven by their underlying wish to have a child—sometimes one who resembles them racially and sometimes one who does not.

Several critics of society, who are not always opposed to the concept of transracial adoption, argue that so-called "color-blind" adoption policies are complicit with racist ideology and practices. Barbara Katz Rothman (2005), an adoptive mother of a black daughter, in her autoethnography makes the following self-indicting statement:

> I profit from American racism . . . [W]e have enough racism so that it is
> black babies and children that disproportionately are up for adoption, and
> white families that disproportionately have the wherewithal to adopt—and
> enough racism that it is hard to imagine the circumstances in which a
> black family could/would adopt a white baby (p. 10).

Many arguments favoring the welfare reform policies "'promote a narrative of Black family pathology and White family values.' Black children, failed by their families, need White families to save them" (Esposito & Biafora, 2007, p. 27).

Whether current policies will be fruitful in reducing the disproportionate numbers of African American children included in a broad category of "special needs" foster care is yet to be determined. Many of these children are never adopted due to "the intersection of race, age, disability, and status as a member of a sibling group. Those who have been in the system for a number of years are likely to have been placed in a number of different foster homes" (Esposito & Biafora, 2007, p. 27). Policies created at the federal level, defined by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, mandate the removal of children and termination of biological parental rights after twelve months of temporary placement in foster care. Federal policies such as this certainly "increase the supply of babies and young children who have always been more readily adopted. Critics of the new federal policy raise questions about the control it places on poor and Black women's bodies and the shift in economic costs from the state to individual families" (p. 27).

Summary of literature engaged in the current project. Each of the aforementioned sources, coming from several distinct disciplines, adds valuable components to the conversation, thus informing narratives concerning adoptive parenting. I will now identify the material that is most pertinent for the current project that I will later engage more fully.

The pastoral theology and pastoral care literature on contextual narrative approaches aids me in situating the present study in those fields. From the social science material, I include the comparative studies between adoptive families and other nonadoptive families (Borders, Black, & Pasley, 1998; Smith & Howard, 1999; and Bird, Peterson, & Hotta Miller, 2002). I further investigate the ramifications of adopting more than one child, adopting older children, and adopting children previously in foster care because these factors relate to psychospiritual outcomes for adoptive couples. Attention is given to the spiritual and psychological ramifications to adoptive parents of emotion-focused coping versus problem-focused strategies for coping (Bird et al., 2002). I consider the implications of emotional maturity in adoptive parents as well as the usual age-gap separating adoptive parents and biological parents who both have children of the same approximate age (Ceballo et al., 2004). The specific factors impacting the transition into adoptive parenthood, suggested by Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) and Santona and Zavattini (2005), are important for my purposes. Included in these factors are sterility/infertility, legal requirements for adoption, the adoption process as well as added parental responsibilities. In chapter three, I will also more fully engage the topic of narrative psychology and its relationship to the present study.

What immediately follows is a discussion of my pastoral theological methodology that guides my general approach and incorporates the above sources among others for exploring and interpreting a particular category of lived experience.

Pastoral Theological Methodology

Theologian Paul Tillich (1984) took into account human experience and originated a stream of thought later expanded by David Tracy's (1987) critical correlational method and Don Browning's (1996) revised correlational method. Primarily following this stream of thought, I see value in the pastoral theologian's decision to rely on various cognate disciplines to enrich his or her approach, while remaining faithful to his or her Christian-pastoral-theological identity. A sufficient hermeneutic is critical to the development of any pastoral theological method. David Tracy (in Mudge & Poling, 1987) argues, "Despite widespread conceptions to the contrary, hermeneutics is not concerned only with meaning but also with truth" (p. 143). I interpret his usage of "truth" as a reference to appropriate Christian values, beliefs, and ethical religious practice. In contrast to Gadamer's hermeneutic of pure retrieval, Tracy's approach includes "both retrieval and critique-suspicion" since he maintains that "every classic and every classic tradition (including both the Christian and the modern) is radically ambiguous and never innocent and pure" (p. 144). This assumption calls for a hermeneutic of suspicion and caution when engaging religious and sociocultural sources.

I must acknowledge that the methodology that was described in my dissertation proposal and originally claimed in the dissertation was not carried out in the end. While mutual critical correlation had been my intention for the project, my methodology assumed a different shape as I will discuss in chapter five. However, I now describe how I originally proceeded to mutually critically correlate my primary

sources. By definition, this more radical correlational method would have allowed the various cognate disciplines to enter into a full and reciprocally transformative dialogue with one another so that each source or discipline (including theology and the social sciences) would not only have influenced but also revised the other disciplines.

The first primary source that I used in this study was the adoptive parents' lived experience; this source of knowledge essentially guided my research question. The second source was the Christian faith tradition. The third source was canonical narrative theology. The fourth source I employed was the perspectives of the social sciences on adoption. I would have correlated the adoptive parents' experience with a particular Christian tradition and examined the relation between experience and tradition through the lens of "narrative" and the social sciences. It was my intention to increase accurate understanding of the adoptive parents' narratives by engaging various perspectives and interpretations provided by these sources.

The research participants' narratives at times call into question the Christian faith tradition with which they are affiliated. At points, their theological perspectives appear to have changed on account of their new lived experiences in light of adoption. Their lived experiences refer to the Christian story, while also being informed by the theological themes of that very body of faith and doctrine. Scripture has acquired a new meaning for several of these adoptive parents; they now filter and interpret it through a very different experiential framework or life-hermeneutic. New information is revealed concerning the faith narrative shift that occurs as adoptive

parents embrace, love, and struggle and grow with their adopted children, while co-constructing the new storyline and engaging in meaning making in reference to the adoption experience. I attempt to accurately describe and interpret the faith narratives of adoptive parents as they unfold and are enriched as a result of the experience of receiving children through adoption. My intention was to critically correlate the parents' experiences with a particular Christian tradition and examine the relation between experience and tradition through the perspective of canonical narrative theology.

I initially placed myself in the mutual critical correlation method because I had hoped to revise the social science perspectives on adoptive parenting specifically in the area of spirituality. However, I later recognized my own misgivings with having those same cognate disciplines reciprocally revise theology and the Christian tradition. This is why I would now locate myself somewhere between the "critical correlational" and "critical confessional" models in the James N. Poling and Donald E. Miller (1985) framework. In their practical theology typology, the vertical axes identifies three methods of relating biblical tradition and cultural interpretations of experience; the horizontal axes depicts two different understandings of the relationship between church and society (one tending towards society-formation and the other towards church-formation). Within Poling and Miller's typology, critical correlation places the interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian faith in direct dialogue with the contemporary situation's interpreted theory and praxis. The critical confessional method focuses on the Christian story and tradition, and is skeptical

about the role of philosophy and science. For my purposes as a pastoral theologian, discerning the value of the social sciences alongside the authority of the Christian story and tradition is an ongoing methodological challenge.

Researcher's Hermeneutical Perspective

I now wish to describe the hermeneutical perspective whereby I explore the topic of the spiritual narratives of adoptive parents. My pastoral theological method begins with the spiritual narratives of twenty adoptive parenting couples who I personally interviewed. I consider the sociocultural context as also, in part, a co-author of the narratives, and not just a passive medium for those narratives. The context includes the social location of the adoptive families with the considerations of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and worldview. I employ a hermeneutical approach that may be described as *narrative*. Multiple stories form larger narratives which I investigate for embedded themes. I also draw from theological sources as well as the social sciences to facilitate an interdisciplinary dialogue.

I have remained curious regarding how the interviewees construct their stories and who function to them as the main actors or characters; I have particularly been interested in what role they view God as playing. I have wondered how their stories are constructed and how their current perspectives perhaps shift with time and new experiences. It has been interesting to explore how they experience life, remembering their stories and imbuing them with new meaning, energy, and power. I have observed how one spouse's story might either slightly or significantly differ from or

contradict the other spouse's account and how their stories may either merge or resist merging into one narrative.

In this project, I use canonical narrative theology as an interpretive source, whereby I compare and contrast various adoptive stories in all their particularity with the details of God's self-narrated story as presented in Judeo-Christian tradition and Scripture. Canonical narrative theology embraces the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the primary prism through which human experience is filtered. My pastoral theological method may be described as an interdisciplinary approach which draws from a few key sources. These sources are reminiscent of the Wesleyan quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience, which is a notable diversion from the Church of Christ's historical claim of holding firm to Biblical authority alone (i.e., *sola scriptura*). The traditional Restoration mantra, "Where the scriptures speak, we speak; where the scriptures are silent, we are silent," credited to Thomas Campbell in 1809 (Richardson, 1897, vol. 1, p. 237), remains prevalent within mainstream Churches of Christ today.

The more conservative branch of narrative theology influences my hermeneutical leanings and theological commitments. Canonical narrative theology (vis-à-vis Hans Frei, Karl Barth, and Stanley Hauerwas) argues that Christian theology's use of the Bible should inductively focus on a narrative representation of the faith rather than on individualist or rationalist approaches as in liberal theology. While the term "liberal" here does not allude to a progressive political agenda or set of beliefs, it refers to the way of thought and belief moored in Immanuel Kant's

foundationalism that greatly influenced the philosophical and religious paradigms developed during the Age of Enlightenment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. More prominent liberal protestant theologians who have followed in this philosophical tradition include Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), William Channing (1780-1842), Adolf von Harnack (1884-1976), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), and Leslie Weatherhead (1893-1976). Roman Catholic scholars have included Edward Schillebeeckx (1914-2009), Hans Küng (b. 1928), John Dominic Crossan (b. 1934), and Leonardo Boff (b. 1938).

Narrative theology, as an outgrowth of postliberalism, provides us with an alternative to liberal individualism by leaning more toward Christian tradition-formed and communitarian understandings of human rationality and personhood. The faith tradition wherein I operate is most congruent with canonical narrative theology. In this study, I examine how the story of Christ may serve as a template or pattern whereby Christian adoptive parents may explore their narratives. The dialogue between Scripture, narrative psychology theories, adoption literature from the social sciences, and lived experience provide a creative and fluid context for interpreting faith narratives.

I have listened for echoes of theological themes, whether traditional or nontraditional, embedded in the narratives of the adoptive parents. It has been my goal to explore how the couples describe their experience. In telling their stories, on the one hand, most of the adoptive parents have demonstrated the capacity to express love, joy, and acceptance and to creatively express faith, engage in meaningful

Christian worship and service, and display hope in the midst of trial and suffering.

Alternatively, many of them have also offered less positive stories describing their

spiritual bewilderment and personal frustration, deep-set anger, profound sadness,

discouragement, and disappointment. Their stories depict experiencing God's

seeming absence, cruel judgment, and punishment at times, as well as God's apparent

silence in the face of profound suffering. I have paid close attention to how the

research participants internalize the content, structures, and meanings of their

adoption narratives, and explore the ways these narratives have informed their sense

of Christian identity. I investigate how the adoptive couples' individual and joint

stories are or are not congruent with God's redemptive story of grace, so as to speak

to the concerns of spiritual life. The way they have reflected upon their experiences

theologically is of central interest to me. I have sought to understand how their

adoptive stories are restorative, re-creative, and resistant to systemic evil and sin.

Graham, Walton, and Ward (2005) describe theological reflection as an

activity that is praxis-based and is located at the intersection of Christian tradition and

lived human experience. Praxis refers to the fruitful relationship between theory and

practice. For these scholars, theological reflection is a means for persons of faith to

account for the values and traditions that undergird their choices and convictions and

furthers their understanding. Pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring's (2006) approach

to pastoral care "begins with pastoral care conversations and the careseeker's

narratives about self, family, community, and culture" (p. 166). Drawing from

Charles Scalise (2003), she argues that "for many people this is a comfortable and

safe way to begin a conversation about their difficulties, since people tend to organize their descriptions of what is happening to them in narratives that 'reflect the story-like character of much human experience'" (Doehring, 2006, p. 166). In like manner, I have immersed myself in the stories told by Christian adoptive parents, while periodically stepping back from the larger narratives to notice underlying themes, inherent complexities, and embedded ambiguities.

The experience of adopting a child reflects both cultural and contextual influences such as power and privilege or disadvantage in race, socioeconomic class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and so on. It is important to recognize and acknowledge that white privilege and minority group disadvantage are operative in this human experience, as they are in many other human experiences. Therefore, the pastoral theological implications of social justice in regards to adoption and adoptive parenting certainly deserve attention. I now turn to a discussion of the various procedures and ethical precautions I have taken in my research.

Research Interview Procedures and Precautions

The primary purpose of the study is to explore the various experiences of adoptive parents in relationship to their spiritual and faith narratives. I seek to uncover any spiritual challenges and/or opportunities for faith maturation that exist in adoptive parents' lives, resultant from undergoing the adoption process and ultimately receiving and maturing with a child. I intend to identify and clarify the psychospiritual dynamics involved before, during, and following legal finalization of

adoption for adoptive parents. Moreover, I contextualize their experiences by considering the various influences around them and the situations in which they think, feel, and act.

Pastoral theologian Charles Scalise (2003) asserts that the quest for equality and justice, so central to contextual models of pastoral theology and pastoral care, moves beyond a basic analysis of social class to also include the contexts of both race and gender. In my research, I have taken the particularity of each participant into consideration to avoid overgeneralization and misrepresentation of findings. I have sought to include as much diversity within my research sample as possible based upon availability and willingness of adoptive parents to participate in my study. Moreover, I have proceeded with the assumption that each adoptive family is configured uniquely with many intangible characteristics, a few being related to the original motives to adopt and others to the specific details of the adoption itself. Several factors often added additional layers to the particularity of the participants. For example, whether the adoption was a transracial, transcultural, or international adoption represented a critical consideration. Furthermore, it was important to determine whether the adoption arrangement was more "closed" or "open" regarding the type of ongoing relationship between the birthparents and adoptive parents.

I noted the time factor of the child's adoption (birth or a later developmental stage, such as the teenage years). I believed it would be important to consider these differences to more fully understand the adoptive parents' narratives of their experiences bonding and connecting with their children. It was also important to

notice the matter of the family's unique configuration, such as birth-related children or other previously adopted children (or both). I investigated the quality of the relationships between biological and adopted children in combined-type families and the parents' sense of connection to both categories. The ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds of each adoptive parent in the parenting dyad was yet another important issue. I determined whether the husband and wife were from similar or dissimilar backgrounds. Each unique nuance to the specific context of an adoptive family appeared to increase complexity, thus adding to the potential for strained narratives but also raising the potential for magnificent diversity and regeneration of the family, church, community, and culture. I contemplated how narrative descriptions and interpretations of experience may inform the work of pastoral counselors while consulting adoptive couples.

The research sample population included twenty Christian adoptive couples ranging in types of experience. Some had adopted from their own race, while others had adopted transracially. Some had adopted domestically, while others had adopted internationally. Some had adopted newborns, while others had adopted children beyond infancy. Some had used private agencies, while others had adopted through the state. Some had started out as fosterparents, while others had not. Some still had young children living at home, while others had already seen their children grow into adulthood. Some had struggled with infertility issues, while a few did not and had pursued adoption for other reasons. Some were parents of both biological and adopted children, while others only had adopted children. These are just a few of the

characteristics that made their adoption experiences and family configurations unique and varied. I attempted to include research participants from a broad range of ages and socioeconomic and racial backgrounds to represent divergent experiences. The sample population group possessed some homogeneity due to their common religious affiliation with the Church of Christ.

Participants were recruited through AGAPE Child & Family Services of West Tennessee and through church-related contacts, including Freed-Hardeman University (FHU), a Church of Christ affiliated institution. Adoptive couples were invited to participate in the study through an invitation letter describing the proposed research (see Appendix E) with an informed consent document that clearly outlined the purpose of the research study. Furthermore, the consent outlined potential risks and rewards (see Appendix F). The informed consent did not include any exculpatory language by which research participants were made to waive or appear to waive any of their legal rights. In addition, the informed consent did not include any language releasing or appearing to release the researcher, the faculty adviser, or Brite Divinity School and/or Texas Christian University from liability for negligence. I described research participation as completely voluntary and included a statement that research participants may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. I offered no material incentive for participation. Also included in the packet was a HIPAA Release Form, addressing protected health information (see Appendix G). The informed consent and release forms included a place for respondents to sign if they chose to participate. I additionally supplied a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope.

I mailed 216 invitations and received 22 positive responses, from which I selected 20 for my study. Once research participants voluntarily agreed to informed consent, I followed a number of specific steps and procedures in an effort to move the project forward. First, I mailed a written survey (see Appendix H) employing closed-type and open-type questions for both husband and wife participants to complete individually. I only included necessary questions and those that directly related to the research project so as to respect the respondents' time. Furthermore, I gave respondents the option of leaving any question blank, which they did not feel comfortable answering for any reason whatsoever. I designed the written survey so that is would only require about 20-30 minutes to complete. Participants were provided a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope labeled "confidential" to be mailed back to me following completion of the written survey. I assigned research participant couples alphanumeric codes to protect their privacy and maintain their anonymity. Any person handling private information in any way was required to maintain strict confidentiality concerning participants' names, ages, addresses, phone numbers, and any other identifying information. My strategy was to use a cross-sectional analysis instead of engaging in a longitudinal panel study. This approach supplied data in a far shorter time period and represented adoptive parents across many adoption process stages, which should be conceptualized as an ongoing experience.

Second, face-to-face interviews were scheduled with adoptive couples fitting the criteria for the study. I personally conducted each of these interviews at one of

three sites: (1) my office at Freed-Hardeman University in Henderson, Tennessee, (2) at my counseling office at AGAPE Child & Family Services in Jackson, Tennessee, or (3) in a counseling office at AGAPE Child & Family Services in Memphis, Tennessee. Conducting the interviews at any one of these locations served to provide privacy as well as a relatively controlled environment that limited interruptions and any distractions. I designed the interviews to take approximately one and a half hours to complete. I began by taking a few minutes to get acquainted with the couple to establish some rapport. Next, I described to them the format of the interview. With the appropriate consent of the participants, the audio of the interviews was digitally recorded for transcription purposes (see Appendixes D and G). I attached lapel microphones to each of us for the sake of audio clarity. During the interview, I used an interview guide of sixteen questions designed to elicit the participants' narratives concerning their adoptive parenting experiences (see Appendix I). The interview guide included a mixture of primarily open-ended with a few closed-ended type questions to facilitate the gathering of relevant qualitative data. I also handwrote field notes and memos, both during and immediately after interviews (see Appendix L). I showed respect for the participants' privacy as well as their human dignity upheld by allowing them to choose whether or not they felt comfortable answering any or all questions.

Third, the interviews addressed the participants' understandings of their spiritual and religious experiences prior to, during, and postadoption. I would listen how participants conceptualized and described their experiences. I gave participants

the option of receiving a free, condensed copy of the research findings upon completion of the project. Moreover, I was prepared to provide participants with appropriate therapeutic and pastoral care resources (written document) in case of a need for clinical follow-up due to any distressing emotions or unexpected problems precipitated by their participation in the study.

Fourth, throughout the duration of my study, any digitally recorded interviews or notes were stored in a locked filing cabinet located in the researcher's office at Freed-Hardeman University. I have protected the privacy of participants in the final draft of the research findings by keeping their names, locations, and any identifying information about their family or situation confidential. In this dissertation, whenever I employ case study illustrations the names of persons and any other identifying information are sufficiently altered and multiple situations or scenarios conflated to conceal participants' identities and maintain participants' right to privacy and anonymity.

Fifth, I uploaded MP3 files of the digital recordings to my office computer, and these were encrypted and sent via the Internet to the professional transcription service, Accentance, LLC, in Chantilly, Virginia. I had previously secured the necessary approval from the Texas Christian University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to use this procedure (see Appendix D). Accentance, LLC, is a licensed and bonded transcription service with which I established a Non-Disclosure/ Confidentiality Agreement (see Appendixes C and D). The transcription service usually expedited their work within three to four days and then emailed transcripts to

me as Word Document attachments. I checked them for accuracy and reformatted them for my purposes. I de-identified any personal identifying information (see Appendix K). Once the interviews were analyzed from the recordings, memos, and transcripts, I searched for recurring themes (categories) and patterns to uncover any connections in the various spiritual narratives about adoptive parenting experience.

Sixth, I assigned participating couples alphanumeric codes to maintain their anonymity and privacy. After the study was completed, I transported all written materials to store for five years inside a secure and locked filing cabinet located in a faculty member's office at Brite Divinity School. At the end of the five years, the material will be destroyed by shredding. I will also destroy and discard all digitally recorded interviews that have been transferred to CDs at the seven-year anniversary of the completion of the study. Furthermore, the personal health information (PHI) will never be reindentified at a later date.

At this juncture, for the sake of transparency, I will discuss my social location that certainly influences the views and perspectives presented in this project. The discussion concludes with information regarding my contextual experience and vested interest in the subject matter.

Social Location

Researcher's Social Location

I am a white, heterosexual, middle-aged male of Dutch, English, Scottish, and Jewish descent. My socioeconomic status is middle class. I am college educated,

married, and theologically conservative and currently reside in the Mid-South region of the United States. My life experience has been split between two continents, North America and Africa. The son of missionaries, I was raised in South Africa during my teenage years during the tragic era of Apartheid. My college education occurred solely in the United States, where I attended institutions affiliated with the Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ. I worked in full-time ministry as a youth minister and preacher for eighteen years for congregations of the Church of Christ in Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Texas. I presently teach in a graduate counseling program at a conservative Church of Christ affiliated institution. The teachings of the Bible are spiritually authoritative to me. My interpretive stance appreciates core narrative theological themes that carry Christian doctrine forward in morally sound, relationally healthy, and communally life-giving ways.

The fact that I myself am an adoptive father of three white children is more than likely both a help and hindrance to this study. I feel this has been helpful because I have been able to relate to many of the experiences described by the research participants in ways that nonadoptive parents would likely be unable to do. On the other hand, it has perhaps occasionally been tempting for me to project my own adoptive experiences, understandings, agendas, and interpretations upon the adoptive parents' narratives. We are all inclined to filter the unique experiences and narratives of others through our own specific experiences and stories, thus impairing our own capacity for clarity, neutrality, and objectivity. It is quite possible that I

sometimes missed, minimized, or misunderstood certain important things conveyed by research participants due to my own finitude and imperfect worldview.

I realize I cannot possibly presume to speak for every adoptive parent's experience. Furthermore, my limited scope of experience inevitably biases me in various unintentional ways. It is perhaps at least a starting place that I am able to recognize the pervasiveness of many political, cultural, and religious narratives regarding adoption. To think that adoptive parents are not in some way deeply affected by these narratives would be naïve. I view the process of adoption as a uniquely spiritual endeavor that occurs within a particular sociocultural and legal environment, while carrying with it numerous political and religious meanings and implications. Uncovering issues of meaning and power by detangling the hidden and interwoven narratives in adoption is difficult due to the complex nature of these narratives. There are many positive and life-giving as well as oppressive and life-draining forces in our North American culture that affect the spiritual and psychological well-being of adoptive families.

Researcher's Contextual Experience and Personal Interest

My personal interest in the research topic emerges from my own lived experience as an adoptive parent. My wife and I have sensed God's presence and guidance in our lives regarding our experiences of adoptive parenthood, though it has not necessarily been an easy path for us. I have wished to compare the various experiences of other adoptive parents with our own. In the present study, as a

subjective researcher, it has been incumbent upon me to be mindful of my social location and acknowledge how my own attitudes and biases have unwittingly been shaped by Western culture and religious traditions. It is possible that these influences could have limited or impaired my vision or objectivity, blinding me to certain facets of suffering and hope.

CHAPTER TWO

CHRISTIAN TRADITION AND CANONICAL NARRATIVE THEOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to firstly provide an account of the Christian

faith tradition in which I function, including the general religious background and the

way in which I approach Scripture. Next, I guide the reader through a discussion of

sociocultural context in reference to adoption practices wherein the original biblical

audiences would have understood the scriptures, and I provide a glimpse into the

scriptures themselves. After this discussion, I offer an overview of canonical

narrative theology and interact with the work of Stanley Hauerwas as a postliberal

theologian who is a representative scholar of this approach. I proceed to tie canonical

narrative theology into the main topic of the dissertation and the spiritual narratives of

adoptive parents and provide an account of how canonical narrative theology is used

in the present research as a source.

Religious Sources

The Church of Christ has traditionally been perceived as a sectarian religious

group that adheres to a very strict and fundamentalist view of Scripture. Its

reputation over the past century, particularly regarding its narrow and exclusivist

boundaries of fellowship, has not been without cause. Within the mainline Church of

Christ, the traditional Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement hermeneutic for

interpreting Scripture and providing authority for faith and practice demonstrates a

firm belief in biblical inspiration, historicity, literality, and inerrancy. Indeed, the church is known for its conservative (at times legalistic), Bible-focused stances on doctrine. Most persons who have been raised in this tradition hold to the belief that the Bible, and more specifically the New Testament, is to be the only "creed" or standard for faith and practice. Hence, ministers within the Church of Christ have usually prided this body of Christians as being "nondenominational," having no earthly headquarters or national conference. Each congregation is completely autonomous, having its own elders and deacons, while remaining in fellowship with other like-minded congregations and church-affiliated educational institutions that carry significant influence. It should be noted, however, that there are several clear divisions within the larger fellowship based on matters of doctrine and practice.

The liturgical tradition in most Church of Christ congregations may be described as being "low church" liturgically and clearly male-led. Churches of Christ have traditionally remained mission-minded and evangelistic in character, seeking to "reach the lost for Christ." Furthermore, the notion of caring for the needy, particularly orphaned children, has generally remained a strong emphasis. There are several Church of Christ-sponsored children's homes located around the nation and world. On the other hand, official involvement in social activism and the social justice movement has not been considered a high priority. In the South, this fellowship remains largely segregated into white and black congregations, particularly in the more rural areas.

Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), one of the founders of the Restoration Movement in America, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, adopted a grammatical-historical method of reading the text of Scripture and an expository approach to teaching and preaching. D. R. Dungan wrote a work entitled, *Hermeneutics: A textbook* (1888, 2nd ed.) that was very influential in Church of Christ preacher training colleges and schools. A simplified three-fold hermeneutic resulted from Campbell's and Dungan's work and has been tenaciously maintained by many preachers and scholars in the Church of Christ. The core interpretative principles for deciding doctrine and practice in this schema are the following: (1) direct command, (2) apostolic example, and (3) necessary inference. Within the last half-century, among a number of the key scholars within our fellowship who have espoused this hermeneutical schema include the following: James D. Bales, Hugo McCord, W. B. West, Guy N. Woods, Garland Elkins, and Thomas B. Warren.

In more recent years, a few scholars within Churches of Christ have called for a broader hermeneutic for biblical exegesis, discernment of doctrinal authority, and ecclesial practice. These scholars have included Abraham Malherbe (Yale Divinity School), Carl Holladay (Candler School of Theology), John Mark Hicks, Randy Harris, Thomas H. Olbricht, and James D. Thompson (Abilene Christian University). These scholars generally adhere to what may be described as a historical-grammatical-communal approach to biblical interpretation. While there is still a strong emphasis on authorial intent and textual historicity, there is also an

acknowledgment of the need for making some hermeneutical adjustments "on the practice side" due to cultural and sociological factors.

For instance, the adoption culture of the twenty-first century is foreign to that of the Greco-Roman culture. In antiquity, the practice of adoption (Gk. υἱοθεσία, ας, translit. *hwiothesia(s)*, cf. Rom 8:15, 23; Rom 9:4; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5) had more to do with legally securing responsible persons by mutual contract or household (Gk. οἶκος or δόμος) slaves to manage one's estate in old age and to function as the legal heir who would maintain the household name and oversee property holdings after the decease of the *paterfamilias* (or family patriarch) (Sampley, 2003; Watson, 2008). In comparison, adoption today focuses more on achieving personal completeness as a parent and relational satisfaction, while providing a permanent family for a child in need. Thus the basic societal function and familial purpose for adoption in our culture has evolved into something quite different than it was during the period wherein the scriptures were penned. The sociocultural narratives in reference to adoptive families and adoptive parenthood have changed from a more legal, pragmatic arrangement to a familial kinship that emphasizes loving care for and connection with children, personal wholeness, and mutual life fulfillment. These factors must be considered when interpreting biblical texts that employ the metaphor of adoption to describe the type of relationship God seeks with humanity. Also, how we "take care of the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (Jas 1:27), will appear

different than it did in the first century CE, just as family configurations and societal institutions are much different today than they were then.

I include this brief overview of my faith tradition's interpretative legacy because I want to point out that we are shaped by both our cultural and religious context, particularly regarding our interpretive style and propensities. Furthermore, since the Word of God is "living and active" (Heb 4:12) and "abides forever" (1Pet 1:23), in order to be relevant within new settings, its spiritual teachings and basic principles must be adaptable and flexible through history and from one context to another. The adoptive parents I interviewed demonstrated a strong commitment to the Bible and to the church. They sought meaning and understanding from the scriptures that they viewed as holding relevancy to their lives in some way. Yet, they sometimes confessed their frustration as they struggled to bridge the gap between the teachings of Scripture and their own lived experiences, particularly during periods of intense suffering and hardship.

The Use of Scripture

I now describe the manner in which I use Scripture in this project. Within the Christian faith tradition, there are multiple views regarding how Scripture should be considered, interpreted, and utilized. My approach to Scripture is informed by the Church of Christ faith tradition that has molded and shaped my thinking. First and foremost, I need to confess that I do hold to the inspiration of the Bible and believe in its authority, canonicity, and historicity. That being said, it is also my contention that

Scripture must be properly contextualized and understood within its original Jewish and Gentile sociocultural and religious milieus. I argue that Scripture can only be accurately interpreted within the limited scope of its various literary genres, including law, salvation history, wisdom literature, prophecy, gospel, or epistle. It is critical that careful attention be given to authorial intent and to the meaning as understood by its first readers.

However, from my perspective the writings of Scripture continue to hold spiritual authority and relevancy for the people of God today. The sacred scrolls preserved and advanced the faith, just as they now continue to be our guide in perpetuating "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). However, the sacred texts need to be recontextualized and reinterpreted with consideration of contemporary sociocultural and religious contexts and exigencies. Many in our churches feel a significant disparity between their own lives and the stories of Scripture because the narrative seems irrelevant to their personal situation. I recognize the significant passage of time that has elapsed between the Scripture's originally penning and our present era in history. However, as pastoral theologians, I believe it is our task to bridge the hermeneutical gap between the ancient Christian community and the church of the twenty-first century. We have the challenge of helping believers grasp how the biblical narrative of the people of God maintains continuity with the Christian community today. Therefore, the Bible needs to be freshly understood and reappropriated through the "shared praxis" of the community of faith (Groome, 1987, 1991). I suggest there is an underlying cohesiveness,

coherence, and continuity embedded in the written and lived narrative of the Christian faith tradition that has persisted throughout history.

The Bible serves as a revelatory window into the life, faith, challenges, conflicts, misgivings and failures, theological understandings, and spiritual hopes of the eschatological community. The narrative of Scripture describes, defines, and delimits the "cruciform" identity of the church, both then and now (Allen, 1990). Moreover, it continues to give meaning to the form, function, and faith of that community. But this narrative is yet incomplete. It is one that continues to promise a glorious future story for the faithful and redeemed of God. Although the focus of the present study is not on an in-depth exegesis of biblical texts that use adoption imagery in the Bible, it is a worthy endeavor to contextualize these Scripture references.

Sociocultural Context of Scriptures Related to Adoption

It is important to consider the sociocultural context of the biblical world wherein the scriptures pertaining to adoption in the OT and NT were penned. Scripture should be read, interpreted, and applied to our lives and the communal life of the church with this particular perspective in mind. The biblical world was different than today's world in many respects, including the issues of family and adoption practices. This contextual perspective contributes much valuable insight to our rather culture-bound understanding of adoption. Furthermore, it may serve as a helpful corrective to our cultural encapsulation and North American ethnocentrism. Because adoption today is not identical to adoption in antiquity, we must be cautious

as we approach and interpret scriptures that refer to this societal institution and practice. It is tempting to superimpose our contemporary mindset upon the earlier practices of adoption, forgetting the former pragmatic purposes that existed for adoption and how the original readers of the Sacred Scrolls would have interpreted the biblical writers' usage of the metaphor. For this reason, I will uncover the basic understandings and practices regarding adoption in the biblical world. That world included Ancient Near Eastern and Israelite cultures as well as the Greco-Roman.

The Ancient Near East and Israel

In the Ancient Near East, if a married couple produced no children, "adoption—mostly of freed slaves or agnatic members of the family—served as provision for old age" (Cancik & Schneider, 2004, p. 332). The quest for economic security and socioreligious continuity necessitated the securing of a male heir (Matthews, 2003, p. 16). Adoption also occasionally occurred when a married couple reclaimed a child that had been abandoned by his or her parents. Financial destitution or some other unbearable life predicament may have caused "a parent or parents either to expose a child or relinquish their rights to a child" (Matthews, 2003, p. 17). The rescuing and adoption of the "foundling" has developed almost as a motif in ancient Near Eastern literature as the basis for the rise of great leaders such as Moses (cf. Exod 2:1-10) and Sargon of Akkad. Historian Victor H. Matthews states, "In some cases, the adopted foundling even retained a personal name reflecting his

origins, such as *Šapi-kalbi,* 'He-of-the-dog's-mouth,' or *Sūqā'a,* 'He-of-the-street'" (p. 19).

Birthparents relinquished their legal rights to their offspring through abandonment and failure to legitimize a child by not cleansing him or her of the amniotic fluid and blood. It was popularly stated that such a nameless orphan was "cast into the dog's mouth" and whoever chose to adopt the infant was reversing the fatal outcome by "picking him up from the dog's mouth." The Code of Hammurabi (ca. 2250 BCE) §185 states that the adoptive parents could bring the child into their household with no need to fear a later claim on the child: "If a man has taken in adoption an infant while still (bathed in) his amniotic fluid and raised him up, that adopted child shall not be (re)claimed" (quoted in Matthews, 2003, p. 19; cf. R. F. Harper, 2003, *The code of Hammurabi king of Babylon: About 2250 B.C.*).

It appears that in antiquity, a number of modern adoptive parents' concerns about birthparents reclaiming their children would have been unlikely. Moreover, it seems from the historical evidence that the motivations to adopt children were multiple, often relating more to a familial form of "social security" in adopting suitable persons to care for one and manage one's estate in later life. However, other occasions reveal the clear sense of human sympathy and compassion for weak and vulnerable infants who had been abandoned (or "exposed"). Adoption in today's world is also motivated by several forces, part of them pragmatic in the quest to perpetuate one's name and/or legacy, and others parental regarding the desire to experience the joys of parenthood; additional forces include altruistic feelings and

genuine concern for at-risk children. To present a balanced view, it is more likely

that persons in modernity possess multiple reasons for adopting children. Our

cultural perspective seems to promote the concept of seeking personal fulfillment and

meaningful life purpose as an adult. In antiquity, adoption was undertaken more

often as a societal and familial necessity to secure a future for both parent and

adopted person. Today, it would be socially and politically incorrect for adoptive

parents today to articulate such pragmatic and perhaps emotionally detached and self-

serving motives.

In the Ancient Near East, several legal formulae existed for adoption and

remain extant in the various cuneiform sources. Matthews (2003) suggests, "These

texts, duly witnessed, dated and sealed, provided a record of a solemn ritual in which

both parties would have declared publicly their new relationship" (p. 19). The would-

be adoptive father, for instance, may state: $m\bar{a}ru^{me\check{s}}$-$\acute{u}$-a, "You are my sons." On the

other hand, the adult would-be son may declare orally and in writing to his adoptive

father: *ana abušu īppuš,* "He adopted him as his father" (Alalakh 16:3). Most

commonly, a man would adopt one or more sons. The arrangement was essentially a

business contract by which certain responsibilities were placed upon the adopted

son(s) in exchange for a portion of the inheritable property. The agreed-to

responsibilities of the adopted son(s) would usually be provision of a set amount of

food for the adoptive parents. In certain cases, he would even pay off a household

debt owed by the adoptive father (Matthews, 2003, p. 20). This type of financially

motivated adoption arrangement clearly had flaws and hints at why many of the

adoption legal contracts included severe penalties for failure to comply . . .

> with the terms or for repudiation of the agreement, including fines or
>
> disinheritance. To address the most severe case, the Sumerian Laws (#4)
>
> contain an instance in which the adopted son makes a public statement, for
>
> whatever reason, denying his responsibilities: 'You are not my father' . . .
>
> 'You are not my mother.' In this instance, the parents were within their
>
> rights to cancel the adoption contract and sell the oathbreaker as a
>
> common slave. Similarly, an adopted son who seriously violated his
>
> adoption agreement might be turned into the street after being forced to
>
> leave his garment hanging on the doorpost. Perhaps more common was
>
> the payment of a fine of 1/3 mina of silver by the son. (Matthews, 2003,
>
> p. 20)

Within Israelite marriages, a husband's primary concern was the fathering of

children. Daniel Block (2003) states, "While monogamous marriage represents the

biblical norm (Gen 2:21-14), and seems to have prevailed among the common folk,

polygyny apparently was not uncommon. In addition to the regular wife or wives, a

man might also have [had] one or more secondary wives or concubines who would

bear children for him" (p. 48). Female slaves within the household were not merely

under the mistress's control; they belonged to her as personal property. On occasion

the mistress would take the initiative and suggest that the husband engage in

intercourse with the female slaves so that they serve as surrogates (cf. Sarah and

Rachel). The foremost intent of such arrangements was to provide an alternative means to secure progeny for the husband. Upon the birth of the child to the female slave, "the mistress would adopt/legitimize the child as her own and exercise her parental rights to the child by naming him (Gen 30:6, 8, 11, 13)" (p. 78). While children were perceived as blessings from Yahweh, childlessness was understood as a curse (cf. 1Sam 1:1-11). According to this mindset, "the worst fate one could experience was to have his 'seed' cut off and his 'name' destroyed from his father's household" (Block, 2003, p. 81). This religious view of childlessness as a curse is a struggle described by several of the adoptive parents I interviewed.

In Ancient Israel, biological procreation was certainly not the only method by which a family received children. Block (2003) asserts, "The Old Testament provides no regulations for and reports no explicitly identified cases of adoption, though several accounts have adoptive overtones [e.g., Gen 15:3; Exod 2:10; 1 Kgs 11:20; Esth 2:7, 15]. Genesis 30:3-8 provides the most likely example, recounting that Rachel gave her maidservant to Jacob so she could bear children 'on her knees'" (p. 87). However, this was not truly an adoption, as the children born were indeed Jacob's own flesh and blood. Frequent allusions "to Yahweh's relationship with Israel as a father-son relationship reinforces the impression that adoption must have been a relatively common experience . . . Even more telling is Yahweh's bond with David and his descendants, which is expressed by what is commonly recognized as the adoption formula, 'I will be his father, and he shall be my son' [cf. 2Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13]" (Block, 2003, p. 88). It is instructive to note that Jacob (Israel)

apparently adopted Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, giving them the

patriarchal blessing as well (cf. Gen 48:8-22). Yet, another adoption story is that of

Joseph, who possibly adopted "his great-grandsons, the sons of Machir, Manasseh's

sons, who were 'born on Joseph's knees' (Gen 50:23)" (p. 88).

Adoption, however, does not appear to have been as common in Israel as it

was within the surrounding cultures. Supposed acts of adoption . . .

> in the narrative lack the kind of formulaic terminology that would clearly
>
> [have identified] them as such. Moses the foundling becomes the 'son' of
>
> Pharaoh's daughter (Ex 2:10), but this may be the author's way of
>
> representing what he took to be an Egyptian practice . . . Perhaps the
>
> clearest instance is Mordecai taking the orphaned Esther, his cousin, as his
>
> daughter (Esth 2:7), though this too may reflect a local custom, in this case
>
> from the Iranian diaspora. (Blenkinsopp, 1997, p. 73)

In the OT, it is unclear whether references to orphans are indicating children who had

no parents or rather children who had no *fathers*. The latter interpretation perhaps

seems to be more plausible. The fatherless are often placed "alongside widows in

scriptural texts, suggesting not only two classes of poor people but also that

impoverished widows often had children to support . . . Within the kinship structure

of the household, clan, and tribe, and perhaps through adoption, the fatherless could

be incorporated within a new household (Job 31:18; Esth 2:7, 15)" (Purdue, 1997, p.

193). In like manner to how Yahweh adopted the Davidic kings as sons (cf. 2Sam

7:13-15; Ps 2:7), the family patriarch could give his name, love, and protection to a person needing a family.

Ancient Greece

There is perhaps a tendency in the literature to romanticize or idealize ancient adoption practices by failing to acknowledge the effects of patriarchy and the ambiguity of interpreting what actually occurred. Historically, we may deduce that in Ancient Greece, particularly in Athens, there were three distinct forms of adoption known and were as follows: first, that done during the lifetime of the adoptive father; second, that done by testament; and, third, that done posthumously. Isaeus (7, 30), who was an early fourth century BCE Attic orator and who was a student of Isocrates and later taught Demosthenes, asserts that families might be spared from extinction through adoption. He also states that through adoption provisions could be made "to secure the performance of the traditional sacrifices and rites after the death of the adoptive father" (Deifsmann-Merten, 2002, p. 146).

Adoption was also a strategy to preserve the wealth of a household and insure the maintenance of aging parents. Again, this type of adoption was more contractual than emotional or relational. Since the perpetuation of individual households was a particular concern, "an only son could not be adopted" (p. 147). An adoptee was permitted to return to his biological father's household once he fulfilled his contractual obligation of providing descendants for the household of his adoptive father. Even after the legal consummation of an adoption, the civil relationship with

the birthmother continued (Isaeus 7, 25), thereby giving the adopted person claim to

his birthmother's inheritance (Isaeus 7, 22). This type of practice is much more

complex than are most "open adoptions" today in which the legal boundaries are

more fixed. After adoption, the adopted son would be initiated into the adoptive

father's clan (*phrátra*) (Isaeus 7, 15f.) and then later given entry into the *deme*

register (Isaeus 7, 28; Dem. Or. 44, 39). From the Hellenistic period onward, females

were also prospects for adoption and could themselves adopt children (Deifsmann-

Merten, 2002, p. 147), though it is uncertain how commonly this actually occurred.

Ancient Rome

During the Roman period, the tales of exposed children who were found and

raised by others were greatly romanticized. Such children were referred to as

"foundlings" as also in the Ancient Near Eastern culture. In the Greek romance by

Longus, *Daphnis and Cloe* (probably late second or early third century CE), both the

hero and the heroine were foundlings raised by rustic fosterparents. At the end of the

story, both children learn about their wealthy parents. But in reality, infant exposure

gave rise to a disreputable industry in which exposed children were collected by slave

dealers or others and raised by wet nurses until they could join a household as

domestic slaves or prostitutes.

Romans had options they could pursue if childlessness beset their marriage.

Adoption was a strategy for attaining the benefits of household functions performable

by children. Even the concept of having physical continuity could be achieved by

adopting a relative. Most of the attested adoptions were performed posthumously involving either nephews or grandsons. Dixon (1992) states, "In the case of sisters' sons or daughters' sons, adoption had the effect of continuing the family name, which normally passed through the male line, and of ensuring that the cult that went with them was maintained" (p. 112).

Dixon asserts, "It must say something about Roman attitudes towards children—and about our own—that they usually adopted adults, while we of the urbanized West associate adoption with newborns" (p. 112). Extant documents from Roman Egypt describe the occurrence of adoptions of young children; in addition, adoption of females also occasionally occurred. Adoption apparently did not sever relations with the birth family; and by law, certain obligations remained between the biological father and the adopted child. Adoption did, however, alter the hereditary succession, qualifying the adopted person for the same privileges (and limitations) as legitimate biological children (p. 112).

The practice of adoption was evidently primarily limited to the ruling class. Adoption was the legal act whereby a Roman citizen was integrated into another family coming under the *patria potestas* (i.e., paternal power) of the *paterfamilias*. Since it was only the *paterfamilias* who had the legal right to adopt, women were excluded from this practice (except in later legislation by imperial grant). Whenever the adoptee, regardless of gender, had previously come under the *patria potestas* of another person, the act was called *adoptio*. However, if a male who was not under another's paternal power (himself being the head of a family) was adopted, it was

called *adrogatio*. It follows then that women were precluded from adrogation. *Adoptio* and *adrogatio* each served to recognize adoptees as the adopter's bona fide children, acknowledged by him and placed under his parental power and protection. Adoption could be nullified through emancipation (Berger, Nicholas, & Treggiari, 2003, p. 13).

Since the original purpose for adoption was essentially to create paternal power and perpetuate the agnatic family, it was originally a prerogative belonging only to men. However, later emperors permitted adoption by women "to console them for the loss of children" and permitted the adrogation of women, which reveals a change in the Roman ideology about the family (Berger, Nicholas, & Treggiari, 2003, p. 13). With time, various safeguards emerged, particularly for small children and their inheritance. Because adoption had the effect of eliminating the adopted person's succession rights in their family of origin, "and a subsequent emancipation would destroy rights in the new family, Justinian drastically changed *adoptio* to allow the adoptee to retain rights in the old family, except where the adopter was a close relative, e.g., maternal grandfather" (p. 13). Whether this legal right was actually upheld, though, is rather uncertain given the insidious effects of patriarchy.

Adoption in Scripture

Our culture-bound perspective of adoption doubtlessly limits our theological understanding of the rich meaning of Scripture's adoption metaphor. In the strictest sense, adoption is a legally binding process that joins non-biologically related persons

in a familial kinship recognized by our society. However, in Scripture, adoption is much more than simply a legal contract. God's relationship with the faithful remnant of the spiritual house of Israel has always been and always will be covenantal rather than representing a contractual arrangement (cf. Hos 11:1). It additionally seems God would desire that earthly familial ties emulate the self-giving covenantal relationship God has initiated with humanity. The theological significance of this relationship of promise is a key motif in the writings of the apostle Paul. He employs the adoption (Gk. υἱοθεσία, ας) metaphor in several noteworthy passages in his letters to the churches.

Because adoption was rather common in Hellenistic times and culture, Paul's audience would have likely had little difficulty in understanding the allusions to adoption as symbolic of God's intimate relationship with God's people. The early Christians recognized that they, through spiritual adoption, had been incorporated into God's household and held special status under the *patria potestas* or parental power and protection of God as the ultimate *paterfamilias*. Thus Paul's first readers would have easily grasped the adoption metaphor presented in his letters and his comparison of salvation to adoption as God's children. The rite of adult believer's baptism into the church (cf. Acts 2:38-41, 47), representing initiation into the "household of faith/God" (cf. Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19) as a type of "new birth" (cf. John 3:3), would have made perfect sense within their sociocultural context and particular understandings of adoption. However, I contend that the theological concept of

adoption ultimately transformed the early Christians' notions about the societal institution of adoption as an intimate and meaningful bond of loving, interdependent relationship.

According to Paul, the unique privilege that Israel once enjoyed as God's chosen children was now being offered to all persons, whether Jew or Greek (cf. Gal 3:26-4:7; Eph 1:4-8, 11-14; Rom 8:22-27). It was through the love of Christ that this same privilege was afforded to all believers by faith. One Roman-Syrian law book even stated that while a man could disown his own biological child if there were sufficient cause, he would never be allowed to disown an adopted child. This historical backdrop would have added much potency to Paul's adoption metaphor, disputing any notion that adopted children are second-rate members of the family or are not truly legitimate members of the family (either physical or spiritual). Thus a fuller understanding of adoption in antiquity reveals a strong sense of permanency and security in one's relationship with God and the permanent nature of the relationship between adopted children and their earthly adoptive parents. Moreover, Jewish Christians would have been challenged regarding their presumed spiritually privileged status; and the Gentiles would have felt validated and more spiritually secure due to the equal status afforded to them as fellow-heirs of the heavenly gift shared with their Jewish counterparts.

The NT writers reveal Jesus as the messianic fulfillment of the prophecies regarding God's adoption of Israel (cf. Matt 2:15; 3:17; John 1:12; Acts 13:32-33; Heb 1:5; and 5:5). Jesus is identified as the firstborn Son of God but not the only

spiritually adopted offspring of the Creator (cf. 1Pet 1:3-9). Adoption is often

employed metaphorically in Scripture to describe the special type of relationship

Christians share with God, Christ, and one another through the Holy Spirit. The

image of a loving, benevolent, just, merciful, trustworthy, and sacrificial adoptive

parent is a powerful description of God the Creator. Jesus is portrayed as our elder

sibling through adoption with whom we will share an eternal inheritance in the world

to come (cf. Mark 3:35; 10:29-30). As our adoptive parent, God accepts certain

unique responsibilities and also holds expectations of us as adopted sons and

daughters. This mutuality of expectations regarding household roles and

responsibilities were like those duties expected of each member of an honorable

household in antiquity. As adopted children, we too possess certain rights,

responsibilities, and spiritual obligations to our Heavenly Parent and our spiritual

siblings within the household of God (cf. 1Tim 3:14-15) as well as to our divine,

firstborn brother, Jesus Christ. The Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman practices

regarding adoption would have added many shades of color to the richness of such

biblical teachings for the first readers of the Scriptures.

God's careful preparation, predestination (cf. Rom 8:28-30), and patience in

waiting for the "fullness of time" (Gal 4:4; cf. Rom 5:6) to finalize or consummate

our adoption as sons and daughters is a powerful biblical theme. The spiritual

adoption process required God's own blood, sweat, and tears (cf. Heb 5:7-10) as well

as emotional and physical suffering. These facts are depicted by the gospels in the

portrayal of the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, the trial of Jesus as well as

the accompanying inhumane treatment, and the scene at the cross (cf. Matt 26-27; Mark 14-15; Luke 22-23; and John 13-19). The sacrifice that God paid to satisfy the price of our adoption is a frequent theme in Scripture (cf. John 3:16; Rom 5:6-8; 8:31-32; Eph 2:4-5; and 1John 4:9-10).

Another biblical motif is the grafting of Christians by faith into the household of God (cf. Rom 11:17; Eph 2:19; and 1Tim 3:15) as members of a spiritual family that is diversely formed with gender differences, multiracialism, multiculturalism, and multinationalism (cf. Gal 3:26-28). Those who were once alienated according to the world order have been made one in Christ, who has torn down the walls of partition that formerly separated us (cf. 1Cor 12:12-14; Gal 3:26-29; Eph 2:14-22; and Col 1:20). We are a household, not connected by blood-kinship but by the Son of God's life-giving blood that was shed freely on the cross. The blood of Christ forms us into one family through God's Spirit. Because of God's ongoing love and commitment to us as adopted sons and daughters, we as family members enjoy special standing in the family and the unique privileges as joint-heirs of an internal inheritance in heaven (cf. Gal 4:4-7 and Eph 2:6-7). We will ultimately share this extravagant inheritance with our elder brother Jesus who is "the firstborn over all creation" (Col 1:15).

To be an adoptive parent is to perhaps experience some of the joy, fulfillment, and love as well as the suffering, hardship, and frustration that God must experience in relation to us as imperfect adopted children. Adoptive parents' God-image is often altered due to their personal experience of adoptive parenthood. I now enter into a discussion of canonical narrative theology as it informs the current project.

Overview of Canonical Narrative Theology

Narrative theology is a relatively broad category that encompasses a number of approaches to theology, interpretation, and practice. In the most general sense, it is an approach to theology that finds meaning in story. At times, this notion is tied to an outright rejection of meaning derived from systematic theology and dogma or morality from the biblical story (Kuitert, 1993). On other occasions, it is associated with the notion that we should not try to primarily learn ethical behavior from Scripture (J. Tracy, 2007). Instead, we should seek how to relate to the Divine One in light of our salvation. The Bible is thus viewed as the story of God's interaction with God's people. This perspective, however, does not negate the possibility for the Bible to make truth claims but insists "the primary purpose of scripture is to record the relationship between God and his people (and how we today can continue in this story) more than detailing a systematic theology. One result of this [perspective] is that narrative theology is less likely to pull verses out of context to support doctrinal positions" (J. Tracy, 2007).

Originally, narrative theology, often associated with postliberal theology, was the collective endeavor of a group of theologians at Yale Divinity School, including Hans Frei (1922-1988) and George Lindbeck (1923-present). These scholars were influenced by Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas and, to a lesser degree, the *nouvelle théologie* of French Catholic theologians such as Henri de Lubac (1896-1991). On a philosophical level, this approach is undeniably shaped by Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1953, 1969) philosophy of language, Catholic theologian Alasdair MacIntyre's

(1984) moral philosophy (based in Thomist thought), and anthropologists Clifford

Geertz's (1973, 1983, 2000) and Peter Berger's (1966) sociologies regarding the

nature of communities. Postliberal theology generally provides us with an alternative

to liberal individualism by promoting Christian tradition-formed and communitarian

understandings of human rationality and personhood. Narrative theology began to

gain wider acceptance in neoorthodox and postliberal theological circles in the second

half of the twentieth century. Early proponents advocated the belief that "Christian

theology's use of the Bible should focus on a narrative representation of the faith,

rather than on the development of a metaphysical system [or a set of propositions]

that draws infallible logical inferences from the data of revelation" (Wisse, 2005, par.

1).

More recently, British practical theologians Elaine Graham, Heather Walton,

and Frances Ward (2005) have been helpful in their differentiation between canonical

narrative theology and constructive narrative theology. These two descriptive terms

bring more clarity to the broader narrative category. In the former approach, God's

self-narration through the divine gospel story encompassing the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus Christ is employed as the primary lens whereby persons of faith

may explore and interpret their Christian identity as it is lived out in the world (Frei,

1980). The faith tradition within which I function as well as my personal theological

commitments are more closely aligned with this former perspective. In the latter

approach, persons construct meaningful stories from the unique context of their lives

(cf. Serene Jones & Paul Lakeland, 2005). Scalise (2003) observes that narrative

theologies may at times "struggle with the gap between the call of the world of stories and the demands of action in the world of everyday experience" (p. 171). He warns, "Without critical interpretation, stories may become culturally assimilated and confused" (p. 171). Christians, in the very midst of plurality and particularity, testify to a God who is revealed in the telling of our stories about our lived experiences and faith (Anderson & Foley, 1998).

Canonical narrative theology argues that Christian theology's use of the Bible should inductively focus on a narrative representation of the faith rather than a set of systematic doctrines. According to the canonical narrative theological approach, the story of Christ and Scripture together provide an avenue whereby Christians may explore their distinct identity and purpose in the world. Maarten Wisse (2005) states, "Various proponents of narrative theology have argued that, while narratives may contain references to external objects, the narrative embeddedness of these references qualify them to such an extent that they cannot be taken out of the narrative setting without corrupting their true nature" (par. 13). Wisse points out that, "Propositional expressions of faith seem to claim universal validity and truth, in contrast to narrative expressions, which seem to restrict themselves to the world of the story that they project" (par. 13). He continues, "[O]ne might suggest that narrative expressions of faith make more modest claims because the references to external objects contained in them remain implicit in the story, whereas they are always explicit in propositional accounts of faith" (par. 13). The context and coherence of the biblical story thus

becomes even more important for making reasonable hermeneutical connections to the beliefs and practices of the contemporary community of faith.

In canonical narrative theology, rationality rather than the individual's personal authority is shaped by the language and culture of a living tradition of Christian communal life. The Christian faith is thus understood as its own culture and language. In this particular culture and language, doctrines are analogous to a second-order "grammar" overlaid upon the first-order social practices, narratives, abilities, and habits of the community of faith. Therefore, in addition to a focus upon the biblical narratives, canonical narrative theology emphasizes Christian tradition as well as upon the culture, language, and intelligibility intrinsic to the worshipping community. I will say much more about this concept later in the dissertation (chapter five); however, at this juncture, I wish to explore the work of Christian theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, who serves as a representative example of a contemporary scholar who employs the canonical narrative approach.

The Narrative Theology of Stanley Hauerwas

Stanley Hauerwas (b. 1940), a Protestant theologian (currently an Episcopalian but formerly a long-time member of the mainline United Methodist Church) has been connected for many years with the narrative theology movement, in which he was steeped during his doctoral studies at Yale Divinity School in the 1960s. It was at Yale that he came under the influence of scholars such as Brevard Childs, Hans Frei, and George Lindbeck. Beginning in 1970, Hauerwas later taught

for a period at the University of Notre Dame. Since 1983, Hauerwas has functioned

as a professor of theological ethics at Duke Divinity School with a joint appointment

at Duke University School of Law. Drawing from the teachings of one of his

mentors, Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, Hauerwas seeks to bring

attention to the importance of virtue and character within the church, promoting

pacifism and nonviolence. He is also a staunch opponent of nationalism and

American patriotism, arguing that these ideas stand in direct opposition to

Christianity and have no place in the church. Hauerwas is primarily interested in

God's action in history and our encounter with God through the biblical narrative. He

emphasizes the story of Jesus Christ and Scripture as a pattern for the Christian life.

Hauerwas (1976) argues that grasping some of the larger, contextual narrative

is basic to our knowledge of any situation, as this links actions in a more coherent

fashion. He states, "A story thus is a narrative account that binds events and agents

together in an intelligible pattern" (p. 344). I believe this particular perspective is

logical and viable regarding adoption stories' relationship to self-understanding,

familial relationships, faith identity, and spiritual formation. I view it as a worthy

endeavor to link our individual and our faith communities' lived stories with the core

narratives of Scripture and Christian tradition. One of Hauerwas' more well-known

pieces is *A community of character: Toward a constructive Christian social ethic*

(1981). In this work, he highlights the importance of the church, the narrative

wherein the church exists, and the multiple disciplines with which the church needs to

interact. His central thesis is that God's narrative, as portrayed in Scripture, is a

social ethic and is to mold and motivate the peculiarity of the community of faith. This notion fits well my study's focus on ministry to adoptive families and children and my personal conviction that it is the responsibility of the church to lead society in this God-given task.

Hauerwas (1983) describes himself as an "embedded" theologian and acknowledges both the influences upon him of Alasdair MacIntyre (p. xiii) and a particular faith community (p. xxvi). Hauerwas argues that we theologize from within the confines of our own history, spiritual community, and faith tradition in which we live. Canonical narrative theology advances a particular vision of human persons as storytellers and of theology communicated in story form. This narrative construction occurs within the context of the Christian community, where it is also lived out. Hauerwas sees Christian convictions as narrative by their very nature because narrative is "the primary grammar of Christian belief" (p. 25). Herein he points to the spiritual reality that Christianity claims to be linked to God's action in history and to the unfinished story of the people of God as they move toward the *eschaton.* Hauerwas considers God to be "hypertemporal" and attributes this idea to the influence of John Howard Yoder, who asserts that believers should always locate God's purposeful actions in the created order's "timeliness" as described in the Scriptures (Hauerwas, 2010, p. 158).

Hauerwas speaks of the self not as an independent and freestanding "I" but, instead, as a narrative reality. Our knowledge of self is only truly possible when we locate ourselves within God's story. For Hauerwas, this task is accomplished by

understanding the Bible as a narrative, and the form of the gospel is determined by the stories of a particular life—the life of Jesus. In his work, *Truthfulness and tragedy* (1977), Hauerwas emphasizes the communitarian characteristic of life, specifically within the church. He underlines the integral relationship between any community and the narrative that contextualizes it. With this relationship in mind, the freedom of the gospel should not be confused with individualism. True freedom may only be experienced when one is part of a community. The church is challenged to be a community of dialogue and interpretation, one that retells the stories of Israel and of the life of Jesus; and the church shapes its corporate life in accordance with the pattern of the biblical narrative. However, the church is not limited to one rigid paradigm of being. Rather, it extends the tradition in living and dynamic ways. From this perspective, the church's very existence is essential for the story being narrated. Thus no community means *no story,* and no story means *no community.*

Hauerwas (2003) asserts that we should understand God's Word as God's revelation of the narrative about Godself. He also contends that he finds "the traditional distinction between natural knowledge of God and revelation to be misleading" (p. 66). God is revealed in both the Word of God and the life of the community. While it appears that Hauerwas' narrative approach has the implicit danger of succumbing to fideism by the rejection of natural reasoning, he denies such a charge, fully aware of the perils of fideism. For Hauerwas (1981), God's narrative is the foundation of hope and courage in the church, and it serves as the driving force behind its unique nature and calling within society. Hauerwas claims that the

narrative of Jesus is a basic requirement for every Christian community, and it is the church's unique narrative that should give it a distinctive voice in society. He discusses the philosophical ramifications regarding the claims of the importance of narrative for a virtuous social ethic. The foundation of God's narrative, namely the stories of Israel and the story of Jesus, is the very heart of the church's interaction with and redemption of society.

Hauerwas argues that the intelligibility and truthfulness of Christian convictions resides in their practical force and, therefore, cannot be divorced from the particular kind of community the church is and should be. It is Hauerwas' contention that if the church is to regain its social relevancy, it must understand that its primary social task is to be a community "capable of hearing the story of God we find in the scriptures and living in a manner that is faithful to that story" (Hauerwas, 1981, p. 1). However, I contend that the church's relevancy also hinges upon its ability to sufficiently connect with the surrounding secular culture along with its various academic and practical disciplines (including the social sciences). This quest, in my view, necessitates a shared or common language that facilitates meaningful and effective dialogue. For the church to influence culture, it must be able to communicate coherently with culture.

The Use of Canonical Narrative Theology in This Study

As a conservative pastoral theologian, who has been shaped by *sola scriptura* (or bibliocentric religious culture), the following question persists in my mind: Which

authoritative source should be weighted or privileged—the adoptive parents' lived

experience or Scripture as interpreted within a particular religious and theological

tradition? I argue in this dissertation that both may be held together in dialogical and

creative tension. On the one hand, it may be demonstrated that the various lived

experiences of adoptive parents hold the power to reshape understandings of the

Divine and inform our perspectives and understandings of Scripture as it takes on

renewed meaning. On the other hand, Scripture and the story of Jesus serve to

provide an authoritative pattern for the Christian life, imbuing meaning into the very

experiences of adoptive parents. I should acknowledge that while my theological

perspective offers particular value among broader evangelical Christian circles, it

might not be as useful for a more widely diverse theological audience.

Canonical narrative theology employs the gospel story of the life, death,

resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ as a lens for exploring and interpreting our

Christian identity in the world. In this dissertation, I explore how God's self-

revelation is mediated through the stories of Scripture and provide a comparison with

and connection to the lived experiences of adoptive parents. I conclude that each

Christian adoptive parent's narrative carries its own intrinsic sense of authority that

testifies to the breadth, diversity, and richness of human experience as well as to the

abiding presence and providence of God, even in the face of suffering. Each adoptive

parent's narrative provides glimpses both of psychologically positive and negative

experiences with God. However, the narratives ultimately find a sense of spiritual

resolution, wherein hope is present.

In this research, Scripture itself is subject to reinterpretation, as new ideas emerge due to the particular narratives that inform the lived experiences of the adoptive parents and that are, in turn, transformed by those lived experiences. Also, the biblical narratives employed by research participants extend beyond simply the gospel message of the New Testament to include several relevant narrative themes from various parts of the Old Testament. To make spiritual and theological sense of these narratives, especially when considering the occasionally painful and troubling stories, I have continually asked myself how God's self-emptying love is made manifest through them.

The following excerpt comes from one of my interviews with an adoptive couple, called Art and Jolene. (Note: all names and places are changed in the interview excerpts to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the research participants). This particular couple already had biological children but then decided to adopt a little girl, after first functioning as her fosterparents.

> ART: The whole decision to be involved in foster care and children with
> needs is directly related to our faith. Now we believe this is the call of
> God, and that God's clear command was to care for the fatherless and
> widows, so it's an intrinsic part of our faith.
>
> JOLENE: It's always been in my mind and I've always loved and cared
> for children. But the idea of caring for those children who don't have
> anyone else to care for them is just what God wants everyone to do. And

we took it very personally and wanted to open up our home and care for those kids that had those needs.

RYAN (researcher): How do you think God feels about adoption, and about you as an adoptive parent?

ART: I'll jump in while I have a moment here.

JOLENE: Yeah (sniffing), I can't talk yet. [Note: she became quite emotional and tearful.]

ART: Okay. For me, the highlight of the Churches of Christ should be our care for children. We've argued through the years about lots of stuff and the world knows us for our view about lots of stuff, and yet we've failed to do a very basic ministry by which the love of Christ could have been seen in us. And our doctrine, our call to the pure gospel would've been so beautiful to the world had we demonstrated the love of God by little kids and been known for that. So I would say that God wants His [*sic*] church, His [*sic*] people to be active in children's ministries, in feeding children, and fostering children, and adoption.

[Later in the interview]

ART: I was reading through the gospels, and it became crystal clear to me that Jesus was often with children. Now, we've all read the gospels

before, and as an adoptive father, I was able to read something that I hadn't seen before. Here's Jesus who never married or had kids of his own. So why would God, who had limited time on earth, spend so much time with kids?

You read through the gospels and there's always a parent bringing their sick child to him, or the children are coming around for him to hold them and touch them; in the gospels these stories recur. From Jesus' life on earth, we only have, according to those who count these things, roughly thirty days of events in Jesus' life, and there's no day that's described in length until you get to his crucifixion. Roughly the second half of each gospel account deals with the last week in Jesus' life, so we only have partial glimpses by the Spirit of what Jesus' ministry on earth was like.

From those partial glimpses we have this single man to whom kids went, and Jesus made the time for them when the disciples were saying, "Send them away!" Even when he goes into the temple, as he's approaching his own crucifixion, and he throws out the moneychangers, you read what happens next: he welcomes the kids into the temple. It's there for a reason: that the ministry of Christ on earth involved kids. And those of us who are Christ's disciples cannot ignore it, the example that's there.

In this conversation, we see a vivid example of adoptive parents making sense of their spiritual work with foster care and adoption as it connects to the gospel story. Moreover, by connecting to the biblical narrative regarding the ministry of Christ, the church's ongoing ministry of providing care and nurturance for children is passionately understood. Furthermore, Art proceeded to argue that many of the petty theological debates of the past and present are indicted when juxtaposed with the theology of children that is illustrated in the biblical narrative. These disputes, in his opinion, were inconsequential in the larger scheme of things. He felt that we should focus our attention on those more important matters about which God seems most concerned in Scripture. Our ecclesial environment often demarcates both the topics and the parameters of the conversations in which we engage. The example above is illustrative of the argument I make in this study that Scripture and human experience both shed light on each other. The church needs to embrace the biblical narrative by finding its center in the life and death of Jesus; and it must grasp the implications for us as God's adopted sons and daughters (cf. Romans 8:14-17) and responsible and blessed members of the household of God.

CHAPTER THREE

SOCIAL SCIENCE SCAFFOLDS

Introduction

The social sciences are helpful dialogue partners for constructing a more nuanced theology that is situated at the intersection of the academy, the church, and society. Knowledge from these secular fields of inquiry reveals the human condition as they address culture, embodied experience, and suffering in understandable and comprehensive terms. The social sciences also provide us with theoretical models and applied psychosocial research findings for purposes of helpful dialogue with narrative theology and lived experiences. In exploring the narratives of adoptive parents, the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and family studies warrant our attention. Each of these fields provides relevant viewpoints and theoretical bases for understanding how adoptive parents possibly think, feel, interpret, and act.

Psychology has traditionally focused more on the individual's cognitive functioning, personality formation, and behavior. In contrast, sociology and family studies have employed a systemic or ecological approach toward anthropological understanding. These latter disciplines make human interaction and social relationships in specific sociocultural contexts their primary foci. The narratives of adoptive parents are more effectively understood and interpreted when viewed from the blended perspectives not only of individual persons but also from the systemic understandings of family environment and larger ecological systems within society.

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The sources I have selected for this project are integral disciplines that inform my theological theory of God's nature and self-revelation through the vehicle of human relationship.

In my study, the social sciences function to allow for a richer and more tangible understanding of adoption practices and experiences, which occur in particular sociocultural settings. These cognate disciplines enlighten my theological theory by serving as an ongoing feedback loop, whereby new information is continually engaging narrative theological understandings of God's relationship with humanity as revealed in the narratives of adoptive parents. While these narratives hold implicit and embedded authority at the microlevel of personal experience, the social sciences hold broader significance at the macrolevel by providing alternate ways of perceiving the human condition. Thus the social sciences provide us with access into the workings of the psyche and suggest theoretical understandings of human experience and relationship. Moreover, they provide a theoretical base for interpreting human narratives from a slightly more objective and empirical perspective, while also acknowledging the intersubjective nature of such inquiry. Psychological and sociological theories are able to interact with the experiential narratives in fruitful ways by suggesting reasoned explanations of how or why these narratives are made possible and what they may represent. Finally, the narrative theological approach I use facilitates theological reflection that addresses the practice of adoption within the context of the Christian community and holds the practice morally and theologically accountable.

Most appropriate for the current research are those resources from sociology, family studies, and psychology that directly contribute to the ever-growing body of knowledge regarding adoption studies and of narrative formation and structuring. From the sociological perspective, I employ the public policy critique of E. Wayne Carp (2004) to disclose the political nature of adoption practices. I employ the helpful adoption demographic data and sociocultural interpretations provided by Adamec and Pierce (2000). Moreover, I dialogue with Esposito and Biafora's (2007) work regarding the United States' social history of adoption that forms a sociological backdrop to contextualize present adoption policies and practices. From the psychological dimension, I dialogue with Judith Daniluk and Joss Hurtig-Mitchell's (2003) findings to help uncover several of the mental and emotional processes experienced by adoptive parents. I also draw from Bird, Peterson, and Hotta Miller's (2002) work to delineate a few of the potential causes of unusual stress in adoptive parenting. Furthermore, I dialogue with Rosaria Ceballo et al.'s (2004) research on factors that buffer the stressors of adoptive parenting.

Also relevant for the present purposes are those counseling and psychological fields of study that construct new narrative psychological theories of self-identity, mental processing, memory structure, and meaning making within the context of human relationships. I have selected Fireman, McVay, and Flanagan's (2003) research in narrative psychology as well as Habermas and Bluck's (2000) paradigm of "autobiographical reasoning" for the purpose of setting forth the basic principles of this approach toward understanding how persons recall and make sense of their

experiences. By incorporating the social sciences of psychology and sociology into my pastoral theological method with intention, while respecting the integrity of these fields and avoiding interdisciplinary syncretism, my work becomes more accountable, relevant, and publicly accessible. Furthermore, this process also nuances my theological constructions by exploring lived narratives within their own particular sociocultural contexts.

Outline of Chapter

I now enter into a discussion describing the specific sources that inform my current research and outline the remainder of this chapter. First, I discuss the sociocultural context of adoptive parents' experiences. In this section, the following topics are addressed in some detail: (1) the politicization of adoption; (2) socioeconomic demographics of adoptive parents; (3) age concerns impacting adoptive parenthood; (4) infertility as a requirement for adopting newborns; (5) transracial adoption as resistance to racism; (6) cultural insensitivity toward adoptive families; and (7) the need for a systemic perspective.

Second, I outline a number of the psychological sources that inform my current understandings of adoptive parent experiences. These include the following: (1) issues and processes related to infertility; (2) emotional maturity; (3) implications of adopting multiple children; (4) implications of adopting children from foster care; (5) factors impacting the transition to adoptive parenthood; and (6) emotion-focused coping strategies. Third, I explore narrative psychology and its conceptual

framework as a helpful source for clarification of psychospiritual processes and existing cognitive schemas within my work.

Fourth, I discuss the topic of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is the primary research methodology I employ as a strategy for collecting, sorting, and interpreting narrative data. This qualitative approach is suitable for the project because it generates the themes from narrative data through induction rather than by imposition upon the data of a predetermined thematic template. According to researcher K. Charmaz (2000), "Grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data" (p. 509). Grounded theory has gained wide acceptance as a valid research method among experts across many disciplines of the social sciences during the past couple of decades (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008). This approach to research has rapidly become an influential paradigm for field research in the social sciences because of its flexibility and adaptability to various contexts. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a discussion concerning the various implications and contradictions of the social science fields that I employ in my project.

Sociocultural Context of Adoptive Parents' Experiences

The Politicization of Adoption

North American culture, including its public policy, societal myths, norms, and standards of morality, wields considerable influence upon the general

population's views of adoption. E. Wayne Carp (2004) describes the politicization of adoption in American society with foci on adopted persons' civil rights and the special interest groups—such as gay rights activists—who seek to change the traditional meaning of "family." On July 5, 2007, journalist Tim Padgett of *Time Magazine* reported in his article "Gay family values" that Colorado's Governor Bill Ritter had signed into law "a bill making Colorado the 10th state to allow gay and lesbian partners to adopt children as couples instead of restricting parental rights to one partner." This legislation elicited a strong reaction from many residents of that state as a new political course was charted, acknowledging same-sex partners as parents with full rights and legal guardianship.

While most adoptive parents are married couples or partners, it is now possible for single persons to adopt children. If the singles are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, certain states will allow them to adopt, while others prohibit such individuals from adopting or at least make the process very difficult. New Hampshire, for instance, rescinded its ban on homosexual adoption in 1999, sending shockwaves throughout the nation. As of 2000, Florida law considers adoption by homosexuals to be "not in the best interests of the child," while other states have not mentioned sexual orientation criteria for eligibility or ineligibility to adopt (Adamec & Pierce, 2000).

Not surprisingly, there remains an emphasis in many conservative religious groups on "traditional family values." To build rapport with their conservative voters in Middle America, politicians often knowingly employ this ideal as a slogan in their

campaigns. The nostalgic ideals of family, children, and parenthood remain strong sentiments in our society and culture. However, in reality, this societal ideal is now primarily archaic, as evidenced by unwed pregnancy rates, single parenthood, divorce, blended families, older relatives who care for a family's young, and the many children neglected by governmental social agencies (such as the states' human services departments and child protective services). From a policy standpoint, many might argue that the government systems' neglect of children has nothing to do with the disappearing values of America. Many would say that the root of the problem is the families who create problem situations needed to be handled by the government and that the government's neglect is from a lack of money and resources. While the myth of the "traditional family" is perpetuated in the collective consciousness of America, the statistics reveal a different story. Adoptive families are generally accepted in society but somewhat remain an anomaly within the larger population.

World politics affects international adoption policies, and a few impoverished Third World countries either have heavy restrictions or completely ban adoptions of their young citizens by persons from other wealthier nations. Many countries will limit adoptions of healthy infants to married couples only, often requiring them to have a minimum of two to three years of marriage experience beforehand. Prospective single adoptive parents are many times referred by agencies to seek "hard-to-place children" or "waiting children." However, singles are often successful in their efforts to adopt infants from foreign countries. Furthermore, they are also now finding increased success in seeking to adopt domestic born infants.

Socioeconomic and Educational Demographics of Adoptive Parents

Informational data gleaned from the National Center for Health Statistics

(1999) deduced that of the adoptive mothers ages twenty-two to forty-four at the time

of their research, approximately 33% were college graduates. Twenty-seven percent

had attended college and received some credits without graduating. Approximately

24% had earned their high school diploma or a GED. Merely 16% of the adoptive

mothers had failed to graduate from high school. Of the available data, more than

50% of the married adoptive mothers (ages twenty two to forty-four) lived at an

income level three or more times the poverty level. On the other hand, those persons

who adopt their foster children are often "blue collar" or working class, due to the

simple fact that most fosterparents generally come from these socioeconomic levels.

Relative-adoption (i.e., adopting extended kin) in the foster care system is increasing,

and this parental population is generally older and less financially secure than

nonrelative adopters of foster children. Few if any fees are involved in adopting a

former foster child and subsidies are often available to those adoptive parents that

"rescue" children from the public child welfare system, especially those who are

classified as having "special needs."

In certain states, following the legal termination of the parental rights of

birthparents, fosterparents adopt more than half of the children adopted from state

custody. While social workers' first goal is reunification of foster children with their

birthfamilies, the trend is to encourage fosterparents to adopt them. Social workers

often habitually attempt to place wards of the state with caregivers who may become

appropriate permanent placements if birth family reunification fails to succeed. These types of placements are referred to as "foster/adopt" or "at-risk adoptive" placements.

Private adoption, particularly international adoption, remains a luxury for those in the middle to upper classes, due to the prohibitive fees involved. All my interviewees who had adopted internationally generally appeared to be college graduates with gainful employment that resulted in fairly comfortable lifestyles. Those who had adopted domestically through private agencies also appeared to be relatively financially stable. A few who had adopted through a state's department of human services and had, at one time, been fosterparents were not always as economically blessed. In my sample, there is a large numeric discrepancy between the white adoptive parents and those of another race or origin, with the former significantly outnumbering the latter.

The education level of the adoptive fathers in my study was as follows: one possessed a twelfth grade education, one had a couple of years of college training, two held associate's or technical degrees/certifications, four held bachelor's degrees, ten held master's degrees, and two held doctorate degrees. The education level of the adoptive mothers was as follows: two had some college training, one held an associate's degree, eight held bachelor's degrees, eight held master's degrees, and one held a doctorate degree. The adoptive parents were primarily from the middle to upper-middle socioeconomic classes. Their vocational background varied, including educational positions, medical or helping professions, full-time ministry, insurance

business, manufacturing, engineering, professional assistants, professional drivers, and homemakers.

Until recently, some adoption agencies have required adoptive mothers to take an extended maternity leave following the receiving of a child. However, the national percentage of all mothers working outside the home has significantly increased in the past couple of decades, in addition to the number of adoptive mothers who must maintain outside employment. This phenomenon has resulted in agencies that require one parent to leave work being faced with significant resistance from adoptive parents. State laws regarding parental leave vary, though the Federal Family and Medical Leave Act permits a maximum of twelve weeks of unpaid leave to care for a child. In adoptive parents' and adopted children's distinct favor is that the law specifically includes both nonadopted and adopted children. Moreover, employees' benefits may include some leave, adoption credits or reimbursements, and possibly other much-needed assistance. Larger companies are often able to be more generous than smaller businesses that have limited resources (Adamec & Pierce, 2000).

Age Concerns Impacting Adoptive Parenthood

The age-range of most infertile couples seeking to adopt infants is mid-twenties to late-thirties or early-forties. A large number of adoption agencies exclude adoption applications from persons under the age of twenty-five. Conversely, certain agencies have established an age limit that denies applications for infants from persons exceeding the age of forty-five or so. Those persons adopting internationally

may be older than persons adopting in the United States because restrictions are less

rigid. Certain countries in Latin America will accept prospective adoptive parents

until the age of fifty-five. Yet, other countries adhere to age guidelines that are as

strict or more stringent than those of U.S. adoption agencies applying to domestically

born infants. Likely, the less restrictive policies in certain countries are due to the

countries' societal hardships such as overcrowded orphanages and an excessive

number of governmental custodians awaiting adoption. Ostensibly, an additional

reason concerns some cultures' positive regard for those persons who have lived into

their senior years. In these cultures, elder persons with more life experience are

valued and esteemed as possessing sought-after wisdom (Adamec & Pierce, 2000).

Infertility as a Requirement for Adopting Newborns

The diagnosis of infertility is usually a prerequisite for applying to most

adoption agencies that place infants. Documented medical evidence of infertility may

even be required as proof. The vast majority of adoptive parents have suffered from

primary infertility, meaning that they have never borne a child, while a percentage of

them have faced secondary infertility. Adoption agency social workers attempt to

determine whether or not the couple has sufficiently resolved most of their anxieties

and psychological conflicts concerning their infertility to be certain the couple will be

emotionally capable of fully accepting an adopted child into their home. Adoption

agencies that place newborns have the power to restrict application to only childless

couples or those with one child. This policy's result is the adoption of no more than

one or two children in most families, unless a family is willing to adopt a sibling

group (which would be categorized as a "special needs" adoption) (Adamec & Pierce,

2000). In my opinion, this situation represents a social injustice whereby decision-

makers at agencies wield power over prospective adoptive parents and unfairly limit

their freedom to decide for themselves regarding how many children they want.

Transracial Adoption as Resistance to Racism

While eight of the couples in my study were of the same racial background as

their adopted children, twelve couples had adopted from a different racial/ethnic

heritage. A couple of decades ago, Thomas Cook (1988) engaged in a comparative

study between those adoptive parents who adopted same-race children and those who

adopted transracially. His revealing research ironically indicated that biological

parents experience the most adjustment difficulties. However, he also posited that

transracial adopters have the second highest level of adjustment difficulty. The

category that experiences the least number of adjustment challenges is adoptive

parents who share a common racial heritage with their adopted children. The stability

evinced in the study is likely due in part to the factor that, considering their age,

adoptive parents of younger children have approximately twice the amount of married

years of experience than biological parents.

With the increase of interracial marriages and partnerships within our culture,

which often result in biracial offspring, it is now much more socially acceptable to

adopt transracially. However, it should be acknowledged that there remains

significant ambivalence regarding the practice of transracial adoption among

minorities in the United States. Still, these types of adoptions often appear to have a

positive impact in debunking racial stereotypes and overcoming biases, especially in

our churches. For example, a white couple named Lester and Gwen stated that the

arrival of their first biracial adopted son seemed to prepare their extended family for

the later births of Lester's biological, biracial nephews and nieces. Gwen reflected

that the adoption of their son perhaps helped to offset prejudiced attitudes the older

family relatives might have otherwise felt toward their biological descendants. What

follows is a portion of our dialogue:

> GWEN: At Christmas we were all there, and we were looking around at
>
> the two blonde children and then the three dark-headed kids, and I said to
>
> Lester's dad –
>
> RYAN (Researcher): What a mix. That must be fascinating.
>
> GWEN: I said, "Did you ever think your grandkids were going to be so
>
> colorful?" He said, "Colorful? That's a good word."

Later in the conversation, the same theme of overcoming embedded racism was

discussed regarding the congregational context. It was enlightening to hear the

adoptive mother's description of the effect of transracial adoption in their home

congregation.

GWEN: I think for us, we get to help God teach some lessons because of Elijah. He is the first black baby a lot of people have held, because when he was little, he didn't care who you were. He was just Mister Friendly. He'd walk up, look up, lift those arms up, and then what are you going to do? You either had to look at this beautiful baby boy and say, "No, I'm not going to pick you up." And people would look at us and go, "What do I do?" It's like, "You can pick him up." And he didn't see black or white; he didn't see young or old. And I just have this picture of some old white man going, "Okay, I'm going to pick up this baby." And we have even had people say to us, "He has changed us." We live in a city where there's a big race issue—and people have said, "He's changed my mind about the whole race thing."

RYAN (Researcher): That is powerful.

This couple's transracial adoption had a far-reaching impact not only upon themselves but also upon their entire faith community. In this example, it is obvious how the dynamic interaction of cultural differences, courage, and decisions to overcome racial stereotypes effected change in other's lives. Former unhealthy perspectives and storylines were challenged and transformed within the communal life of this church.

Cultural Insensitivity toward Adoptive Families

Adoptive parents described their experiences of being confronted with thoughtless and insensitive comments from other persons. One adoptive mother recalled how her female friends often said to her, "Adoptive mothers are so lucky, because they are just handed a baby without having to go through all the pain of childbirth." Most barren adoptive mothers would gladly go through the hardships of labor to have a child of their own. Another couple told me that when progress in their adoption process had ceased, certain well-meaning church members said to them, "You should just pray harder than you are." Others asked, "Have you been praying *specifically* for an adopted child?" The adoptive father spontaneously exclaimed during the interview, "Well no, I have been praying for a chicken. Thanks for your suggestion—now I will know to actually pray for a child." One adoptive mother described the hurtful and misguided statements made to her by a "friend" who accused her of hiding a secret sin in her life and suggested that God was punishing her through infertility.

Adoptive father Steven described the isolation he sometimes felt due to the lack of understanding he had experienced when persons were not empathetic to his and his wife's struggle in raising adopted children who had suffered from physical and sexual abuse. Steven and Judy were frustrated by the unsolicited and unfitting advice about discipline that they received from certain individuals who had no personal experience in foster care or adoptive parenting whatsoever, much less with

abused and victimized children. Steven would find himself screaming inside his head, "No, we have an abused child, thank you. Discipline will not work here."

The Need for a Systemic Perspective

A real challenge faced in adoption studies pertains to the limited perspective often presented from the social sciences. Esposito and Biafora (2007) have argued that the body of literature on adoption primarily views it through the perspective of the individual actors of the adoption triad, including the birthparents, child, and adoptive parents. A multisystemic perspective could be helpful in more holistically understanding the overall picture of adoption. The focus of many studies in the past has centered on pathology and dysfunction, which also serves to distort our thinking (Fisher, 2003). In researching broader samples of adoptive parents with diverse backgrounds and adoption stories, a more complete picture of adoptive families may be facilitated. It would likely be beneficial to the adoption enterprise to focus more on strengths and competencies, rather than only on the problems and deficits of a narrow sample population of adoptive families. However, I believe a percentage of the families I interviewed possibly needed medical or therapeutic treatment but may not have sought such help for various unknown reasons, while others had received professional help along the way and continued to receive it.

Psychological Sources Informing Adoptive Parents' Experiences

I have already uncovered some of the myths surrounding adoption, including the deficit model through which adoptive families are all too often viewed.

Nonetheless, most of the couples I interviewed showed many signs of strength, resilience, efficacy, realism, and emotional and relational stability. They often described their adopted children as talented, capable, enjoyable, and well-adjusted persons. There were those parents, however, who had suffered from the residual emotional issues and psychological problems of their children. Psychology research has primarily focused on clinical populations of adopted persons and adoptive families. Adopted children have often been labeled as "troubled" and portrayed as relationally unattached and somehow emotionally impoverished. The truth is that these reports seem to be grossly overstated and overgeneralized.

Many childless adults report a desire to adopt a child because of their love for children and their sense of missing something important in their lives. Those adults who already have biological or stepchildren often emphasize what they have to offer a child rather than receive from him or her, such as a happy and stable family life (Adamec & Pierce, 2000). Most adoptive families appear to function satisfactorily at the psychological and relational levels. However, there are those families in which primarily older children have been adopted and, therefore, troubling issues arise and unanticipated psychological strains surface. The problems of past experiences result in difficulties in the present and often affect children's emotional stability, behavioral patterns, and ability to satisfactorily attach to their adoptive parents and siblings. This factor negatively impacts the adoptive parents' ability to bond with these children, who may seem very unlovable at times and often present severe challenges

of oppositional-defiance and strong resistance to the parents' care and authority in the home.

The adoptive parents may be unprepared for the emotional strains and family systemic upheaval that result as their children's history and, therefore, their own stories collide. The parents' narratives may have unresolved issues from their own painful stories regarding infertility, miscarriages, grief, and disappointment. The children's narratives may be fragmented, holding unresolved themes of previous caregivers' betrayals of trust, profound sadness over personal loss, developmental delays, and emotional difficulties resulting from their past history. The adoptive family may struggle systemically when these various factors combine. A recurring theme in my interviews was adoptive parents' sense of guilt for occasionally disliking their child and finding the child's behavior repulsive. For instance, Mike had wondered earlier in his life as a parent if he and his wife had made the right decision to adopt their son. Mike confessed he had often second-guessed and occasionally almost regretted the decision because their adopted son had caused so much heartache for him, his wife, and their two younger biological children. This feeling of regret represented an ongoing and nagging source of guilt for him. Adoptive parents most commonly experience these types of disquieting feelings when adoptive children exhibit various distasteful behaviors. However, despite these troubling feelings, they continue to deeply love their children and generally remain committed to them.

A few research participants displayed a sense of shame and self-reproach by their own intermittent desire to return the adopted child to her or his place of origin.

These types of negative emotions often seemed to be the result of the upheaval in their lives that they experienced after initially adopting their children. These parents reported experiencing an adverse reaction to all the personal and familial adjustments and new responsibilities required to accommodate the children. A number of the research participants described how they had longed for the days prior to the adoption when they had been subject to less chaotic routines and schedules. They missed the peace and quiet they had once enjoyed. One adoptive mother described her troubling experience as being somewhat comparable to a biological mother's postpartum depression.

Issues and Processes Related to Infertility

In my research population sample, fifteen out of the twenty couples had pursued adoption due to health concerns related to fertility issues, miscarriages, or other physical maladies. Psychologists Judith Daniluk and Joss Hurtig-Mitchell (2003), in their research concerning the experiences of those who adopt due to unsuccessful fertility treatments, have offered findings regarding the basic psychological process that adoptive parents undergo in beginning to view adoption as a viable alternative to bearing children themselves. I find that their tripartite sequence, namely (1) revisioning family by deciding to adopt, (2) the crucible of the adoption process, and (3) coming full circle in parenting, illuminates many of the stories I heard during the interviews. Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell's positing of the significance of the sociocultural context wherein the adoption process occurs is also

helpful. Furthermore, I find their observation regarding particular religious contexts, in which spiritual beliefs are fostered in persons concerning being predestined to adopt specific children, to be quite enlightening. This factor, however, does not adequately address issues of ongoing and profound sadness because of infertility and/or miscarriages that persist even after adoption has occurred.

A few of the male research participants in my study reported that they previously had felt "broken" and "less of a man" due to their inability to impregnate their wives. In some cases, this medical problem had been perceived as a threat to their masculinity and self-image. In contrast, a larger percentage of the females in the study reported they had felt "less of a woman," as their sense of femininity and usefulness had been threatened by an inability to produce offspring "for their husbands." Their self-worth and sense of purpose as women had been compromised. Therefore, they had previously felt worthless and useless because they were unable to fulfill what they considered their God-given responsibility as a woman, namely to "be fruitful and multiply" (cf. Gen 1:28). These women had found it difficult to be in close proximity to their female friends who were either pregnant or with their children. Watching friends carrying out their "motherly duties" represented a constant reminder of their own sense of incompleteness and inadequacy as women. They had experienced a pervasive sense of grief and loss because they felt they had been "robbed of the gift and joy of motherhood."

The Effect of Emotional Maturity (in Adoptive Parents)

Age is often a predictor of current emotional maturity. In my research sample, the current adoptive fathers' ages ranged from thirty-six to seventy-four years of age. The mean (average age) of the adoptive fathers' current age was forty-nine. The age of the adoptive fathers at the time of their first (or only) adoption ranged from twenty-seven to forty-nine years of age, with the mean being forty years of age. The current adoptive mothers' ages ranged from thirty-five to seventy-one years of age, with the mean being forty-eight years of age. The age of the adoptive mothers at the time of their first (or only) adoption ranged from twenty-seven to forty-five years of age, with the mean being thirty-six years of age. Thus the adoptive parents were on average approximately a decade older than their biological parent counterparts.

In their study, Rosaria Ceballo et al. (2004) discovered some of the advantages that adoptive couples may have over other parents. Due to the fact that adoptive parents are generally older than other parents, they often possess more finely honed coping skills and strategies, are generally somewhat more financially stable than younger couples, and have at their disposal more marital communication skills than other parents. The above factors seem to put adoptive couples at a slight advantage as these factors serve to "buffer marital relationships from the demands of parenting" (p. 39). These factors apparently offset a number of the struggles and troubles that seem to be endemic to the adoption enterprise. However, I have learned from my research that this age disparity also represents several challenges to older

adoptive parents raising young children due to limited energy resources and physical demands of parenthood. Yet, another age-related struggle arises on account of outside persons' expectations (for example, church members) that these couples fulfill leadership roles requiring increased communal responsibility than their younger biological parent counterparts, due to having reached a more mature developmental lifestage.

Implications of Adopting Multiple Children

Nine of the families in my study had adopted two children, and one family had adopted three. Adopting more than one child has a significant impact upon the mental and emotional well-being of adoptive parents. Bird, Peterson, & Hotta Miller (2002) have positively correlated the relationship between the variables of the children's ages at adoption, as well as the number of adopted children, with increased levels of adoptive parental stress and anxiety. In other words, the older the children are at adoption (particularly the most recently adopted child) and the larger the number of children, the greater the level of stress and anxiety for the parents. This finding is presented in my research too, particularly when one or more of the children were adopted beyond the age of two. The stress and anxiety in this situation was often the result of the psychological issues that frequently plagued these children as they grew older and the strain this single factor placed upon the adoptive families.

Implications of Adopting Children out of Foster Care

In my population sample, four couples received children through state foster-adopt programs. Two families, however, had adopted through the department of human services without first providing fostercare. When adopted children have previously been in the fostercare system, there are additional difficulties for not only the children, but also their adoptive caregivers. The past treatment of the children and the consistency/inconsistency and adequacy/inadequacy of the children's nurturance in prior placements greatly affect the children's current behaviors.

In postadoption, a number of couples struggle to cope with the various emotional and behavioral problems of their children. These emotional scars and psychological baggage arise from the trauma to which these children were exposed in the earlier and preadoption periods of their life. The spiritual strain of managing difficult or troubled children regularly surfaces as an underlying source of discouragement and disillusionment. A few couples in my research sample described the sadness that one or both spouses experienced because of being the target of aggressive and hateful behavior from their children. This aggression often seemed to be targeted at the adoptive parent to whom the child may actually have felt closest and to whom the child was most emotionally attached. For example, Mason, in considering his child's aggressive behavior toward his wife, commented on how they had both failed to recognize, beforehand, the exceedingly difficult challenge that foster care and adoption were going to present, prior to committing to this "path of discipleship."

Shannon and Asa reflected upon the extremely difficult and discouraging issues with which they had been confronted, as related to the consequences of the inadequate prenatal care and the preadoption neglect and abuse experienced by their daughter. Due to the birthmother's use of drugs and alcohol during the pregnancy, and then the later physical victimization of their daughter by her birthfather, this adoptive couple was left having to "pick up the broken pieces" of their daughter's life. They described the grief and suffering they had endured together while trying to address the many troubling residual effects to their daughter's personality, developmental delays, and disturbing psychopathological behaviors. They could not easily dismiss their disappointment regarding the consequences of her past life experiences upon her present behavior and their deep sadness and disillusionment because of the many difficulties this situation had presented to them as a couple on so many levels.

Factors Impacting the Transition to Adoptive Parenthood

In comparing adoptive parents with biological parents as they discuss specific factors involved, Alessandra Santona and Giulio Cesare Zavattini (2005) are helpful in their exploration of the various dynamics involved in transitioning to adoptive parenting. Santona and Zavattini indicate that since most persons applying to become adoptive parents have in their background a history of sterility or infertility, they are likely to possess deep psychological wounds as well as suffer related grief processes. Next, these researchers identify the anxiety and stress resulting from legal and

bureaucratic requirements by which prospective adoptive couples endure lengthy evaluative procedures consisting of multiple steps under the oversight of institutions that hold power over them.

An adoptive mother named Nikki described her anxiety resulting from the invasiveness of the adoption process itself. She and her husband Wendell recalled being asked unnervingly personal questions by the social workers during the course of their home studies, a state requirement for receiving eligibility to adopt. They and other interviewees complained, "Why is it that prospective adoptive parents are forced to undergo this harrowing process while any teenage girl who is able to become pregnant, bear a child, and keep it, is free to do so without having to demonstrate her fitness for parenthood?" It appears the psychological desperation of many married couples to have children is often used as leverage over them by federally funded and state-run social service organizations. However, what choice do they truly have except to comply with the various requisites imposed upon them if they ever stand a chance to become parents?

Another stress-causing factor relates to the implementation of the adoption plan and the waiting period that often remains uncertain and is beyond the control of the prospective adoptive parents. Lester and Gwen reported struggles with self-doubt and disappointment when, during the adoptive parent selection process, birthmothers chose other couples over them. Gwen recalled the deep desire to be a mother but also the continual, profound disappointment when she was not selected. One adoptive parent identified a spiritual paradox: although God favors adoption, the process itself

is often thorny and complex. Discussed a few times during interviews was the reality of extended family members' resistance to nonbiological lineage and the consequent discouragement of the adoptive couples. In addition, the emotional upheaval of false starts and dashed hopes because of the failure of potential matches and placements added to the duress and despair endured by several adoptive couples.

One more element regarding added stress relates to the additional parenting responsibilities (beyond those normally expected of biological parents) that are placed upon adoptive parents after eventually receiving a child. These responsibilities include having to cope with and accept unknowns regarding the child's history, gaining an understanding of their child's special physical and psychological needs and the reasons behind possibly maladaptive behavior, and acquiring the ability to ultimately help the child accept the emotional trauma of the biological parents' relinquishment. As adopted children begin to comprehend the meaning of relinquishment, "their anger and resentment toward the birth parents or their sadness over losing their biological parents may be transferred to the adoptive parents" (Fraser, 2005, p. 71; cf. Smit, 2002, pp. 147-148).

Emotion-Focused Coping (of Adoptive Parents)

According to Bird et al. (2002), "Coping strategies refer to the ways that people deal with situations appraised as stressful. Coping strategies usually are activated either to manage the problem causing the distress (problem-focused coping) or to regulate the emotions aroused by the problem (emotion-focused coping)" (p.

216). For example, "emotion-focused coping strategies include avoiding the problem, distancing oneself from the problem, and hoping that a miracle will happen to solve the problem . . . Emotion-focused coping has been linked to increased feelings of distress in the general population" (p. 216). Thus emotion-focused coping strategies are those internal reactions employed to deal with unpleasant emotional reactions resulting from problems and/or stressful situations.

The maladaptive strategies used by certain adoptive parents include "Pollyanna approaches" to attempt to ease their unpleasant feelings. These often are merely wishful thinking, hoping the problem will simply vanish, or believing that enough love can magically change a severely emotionally disturbed child. Those adoptive parents who operate from a stance of naivety are destined for problems themselves and tremendous disappointment and distress. Bird et al. (2002) point out that while emotion-focused coping strategies are seldom effective for long time periods, neither are such strategies as detaching or avoiding the children, giving into fatalism, or trying to emotionally escape by filling one's time with activities away from the child and his or her problems. While a few of the above strategies may work over the short-term and provide some immediate relief, they will not indefinitely sustain adoptive parents psychologically. Any parent certainly needs occasional respite, but continually "running from the problem" is clearly not the right solution. Those adoptive parents who use problem-focused approaches and proactively tackle the problems seem to fare much better in the long run. Facing the realities of

problems with courage and determination rather than escaping into fantasy and avoidance produces more satisfactory results.

In the next section, I turn to the topic of narrative psychology. While I fully recognize that narrative psychology is a field of study located within the social science of psychology, I purposely have culled this information from the other material because narrative psychology has not until now been used as a resource to facilitate greater understanding of adoptive parents' interpretations of their own experiences. I distinguish between those social science fields that directly focus on adoption research and narrative psychology that provides a cognitive theoretical model concerning how persons give structure to and interpret their lived experiences. I engage this newer discipline within psychology to facilitate a conceptual framework for how adoptive parents construct personal narratives regarding their experiences and reassemble memories into coherent storylines.

Narrative Psychology

The "storied nature" of human personality is upheld within psychology research, providing an alternate method for conceptualizing human thought and action (McAdams, 1993). Psychologist Theodore Sarbin (1986) provided foundational thought for the definition of the narratory principle as "that human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures" (p. 8). More recently, psychologists Fireman, McVay, and Flanagan (2003) have proposed the following:

Given that personal narrative and self-representation exist as human experience, are spontaneous and recurrent by early childhood, and give meaning to experience, they are therefore central to a conception and examination of human consciousness. Narrative does not merely capture aspects of the self for description, communication, and examination; narrative constructs the self (p. 5).

These same authors assert, "Narrative pervades our lives—conscious experience is not merely linked to the number and variety of personal stories we construct with each other within a cultural frame but is also consumed by them" (p. 3). Narrative facilitates the connection of our personal memories from the past to both present conditions and future hopes. Our mind accomplishes this task "by organizing, translating, and providing continuity and coherence to experience" (p. 4). Therefore, it may be argued that people's self-awareness and self-knowledge are largely constructed through narrative, as they construct and compile stories for themselves and their world. Through a "complex interplay between the experience that makes for the personal story and the personal story that structures the experience, the narrator discovers the meaning and significance of the experience" (p. 4).

Through personal narrative, the self is afforded a sense of continuity and meaning is attached to action. Part of the process of personal narration is locating and valuing present activity in consideration of past experiences and desired outcomes. Furthermore, narrative is intertwined with "the development of signs and language

and as such is constrained by and consistent with developmental biology and human

neurobiology as well as linguistic structures and narrative traditions" (p. 5). The

linkage of narrative to signs and language means that appropriate uncertainty

concerning truth and accuracy of personal narratives is necessary (McAdams, 1993).

When a person tells an autobiographical story, he or she engages in a conscious

process that involves selection of details/information and imagination (i.e., artistic

license). Moreover, the storytelling process is itself significantly influenced by the

listening audience, the purpose for telling the story, and the context in which the story

is told. Remembered events are mentally reassembled, resulting in an unavoidable

fictive process that "is imposed on real events in an effort to re-present the self to

others with a suasory purpose. As the line between the imagined and the factual blurs,

the difficult question of how to determine what makes a 'good' (e.g., coherent,

organized, meaningful, compelling) personal narrative becomes crucial" (Fireman,

McVay, & Flanagan, 2003, pp. 5-6).

Habermas and Bluck (2000) employ the term "autobiographical reasoning" to

describe the process whereby personal memories are reassembled into a coherent life

story that is related to the current version of the self. These researchers outline four

distinct components that comprise autobiographical reasoning, including the

following: (1) temporal coherence—the linear sequencing of events in time; (2)

causal coherence—explaining life event and changes in the narrator's personality; (3)

thematic coherence—an analysis of common themes among various memories; and

(4) the cultural concept of biography—a set of cultural mores dictating which events

are selected for incorporation into a life story. Narratives construct us, while we reciprocally construct narratives. Thus we employ the vehicle of narrative to bring meaning to our experiences, while narrative simultaneously reconstructs our experiences. Furthermore, our ability to describe human experience itself is limited by the language structures we have at our disposal as well as by our sociocultural context. This context not only supplies us with prescribed ways of thinking and communicating, but may also blind us to certain facets of suffering and liberation, despair and hope, and evil and goodness. Our perspective and grasp of human experience and related meaning making are shaped as well as constrained by our internalized narratives, our use of language, and by the contextual narratives that envelop the experience itself.

The principles of narrative psychology are helpful in attempting to gain a fuller understanding of any type of remembered and described lived experience. In our case, the narratives of adoptive parents are the focus of discussion. This information aids us in recognizing that while the tool of narrative affords meaning to adoptive parents' respective experiences, it also reconstructs and reinterprets those experiences, partially depending on the sociocultural context in which those stories are narrated. The perception of the adoptive parents ultimately becomes their reality. In my research, it is also important to note that many aspects of the adoptive parents' stories were likely forgotten, intentionally omitted for some unknown reason, and occasionally edited or altered from the past's reality.

The faith context in which the adoptive parents operated doubtlessly affected

their perceptions of various happenings, struggles, and victories. Furthermore, had

the couples been interviewed individually, with the same set of questions, it is likely

they would have narrated a different set of stories. But, since spouses were

simultaneously interviewed, there was a linkage between them that resulted in a joint

telling of their collective narrative as they collaborated together and either corrected,

revised, or attempted to provide missing information for each other. It seemed each

spouse somewhat served as an external memory source (or "database" to use a

computer term) for the other. Even so, I suspect that numerous details of the

narratives were likely communicated inaccurately, as interviewees either

romanticized their experiences and/or were unable to precisely recall the finer details

of events during their reconstruction and retelling of stories. Furthermore, had

someone else conducted the interviews and had the interviews occurred in alternate

locations, it is quite possible that the responses would also have been different. I now

proceed to describe the particular social science research approach I employed to

collect, sort, and interpret narrative data.

Grounded Theory as Qualitative Research Method

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, my research protocol for collecting

and thematizing qualitative data followed grounded theory (GT). This inductive

approach provided a valuable entry point for identifying the various themes

(categories) in the faith narratives concerning adoptive parenting. The creation of

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), GT has effectively been employed across

a broad spectrum of the social sciences. Glaser and Strauss creatively synthesize two major traditions of research, namely positivism and symbolic interactionism. Through GT they seek to derive theories by observing patterns, themes, and common categories discovered in observational data (Babbie, 2007, p. 296). Echevarria-Doan & Tubbs (2005) contend, "Grounded theory emerges when theoretical saturation of meanings, patterns, and categories occurs" (p. 42).

This social scientific approach to data collection and analysis facilitates the present study's purposes as relevant topics and themes have been allowed to emerge from the spiritual narratives on their own, rather than deductively being imposed on the qualitative data by me as the researcher (see Appendix K). I have also been able to maintain a satisfactory measure of detached objectivity for the purposes of establishing the core themes embedded in the narratives by following the grounded theory protocol. This factor has allowed for a system of checks and balances and for built-in accountability.

Guidelines for Grounded Theory

Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that grounded theory permits researchers to remain "scientific" while remaining free to be able to be creative in their explorations of various phenomena. However, they are insistent that researchers abide by certain stabilizing guidelines in their work. These guidelines are as follows: (1) Researchers are to think comparatively by comparing numerous incidents to avoid bias in their interpretations of early observations; (2) Researchers are to obtain multiple

viewpoints through gaining different perspectives from study participants and a variety of observational methods; (3) As data accumulates, researchers are to "step back" periodically and begin to frame interpretations and should continually check their data against those interpretations; (4) Researchers are to maintain an attitude of skepticism by regarding all initial interpretations of the data as provisional and by employing new observations to test those interpretations rather than unwarrantedly confirm them; and (5) As theories evolve, researchers are to follow the research procedures throughout the flexible data collection process by incorporating three essential techniques: "making comparisons, asking questions, and sampling" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 46).

Undergirding this approach is the basic tenet that theory must emerge from the data and be firmly grounded in the data, thereby making the theory far more inductive than deductive in nature. The purpose is to formulate an account of a phenomenon that uncovers the major constructs (or categories), their various relationships, and the particular context and process, thereby proposing a theory of the phenomenon that extends far beyond a descriptive account (Becker, 1993). While grounded theory necessitates the emergence of theory from the data, it does not compartmentalize the two. Instead, data collection, analysis, and theory formulation are understood as coexisting symbiotically, and the method utilizes certain fixed procedures to guide this reciprocal relationship.

Processes of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory employs three processes for analyzing data and derives its specific sampling procedures from these. First is *open coding*, which identifies relevant categories by investigating the raw data. Second is *axial coding*, which refines, develops, and relates the tentative categories. Third is *selective coding,* which identifies the central category that unites all the subcategories together and connects this central category to other main categories.

In my research, I have listened for how the adoptive parents' narratives are related to biblical narratives, Christian tradition, and narrative theology as well as to sociology, psychology, and counseling sources. I have employed the following three key procedures: inviting storytelling, asking questions, and making comparisons. I have carefully detailed the comparisons to inform and guide analysis and to aid me as I theorize. Once I have analyzed the interview data, recurring themes and patterns have been thematically diagrammed to reveal any connections between the various narratives. I have remained open to the possibility of there being a plurality of perspectives that may not fit in any preestablished category. The spiritual narratives themselves have represented the point of departure, with all the particularity of human experience being fully appreciated.

My attention now shifts to the implications and/or contradictions pertaining to what the social science resources contribute to the present study.

Implications and/or Contradictions in Theories

In my pastoral theological method, I employ social science theories that function as a corrective to any psychologically disembodied, socioculturally detached, or morally destitute mode of canonical narrative theology. This section summarizes the relevant implications and/or contradictions in the specific social science resources that I engage in my study. I address what is to come using the following outline: (1) perceptional considerations regarding adoption in society; (2) political considerations regarding adoption; and (3) psychological considerations regarding adoption.

Perceptional Considerations Regarding Adoption in Society

Adoptive parenting viewed as "second-rate." From my research, I have learned that adoption within our society is generally viewed as an acceptable but not a preferable strategy for growing a family. Prior to adopting, couples will often endure a prolonged series of invasive and emotionally taxing medical measures at significant expense to attempt to become pregnant. These emotionally taxing procedures include artificial insemination, fertility drugs, in vitro fertilization and implantation, and surrogacy, to name a few. It is only after exhausting most other viable possibilities, but with much heartache and frustration, that the idea of adoption is even considered by many childless couples. Even so, the very concept of adopting a child still requires much time to take hold in the couple's conscious field of possibilities. Oftentimes, various worries, fears, and shared concerns win out in the end, preventing

couples from pursuing adoption in earnest. The idea of letting go of the sociocultural expectation to produce blood-related offspring and turning to an alternative like adoption is simply too painful a proposition for many persons to bear.

The impact of the media on adoption. Frequently, the practice of adoption is viewed as a nonviable, risky legal proposition because birthparents, after relinquishing their offspring, may later return to court to attempt to reclaim the child as their own. The media appears to focus on such heartbreaking stories to create "shock value," thereby implying that such horrific situations occur often. Thus, popular mythology depicts the security of adoption as contingent upon "the whims of fickle birthparents," who may at any time change their decision and embroil adoptive parents in lengthy legal battles. Childless couples often fear that these types of precarious situations may require large amounts of time, money, and emotional resources. However, such regrettable scenarios are truly exceptional rather than commonplace.

Warren, an adoptive African American father, noted how much negative misrepresentative press about adoption exists, particularly on television shows and the Internet. Many of the adoption stories broadcasted on television concern international adoption scams and the many childless couples that are deeply hurt by getting lured into them. Other media stories are inclined to either pathologize adopted children or demean birthparents and/or adoptive parents. These pejorative representations of adoption surely have a negative impact in our society upon adoption practices and popularized perspectives.

Sociocultural definitions of "parenthood." Another negative and harmful narrative in popular culture's rhetoric about family is the myth of the superiority of biological ties over nonbiological connections. In one of my interviews, for example, Anna spoke to the topic with strong passion in her voice.

> ANNA: Well, I think that we live in a society that makes a myth of some biological connections. Like there's this myth out there that there is some biological connection between birthmother and child, and, therefore, no one can love a child the way the birthmother loves the child . . . I think that's part of the reason why we have such stupid laws about giving parents rights, that they should have lost the moment they first injured their child. But because we have this myth that there's a biological connection, we give parents chances that we wouldn't give a dog owner.

Anna proceeded to define "motherhood" as caring for a child, rather than merely giving birth to a child. I extend her sentiment to "fatherhood"; fathers should be defined on the basis of not only their contributed seed, but also on the basis of their responsibilities to protect, provide for, and nurture their children.

Social perceptions regarding adoptive parents. Sometimes, nonadoptive parents will applaud adoptive parents as individuals who demonstrate saintly virtue, while other persons will disparage adoptive parents and view them as "less than" and somehow deficient. Either of these distortions is injurious to adoptive parents' and their children's psychological, social, and spiritual well-being. Adoptive parents are

not usually seeking accolades and are simply persons who desire to have children. Because they are sometimes held to a higher standard, adoptive parents often feel that they are judged unfairly. One adoptive mother communicated to me her immense personal burden and her perceived external pressure to successfully raise her child to be a well-adjusted, responsible Christian adult. She clearly seemed to fear the possibility of failure in this "monumental task," and this pressure and anxiety eroded her confidence and self-esteem as a mother. When adoptive couples believe others in society consider them deficient, they may internalize that pejorative narrative to their own detriment. Their personal sense of individual and familial wholeness may therefore be seriously jeopardized.

Political Considerations Regarding Adoption

  Adoption and public policy. Sociologists Dawn Esposito and Frank Biafora (2007) uncover various paradoxes endemic to the historical development of adoption practices. In the past century, the field of sociology has identified larger cultural and political trends that have wielded a significant influence upon adoption practices. Sociological influences, research in psychology, and public policy have clearly imposed a powerful impact upon adoptive parents and their children. On the one hand, greater awareness concerning adoption issues has helped to promote the use of adoption language that serves the adoption triad more beneficially and focuses on the competencies and strengths of birthparents, adoptive parents, and adopted persons alike. On the other hand, current domestic and international law as well as certain

adoption practices create an immovable barrier to those who desire to place their children for adoption and those persons wishing to adopt the children.

In the United States, a few states like Texas are "adoption-friendly" in their legal policies, proactively seeking the termination of unfit birthparents' custodial rights. Compared to other states, Texas imposes shorter "waiting periods" in which birthparents are permitted to change their minds concerning the relinquishment of their parental rights after adoption. One couple in my research made the observation that, while Texas only permits up to forty-eight hours for birthparents to change their minds, other states allow birthparents sixty to ninety days, forcing adoptive couples to agree to what has become referred to as "high risk" or "at-risk" adoptions. Adoptive parents continue to have relatively few rights in several states during the early days of welcoming a child into their family; and blood-relatives continue to hold more rights and privileges, irrespective of whether or not they are neglectful of parental responsibilities and/or are abusive to the children in those families.

Challenges posed by international politics. Vanessa and John, who adopted two children from South America, described "the evil that militates against God's purposes and seems to stand in opposition to the Divine will." They spoke of their frustration with political delays and continually changing governmental policies that hinder the practice of international adoption. Vivian, a medical professional, decried how children in China qualify as special needs cases if they simply exceed the age of nine or ten months. In their governmental system, when children are no longer infants, they are labeled as "waiting children." This designation encompasses a large

category that includes other criteria such as having a disfiguring mole, cerebral palsy, congenital heart disease, or any other characteristic that somehow marks a child.

Political correctness and transracial adoption. John and Vanessa, who adopted two Latino children, discussed the popular view that it is immoral to deprive a child of their racial, cultural, and ethnic heritage and religious belief system. This social concept asserts that children are best served by remaining in their own culture. But if for some unfortunate reason they must be removed from the culture due to war, famine, poverty, or death of both parents, their religious and cultural heritage should be maintained. While this may sound appealing at face value, what if the child's birth family's religious belief system is not Christian and possibly even antagonistic to Christianity? One can easily see the issue is not as clear-cut as one might first believe. Adoptive parents are often placed in an awkward predicament.

Psychological Considerations Regarding Adoption

Contradictions in research on adoptive parents' well-being. The social sciences reveal that adoptive families generally appear to experience comparable satisfaction to other families (Borders, Black, & Pasley, 1998). This finding, however, seems somewhat contradictory when considering the related findings regarding added stressors caused by the adoption process for adoptive parents (Smith & Howard, 1999). These stressors are sometimes partially due to the genetic and placement history of adopted children; examples include alcohol and substance abuse during pregnancy or neglect or abandonment during early childhood. Sometimes,

adoptive parents are confronted with a lack of background medical information on their child, troubling behaviors, emotional disturbance (especially with older children), psychological strains as well as inadequate parental coping skills (Bird, Peterson, & Hotta Miller, 2002). It is difficult for me to reconcile these two apparently mutually exclusive findings. Logically one may reason that increased stress would seemingly result in a decreased sense of well-being. Perhaps the answer to this incongruity is partly due to the fact that adoptive parents are usually a number of years older than their biological parent counterparts. Since they are likely more established, they have more resources at their disposal than typical biological parents with comparably aged children.

Limited perspectives on infertility and miscarriage. The social science research related to adoption is only now beginning to provide helpful insights into the various residual psychological issues and difficulties concerning infertility and miscarriage. It is not uncommon for these problems to persist in postadoption as adoptive parents continue to yearn for blood-related offspring. These studies, however, may also serve to obscure another important reality, the existence of persons who adopt for reasons completely unrelated to infertility and miscarriage. A significant number of individuals decide to adopt for alternate reasons. Some of them follow this course of action because they simply wish to have more children after their biological children are grown, others on account of same-sex partnerships, and yet others due to divorce or singleness. Society often mistakenly overlooks those

people who choose to adopt for various reasons besides infertility, perhaps for purely altruistic reasons.

Issues related to "open adoption." In contemporary social science dialogue, within the past twenty years, the majority of helping professionals have begun to argue for more "open" styles of adoption. They have articulated the now widely-accepted adoption doctrine of openness in adoption as the preferable paradigm, in which varying levels of contact with the birthparents are to be negotiated and maintained by the adoptive parents in their adopted child's behalf. While there are certainly merits to this view, and there is evidence to its value in helping to develop a greater sense of coherence in the adopted child's and adoptive parents' narratives (Grotevant et al., 1999, 75), a number of obvious dangers remain. For example, under certain circumstances, ongoing contact may be unsafe for the adopted child or adoptive parents, especially if drugs or violence remain a dynamic of the birthparents' lifestyle.

Today, prospective adoptive parents often feel somewhat forced to say "yes" to openness in adoption if they want to succeed at winning the favor of either adoption agencies or birthmothers, the latter of which have more control than in the past over who is selected to adopt their children. Therefore, these adoptive parents in-waiting feel the need to adroitly market themselves in hopes of being selected. A few of the adoptive couples I interviewed described several the anxieties they had felt concerning "open adoption" as well as the precarious relationship with the

birthmother. They worried that the birthparents would later file legal suit to reclaim their child.

Genetically-related concerns of adoptive parents. A few couples in my study feared their child might be the genetic beneficiary of certain undesirable predispositions to behave in unhealthy and harmful ways or make reckless choices. Such genetic predispositions would have resulted in the parents' inability to influence many aspects of their child's personal development and future destiny. Concerns over the lack of information regarding their child's birth family's background, including medical and mental health history, caused significant anxiety for several adoptive parents. For example, one adoptive mother feared her child could possess an unknown "deadly allergy," such as an allergy to bee stings. But she was freed from this fear when her child was first stung with no adverse reactions.

Normalizing problems common to all parents. A number of times, I was cautioned by adoptive couples against pathologizing adopted children's occasional maladaptive behavior. The parents recommended that I view it as developmentally normal, in many cases, and recognize that rebelliousness often represents a juvenile attempt of most adolescents to assert their independence.   Other everyday issues involved sibling rivalry, "high maintenance" or demanding children, the stress and exhaustion of following family members' busy schedules, and coping with different types of personalities in the household. All too often, their frustrations and challenges represented ordinary parenting difficulties common to most adults with children.

While acknowledging their unique struggles, many of the adoptive parents I interviewed also identified what they saw as ordinary parenting issues faced by most parents in society. I had wondered how they might differentiate between challenges that are common to all parents and those that are specific to adoptive parents. Jack, for instance, described a few of his interactions with persons who asked him to compare the difficulties of adoptive parenting with biological parenting. Here is a portion of our dialogue:

> JACK: None of the stereotypical stuff has been our experience, I guess. Nonadoptive parents will ask us stuff like, "You know, what's really hard about being an adoptive parent?" And it's like, "Oh, you know, no harder than your own kids. There's just the pretty basic stuff, discipline and training and . . ."

> RYAN (Researcher): Part of the normal parenting.

> ANNA: Yeah.

They identified a few of the expected types of parenting concerns and challenges, including the following: (a) typical adolescent developmental problems such as rebellion, (b) poor choices, (c) peer pressure, (c) child discipline, and (d) spousal disunity due to children's tendency to manipulate their parents. One slightly frazzled mother of a teenage daughter mentioned her worries related to keeping her child away from "the wrong crowd," a common worry of parents which will unlikely ever cease.

Narrative psychology and constructions of adoption stories. Regarding

narrative psychology, I have explored how research participants cognitively

reassemble various memories of events, which may superficially appear unrelated,

into coherent stories and narratives concerning their adoptive parenting experiences.

While a number of memories held by the research participants seemed to have

remained vivid, others appeared to be gradually fading. Certain portions of stories

required editing and revising by spouses as various details were either forgotten or

apparently inaccurately remembered. At times, it almost appeared that spouses

served as a sort of "virtual memory data bank" for one another as their stories and

larger narratives were remembered, reexperienced, and reinterpreted. Together, they

co-constructed a revised version of their individual and shared narrative that was

created *in vivo*, especially for the event of the interview itself. I hypothesize that

these stories would likely have assumed a different format had they been remembered

and shared in alternate settings and rehearsed before a different listener.

Issues regarding the use of grounded theory method. While narrative

psychology has provided a vehicle for listening to the individual's and couple's

stories and larger narratives, grounded theory has supplied a qualitative research

strategy to identify narratives' common themes and categories of experiences as well

as to clarify differences in their perspectives. However, during the course of my

research, I have come to recognize a few of the potential weaknesses of grounded

theory method. One of these deficits is grounded theory's failure to attribute

sufficient authority to the basic, internal integrity of individual narratives. I argue

that each adoptive parent's or couple's specific narrative should be not only compared

to other persons' narratives, but also understood as a whole entity that should be

interpreted in its own right, context, and according to its own thematic schema. This

critique of grounded theory perhaps alternately demonstrates the value of a case-study

approach when possible.

In this chapter, I have disclosed my usage of several helpful social science

resources to construct a narrative pastoral theological method. Chapter four begins

with my offering of an approach to understanding and interpreting spiritual narratives.

Following this discussion, I unveil many of the actual narrative findings that emerged

from my research project with consideration of adoptive parents' lived experiences. I

undertake a thematic analysis of the narrative case material, while employing the

broader philosophical notion of "narrative" as the hermeneutical perspective used to

sustain the interdisciplinary integrity and bearing of the project.

CHAPTER FOUR

ADOPTIVE PARENTS' EXPERIENCES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Introduction

The present chapter discusses the findings from my research interviews

conducted with twenty adoptive couples (see Appendix M for demographics). In

exploring these adoptive parents' diverse offerings of knowledge, insight, and

personal experience, I attempt to maintain the inherent spirit, unity, and basic

integrity of their stories. It is my purpose to investigate the implicit themes in their

narratives with careful attention given to their ever-changing relationship with God,

their families, and the broader communities wherein they live out their faith.

Additionally, the chapter represents an effort on my part to critically correlate my

project's primary sources, including the lived human experiences of adoptive

parenting, Christian faith tradition (particularly canonical narrative theology), and the

social sciences.

The chapter is outlined in the following manner. First, there comes a

discussion regarding how I engage the formidable task of understanding and

interpreting spiritual narratives appropriately. Second, I enter into a careful thematic

investigation of the spiritual narratives themselves, while attending to the couples'

autobiographies with regard to the contextual influences and relational

interconnections represented. Third, I offer a few personal summations and

observations with reference to the adoptive parents' experiences. Finally, I engage in

reflection over my use of a specific methodology in terms of representing a novel approach to canonical narrative theology.

Understanding and Interpreting Spiritual Narratives

The revelatory narrative of the Bible informs Christian adoptive parents' cognitive schemas and sieves their interpretations of lived experience like a theological filter. However, the sociocultural context determines the parameters within which persons are capable of interpreting the biblical narrative itself. The formative landscape of our environment is implied in the preconceived ideas we unconsciously and consciously hold within our minds.

In my research, I became increasingly aware of the reciprocity between Scripture and experience, knowledge and context, personal and relational. These linkages uphold the idea that biblical revelation is a living and dynamic narrative which requires reinterpretation in each new setting, thus also requiring creative approaches to live in faithfulness to the gospel. This concept may readily be illustrated in the following manner. In the NT, it is quite obvious that the apostle Paul makes special allowances for different cultural settings in prescribing in his letters certain practices. For instance, we observe his views in First Corinthians 10:20-33 regarding the question of the morality of eating meat that had previously been offered to idols. In the very next chapter (11:3-17), Paul addresses the various cultural practices regarding women's head coverings. In his opinion, each situation requires a

different faith response based on the same fundamental Christian principle, namely self-emptying love for one another.

Adoptive parents' lived experiences and sociocultural parameters mediate their understanding and interpretation of Scripture as they try to live out their faith within a particular context. Thus there is a reflexive relationship between the written Word and the ongoing, lived narrative of Christians as each one informs the other. Additionally, I also believe, however, that there is an intangible and transcendent component involved in the aforementioned process that must also be duly noted. I argue that the Holy Spirit works through Christians' lived experiences to influence their reinterpretation of Scripture in new situations and diverse contexts. In my opinion, this metaphysical influence is difficult to explain purely in psychological or sociological terms. Christian adoptive parents' unique lived experiences seem to add shades of color to their previous understandings of the biblical narrative and affect their perceptions about themselves, their families, and their general spiritual purpose. There is thus a dynamic interplay between the sacred text and "the living human document" (to borrow a term coined by Anton Boisen, 1946 and 1960). Moreover, lived experience may be enlightening to adoptive parents and to those within their sphere of influence, because the experience reflects the intimate relationship God shares with those who are chosen and adopted into the family of God.

I wish to reveal how the interaction of my selected sources for knowledge may revise Christian theology concerning Divine revelation. I seek to demonstrate what is possible if one affords value to human experience as it relates to Scripture or,

more accurately, to the particular interpretative stances of a faith tradition. I later

observe how in the telling of their narratives, adoptive parents make mental

connections to certain biblical passages and prior beliefs concerning revelation that

are stored in their "memory banks," which are now imbued with new meaning due to

their experiences. For example, during my interview with Will and Anna, a couple

married for eighteen years who had adopted because of secondary infertility (meaning

they had borne one child biologically but now were infertile), I brought up the topic

of Scripture. The question I posed to them regarded whether or not their view of

Scripture had changed because of adopting a child. Anna's response was particularly

profound when she referred to the text in Philippians 2:6-8 regarding Christ's

condescension. She reinterpreted God's self-emptying love, wherein condescension

came to represent "not grasping" onto personal entitlement or power but rather

"letting go" out of love. A glimpse into our interview is what follows:

> RYAN (researcher): How has your view on Scripture changed, if any,
>
> due to becoming adoptive parents?

> ANNA: I don't know that my *view* towards Scripture has changed any.
>
> But maybe my *understanding* of Scripture has deepened.

> RYAN (researcher): Okay, can you say a little more about maybe how
>
> your understanding has deepened?

ANNA: Just, I think, the way that God feels about us because He [*sic*] chose to adopt us into His [*sic*] family. I think it almost—it makes me even understand the Scripture about Jesus not feeling like he needed to grasp onto his godliness; that, instead, he made himself of nothing and became a man. I just understand that more deeply now, because I think I try so hard to hold onto my stuff, to the ones I love—

RYAN (researcher): Right.

ANNA: — to my little world. And so I think it helps me understand that going through that whole process of the miscarriages and then adoption, just helps me understand a little bit better how easily he could have tried to hold onto everything that he was. But, instead, he gave all of that up without even trying to hang onto it.

Again, this vignette demonstrates how adoptive parents' understandings of certain biblical texts are apparently enriched due to their own lived experiences and level of acculturation. In the above case, this middle-class, white, adoptive mother was significantly influenced by American culture, which places its trust in the medical sciences and the latest, "cutting-edge" technologies that promise wholeness and personal well-being. The financial burden, even with health insurance, that the pursuit of pregnancy represented for this adoptive mother would have been cost prohibitive for persons of lower socioeconomic status. Furthermore, the surrounding

religious and secular culture influenced this woman's sense of failure and worthlessness prior to becoming an adoptive mother. Even in the face of multiple miscarriages, her desperation had kept her attempting time and again to get pregnant and then to successfully carry a child to full-term. In consideration of her personal experiences, Anna was able to reinterpret and come to a deeper understanding of Philippians 2. She had grown in her appreciation for the countercultural decision made by Jesus Christ to give up his positional power, authority, and status to lower himself and serve the world in sacrificial love, meekness, and humility. We find a reciprocal relationship in how she had assigned authority to the biblical narrative and how the scriptures were themselves illuminated by her lived experiences.

It has never been my purpose in this project to evaluate (or judge) the contents of the spiritual narratives of the research participants. Instead, I have listened for the spontaneous emergence of biblical narratives and theological themes that are woven into the adoptive couples' individual and shared stories. At times, I have sensed a yearning in the adoptive parents to find a satisfactory path toward reconciling their internal frustration and confusion by making sense of seemingly conflicting and incongruent storylines. Their communally formed faith commitments have resisted the unsettling emotions and cognitive dissonance caused by their painful experiences, and this factor has resulted in them finding a way to resolve their contradictory spiritual narratives regarding their lived experiences. The manner in which the various objectionable pieces are mentally reassembled represents a fictive reconstructive process, according to Fireman, McVay, and Flanagan (2003). This

phenomenon may further be construed through the perspective of "autobiographical reasoning" (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), whereby linear sequencing of events and the concepts of acceptable causal and thematic coherence become relevant. However, beyond the linear conceptualization offered by the narrative psychologists, the circularity and reflexivity of this narratory process should also be taken into consideration. There are many internal as well as external factors influencing how adoption stories are constructed depending on the purposes they serve and audiences before whom they are rehearsed.

When certain life events or personal experiences are too painful to consider or fully embrace, they are often minimized and pushed to the periphery of one's conscious awareness and theologically reinterpreted, or somehow cognitively reassembled, into more tolerable plot structures. It is less probable that persons will be psychologically prepared to fully accept their most painful memories and remember them in the identical way they originally had experienced these traumatic events. I theorize that humans possess an internal coping mechanism, by which we reconstruct (or revise) those most painful portions of our stories to make the overarching narrative more tolerable. Alternately, certain memories of relatively ordinary moments may be reassembled to afford them a greater sense of importance, intensity, or meaningfulness. In other words, certain happenings or experiences that were really quite unremarkable at the time may slowly evolve into "life-changing moments" or "mountaintop experiences" of mythic proportion. Furthermore, I suggest that one's embedded theology (whether or not self-aware), spiritual maturity

level, psychological pain-tolerance threshold, and personal capacity to handle cognitive/internal ambivalence may all influence how one internally assembles the various storylines and thematic fragments into an intelligible and cohesive narrative. I thus explore how adoptive parents tell their stories and make sense of the events and psychospiritual difficulties as well as moments of joy they have encountered.

One of the more prominent themes emerging from the interview data references the research participants' perception that God orchestrated countless, minute details over an extended period of time to facilitate the unification of parents and specific children. As adoptive parents reflected on their life circumstances and the adoption process they endured, they often reassembled the events of their narratives as to uphold or validate their internalized theological schema regarding God's providential involvement in their own unique story. Psychologists Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) postulate the typically unrecognized influence of certain sociocultural and religious contexts, which facilitate adoptive parents' cognitive schemas regarding their supposed direct personal selectedness (or predestination) by their "higher power" to parent specific children.

The narrative understandings of Ricouerian philosophy and narrative psychology provide parallel paradigms for understanding some of the internal and religious processes by which our personal experiences of God are contextually made plausible (even probable) and how they are cognitively assembled. Could it be that when our former, internalized theological template is rendered inadequate in some way due to unpredictable circumstances (either viewed positively or negatively by us)

that our neural processes begin working to revise the template to accommodate our new experiential knowledge? I hypothesize that the answer to this question is affirmative.

The notion of self-identity, according to much of the literature in psychology, is often posited from an individualistic understanding of human existence. However, from the perspectives of narrative psychology and narrative theology, the self is more accurately understood in systemic and communal ways. These disciplines provide ready-made paradigms by which adoptive parents may be complexly and multi-dimensionally understood. Their multifaceted connection to broader networks of relationships and social influences may be explored in terms of interdependent relationships with God, spouse, children, extended family, church, community, culture, and world. The type of role in which adoptive parents perceive God to function will heavily depend upon their theological stance, worldview, and personal preferences.

In a moment, I will enter into a discussion of the thematic structure that has emerged from my research's narrative case material. These themes or leitmotifs will be introduced, described, and interpreted. My primary methodological strategy is to critically correlate the spiritual narratives of the adoptive parents from my study with Christian tradition (including canonical narrative theology) and the social science perspectives I have selected for this project.

Thematic Analysis of Narrative Case Material

I believe that my research has generated new theological understandings of adoptive parenting, especially as it relates to the parents' personal perceptions of spirituality. While the vast majority of the research participants in my study exhibited a generally positive perspective toward their experiences and their children, others presented symptoms of spiritual and psychological duress due to being confronted with overwhelmingly stressful circumstances. Notwithstanding, each of them had seemingly gained wisdom and a renewed perspective as a result of their lived experiences. Each of the participant's unique adoption processes had informed their spirituality and faith in a remarkable manner. However, before I launch into my discussion concerning the thematic discoveries and interpretation of these respective understandings, it important for me to first engage in a process of self-reflection to explore the potentially hidden ways that my own particularity and theological location, and that of the research participants, may have contributed to the establishing of these specific themes.

Self-Critical Reflection Regarding the Emergence of the Narrative Themes

Conservative ecclesial environment. As already stated earlier in this dissertation, both the research participants and myself were all affiliated with Churches of Christ in the South, and more particularly what is commonly referred to in the Unites States as "the Bible Belt." The Church of Christ has traditionally been viewed as a fellowship that takes literally and strictly adheres to the teachings of the

Bible. This fundamental "scriptural" attribute of congregations still holds largely true even today, at least by reputation. I remained keenly aware of the priority that most of the research participants placed upon the Bible and recognized that they viewed their religiosity as closely linked to personal obedience to and honor of the Word of God. In fact, within Churches of Christ, a traditional doctrinal stance regarding revelation holds that it only occurs by and through the inspiration of the Scriptures, which was facilitated by the work the Holy Spirit in the first century C.E. (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17).

A debate within my fellowship over the years has concerned whether the Holy Spirit singularly operates through the written Word or if it also directly indwells the Christian. In recent decades, the latter position has gained more support among moderates (who would likely be regarded as conservatives in broader Christian circles). The philosophical doctrine of natural revelation, whereby God is manifested through the created order and humanity's moral capacity, has never been a primary focus of Church of Christ doctrine. In this project, I disclose how adoption experiences affect the participants' perspectives on Scripture and revelation as comparatively framed by the church's traditional views.

In my "interview guide," I included a carefully worded question focusing on how the participants' views, interpretations, and/or understanding of Scripture have changed or somehow been influenced as a result of adopting a child (see Appendix I, no. 13). My assumption was that they did view the Bible as critically important and authoritative. For many participants, the idea that their "view" of Scripture had

somehow changed may have contextually represented a very uncomfortable or threatening idea, since it could have implied that their commitment to biblical inspiration and inerrancy had somehow wavered. For this reason, after my first couple of interviews and seeing the type of response I was receiving, I decided to revise the question to include the word "understanding" in addition to "view." My strategy in slightly changing the wording was to soften the question and allow the participants more cognitive space and freedom to be capable of reflectively responding. This question resulted in the discovery of raw data that helpfully informs canonical narrative theology's perspective on lived experience as it relates to biblical narrative.

Religious isolationism and exclusivity. During the last century, the Church of Christ earned a relatively negative reputation in broader circles of Christianity as an arrogant and sectarian religious group whose members "think they are the only ones going to heaven." While there certainly was once credence to this sharp criticism, many members of the Church of Christ no longer hold this narrow view. In the past, preachers in Churches of Christ have routinely condemned various denominations' beliefs and practices as well as their members. This habitual practice resulted in many members of Churches of Christ actually feeling spiritually insecure in their own salvation, since they recognized they would never be able to live up to the perfectionist standards connected to perfect obedience of God's Word. Some of the doctrinal narrowness, religious bigotry, and judgmental attitudes of my fellowship have surely personally influenced me. Though I would like to believe that I have

somehow managed to move beyond many of these less-than-helpful ideas, I recognize that I remain influenced by the legalistic religious culture in which I was raised and continue to function as a pastoral theologian.

Views on God's personhood and providential care. Members of the Church of Christ hold to a high view of God's personal investment in creation and humanity. However, there remain many distorted views of God that often lurk just beneath the surface resulting from hidden perfectionism, including the perception of God as a harsh and cruel judge who demands complete obedience and tolerates no mistakes. This theological conception may have resulted in the feelings of personal failure, disappointment in self, and sense of unworthiness of acceptance that were described by a number of the research participants regarding their identity and role as parents. On the other hand, it may have also been the very factor that precipitated the surprising joy that many of the interviewees experienced regarding God's grace, tender mercy, and loving kindness demonstrated toward them and their children. It seemed they were at times surprised by God's divine initiative and unconditional love because the situations did not portray the same austere concept of God they had previously held to or psychologically experienced. Thus the narrative regarding the unconditional love of God served as a powerful corrective to many of their previously erroneous and distorted beliefs about God's personal concern and genuine interest regarding the intricate details of their lives.

Members of the Church of Christ have often been exposed to congregational settings where fear and guilt are used to motivate persons into "responding to the

invitation" at the close of sermon. In my counseling practice, I work with a number

of Christians that share my religious background and have observed how acute

struggles with guilt (often false guilt) erode clients' sense of spiritual confidence and

hope. This pervasive guilt or shame over sin and past failure often results in

psychological and relational difficulties for Christian adoptive couples. Sometimes at

the very root of these struggles is a basic spiritual insecurity concerning their

acceptance by God. Psychologically experiencing God's acceptance has traditionally

not been a theological concern in Churches of Christ. The focus has often remained

on foundationalist processes inherited from the Enlightenment and cognitive assent to

"sound doctrine." Again, I believe this emphasis has likely resulted in spiritual

uncertainty for many members partially due to the belief that they will "never be good

enough" to earn God's favor and approval. Churches of Christ have traditionally

adhered to a belief system that emphasizes righteous deeds and law over God's grace

and scriptural correctness over religious openness and collaboration with other

Christian religious groups.

  The meaning of Christian faithfulness. The theme of "faithful human

response," described later, may have originated from two opposite directions in the

spiritual narratives. The first relates to a renewed experience of the grace of God in

consideration of specific life-events or experiences that have been interpreted to

support this concept. The second pertains to a deeply felt sense of personal Christian

duty and responsibility, which may have likely already existed long before the

adoption process started, because of the high moral standards and religious

expectations of the religious culture in which the participants were functioning. I

have also come to recognize how adoptive parents' own interpretations of their

narratives and use of Scripture often stand in contradiction to the fundamentalist

Christian tradition in which they had been formed. The adoption experience has

apparently expanded their worldview and theology to allow for alternate

understandings of divine revelation and perspectives that consider more open

Christian fellowship as viable.

   Toward thematization of the narratives. It has been important for me to be

able to sufficiently "step back" from the qualitative data to reflect upon how my own

social location and those of the research participants may have unwittingly influenced

the shape assumed by the narrative themes. I now proceed with a discussion of the

four central themes that have emerged from my research, and I correlate them with

my sources, attempting to satisfactorily interpret their significance. In using

grounded theory protocol to analyze the data, four central themes emerge from the

narrative data and serve as overarching motifs that are populated by several sub-

themes. These leitmotifs are classified in the following manner: (1) systemic evil

that militates against adoption; (2) divine initiative and love; (3) spiritual struggles;

and (4) faithful human response.

Systemic Evil that Militates Against Adoption

   There are many barriers to the practice of adoption, to adoptive parents, and

to the suffering children who are in need of "forever families" (a term commonly

used in foster/adopt circles). One adoptive father had this to say regarding his

foster/adopt experiences: "For me, the first thing it did, I think, was it opened up my

eyes to the human evil that's out there, that affects children, that then affects their

whole life, that then affects society." Becoming involved in this enterprise seemed to

have awakened his soul to the evils of society due to the systemic oppression and

endangerment of children. His experiences appear to correlate with the assertions of

sociologists Esposito and Biafora (2007), who employ a hermeneutic of suspicion

regarding the manner of how adoption policy in the U.S. appears to "have been

handcrafted to maintain a specific social order" (p. 18). They describe the "posturing

of social, cultural, political, economic, and religious forces" (p. 18) that inform public

opinion and practices surrounding adoption. I now move into a description of various

subtopics of systemic evil which include the following: racism and nationalism,

classism, ageism, and bureaucracy.

Racism (and nationalism). As the result of engaging in transracial and

international adoptions, adoptive parents report gaining a heightened awareness of

racism, in addition to a new sensitization to the plight of Third World endangered

populations of children. One adoptive parent commented how the embedded racism

and racial stereotyping became more obvious to her after adopting a Hispanic child.

Another couple that adopted a Korean child articulated that, because of their son, they

had become far more aware of racial prejudice within the church. Other adoptive

parents noticed the alarming attitudes of family and church members toward persons

from minority races. One adoptive mother discussed how strongly opposed her

grandmother was to the idea of adopting a biracial child. It hurt deeply to be told that if she followed such a course of action that the grandmother would refuse to have anything to do with "it."

Another white adoptive mother commented about the stress she felt regarding the stares they received whenever she and her husband were in public with their black child.   The adoptive father said, "I would just stare back." Whenever his son was not with him, the adoptive father often heard white people make racist comments. It seemed to him that certain individuals somehow forgot that he was the father of an African American child or that his child suddenly became invisible and did not matter. For the sake of the child's physical and emotional protection, the father and mother taught their son to neither trust whites nor blacks, because he was caught between the two races, and was therefore often rejected by both groups. Even more pain was caused when some older white women at their church publicly voiced concerns about their misguided fear of contracting HIV Aids from their African American child (who did not have any symptoms of this disease). These kinds of racist attitudes add significant stress to adoptive parents.

Molly and Dallas, who adopted a Hispanic child, described their sore disappointment because of their family's racist and prejudiced attitudes. Individuals said to them hurtful and stereotypical statements such as, "Hispanics are lazy and don't like to work." Several of the adoptive couples that had adopted transracially articulated concerns that their minority children may feel self-conscious or out-of-place and may lack a sense of belonging, particularly someday in the future.

Moreover, several couples voiced concerns about racist maltreatment of their

children, particularly if they ever wished to someday date young persons from the

majority culture in their churches. They feared how even the "good church folk" may

react to their black or biracial son showing interest in dating their white daughter. In

a largely racially segregated religious culture, these are the circumstances that push

the boundaries of faith and neighbor love. Not surprisingly, sociological research

revealed almost two decades ago (cf. Cook, 1988) that adopting transracially

produces heightened familial strain. I have wondered how white persons in

conservative Churches of Christ would react to a black family adopting white

children. This type of scenario would turn the power differential between the

majority and minority cultures upside-down within the church, and moreover

represent a formidable challenge to embedded racism.

For Mary Lou and Wesley, adopting a biracial child was the one event that

resulted in more racial diversity in their congregation. Vanessa and John, parents of

two children from South America, revealed that their adoption experiences increased

their sensitivity to the sufferings of impoverished persons in Third World countries

and especially to the oppression of children. With tears in her eyes, Vanessa told me

that it really "hit home" to her one day when the children in Sunday school were

singing the familiar song, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.

Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight." She was caught off-

guard by the thought that her two sons are "children of the world." This sentimental

children's song acquired a new significance for her because they were not singing

about imaginary populations of children living in an exotic, faraway land; they were singing about her own children. Vanessa explained how this realization deeply touched her soul.

Classism. The high financial cost of private adoption prevents many childless couples from being able to afford to adopt a child. Several of the couples I interviewed discussed their serious financial concerns after being told of the high costs when they first became interested in adoption. This unfortunate situation seems to be a byproduct of the capitalistic nation in which we live. We should not forget that adoption is also a moneymaking, economic enterprise in America. Unless a couple is willing to adopt a noninfant through their state-run department of human services, they likely will have to pay tens of thousands of dollars to adopt a child and these expenses will not be covered by their insurance policies. This reality robs many childless couples of the joys of parenthood.

The financial situation regarding adoption is exacerbated by current political proceedings in Washington, D.C., whereby adoptive parents may be in imminent danger of losing their federal adoption tax credits. There is currently an important bill before the 111th congress, titled: "S. 2186: Adoption Tax Relief Guarantee Act." Republican Senator Jim Bunning of Kentucky has sponsored this bill with the bipartisan support of twenty others. The purpose of the bill is to "repeal the sunset of the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 with respect to the expansion of the adoption credit and adoption assistance programs and to allow the adoption credit to be claimed in the year expenses are incurred, regardless of when

the adoption becomes final" (http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s111-2816). Since the 2005-2006 session of Congress, the same appeal has been introduced and presented to committee four other occasions only to achieve little buoyancy and die. If it fails to pass, an additional financial burden will be placed upon adoptive parents.

    Ageism. According to one adoptive couple, until recently, a policy of their adoption agency specified that if a prospective adoptive couple's cumulative age exceeded ninety years, the couple would be ineligible. At the time of adoptive placement, both these individuals were forty-five years old, which meant they barely qualified. I referred in chapter three, during my discussion of the sociocultural context of adoption, to some of the common age restrictions regarding persons who wish to adopt healthy infants domestically, and somewhat less often so internationally (Adamec & Pierce, 2000). Unless a slightly older couple is willing to adopt a "special needs" or "waiting" child, the odds of them succeeding decreases significantly.

    Gwen married later in life and soon discovered her infertility issues. She described how she had felt her "clock was ticking," and not even so much her biological clock, but rather the societal expectation of women to already have children by this stage in their lives. Again, my findings regarding the social context and majority culture's prejudices regarding age are here relevant. She feared that by the time she eventually became a mother, people in public who saw her and her child together may mistake her to be the grandparent. She also feared being told by the

state-run agencies, such as the department of human services, that she was too old to adopt an infant and would have to resign herself to adopting a teenager. While she may have held some inaccurate information regarding federally legislated age limits of adoptive parents, she had clearly internalized a negative popular culture view regarding older parents.

Bureaucracy (interlocking political and legal systems). It increasingly appears that "the system is broken" and will not be remedied in the near future. One foster/adopt parent commented that the department of child protective services (CPS) remains in constant crisis mode with the overwhelming number of children for whom they must secure homes. State employed social workers are often placed in a precarious position in attempting to locate appropriate foster placements for children who come into the guardianship of the state. These hardworking social workers have an unenviable task and are themselves frequently overextended. Art and Jolene voiced their frustration and concern about how foster children, who are already in temporary foster placements, often "fall through the cracks" when it comes to seeking family permanency for them. Many children are put "on hold" for years in the system before finally being chosen for adoption but, more often than not, "age out" (that is, they reach eighteen years of age) before that opportunity ever materializes.

After successfully completing a thirty-hour training program for prospective foster and adoptive parents (referred to as PATH in Tennessee and PRIDE in Texas), and their home-study has been approved, those adopting through the state often are required to consent to serving as fosterparents too. But what if they only want to

adopt and not provide foster care? Though foster care is certainly an important ministry and a critical function that needs to be taken care of within society, it seems unethical to coerce persons into agreeing to become fosterparents when all they truly desire is to adopt a child.

Another issue regards federally legislated "openness" in adoption, which is not always in the best interest of the child. On March 4, 2010, Margie Chalofsky, Executive Director of the Foster & Adoptive Advocacy Center (FAPAC) in Washington, D.C., gave a testimony before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Human Services regarding Bill 18-0547, "The Adoption Reform Amendment Act of 2009." An advocate for adoptive families, she argued families should not be forced by governmental policy to accept long-term and legally binding obligations to indefinitely maintain an open relationship with birthfamilies after the adoption has been finalized in court. Chalofsky clarified that foster/adopt parents are not necessarily opposed to open adoptions in all cases but do wish to be given the choice rather than being in danger of birthparents' court action over visitation rights, especially when the birthparents pose a threat to the child's or parents' safety and well-being. Chalofsky asserts that to compel adoptive parents to submit to the demands of unfit birthparents is to create "adoptive families as a second-class category of families" (http://www.dcfapac.org, 2010).

The government as a political institution and adoptive parents as private citizens have always seemed to maintain a somewhat tenuous relationship. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1959) argues that the government provides the social space

for the coexistence of various groups of citizens, including religious, academic, and economic institutions. The institution (i.e., establishment or corporate body) of government in a true democracy is designed to protect each private institution from infringement by the other institutions, thus ensuring freedom of speech, freedom from physical harm, etc. Therefore, the government is to represent the empowerment of the people by facilitating the maximum expression of human ingenuity and strength. However, political power holds inherent ambivalence to citizens of any nation, and many paradoxes regarding their relationship with it exist. Unfortunately, due to systemic evil and the unavoidable abuse of power that persists in the world, domination is always present and defensible politics is a very fragile proposition. Adoptive parents and private adoption agencies thus exist in tension with the power of the bureaucratic institution that holds political power within the society.

Divine Initiative and God's Love

   God as being proadoption. The resoundingly unanimous vote of every adoptive parent I interviewed was that "God is in favor of adoption." Several adoptive parents observed that God is an adoptive parent, since God adopted us (reciprocally we are therefore God's adopted children) (cf. Rom 8:15; Eph 1:5). Barry explained that being adopted means someone has said, "I will stand for you." It also means you have the same standing as anyone else in the family, with full rights and privileges. Using the "necessary inference" hermeneutical principle, as one of the three most common in the Church of Christ, the couples evidently seized upon the

biblical metaphor regarding God's spiritual adoption of the redeemed of humanity and made the hermeneutical leap that God approves of us adopting children. However, the Bible actually never makes such an assertion, though I believe it to be true under the right conditions and legitimate circumstances.

As mentioned earlier, it should be noted that adoption in antiquity had little similarity to adoption today. The early church would have understood adoption-related scriptures differently than we do due to their particular cultural context and presuppositions regarding the subject of adoption. We should exercise caution to avoid misunderstanding the scriptures by superimposing our contemporary North American context upon the biblical passage. Several assumptions would need to be made about biblical interpretation and about God's will for families and individuals to see adoption as *always* endorsed by Scripture and God. Canonical narrative theology needs to entertain ethical considerations about the well-being of birthfamilies as well as of adoptive families and implicit issues of social justice regarding white privilege and marginalized minorities as pertaining to current adoption practices. One of Hauerwas' (1981) central theses is that the divine narrative of Scripture represents a social ethic which should shape or mold the distinctive uniqueness of the faithful community. I equally believe that this social ethic, if it is to hold any genuine societal relevancy, should be articulated and promulgated in coherent terms in such a way that it ultimately permeates and transforms the secular culture as well. Otherwise the salt of Christian influence has lost its flavor and sense of purpose in the world (cf. Matt 5:13).

Several adoptive parents pointed out their belief that Jesus' earthly father Joseph adopted him. Given the Scripture's silence about the matter, this again may or may not be an accurate assumption. But if this were true, one might posit that God has the experience of both adoptive parent and adopted child. Adoption theology regarding the Christ is poignant in biblical messianic prophecies that view the Messiah as King David's antitype (cf. Ps 2:7; Acts 13:32-34; Heb 1:5; 5:5). The earlier theocratic structure of Israel evidently facilitated the idea that Yahweh adopted the Davidic king, who had been selected to shepherd the people of God in righteousness.

Therefore, according to the theological imagination of the research participants, adoption has always been an integral part of God's plan. One adoptive father stated, "God does not play favorites," and that God's love for us is the same as for the "unique" or "one of a kind" (Gk. *monogenei*, cf. John 3:16) Son of God. Earlier translations of the Bible from Koiné Greek into the English language did the church a great disservice by translating *monogenei* with the words "only begotten." It should be noted that Jesus was not the Holy One's only begotten son. The previous statement is not meant to deny or negate in any way the preeminent and divine status of Christ. It simply opens up the possibility for us as adopted sons and daughters of God to be fellow-heirs of an eternal inheritance with one another and Christ (cf. Acts 26:18; Rom 8:17; Gal 4:7). God sent the Divine Child as an act of self-sacrifice to make it possible for us to ultimately be adopted into God's family. When Hugo McCord (1988), a conservative Church of Christ scholar, translated the Greek phrase

tôn hwiôn tôn monogenei "unique Son" (rather than "only begotten Son") a lengthy and heated debate ensued within Churches of Christ that lasted for well over a decade regarding the theological implications of such a translation. Some viewed McCord's translation as heresy because, in their eyes, they believed it somehow denigrated the exalted status of Christ above all creation and even the very deity of Christ. Churches of Christ have only recently begun to recover from the aftershock that reverberated throughout our fellowship.

Moses serves as a type of the Savior, in that both he and his people were ultimately saved because of God's providential plan which included Moses' adoption by Pharaoh's daughter (cf. Exod 2:10). Many of the adoptive couples explained how they now more fully grasped the depth and breadth of God's love for humanity. Their adoptive parenting experiences also helped to frame adoption as an "ongoing process" which will continue until that eschatological banquet begins when our adoption is fully consummated in heaven. In my view, it seems that the social sciences need to more fully acknowledge the ongoing nature of the adoption process, as each life-span developmental milestone has the capacity of presenting new and unpredictable challenges. The adoption relationship is a perpetual, existential category of lived experience that carries significant personal and familial identity ramifications for all parties involved beyond the immediate adoptive family to include other relatives (both through adoption and by birth) and relationships yet to be formed. In adoption many narratives are "woven together" into an indissoluble, enduring, and variegated tapestry of meaning making.

In my section on canonical narrative theology, I described Stanley Hauerwas' primary interest as a focus on God's action in history and our encounters with the presence and person of God through the narrative of Scripture. Hauerwas also emphasizes the gospel narrative concerning Christ's life, death, burial, and resurrection and believes this narrative serves the eschatological community as a pattern for living the Christian life. Hauerwas' (1981) work emphasizes the importance of the church and the biblical story that contextualizes the communal life of the church. Furthermore, he brings attention to the idea that there are several surrounding narratives, originating within several secular disciplines, with which the *ecclesia* must remain in dialogue. Again, his primary argument is that the divine narrative, as illuminated in Scripture, should be recognized as a social ethic that shapes and informs the unique identity and mission of the church. If this is the case, God's self-revelatory narrative should guide the church's emphasis on children and all categories of families as well as their care, including adoption.

Rather than being reactionary to or imitating the social justice work of various secular organizations and institutions, the church should be socially mobilized in such a manner that presents an valuable example of care—establishing ethically sound and socioculturally relevant modes of creative pastoral care and practice. Hauerwas argues in his work *A community of character: Toward a constructive Christian social ethic* (1981) that if the church is to again become a socially relevant community, it will need to reestablish its primary task and priority of carefully relating itself to the narrative of God in Scripture and finding appropriate and creative ways to live in

faithfulness to that transformative story. Adoptive father Art stated how he believed

that adoption is very similar to what God wants us to do in this life—to become

family to those who do not have any biologically related family to nurture, care for,

and love them. This adoptive father also compared the excitement and anticipation of

the adoption ceremony and the pure joy experienced by the adoptive parents to how

God must feel when adopting us.

Alaina, an adoptive African American mother, articulated her thoughts about

how in adoption we are able to reinterpret the depth of God's parental love for us.

She argued that, in adoption, we experience a "transcendent love" for another human

being that is not related to us by flesh and blood. She asserted, "Adoption is

acceptance." I expand her thought to suggest that it is not only the acceptance of the

child, but also the parent's acceptance of self as well as the child's acceptance of the

parent. In borrowing theologian Paul Tillich's (1948) conception of the acceptance of

being accepted, I believe that through adoption, adoptive parents are invited to accept

God's acceptance of them, their child as an adopted person, and their child's

birthparents as beloved children of God. In being accepted by the Eternal Adoptive

Parent ourselves, we learn the meaning of accepting others as they are and for who

they are—even one's enemies (cf. Matt 5:43-48). In adoption, it is often the situation

that either the birthparents or the state-employed social workers are perceived as

adversaries, rather than persons also created in God's image.

During almost every interview, one or both adoptive parents made an either

implicit or explicit reference to James 1:27, which states, "Pure religion and undefiled

before God and the Father [*sic*] is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their afflictions, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." These adoptive parents were convinced of God's full support of and pleasure in adoption as an act of true love and undefiled religion (in caring for the "orphans"). One disparity I can identify, however, is that many adopted children are not literally orphans. Their birthfamilies are often still very much alive and may not be willing participants to the processes of relinquishment and adoption. Nonetheless, I believe the biblical principle of compassionate and ethical care for children to which these adoptive parents allude still holds validity and value. One adoptive mother, though, struggled with cognitive dissonance over the paradox of God's support of adoption in light of the frequently difficult process required to bring adoptive families into existence. Upon more careful theological reflection upon her statements, however, I argue that the struggle of human persons to adopt more nearly approximates the "excruciating process" that was required of God to spiritually adopt us—a death to self.

Another adoptive mother, Vivian, stated that her adoption experience added another "layer" and more "color" to her and her husband's understanding of God's adoption of us. She now more fully grasped "what it means to be adopted and the full love, full rights, full everything of being part of the family and chosen of God." Her husband's understanding of the tenderness that God has for adopted children and orphans also deepened, because he and Vivian were able to observe it, be a part of that world, and experience the process of becoming adoptive parents. Vivian felt like God had invited them to into partnership and wanted them not to fear but trust and

hold onto hope. While the adoptive parents in the study generally gave credence to the notion of God's overall approval of adoptive parents, they also alluded to a belief in God's occasional frustration with them and God's desire for them to improve. This propensity toward self-judgment is perhaps an unfortunate consequence of the "works salvation" religious environment with which they have been indoctrinated within the Church of Christ.

God's preparation of adoptive parents' hearts.   A surprisingly large representation among my research population described having already possessed the desire to adopt children prior to reaching adulthood and marrying. I interpreted them to mean that God had somehow implanted the idea of becoming an adoptive parent in their hearts quite early on in their lives. Some of the research participants had been exposed to adoption because of having a close adopted friend or relative. Several of the adoptive parents had been raised themselves by parents who had participated in foster care or at least tangibly contributed to adoption ministries. Thus their formative experiences within their faith community facilitated beliefs about the importance of adoption. Through their childhood experiences, it appears that a seed had been sown that predisposed them psychologically and spiritually to being receptive to adoptive parenting at a later stage in their lives. A few couples described how they had been influenced by the positive examples of other adoptive parents before becoming involved themselves—whether at a military base, through friendships in the church and the community, through co-workers, or through close relatives who had adopted. This type of networking and psychological exposure

seemed to normalize the idea of adoption for these couples, making it seem more possible, and at times produced a yearning to adopt.

In Ricoeur's philosophy (1992), any narrative about human persons demonstrates the linkages unifying multiple actions performed over a particular period of time usually by a large group of people. Moreover, it reveals the connections of the multiple viewpoints on and evaluations of those actions. Ricoeur states, "The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character" (pp. 147-148). These ideas relate to the adoptive parents' development of their initial appraisals about adoption in consideration of the narratives and assessments regarding adoption they have been exposed to in their specific sociocultural context. Furthermore, there needs to be a sufficient measure of perceived support from significant others for this route to parenthood to become psychologically viable.

Steven and Judy described the first several years of their marriage without children. They felt God had prepared them for adoptive parenting through some very difficult and painful experiences in their lives. Steven believed that God allowed them as a childless married couple to experience human brokenness, so they would be more open to pursuing adoptive parenting and assuming all the challenges and difficulties that often accompany adoption. I believe this idea reflects the suffering servant motif of Christ in the story of the Passion as he prepared for his intercessory high priestly role. Steven perceived God as integrally involved in preparing the

hearts of adoptive parents for this ministry of self-giving love and also imagined

God's suffering due to the traumatic circumstances that result in precious children

ending up in the adverse predicaments necessitating their adoption.

Several adoptive mothers related to me that it was the unbearable grief of

multiple miscarriages that awakened them to their desire of pursuing motherhood and

receiving a child by the alternate means of adoption. After losing a third child to

miscarriage, Nikki prayed that God would not allow her to again become pregnant

unless she could carry the baby successfully to labor and delivery. Because of the

emotional and physical pain and suffering of the D & C of her last child, Nikki and

her husband Wendell had become receptive to the avenue of adoption. I will resume

their inspiring story later.

A couple of adoptive mothers described some of their spiritual preparation for

adoption as including bargaining with God, as Hannah did (cf. 1 Sam 1:9-18) in her

attempt to secure a son, whom she vowed she would ultimately return to Yahweh.

These barren women also promised to somehow find a way to return their children to

God. They now reinterpreted their own story as an extension of Hannah's story, one

of the most loved biblical stories about God's mercy and compassion. One adoptive

father described his spiritual process as wrestling with God for a blessing, as Jacob

did across the brook before facing his worst fear—the wrath of his older brother, Esau

(cf. Gen 32:24-32). Other couples, like Gwen and Lester, had prayed daily that God

would prepare them for parenthood and that God would not forget them as they

waited. Their ability to pray in this fashion portrayed their belief in the immanence of

God and in God's keen interest in the intricate details of human experience and the affairs of humanity.

Divine calling and "chosen-ness." God's divine call in the lives of humans is a very subjective religious belief and existential phenomenon that is difficult to either quantify or refute. The very notion of God's calling certain persons for specific works of ministry has never been fully accepted within Churches of Christ. The traditional view has proposed that today God only calls persons through the inspired Word. I have chosen to also incorporate into this section the idea of "chosen-ness," since it would be virtually impossible to disentangle the two concepts from each other. In the mystery of the adoption process, adoptive parents described feeling not only called by God to adoption but also called to parent specific children (as also suggested by Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) in their psychology research). A few adoptive parents described the idea of being chosen not only by God, but also by particular birthmothers to raise their children. This latter idea positively speaks to the concept of mutuality in the adoption process. A few participants articulated the idea of their children, later in life when they could decide between their adoptive and birth parents, choosing their adoptive parents. My question in reference to canonical narrative theology's views on communal character (vis-à-vis Hauerwas) regards why it has to be an "either-or" and not a "both-and" option.

When I asked Steven and Judy to tell me how their view of religion, spirituality, and God had changed because of the adoption process, Judy responded in this way concerning her adopted son, Victor:

JUDY: When Victor came, "calling" is not a term I grew up with, but I felt called to parent him. There's really no other word, and I know that any time you are a parent, you do feel like that's your ministry. And I feel like I was my adoptive daughter Cindy's mother. I also feel like I was my adoptive son Joe's mother for the period he would allow it, but because he came into our home older there was not quite as tight of a bond. But I felt like I was "called" to parent Victor.

This is quite a remarkable statement because in it she both contradicts her religious formation in the Church of Christ and advances the idea further to suggest a "calling" to parent not just any child, but a specific child. I wonder how other religious perspectives among protestant and evangelical circles have influenced her ideas. The boundaries surrounding a particular belief system are seldom totally impermeable. In this way, the interconnectivity and intersubjectivity of narratives may be inferred.

Vivian discussed receiving mail from a Christian adoption agency that was promoting international adoption and gradually how she was overcome with a deep personal conviction to pursue this course of action, even though she already had two biological children. Vivian struggled to discern whether this "burning desire" was simply her own will or if it was really God calling her to become an adoptive parent. Though her husband Grant was initially quite resistant to the idea, he eventually supported it; and they both experienced much reaffirmation about their decision to adopt. Vivian said that God constantly gave her "signs" and continued to call her.

She described how she had felt a "deep burning sensation" and an unstoppable conviction within her spirit about becoming an adoptive mother, which was a very different experience for her. She explained that during the deciding process and waiting period, she experienced God's presence as a "gentle whisper and a gentle tugging on her heartstrings, rather than as God banging loudly on her head." She stated that she believed "God is looking for hearts that are open and willing." Grant said he had never felt so much "in line with the will of the Holy Spirit" in his life before as he did with their adoption experience.

God's providence. Most of the adoptive parents asserted that as they recognized all "the pieces of the puzzle" which had to coalesce for their adoptions to come to fruition, they could only explain the adoption process by attributing it to the hand of God. Again, I wonder how much this belief in God's providence was facilitated by influences from within the religious culture. Winona referred to a popular verse that she felt is often misunderstood in the church—namely Romans 8:28—which describes the mysterious, providential workings of God in the lives of faithful persons. She saw one aspect of providence as the way in which God is able to work through our pain and suffering to accomplish a greater good in our lives. But Winona in no way implied that being a Christian gives the person a "free pass" from suffering. She acknowledged that "bad things still happen to good people" but that God also remains faithful and sovereign and keeps Divine promises.

A prevalent theme regarding providence related to "God's perfect timing." Each adoption seemed to have happened in what I have come to term "the fullness of

time" (cf. Gal 4:4). Through their spiritual conviction adoptive couples

acknowledged God's perfect timing in answering their prayers. The adoptive parents

now viewed their adoption timelines through the eyes of faith and thereby sought to

demonstrate how God's providence, presence, and provision were discernable as they

remembered the intricate details and the awe-inspiring and faith-bolstering

circumstances surrounding their adoption stories. While some adoptive parents

pointed to God's providential acceleration of events, others could see God's

occasional providential hindrance.

Some of the adoptive parents described how they previously held a more

deistic and distant view of God's involvement in the world. Their beliefs, however,

had shifted from their preadoption notion of God's indifference and detachment

toward the intimate details of their life to an increased awareness of God's personal,

"hands-on" involvement and loving concern. Dallas was raised in the Church of

Christ believing that religion was a "hands-off" proposition. Since God was "distant

and aloof," church to him was "a memorial service." He used to believe that God did

not truly influence human action and experience. But now, Dallas was convinced that

"God does move in our lives" and does take an integral role. He came to be

convicted of God's providence surrounding their adoption experience. He formed a

far broader and more faithful view of "God's providence through longer time periods

stretching up to 300 years," and he wondered about the special place of his adopted

son Robert in God's larger plan in history.

God's abiding presence and care. Julie, who did not have the advantage of being raised in a religious family and was only "converted to Christ" in her late twenties, recalled how, through her adopted children, she was constantly reminded of spiritual lessons about God's care and provision in our lives. While Julie had become overwhelmed by her sense of inadequacy to handle the stressors of adoptive parenthood of older children, she had also eventually accepted "God's ability to take care of things and to gently guide her on her path as a parent." This new awareness of the way in which God cared for her was initially threatening to her previous sensibilities—namely her prideful quest for self-sufficiency and independence as a professional and capable woman. She came to learn the importance of dependence on God in her life and grew in her ability to trust God to provide rather than attempt to rely solely on her own power and ability to "make it in this world."

Ingrid recalled moments in her adoptive experiences when she had not always felt God's presence or help but later she realized that "God had been carrying her for the entire journey." She recalled having to cope with God's periods of silence when she was pleading for God's help but was later able to grasp that God never deserted her and her family and always remained with them in the very midst of their painful struggles together, each and every step of the way. She and her husband Phil had experienced great difficulty dealing with their daughter whom they described as a very "difficult child" due to her oppositional-defiant propensities. Phil described his sense of their struggle and God's quiet and faithful presence in the following manner:

PHIL: When we're having a rough day with her and we pray for things to get better, things don't always get better the first time you ask or the third time you ask. So we just pray for strength to get by, and you know that you're on the right course and you're doing everything in the world that you know to do. So it's a continual relationship, that God doesn't magically snap His [*sic*] fingers and make all your problems go away, but that He'll [*sic*] be with you, involved in your struggle every step and we're not left on our own.

Ingrid also reflected on this particular subject:

INGRID: Sometimes it would hurt me that I didn't have the faith that I needed to have, knowing God was always there for me.

RYAN (Researcher): M-hmm, m-hmm.

INGRID: But, I guess sometimes I just got so low that I wasn't thinking clearly. And it's like the unconditional love for her, I knew that that love for me was there but I was in such a state I didn't think I felt it.

RYAN (Researcher): Right.

INGRID: And looking back on it, you know obviously I knew He [*sic*] was there for me and He [*sic*] was carrying me through that time.

In the interview, I reframed her experience as being a divorce between what was occurring cognitively for her and what was happening at the spiritually level. As I now reflect upon my comment to her, I recognize that this "head" versus "heart" dichotomy is perhaps largely a product of the popular, Western mode of Christianity that also influences my unexposed theological assumptions. It seems Ingrid had internally struggled to understand her faith. She eventually reassembled the events of her narrative into a coherent sequence that brought cohesiveness, comfort, and a sense of self-identity. Her reflection process clearly echoes the cognitive paradigm presented by narrative psychologists cited earlier. Ingrid, like other interviewees, mentioned struggling with God's silence in times of unanswered prayer. However, she was later able to claim that God had never deserted her during the periods of frustration and suffering she had endured due to her daughter's oppositional and defiant behaviors and ADHD issues.

In interpreting Ingrid's narrative, I find it helpful to utilize psychologist Theodore Sarbin's (1986) "narratory principle" concerning the manner in which persons unconsciously and consciously employ narrative structures to think, perceive, imagine, and make moral and ethical decisions. Fireman, McVay, and Flanagan (2003) also offer help in unpacking Ingrid's case study. Again, it is their argument that, "Narrative does not merely capture aspects of the self for description, communication, and examination; narrative constructs the self" (p. 5). The wide variety of personal stories at Ingrid's disposal have doubtlessly been constructed and linked together within her sociocultural frame, giving meaning to her experience of

God so that it makes sense to her and provides a measure of emotional comfort. Her past memories are connected to her "present conditions and future hopes" (p. 4). Narrative psychology provides us with a paradigm to understand how Ingrid's mind has organized, translated, and provided both continuity and coherence to her experience, as a narrative that is played out and afforded meaning within a specific sociocultural and religious context.

William, the adoptive father of three children, felt it was partly due to enduring the adoption process that he was now able to trust more in "God's ability to do all things" and to provide for him and his family. Several adoptive parents mentioned how they had experienced God's abiding presence through the support and generosity of their physical families, church families, friends, and work colleagues and even through their interactions with "God-sent strangers." Jeanette described how she "felt overwhelmed by an experience of acceptance" when handed her baby Chinese girl to hold for the very first time. She finally "knew" for certain that God did truly love her as an individual and wanted what was best for her, despite her imperfect and troubled past.

> JEANETTE: I wasn't as close to God as I am since they handed me my daughter—since I took her in my arms. It's like when they brought her in, and put her in my arms, I mean it is like something opened up to me; there is a God and He [*sic*] really loves me. And He [*sic*] really wants the best for us and He [*sic*] loves me.

I now return to Nikki and Wendell's story. Nikki came to a new realization of God's abiding presence soon after she had suffered her third miscarriage. After eventually returning to church, Nikki noticed a gift that had been left on the table in the foyer by her "Secret Sister" (i.e., an anonymous encourager). The gift was a little birdhouse with a black Sharpie pen and included a kind and compassionate note. The note read something like the following: "Nikki, I can't imagine your pain. I've been praying for you. I'm so sorry for your loss, but please find a Scripture that speaks to you and write it on this birdhouse and help the Lord heal your wounds." Nikki was initially furious because she deeply resented God for what had happened to her, and she refused to open her Bible in protest. But shortly thereafter Nikki decided to heed the request in respect for her "Secret Sister" and in gratitude for her many anonymous kindnesses during the past weeks and throughout Nikki's infertility and miscarriage ordeal.

The day she decided to fulfill the "Secret Sister's" request, she lay on her bed—alone in the room; as she begrudgingly opened her Bible, she thought, "Well, there's not going to be anything in here that speaks to me about this one." It was at that precise moment she discovered what she and her husband have come to call "their verse." Nikki could not recall having ever read it before. "Their verse" is Psalm 113:9, which promises, "God settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the Lord!" After first reading the verse, she was startled and did not understand it. However, as requested, she wrote the verse on the

birdhouse and placed it upon her bedside table. Nikki felt God was beginning to heal her and her husband's relationship with God through the comfort of the Scriptures and the encouragement of Christian friendships.

The rest of the story is truly amazing. One year to the day after losing their baby, God blessed Nikki with an adopted child; this gift from above brought healing into her heart and immensely strengthened her spiritual walk and faith. Nikki finally believed that God takes care of God's own, but perhaps not in the way we expect. God sometimes does so through situations of pain and loss. An inspirational postscript to the story is that barely six months after adopting their son, the proper diagnosis and cure for Nikki's infertility problem was discovered. Not long after beginning a new regimen of medications, Nikki became pregnant and this time managed to successfully carry her baby to a full-term delivery. Had she and her husband learned of the cure for her infertility issues earlier, they now recognize that they would never have received the blessing of adopting their son. Nor would their son, I believe, have received the blessing from God of having them as his devoted and loving parents.

After becoming an adoptive father, Lester described how he had grown to understand more about God's parental relationship with us. The revelation of God's love in Scripture came into greater clarity for him. This realization helped mature Lester's personal relationship with God.

LESTER: We do understand more why God calls himself [*sic*] our father [*sic*] and all that stuff—especially when you are a father—and it helps your relationship. It helps you understand God more because God wants us to know him [*sic*]. That's what the Bible is about, him [*sic*] revealing himself [*sic*] to us and how he [*sic*] deals with the decisions we make, whether it goes along with his [*sic*] plan or not. It just gives you a deeper understanding of your relationship with God.

RYAN (Researcher): So there's a way in which it's like all others that have children; other ways though that being an adoptive father speaks a little bit differently perhaps or informs your faith somewhat differently than you would think a biological father.

LESTER: We do feel God has paid attention to what is in our hearts and what we've prayed, and he's [*sic*] listened. And to me, I don't even think about it that he [*sic*] listened in his [*sic*] time, I just think that he [*sic*] listened, you know? And that's right there, that we were heard and we were blessed.

In this section, I explored how the adoptive parents I interviewed described their personal experiences of God's goodness and grace, correlating the material with Ricoeur's narrative concepts, narrative theology, and narrative psychology. Many of the adoptive parents described their sense about how God rescued them from doubt

and despair. In this manner, the spiritual narratives of adoptive parents attest to the providence, presence, and preservation of a God, who is all-knowing, all-loving, and all-giving.

Spiritual Challenges of Adoptive Couples

Jesus stated, "In the world you shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33b, KJV). Christian adoptive parents are certainly not immune from the trials and tribulations of the world. In this section, I attempt to categorize the various spiritual challenges described by the adoptive parents that emerged from their stories regarding hardship and suffering.

Anger over unfairness and injustice. Childless couples often are faced with feelings of anger about the unfairness and injustice of their painful predicament. Their childhood fantasy of someday meeting the right person, falling in love and getting married, and then having children is dismantled by infertility. Their grief and despair may easily become all-consuming, negatively impacting their marital relationship and jeopardizing their faith or trust in God. A few of the questions that these couples had to address were, "Why me?" and "Why does it have to be so hard to have a child?" These questions were particularly exasperating considering all the abused and neglected children in the world whose parents routinely fail them.

During infertility, one woman had become very frustrated and angry with God, wondering why she could not become pregnant but "sixteen-year-old girls who are truly still children themselves and who are barely capable of providing for

themselves (and are certainly incapable of providing for infants) can so easily become pregnant." In her mind, it simply made no logical sense and seemed unjust. Her spiritual narrative was challenged by seemingly incongruent surrounding stories that produced confusion and conflict within her own mind and spirit. Psychologists Santona and Zavattini (2005), as previously stated, argue that due to the reality that most persons seeking to become adoptive parents possess a painful story of infertility, this factor often results in them nursing a deep psychological wound. Additionally, such suffering individuals usually are faced with the need to work through a difficult grief process related to their loss of a future, hopeful narrative. I imagine these background factors were playing a psychological and spiritual role in fueling the above woman's internalized anger and bitterness.

Lester described how angry and upset with God he had become after observing his wife's deep pain regarding her barrenness. Eventually, however, he came to believe he could question and express anger toward God, because "God was big enough to handle that sort of raw, uncensored anger." Another adoptive father named Troy described the strain losing his third child to miscarriage placed upon his relationship with God. His wife Felicia also said she did not respond very well to the direct challenge on her faith in God she experienced when losing her babies. She had taken it as a personal affront and because of it had meted out unbridled fury toward God. Her life had seemed "pretty easy" prior to this intense ordeal and spiritually disorienting personal struggle. But the excruciating experience of infertility and

miscarriage created for her an intolerable and unbearable situation. It did not fit her preexisting theological schema that "bad things don't happen to good people."

Grief, disappointment, and discouragement. Again, there was immense grief and disappointment for adoptive couples concerning struggles with infertility and attempts to cope with miscarriage (cf. Santona & Zavattini, 2005; Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003). Many adoptive parents described the long and discouraging experience of suffering through countless medical tests in attempting to resolve their infertility. A number of couples described how they subjectively experienced God's absence during times of miscarriage and loss but had later recognized that God actually never abandoned them, though it certainly felt that way at the time. I am reminded of Jesus' haunting words from the cross as he echoed the Psalmist's anguish, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46; cf. Ps 22:1, NIV). Adoptive father James described his experience of private and unshared grief because of his wife's multiple miscarriages. He found himself suffering in silence and grieving alone without her, as he wanted to avoid upsetting her more. He described spending many long, lonely nights in the privacy of their bathroom where he shed many tears as he cried out to God in personal anguish.

Adoption Guilt. Several adoptive parents described their various struggles with guilt due to adoptive parenthood. Prior to adoption, several adoptive mothers had experienced significant guilt for occasionally becoming jealous and angry when other social acquaintances became pregnant rather than them, although they truly desired to feel happy for the other women. A number of adoptive couples had

experienced guilt due to being required by agencies to identify the races, sex, disabilities, or other characteristics they would be willing to accept and to identify those they would not. This uncomfortable experience caused them to at times feel like racists, bigots, or self-centered individuals. Adoptive parents' guilt is not a topic that has generally been addressed by the social sciences.

Some research participants expressed how they were occasionally disappointed in themselves for seeming unappreciative of God's blessings related to the gift of adoption. This self-disdain particularly surfaced in those moments when they had become frustrated or impatient with their children due to sleep deprivation when their children were still infants. Adjusting to adoptive parenthood for some was more challenging than they had previously anticipated; especially since they were several years older than other biological parents with children that age and, therefore, often lacked the same energy resources and reserve. Some individuals felt they were guilty of failing to "live up to their spiritual calling" as adoptive parents. Others entertained the thought that God might be disappointed in them for sometimes failing to always model the proper kind of behavior before their adopted children's eyes. The internalized parental expectations and God-image derived from both their social and religious contexts likely contributed to these feelings of personal failure as a parent and the guilt attached to that failure.

Fear and anxiety. Some adoptive couples recalled the early concerns they experienced because of inadequate "bonding" and "attachment" with their child (cf. Bowlby, 1988; Hopkins, 2001; Howe, 2001; Hughes, 1997 & 1999; Levy & Orans,

2000 & 2003; Santona & Zavattini, 2005; Steele, 2003; Steward, 2000; Watson, 1997). I wish to note here that the concepts of bonding and attaching are often erroneously conflated and the distinction between the two is blurred in common parlance (and even within the social sciences). However, there is a considerable difference between these two psychological and relational processes. Technically speaking, the term "bonding" refers to the deep psychospiritual sense of connection felt by adoptive parents toward their adopted child. In contrast, the term "attachment" refers to the internal feeling of closeness and familial kinship felt by adopted children toward their adoptive parents (Fraser, 2005) and neural development related to it. These two distinct phenomena represent quite dissimilar types of lived human experiences and internal processes that deserve far more attention than I have opportunity to give in this project. Shannon described the tremendous self-imposed pressure she had felt to physically be present with her adoptive daughter every moment of the day to almost "try and make up for lost time." Since Danielle had only entered their lives when she was almost three years old, Shannon and her husband had felt robbed of the time period during which bonding and attaching normally occurs between parents and children.

Another topic that emerged from several couples related to their worry about dying, whereby their child would be "all alone in the world." They were concerned that the age disparity between them and their child was wider than between most biological parents and their children. They realized they would be quite old when their children barely reached adulthood and that they would likely die while their

children were still relatively young. The adoptive parents thus felt concern about who would someday serve as a stabilizing force for their children and as a "security blanket" for them as they grieved and once again became "parentless."

Despite all the spiritual challenges faced by adoptive parents, representing significant threats to their faith narratives, there were also remarkable stories that demonstrated the beautiful fruit of the Spirit (cf. Galatians 5:22-23) and an unwavering faith in God. I now discuss the inspiring manifestations of Christian faithfulness that emerged from the interviews.

Faithful Human Response

The high level of Christian faithfulness the adoptive couples I interviewed exhibited was very impressive. Interwoven in the sometimes less favorable narratives regarding disappointment, discouragement, and dilemma was a completely different thread of inspirational stories that communicated faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these was love (cf. 1 Cor 13:13). In my view, their faithful response represented a resistance to evil and sin and a strong commitment to Christian discipleship and service.

Waiting faithfully on God. A persistent spiritual theme related to the manner in which the adoptive couples "waited on God" in faith, trusting God to ultimately provide. One couple described a reciprocal process, whereby "sometimes the ball was in God's court and sometimes it was in theirs." In other words, they faithfully acted (e.g., completed training, filled out paperwork, etc.) and then God

responded. Their response to God's action would be to act again in faith and then once more to wait on God's action. While some waited for a relatively short time, others described waiting as long as three years for a child after first submitting their original paperwork. But, they waited prayerfully and proactively never losing hope. Alaina asserted, "God never promised it would be easy, but that if we were faithful and trusted Him [*sic*] that God would bless us." Many couples had garnered strength and encouragement from faithful characters of the Bible like Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Hannah, and Daniel.

The topic of the adoption waiting process is one that occurs regularly in the social science literature. Santona and Zavattini (2005) point to the potential threat of anxiety and stress resulting from the long evaluation process of the couple by external "experts" (including adoption caseworkers). The theological concept of "waiting on God" is a frequent motif in the narrative of Scripture. For instance, in attempting to comfort Israel during a time of distress, the prophet Isaiah (40:31) promises, "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings of eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (KJV). It is common knowledge that patiently "waiting on God" is not an abounding virtue of most human persons. Waiting is difficult because it implies patience and self-restraint.

Trust in God's will. Several couples described having to learn how to surrender their will to God's will and then simply trusting God to arrange the events of their life in the best manner possible. Surrendering their illusion of control to God

was a great test of their faith. A supportive Christian community that believes in God's providential care can facilitate such action, though it is much easier said than done. A couple who had lost more than one child to miscarriage prior to adopting had arrived at the point where they could now understand their circumstances differently than before. They presently trusted God had answered their prayers "by giving them two biological children in heaven and two living adopted children." Another couple described how they looked to God as the head of their family before the adoption process and sought God's guidance throughout their experience.

Expressions of humility. Several adoptive parents mentioned how they felt uncomfortable when others praised them for becoming adoptive parents. Their belief was that, while God views the adoption of children as a righteous act of faith and is therefore pleased by adoption, adoptive parents are no more special or virtuous than other Christians. Anna described how she did not want to be singled out or considered as somebody special for simply loving her adopted children. She stated that she only wanted to be acknowledged as a mother.

> ANNA: One of the things that bugs me most is when sweet little ladies at church will say, "Oh, I love to watch you with your children. It's so obvious how much you love them." And I want to say, "Yeah, what mama doesn't love her children? Because that's just normal." But I know that they're trying to be sweet so I reply kindly. But inside I want to say, "I'm just a mom."

Some of the adoptive parents I interviewed felt that "while adoption makes God happy, God wants you to move on and do the rest of your job." They avoided becoming inappropriately proud and did not wish to be praised in any way. Part of this humility evidently also came as a result of frequently being humbled by their own imperfections and mistakes as spouses and parents.

Joy and gratitude in blessing. Couples related the profound sense of thankfulness and joy they experienced in receiving a child through adoption. They were extremely grateful to God for bountifully blessing them in this very unique and special way. More than one couple related how they felt that instead of being a blessing to their child, they were the ones who were blessed because of their child. Couples acknowledged and were thankful for God's faithfulness and God's guidance "from loss to great gain." One wife described unexpectedly finding her husband praying on his knees beside their bed the first night their new daughter was home. His heart was full and his life felt complete. Another adoptive mother described her feeling that while she and her child were not related by blood, they were "related by love." She said that she would be willing to endure the pain of miscarriage again to be able to adopt the same children. I found this to be a truly remarkable statement.

Stewardship and spiritual responsibility. Each couple described feeling a tremendous responsibility to set the proper Christian example for their adopted children and to accurately teach them about God. They yearned to prepare their children for a life of Christian faithfulness and commitment. Furthermore, they

prayed for wisdom to speak and act in ways that would nurture an abiding

relationship with God for their children. Several couples described how they as

adoptive parents felt like they would be held responsible for this stewardship and

possibly be evaluated at even at a higher standard. Perhaps part of this internalized

pressure resulted from sensing the secular and religious culture's higher expectation

of them. Santona and Zavattini (2005) validate that there is legitimate cause for how

adoptive parents feel on this issue because society does, in some ways, more

stringently judge adoptive parents than biological parents. Most often, the adoptive

parents stated that their life's ultimate goal and greatest desire of their hearts was "to

someday spend eternity in Heaven with their children."

Concluding Remarks on Adoptive Parents' Experiences

In the transcripts of my conversations with the research participants, while

there seems to be a high regard for the authority and divine revelation as mediated

through Scripture, there is also apparently a widening and deepening of perspectives

regarding God's self-revelation as mediated through providential timing and care that

they have experienced firsthand as adoptive parents. The adoption experience is

viewed as "adding more shades of color" and illumination to former personal

theological understandings, particularly regarding their God-image. One adoptive

father described his revised understanding of divine revelation occurring as a result of

how God seems to communicate to him through his adopted daughter who apparently

possesses the gift of spiritual sensitivity. I interpreted his comments to mean that his

daughter represented a revelatory window through which he could see God's will more clearly in his life and that she served as a conduit of God's grace.

Fundamentalist Christian theology, which is generally more cognitively centered, was expanded to allow for the deeply emotional and spiritual experiences of the adoptive parenthood. However, with few exceptions, the adoptive parents never ventured to argue that their experiences somehow contradicted or called into question the inspired text of Scripture. Their experiences instead shed light upon the narratives of the Bible, just as reciprocally the teachings and stories within the Word of God shed light upon their very experiences. Those who had formerly adhered during pre-adoption to a more deistic stance regarding how the transcendence of God was understood had now seemingly transitioned to a revitalized God-image, allowing for not only God's sovereignty, but also God's immanence and "hands-on" involvement in the minute details of human life.

In some cases, the previously closed and exclusivist perspectives common to many persons in Churches of Christ regarding Christian fellowship and theological sources was broadened to a wider acceptance of different religious resources. Formerly held theological views concerning the "rightness" of the Church of Christ and the "wrongness" of other religious groups was challenged when they were sometimes contradicted due to adoption experiences. Many of these personal experiences regarded the forming of close relationships in adoption support groups and other adoption-related settings with non-Church of Christ persons of faith. This broader perspective made possible the acceptance of several alternate theological

sources that previously had been viewed as residing outside the boundaries of "legitimate Christianity." Thus a more inclusive cognitive schema of Christian beliefs and practices became plausible when those former more restrictive theological and religious schemas were diminished, although not completely. In this way, embedded ecclesiology was now informed by an enlarged worldview, whereby persons from other religious groups within broader Christendom were also considered to possess legitimate spiritual insight, theological knowledge, and genuine Christian faith.

Learning to be more tolerant of "difference" was a significant growth area for several of the adoptive parents. One particular adoptive father discussed how the way in which their son thinks differently and reasons differently had made him and his wife more tolerant of and open toward those who come from different backgrounds and hold to alternate perspectives. This adoptive father had a rather unique way of describing the generative mismatch between their adopted son and the remainder of the family: "He's a random abstract adopted into a logical sequential family." I understand this comment to mean that their son has "opened up their eyes and minds" to alternate ways of thinking and has challenged their former perspectives.

Moreover, their beliefs are augmented regarding stewardship and the Christian's duty to "care for the widows and the orphans" to include themes of faithful response and praise to God because of God's undeserved blessings received in adoptive parenthood. While an emphasis on "works" remained as well as a sense of great personal responsibility for the spiritual training and nurturance of their

children, they now understood these God-given duties more as a heartfelt response of gratitude for God's goodness and grace than as merely an obligation to be fearfully expedited. Their cognitive schemas had often been significantly changed regarding their conceptual understanding they held of their relationship with God. It was articulated that "God is proud of us" as spiritually adopted children when our loving care for and commitment to our own adopted children demonstrates to God that "we get it." When we finally understand God's beneficence as a loving parent, new awareness occurs in our faithful responses to what God has already done for us and is continuing to do, and we make God proud.

There remains a wide range of stories that I could still tell concerning adoptive parenting experiences. The sampling of stories presented here for consideration represent only a portion of those. It is important for me to acknowledge that the focus of my research project and the types of questions I asked resulted in spirituality being at the epicenter of the narratives. However, had I posed a different set of questions the responses would have also likely demonstrated a different epicenter. Through my questions these interviews demonstrated that adoptive parents' faith narratives and understandings of God and their perceptions of the church, Scripture, and spirituality are changed due to adoption. They generally experience God's presence and preservation in new and life-giving ways that produce greater hope and trust in God's promises. Renewed understandings of God's grace and mercy are clearly visible in their adoption narratives. As they reflect upon the precise details and timing involved in their adoption stories, adoptive parents are led

to a deeper knowledge and personal spiritual awareness of divine providence and "the peace that surpasses all understanding . . . in Jesus Christ" (Phil 4:7).

Methodological Reflections

I wish to conclude this chapter by offering a few reflections on the methodology I have used to identify, investigate, and interpret the spiritual narratives. While grounded theory has represented a helpful tool in this project to determine the key themes and connect them appropriately, the quality of the data I compiled and categorized heavily depended upon the very nature of the questions asked.

My canonical narrative theological approach reflects three interwoven pieces. The first is the biblical narrative that describes in spiritual terms the adoptive household of God. The second is the experiential narrative of a particular category of human experience (i.e., adoptive parenting in the context of a specific Christian faith community, namely the Church of Christ). The third is the societal context in which the social sciences are situated (i.e., Westernized culture as manifested in the United States. (I must acknowledge that the latter piece is perhaps more accurately understood as actually containing multiple distinct disciplines, including psychology, counseling, sociology, family studies, law, and politics.) Furthermore, I employ the descriptive notion of "narrative" from Ricouerian philosophy to more fully comprehend each of these pieces as located in historical time and culture.

I view Scripture in its descriptions of adoption, particularly within the New Testament, as the core narrative that serves as the standard by which the other parallel

and sometimes competing narratives may be evaluated. I use the term "evaluated" to mean investigated for validity in their true adequacy, implicit morality, and imbedded assumptions regarding "family" and "parenthood." In the current chapter, I investigate the adoptive couples' spiritual narratives to learn how they are intelligible or do not correlate with both the Christian and the secular cultures in which they have been situated and cognitively structured. Their basic intelligibility and sociocultural coherence is interpreted through the paradigms of Ricoeurian philosophy, narrative psychology, and narrative theology. Additionally, their basic intelligibility is also construed through a self-awareness of my own particularity and social location that exercise significant influence over my thought processes and theological biases.

Regarding personal intersubjectivity, my use of grounded theory provides a helpful measure of counterbalance in allowing the narrative data to be given an appropriate voice and to be equitably represented in my findings. After having carefully pored over the transcripts of the narratives and coding the data, I maintain that the four central theological leitmotifs that ultimately emerge are defensible. However, I should also acknowledge that I have valued my own voice within my method, while not marginalizing other voices. In my personal commentary and reflections concerning the narratives, I have used theological imagination and some "artistic license" in describing and establishing connections among the adoptive parent narratives and theological sources as well as with the social science disciplines I have selected for this research. My methodology has enabled me to engage several cognate disciplines without devaluing Christian identity or conflating disciplines,

while still being able to value and interpret human experience.

I now shift my attention toward the last chapter of my dissertation, which is entitled "Pastoral Theological Reconstructions." In this chapter, I deepen my discussion regarding my four selected sources and offer specific suggestions for pastoral care and ministry as a result of my research findings.

CHAPTER FIVE

PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

Introduction

In my research on the spiritual narratives of adoptive parents, I have attempted to engage several dialectical streams to allow for both critical reasoning and theological reflection. The cognate disciplines and raw narrative data have offered the potential for interdisciplinary dialogue, detailed description, and the advance of critical thinking regarding canonical narrative theology. The present chapter delineates a number of pastoral theological reconstructions pertaining to my research findings and holds forth what I consider to be the most important concepts from my learning process. The chapter encompasses a thorough engagement of my pastoral theological method as it pertains to theory advancement.

This chapter is outlined in the following manner. I begin by addressing new theoretical constructions on account of interpretation of theology and lived experience. Next, I suggest a number of my research findings' important implications for the academic discipline of pastoral theology itself. After this section, I enter a discussion concerning specific findings and theory emerging from the study. I hope that these findings and theory reconstruction may be used in the service of more ethical and effective forms of pastoral care, counseling, and the practice of Christian ministry. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the project and highlights

other potential issues that warrant future research. Finally, there is a postscript in which I posit spiritual experience as "beyond narrative."

New Constructions from Interpretation of Theology and Experience

There have been several areas of this research project which have been very generative for me as a pastoral theologian. One of the central issues that I have noted as being very important for my pastoral theological theorizing has been that of striving to respect and uphold the inherent integrity of various cognate disciplines by avoiding the blending of language systems. Trying to remain consistent in the language I use without conflating or confusing language systems will be an ongoing growth area for me as a pastoral theologian.

Mutual critical correlation was my intention throughout the project; however, a method somewhere between correlational and confessional methods of relating biblical tradition and cultural interpretations of experiences is more representative of where I stand as a pastoral theologian. Poling and Miller (1985) posit vertical axes upon which they identify three methods of relating biblical tradition and cultural interpretations of experience. They also envision horizontal axes depicting two alternate views of the relationship between church and society with a continuum between church-formation versus society-formation. In their paradigm, "critical correlation" has to do with a reciprocally transformative relationship between the interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian faith and the interpreted theory and praxis of the contemporary situation. By way of contrast, the "critical confessional"

method emphasizes the Christian story and tradition while remaining cautious about the role of philosophy and science. The current challenge in my pastoral theological method is to uphold the authority of the biblical tradition while also remaining open to the value of the social sciences.

For the sake of clarification, Poling and Miller (1985) suggest three types of critical methods upon their two axes, the first axis being "the critical method which is used to bring together the various interpretations available in the Christian tradition and culture. The second axis [is] the relationship between church and society" (p. 31). The three types of methods include: "critical scientific, critical correlational, and critical confessional, on the critical method axis" (p. 32), resulting in six types of critical practical theology. My method may be described as leaning more toward the critical confessional approach, since my approach is firmly rooted in the narrative message of the Gospel.

Poling and Miller clarify that "each of the critical methods focuses either on facilitating the church's faithfulness and identity, or encouraging the church's dialogue with society" (p. 34). For them, the term "critical" suggests self-critical "awareness of one's method and presuppositions, and the definition includes a willingness to revise one's perspective under certain conditions" (p. 32). Poling and Miller describe the critical confessional approach as one that views the theological tradition as . . .

> normative in relation to philosophy and science. The church must
> continually work with a careful hermeneutic to interpret and reinterpret the

Christian story. This type reflects an increasing interest in the community

of faith as the interpreter of truth . . . It is the development of community

consensus that allows the church community to act with conviction on

critical issues. (pp. 57-58)

As a result of the current project, I have grown in my understanding and belief that

our particular theological communities indelibly shape our work as pastoral

theologians, including the types of methodologies we gravitate toward. This learning

has been helpful to me although I veered away from implementing the mutually

critical correlation method originally intended in this project. I have learned that my

approach, as located somewhere between the "correlational" and "confessional"

types, will be a better "fit" for my future work as a pastoral theologian given my own

personal context and theological convictions. This approach allows me to take into

consideration knowledge concerning the human condition from various secular

disciplines while still privileging the Christian tradition, including the Biblical

narrative.

My broader philosophical understanding of "narrative" has borrowed from

Ricouer's work that demonstrates anything intelligible to us is only derived through

linguistic processes which necessitate a sufficient hermeneutic for interpretation.

Moreover, these linguistic processes depend heavily upon the necessity of clear and

consistent language that allows for mutual understanding and coherent dialogue.

Ricouer's philosophical concepts of narrative identity, the embodied nature of the

self, and the agential capacity of the self (in his or her ability to initiate meaningful

action) inform my understandings of descriptions of lived experience—whether or not framed in theological terms. I feel that narrative psychology and narrative theology have each borrowed (often without giving credit) many of Ricoeur's ideas, anthropological constructs, and narrative theories of human self-understanding. For those of us in pastoral theology who employ narrative ideas, I believe that Ricoeurian concepts will remain a foundational component of our theoretical understandings.

My work makes a valid contribution to pastoral theology in that it increases our knowledge regarding adoptive parents' experiences and the secondary processes of narrative formation which influences their spiritual and theological views on God, self, and others. Furthermore, my work brings the psychological and sociological findings regarding the adoption process (including its potential pitfalls and hopeful resources) to bear upon the spiritual narratives of adoptive parents. I have become increasingly aware due to my research that spirituality and the subjective, psychological experience of God are not compartmentalized from secularized culture, including the effects of systemic evil and sociocultural values upon one's embedded worldview and life-hermeneutic.

Reconstructions of Canonical Narrative Theology

One of the primary sources I selected for correlation in the current project is canonical narrative theology. In chapter two, I outlined what this approach to theology entails and its substantial ethical moorings. Later in chapter four, I introduced some ideas regarding my adaptation of traditional modes of canonical

narrative theology that I now wish to expand upon. While the field of pastoral theology has ordinarily privileged lived human experience, canonical narrative theology has traditionally given precedence to biblical themes, particularly as they regard the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. My approach has represented an attempt to bring the two approaches into more intentional dialogue with the purpose of initiating an alternate route toward constructing a well-grounded pastoral theology of adoptive parenting. An additional purpose of mine has been to develop an effective method for exploring other categories of lived experience from a canonical narrative theological perspective. Unique to my approach has been the incorporation of narrative psychology as a theoretical template for conceptualizing the mental construction of narratives. I believe this approach has much to commend it within the field of pastoral theology.

As a conservative pastoral theologian, the valuing of the biblical narrative remains of large religious and theological importance to me. However, as a pastoral theologian who is also influenced by the broader diversity of thought present within our field—particularly regarding embodied experience, cultural analysis, social justice, and pastoral diagnosis—I too am committed to advancing new, contextual understandings of human experience. Furthermore, I support a pastoral theology that intentionally fosters interdisciplinary dialogue and facilitates the outward expansion of social justice efforts from the academy and church into the surrounding secular milieu, while maintaining (or producing) Christian identity and orthopraxy. Because of my religious context, it is essential for me to put forward a theological method that

sufficiently engages Scripture but also allows for enriched understandings of lived experience within various cultural and religious settings. Therefore, I propose a theological method that makes allowance for these important considerations, while also affording adequate freedom for pastoral theological reconstruction. Taking this path, I am able to simultaneously remain sensitive to my conservative faith tradition and to my pastoral theological identity. I believe this option is critically important during our period of theological isolationism as it allows for increased generative dialogue with evangelicals and more conservative Christian scholars.

Thus the approach of my theological theory is to enhance and expand the existing paradigm of canonical narrative theology. My goal is to facilitate greater theological knowledge concerning the sociocultural and religious contexts within which Christians function and give expression to their faith. In my view, Hauerwas' understanding of Christian culture as possessing its own language and grammar needs to be adjusted for there to be the potential for mutually critical conversation and collaborative work between the social science disciplines, lived human experience, and the Christian faith tradition. In order for cross-disciplinary dialogue to be made possible, there must be shared language that social scientists and pastoral theologians use to communicate which facilitates productive collaboration and mutual understanding. Without this shared language, I believe we return to the dialogical confusion and resulting linguistic chaos of Babel. For pastoral theologians to be taken seriously within the broader culture, our language should be sufficiently accessible and intelligible across disciplines—both secular and religious.

Hauerwas also helps us understand (from the theological and moral perspectives) that it is essential to adequately comprehend the broader sociocultural contextual narrative if we hope to sufficiently situate our theological and secular knowledge and ethically link action to our Christian worldview. Hauerwas places emphasis, as described earlier, upon the intelligibility and fidelity of Christian convictions as they reside in their practical force within the world and rely upon the faithful character of the church. For Hauerwas, and partly for me, the narrative of Scripture is a social ethic that holds the primary purpose of molding the community of faith into what God is calling us to become in the world. However, I further expand upon his thought to propose that the biblical story represents more than a mere social ethic; it also provides us with a guide for how we are to understand and live into our adoptive familial identity and unique roles within the household of God. Something unique that I propose in my work is a reclaiming of the biblical adoption metaphor as a central defining understanding for the church's identity in the world.

In my research, I have revealed that our spiritual identity as divinely adopted persons living together in Christian community is certainly impacted by sociocultural factors that influence our lived experiences at the macrolevel. Moreover, our spiritual identity is also affected by psychological factors occurring at the microlevel, whereby psychospiritual and relational processes come together to mold us. Concepts from narrative psychology can assist pastoral theologians in theorizing how personal narrative affords for persons and communities of faith a measure of continuity and coherency in their self-understanding. However, narrative psychology is perhaps not

as helpful in providing a theoretical framework whereby we may comprehend our God-imaged relationality and our responsibility to mutually construct spiritual narratives that call the world to Christ. I have demonstrated that due to the culturally contextualized spiritual narratives of adoptive families (as well as other categories of lived experience) Scripture requires ongoing reinterpretation at the practical level within the Christian community. Again, I posit adoption as a primary biblical motif that stimulates the theological imagination, heuristically providing alternate ways of grasping the meaning of Christian faithfulness and human relationality.

Canonical narrative theology and adoptive parents' experiences have intersected in my study as the spiritualized adoption stories have expanded beyond the gospel message (of the life, teachings, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ) and have found meaning also in alternate biblical stories. Moreover, the former chasm between lived human experience and scriptural narrative appears to have diminished. I argue that these adoptive parents view their lived experiences as reinterpreted by the biblical narrative and propose that the biblical stories themselves are reconceived by the adoptive parents' personal narratives. In my study, a number of couples described how, in the midst of travail, the Holy Spirit guided them to particular biblical texts that provided encouragement and hope. For example, Nikki's touching story concerning the "birdhouse" and the resulting discovery of Wendell's and her theme verse (i.e., Psalm 113:9) powerfully demonstrated this idea. Thus numerous research participants believed that the Holy Spirit directed them to a fuller understanding of God's will in their lives as they attempted to make sense of their

experiences with infertility, adoption, and child-rearing. They matured spiritually due to a revitalized understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in leading God's adopted children through both Scripture and personal experience. As a result of their lived experiences the scriptures were imbued with new life and greater potency for them.

Augmentation of Adoptive Parenting Narrative Themes

Chapter four unveiled the theological motifs emerging from my interviews with adoptive couples. These thematized categories included the following: (1) systemic evil that militates against adoption; (2) divine initiative and love; (3) spiritual struggles; and (4) faithful human response. The themes emerged via the grounded theory process I employed in this study. In my view, these identical themes could also serve well as a template for exploring other categories of lived experience within pastoral theological research.

The first of these, *systemic evil that militates against adoption*, is a broad category that is critical to explore when developing a theological anthropology regarding lived experience, because it seriously considers the various interlocking components that contribute to subjugation and domination within our culture. I intentionally limited myself in the project to only the specific manifestations of systemic evil that emerged from the interview data, including (a) racism (and nationalism), (b) classism, (c) ageism, and (d) bureaucracy (interlocking political and legal systems). While these represent a fine start, I recognize there are many more forms of systemic evil that were not articulated by research participants. I here refer

to structural evils within culture such as colonialism, patriarchy, sexism, ableism or disablism, and heterosexism. It is possible that these forms of systemic evil and areas of discrimination were left unmentioned by the adoptive parents due to their complicity in the majority culture, white privilege, internalization of traditional church dogma concerning women's role, or the fact each of them was allegedly heterosexual in orientation (thus lacking personal knowledge of discrimination against LGBTQ persons in the United States).

Second, the experience of *divine initiative and love* encompassed the following subthemes: (a) God's proadoption attitudes, (b) God's preparation of adoptive parents' hearts, (c) divine calling and "chosen-ness," (d) God's providence, and (e) God's abiding presence and care. The secularized fields of psychology and psychiatry often marginalize these kinds of subjective spiritual experiences. Nonbelievers would likely argue this experience is purely a figment of the imagination or a religious community's contrived belief-system that holds no factual validity or measurability due to its subjectivity and lack of empirical evidence. My response to such a perspective is that persons who have undergone the adoption process have often reported this precise type of experience across religious backgrounds.

In my research, the potency of this finding lies in the fact that numerous participants who reported having this kind of experience of God had purportedly never experienced anything resembling it before in their lives. Their personal awareness of and reliance upon God was possibly increased due to stressful factors of

the adoption process, as presented by Gloria W. Bird, Rick Peterson, and Stephanie

Hotta Miller (2002) (i.e., background factors, adoptive strains, coping resources, and

emotional distress). In my view, however, the countless minute details present in

direct answers to prayer could hardly be interpreted as mere coincidence. Through

faith in God, Christian adoptive couples generally viewed these improbable and

complex so-called happenstances as evidence of the providential care of God.

Third, I have outlined the main *spiritual struggles* indicated in the narratives

of adoptive parents in the following manner: (a) anger over unfairness and injustice,

(b) grief, disappointment, and discouragement, (c) adoption guilt, and (d) fear and

anxiety. When exploring these struggles, one might point out that these represent

psychological struggles common to most adoptive parents—whether Christians or

nonbelievers. Santona and Zavattini (2005) enumerate some of the unique stressors

faced by adoptive parents in-waiting who often endure frustration, suffering, and

anxiety because of the hardships of the adoption process. I propose, however, that

due to their well-developed cognitive schemas regarding trust in God, Christian

adoptive parents likely process these adoption challenges and difficulties from a

different vantage point than nonbelievers. Christians often possess an internalized

general belief and expectation that God should be personally involved their life-

narrative. Thus during those periods in which they experience God's silence due to

unanswered prayer, adoptive parents may also feel "forsaken" by God as Jesus did

while on the cross (cf. Matt 27:46). Therefore, their psychological struggles may

easily evolve into spiritual struggles. Their attempt to make meaning of their

seemingly unjust suffering may represent a direct challenge to their faith.

Fourth, I identified and unpacked the thematic category of *faithful human response to God.* This theological category includes the following subthemes: (a) waiting faithfully on God, (b) trust in God's will, (c) expressions of humility, (d) joy and gratitude in blessing, and (e) stewardship and spiritual responsibility. Collectively, these themes represent Christian virtues that were described by the research participants as having great spiritual importance in their lives. I imagine that their religious context probably influenced their decision to emphasize these themes in our conversations. The culturally "suasory purpose" of narrative, whereby the non-self-aware and unconscious goal is to construct a good, compelling, and coherent narrative (Fireman, McVay, & Flanagan, 2003), also perhaps was at work. While this possibility certainly may have existed, it is my belief that the interviewees were basically honest and sincere in their responses to my open-ended questions. I have also come to the conclusion that faithful response to God's initiative requires a basic restructuring of psychological and theological schemas regarding our self-identity and a fresh relational understanding of ourselves as members of the household or family of God.

Implications for Pastoral Theology

I will now discuss what I view to be a number of important implications from my research project for the discipline of pastoral theology and for the environment in which I carry out my particular work as a pastoral theologian. In this study, the use

of narrative as a descriptive hermeneutical approach, coupled with the theoretical concepts of narrative psychology, has provided a fertile ground for the exploration of a particular category of lived experience. Furthermore, my findings contribute to new knowledge regarding the unique lived experiences of adoptive families.

The Contexts and Cognitive Schemas of Spiritual Narratives

Sociocultural, religious, and personal contexts represent the environments in which narratives are constructed regarding how God is psychologically experienced. It is important for pastoral theologians to remember that persons unwittingly internalize many of the hidden norms, values, and uncritical assumptions of their cultural context. While interpreting spiritual narratives, we must be careful to avoid missing the subtle nuances regarding what might either promote or support the presence of particular narratives and what might reduce or limit the possibility of other types of narratives. Thus we should discern how cultural and communal values and meanings, as well as personal interpretations of those meanings, have made the current narrative feasible and comprehensible. Questions concerning the research population's sociocultural and religious context always need to be sufficiently considered to socially locate the stories and identify internalized cultural narratives.

Furthermore, I propose that theological beliefs and religious values are overlaid upon cognitive schemas (vis-à-vis narrative psychology) that are informed by the cultural context in which persons' lived experiences occur (Fireman, McVay, & Flanagan, 2003). These theological beliefs and religious values do not stand in

isolation but are undergirded by larger social and ecclesial narratives, several of which may even appear contradictory to one other but nonetheless play a significant role in constructing self-identity. The spiritual narratives of the research participants have brought together secular cultural and religious and theological influences and perspectives into dialogue with each other. While larger surrounding narratives at times seemingly shape or limit these spiritual narratives, the Christian adoptive parents in my study have evidently resisted many of those external narratives due to new experiential knowledge. The experiential knowledge that comes as a result of intense personal suffering and unimaginable joy serves to reconstruct both cognitive schemas and embedded theological belief structures.

A perspective shift occurs for many Christian adoptive parents as their psychological experience of God's personal acceptance and love in the midst of struggle opens their spiritual eyes to new relational possibilities and alternate spiritual realities. Jeanette, for example, described her experience of feeling overwhelmed by a renewed sense of divine acceptance the first time she held her infant Chinese daughter in her arms. In that moment she recalled psychologically experiencing God's unconditional love and acceptance for the very first time in her life. Narrative psychology provides us with a theoretical cognitive paradigm for grasping the process by which the stories are formatted and made comprehensible both socioculturally (and I would add theologically). Habermas and Bluck's (2000) concept of "autobiographical reasoning" is also helpful here, especially regarding temporal, causal, and thematic coherence. Properly understood, scriptures regarding God's

adoption of us as beloved children imbue adoptive parenting experiences and narrative with theological meaning regarding Christian love and true mutuality in relationships.

The Interplay between Cultural Contexts, Cognitive Schemas, and Scripture

My work reveals the manner in which sociocultural contexts, cognitive schemas, and biblical narratives intersect in the construction of spiritual narratives. One way to illustrate this process is to describe some of the unique dynamics involved in transracial adoption. The psychological, sociological, and theological implications of cross-cultural and/or transracial adoption are indeed complex. Comparative psychological research demonstrates that those who adopt transracially have the second highest level of parental adjustment difficulty, ironically only behind biological parents (Cook, 1988).

I suggest that transracial adoption may be understood in terms of signifying majority culture privilege on the one hand and minorities' subjugation on the other. Sociologists Esposito and Biafora (2007) have indicated that, oftentimes, the arguments promoting welfare reform policies imply pathology among black families as opposed to white family superiority. These policies perpetuate the pejorative notion that black biological families routinely fail their children who therefore need to be "rescued" by white families. My research has revealed that most white adoptive parents who adopt transracially apparently overlook the reality of white privilege when it comes to adoption practices. The participants in my research, while positing

transracial adoption's potential for good in society seemed to remain blind to its equally destructive potential as a symptom of white privilege in our culture. This area is precisely where the politicization of adoption (Carp, 2004; Adamec & Pierce, 2000) becomes an important consideration in pastoral theology. The societal group holding the most socioeconomic resources and social and political power clearly benefits at the expense of marginalized minorities that suffer the collective psychosocial consequences.

While transracial adoption has the effect of revealing embedded racism within families and churches, it also—to a degree—may represent a transformative practice whereby racial stereotypes and prejudices are gradually conquered. Firsthand exposure to children of a different racial heritage within families and churches generally makes a noticeable difference in overcoming bigotry and ethnocentricism, according to the narratives of my research participants. For example, Gwen and Lester described the subversive influence their adoption of a black child had upon their predominantly white congregation and their previously racist extended family. However, the practice of transracial adoption also presents several ongoing racial identity development struggles for adopted persons, while simultaneously producing unforeseen stressors for the adoptive parents that often translate into spiritual struggles. Molly and Dallas, for instance, articulated their deep concern regarding how persons in their predominantly white congregation would respond to their Hispanic son someday wanting to date their white daughters.

Theologically speaking, the diverse interracial composition of the adoptive

household of God is a pervasive theme in Scripture. The apostle Paul recognizes the

challenges and difficulties that this situation presents and, therefore, encourages unity

and solidarity within the congregations he addresses (cf. 1Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27-29;

Eph 2:14-16). Canonical narrative theology provides a useful approach for

interpreting the lived experiences of persons who adopt transracially in light of the

Christian story and the great equalizing influence of the cross. Their pain, spiritual

struggles, and faithfulness are afforded theological and religious intelligibility when

viewed through the message of the gospel and their new cruciform identity as

redeemed children of God.

Spiritual Narratives as Positive and Negative Constructions

Because of my research, the previously untold spiritual narratives of adoptive

parents including both positive and negative components are laid bare. These

narratives are comprised of stories of faith and doubt, connection and emotional

distance, commitment and repulsion. Various theological themes such as "waiting

faithfully" and "spiritual malaise" are afforded deeper meaning when viewed through

the perspective of adoptive parents' psychological experiences of God's presence

and/or absence.

Psychologists Bird, Peterson, and Hotta Miller (2002) view prayer as a naïve

and inadequate coping mechanism (i.e., symptomatic of "emotion-focused coping")

when it comes to adoptive parents' attempts to handle difficult issues regarding their

children. In my study, however, the research participants have described prayer as

being indispensable to their very psychological and spiritual survival. For example, Phil and Ingrid, who struggled with an "oppositional-defiant" child, described the centrality and efficacy of prayer in their lives. Bird et al. have seemingly made the common error of oversimplifying the purpose and meaning of prayer, and they have eschewed its psychospiritual power to make a real difference. Christian tradition understands prayer as an indispensable and powerful spiritual discipline for successfully navigating the life of faith. My research findings indicate that adoptive parents' mode of prayer occasionally takes the form of brutal honesty, lament, and/or the unleashing of personal frustration and anger toward God. On other occasions their prayers consist of humble petitions or heartfelt expressions of thanksgiving and praise toward God.

Furthermore, adoptive parents' descriptions of the critical importance of the support of their faith community (and, by extension, other Christian communities) in their ability to cope with various hardships is another piece that is left out by the social sciences regarding adaptive coping skills. When the spiritual support system has been lacking or absent in some of the narratives of the research participants, they have clearly experienced significantly increased stress and anxiety. Pastoral theology posits that it is primarily within the Christian community where the resources for psychological and relational healing reside. While the salience of the spiritual dimension of adoption for adoptive parents is at least acknowledged by certain social scientists (e.g., Bird et al., 2002), it is usually not given the centrality in the literature that my research participants have afforded it. For example, like other Christian

adoptive parents, Ingrid and Phil described their ongoing adoption process as an intense and arduous "spiritual journey." Rather than perceiving their struggles and victories from primarily a psychological or sociological perspective, most of the adoptive parents understood their experiences through the "eyes of faith" and thus from an overtly spiritual and theological vantage point. They directly linked their adoption stories to those inspiring and encouraging biblical narratives that contained deep spiritual meaning for them.

As a result of my research, I have learned that adoptive parents' spirituality and theological perspectives are, in fact, significantly affected due to their adoption experiences. Moreover, it appears that their faith is generally strengthened and transformed as a result of personally experiencing God's abiding presence and preservation during the course of the adoption process. Another important learning for me in my work as a pastoral theologian and pastoral counselor is my discovery that the adoption process is an ongoing lived experience (rather than a one-time event) for adoptive parents, which holds lifelong implications for their sense of self and familial identity and for their unfolding relationship with their children throughout the course of the lifespan.

A Theological Anthropology of Relationship

I propose that fundamental to the *imago Dei* is the human capacity for loving interdependency as revealed through intimate forms of mutuality in relationship. God's very personhood is described as, above all else, love. We are simply told in

Scripture that "God is love" (cf. 1John 4:16) and that love originates from God (4:7). Thus to love is to be born of God and to truly know God. The inherent human capacity to love and to receive love reflects God's essential relational being. I have come to the conclusion that this first-order principle should be fundamental to any theological anthropology. From this standpoint, I postulate that God's presence and divine will are revealed in the midst of diverse manifestations of human persons' capacity to establish and nurture meaningful relationships with each other. I believe that these kinds of lived relational narratives are emblematic of God's redemptive and re-creative work. The Word became flesh and dwelt among humanity to reveal God's own love in ethically sound, culturally just, and spiritually life-giving ways that foster growth and facilitate hope. Jesus pronounced, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35, ESV). Our capacity for loving relationship is basic to our very humanity.

Through narratives of mutual care, fidelity, and human compassion, God's perfect will is instantiated before the world; so is the meaning of our true humanness. Adoption is one of the many incarnations of this kind of mutuality, interdependency, and reciprocity within the context of loving and nurturing relationships. I believe the narratives of Christian adoptive parents are purposed by God to serve as a revelation of divine acceptance and unconditional love that testifies to the reality of our spiritual adoption. Under the proper conditions, the practice of adoption within the community of faith may serve as a vivid and powerful testimony to God's adoption plan and to the fundamentally relational nature of the Creator of the universe. The

spiritual narratives of adoptive parents are seldom if ever neat and tidy. Instead, these narratives are often rather "messy" at times and seemingly chaotic and incoherent. But positioned in the very midst of these stories is the presence of a Heavenly Adoptive Parent, who lovingly prepares, preserves, and provides for us.

Narrative Conceptualization of Faith Construction

My research project has revealed some creative and new possibilities regarding understandings of faith construction from narrative perspectives, as faith construction occurs in response to the particular lived experience category of adoptive parenting. This study has expanded my conceptual framework regarding how Christians are psychologically shaped by the Christian communities in which they function and how they make spiritual meaning of their lived experiences. Christians' narrative constructions of their lived experiences inform their self-understanding and perspectives regarding the will and involvement of God in their lives within their particular contexts. The adoption experience itself holds transformational power concerning the reconstruction of faith.

In light of my research findings, I propose that Christian faith is constructed at the intersection of the following four key components: (1) canon (i.e., the Biblical narrative), (2) Christian community (i.e., the church), (3) cultural context (i.e., social location), and (4) cognitive schemas (i.e., meaning-making and interpretive structures regarding lived experience). These components seem to coexist in an ongoing reflexive relationship. I suggest that the components are well illustrated by the

spiritual narratives of adoptive parents since their understandings regarding God's mode of divine revelation are reassessed, their faith communities are reshaped, and their minds are renewed (cf. Rom 12:2). In the present study, the adoptive parents' views derived from Scripture, connection to a particular faith group, sociocultural environments, and interpretive processes as informed by their life-hermeneutic all contributed to the construction of their spiritual and theological perspectives.

However, to end this chapter without moving beyond theoretical implications would be to fall short in ensuring that theory translates into responsible practice. The following section focuses upon specific implications of my study for the fields of pastoral care, counseling, and the practice of ministry, particularly within the adoption framework.

Implications for Pastoral Care, Counseling, and Practice of Ministry

Pastoral theology should be relevant to the fields of pastoral care, pastoral counseling, and professional ministry. These ecclesially situated and practically based disciplines should be a natural outgrowth of the more academic and theoretically focused field of pastoral theology. Furthermore, these ministry-oriented disciplines should facilitate the theory-practice spiral that is described earlier in this dissertation. Christian ministry may be understood as representing a "theology on our feet," to borrow a memorable metaphor from Thomas Groome (1987). My research findings suggest a number of practical implications regarding the work of caregivers, counselors, and ministers with adoptive parents and families who are suffering and

struggling in various ways.

In this section, I identify a few of the challenges and hardships often confronted by adoptive parents. Next, I suggest therapeutic approaches for exploring and creatively working with careseekers' narratives.

Recognizing Challenges Faced by Adoptive Couples

I now will delineate some of the potential difficulties faced by adoptive parents of which pastoral caregivers need to be aware. While adoptive parents must often cope with many of the same kinds of struggles confronted by most parents (including biological), it seems that there are a number of issues specific to the adoption context. Hidden in the stories that adoptive parents share with us about their lives may be a number of negative and debilitating ideas that have often been unconsciously accepted and internalized by them. The pastoral caregiver should tune in to these narrative strands and more closely examine these unhelpful notions by encouraging awareness and deeper investigation on the careseekers' part, so they may reinterpret, reframe, and resist these damaging beliefs. What follows are some of the problematic concepts that may be identified when consulting with adoptive couples.

Unrealistic expectations. There are often unfair and unreasonable expectations of self, partner, child, and others that are subtly embedded within the couple's story about their relationship. In addition to these expectations, there are the larger societal, cultural, and religious ideologies informing the couple's lived experiences that are potentially oppressive and harmful. Unmet expectations,

whether realistic or not, frequently result in self, spousal, or child denigration and damaging accusations regarding any perceived deficiency. Consequently, the adoptive couple begins to see themselves, their child, or one another as being the underlying problem instead of properly locating it in the sociocultural and religious beliefs that erode away at the positive and hopeful narratives upon which their spousal and familial relationship was originally built.

Attachment and bonding issues. Another difficulty often faced by adoptive parents is that of attachment and bonding issues, viewed through the self-denigrating lens of personal deficit. When couples assume personal responsibility for the perceived lack of emotional closeness and connectedness with their adopted children, self-esteem begins to unravel and "finger-pointing" often begins. These concerns sometimes result in anxiety and fear related to abandonment and rejection issues from both the child's and adoptive parents' perspectives. Worry and concern about future reunification of the adopted child with his or her birth family may limit the present potential for satisfying relationships in the family.

In cases of adoptions of noninfants, the adoptive couples may be confronted with confusion, frustration, and disappointment due to attachment and bonding difficulties with the adopted child (cf. Hopkins, 2001; Howe, 2001; Levy & Orlans, 2000 & 2003; Santona & Zavattini, 2005; Steele, 2003; Steward, 2000; Watson, 1997). When the desired sense of connection with the adopted child does not materialize as quickly as expected, a sense of personal failure may overwhelm the couple. The child's age at the time of adoption represents a significant variable in

possible compromises in attachment and bonding. The adoptive parents may consequently turn against each other as they resort to a "blame game" regarding who is at fault for this perceived failure and parenting letdown. It is important again for the pastoral caregiver to validate and normalize adoptive couples' challenges with bonding and attachment and assure them that it is not their fault (Hughes, 1999; Gray, 2002). Offering the couple some psychoeducational materials to read and discuss on attachment issues may be a helpful caregiving strategy.

Pressure from external sources. Adoptive parents often experience added stress and anxiety from the many ongoing evaluations to which they are subjected by various authorities, including agency caseworkers, social workers, and government or state officials. Home-studies that occur prior to and following adoptive placements may be perceived as quite invasive and threatening because adoptive couples are required to expose their personal family histories to external scrutiny and evaluation (Santona & Zavattini, 2005). These types of questionings can be experienced as invasive, causing adoptive couples to go on the defensive and reminding them of their contingent status as parents. This factor may be quite disturbing to adoptive parents because they feel vulnerable each time their family is investigated by another outsider. They may sense they are at the mercy of others regarding the permanency and security of their family.

Stress may be produced by the continual need to explain to others (e.g., school officials and medical professionals) about the child's social history. Many times, the adoptive parents are unable to determine a child's previous social and medical history

due to a scarcity of reliable records (cf. Bird, Peterson, & Hotta Miller, 2002; Brooks & Barth, 1999). This predicament might result in frustration for the couple regarding external pressure as various outsiders expect the adoptive parents to readily have this information on hand. This awkward situation may result in increased stress and personal embarrassment. This factor may also contribute to a reduced sense of parental entitlement. Moreover, it may seem unjust to adoptive parents that more is required of them in the way of parenting skills, ongoing home-studies by social workers, and expectations to know about the social history of their child than is required of biological parents. In our society, it often appears that adoptive parents are held to an unfair higher standard than biological parents (Santona & Zavattini, 2005). As pastoral caregivers, demonstrating a keen awareness, genuine empathy, and sensitivity to these kinds of concerns can go a long way toward earning the caregivers' trust and facilitating a strong therapeutic relationship.

Unrealized dreams and unresolved grief. The inability to bear children may cause adoptive couples to experience depression and despair and to direct their anger and bitterness toward God. These disquieting emotions may exist prior to, during, and postadoption. A prolonged period of spiritual dryness, personal dissatisfaction, and general depression may easily be the outcome. Adoptive couples often struggle with the sense of being robbed of lifelong personal and/or marital hopes and dreams for the establishment of happy, "natural," and "normal" families. This narrative of injustice threatens to interfere with, or even incapacitate, the potential for personal and relational satisfaction. When society suggests the

"unnaturalness" and "second-rate status" of adoptive families, the sense of wholeness

and well-being within the couple may unravel. Even after successfully adopting a

child, adoptive parents sometimes are faced with a sense of ongoing grief because of

their inability to produce biological offspring. The continuity of the family bloodline

is threatened and the couple's original hopes and dreams concerning birthing children

into the family must be significantly altered.

Later, when the adopted child enters into adolescence and begins to come into

his or her own sexuality, many of the suppressed negative feelings of the couple

concerning their own infertility or sterility may resurface, thus reopening old wounds

(Janus, 1997, p. 270). These troubling issues may furthermore undermine the fabric

of the marital relationship as both partners have their own unique ways of coping with

latent sadness and regret. As pastoral caregivers and counselors, we must be

particularly attentive to these kinds of issues that may undermine relational health and

a personal sense of well-being and satisfaction in life.

Mixed emotions and cognitive dissonance. Beneath the surface emotional

layer of gratitude and happiness displayed by many adoptive parents is often a

troubling emotional layer of sorrow and doubt. This cognitive dissonance is common

to many adoptive parents but is often not articulated by them for fear of being

misunderstood by others or unfairly judged. I have learned from my research that a

profound sense of shame may also be present when adoptive parents are disappointed

with themselves for feeling anything less than grateful for their adopted child.

Pastoral caregivers should normalize this psychological difficulty but not minimize it

by any means. Empathetic understanding is called for here. Sometimes simply

providing a safe environment in which adoptive parents may explore troubling

feelings such as these may provide an opportunity for emotional catharsis and

experiential validation.

Pastoral caregivers need to be cognizant that there may be a psychological

process at work in adoptive parents that includes several perplexing dynamics.

Counselors and ministerial caregivers should remain sensitive to the many hidden

emotional layers experienced by some adoptive parents regarding residual grief over

their initial loss (if infertility or miscarriages was involved). Couples may experience

something similar to a postpartum depression toward the end of the legal adoption

process which involves a keen "awareness that the child is not biologically theirs . . .

These feelings, although usually short-lived, frequently engender guilt" (Janus, 1997,

pp. 269-270).

Coping with children's emotional problems. Difficulties may occur when

adoptive parents face the task of having to resolve problems that originated in the

adopted child's previous placement (especially when foster care has been a part of the

equation). Deep-seated feelings of shame, guilt, and anger can wreak havoc within

couples' intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, adoptive parents

may be unaware of their child's ongoing emotional upheaval and psychological

insecurities related to the trauma of relinquishment. Nancy Verrier (1993) has named

this psychospiritual phenomenon the "primal wound." This factor may result in

adoptive parents misinterpreting what is at the root of their child's seeming rebellious

behavior, which may be a symptom of their unacknowledged sense of personal loss and rejection due to recognizing that their birthmother voluntarily "put them up for adoption." Pastoral caregivers need to help adoptive parents understand that "while they cannot spare the child from pain, they can help ease the pain by acknowledging it" (Smit, 2002, pp. 146-147). In such cases, conjoint family counseling may be the most preferable route for effective therapeutic treatment. Meeting with the family together may facilitate a healing conversation concerning what each person as "lost" and "found" due to the processes of relinquishment and adoption.

Methods for Exploring Careseekers' Stories

It is important to recognize not only that adoptive parents are "storied" persons, but also to remember that their life narratives are yet incomplete. Moreover, the stories regarding the adoption experiences may still exist in a relatively early and undeveloped form, having never before been fully explored for the intentional purpose of meaning making. The pastoral caregiver should assist adoptive parents in identifying, examining, and reinterpreting this unexamined narrative material so as to uncover the helpful and hopeful data potentially hidden within it. There should also be a focused effort to expose any psychospiritually harmful ideas embedded within the narrative. By receiving assistance with the process of carefully interpreting the content and meaning of the narratives, careseekers may recognize they have been holding onto various unhealthy ideas and disparaging beliefs. They may also realize that they need to reinterpret and redeem their stories in such as way as to more

healthfully describe their sense of self-identity, their lived experiences, and their

collective desires for a satisfying future shared together as an adoptive family. This

therapeutic process is likely to engender hopeful anticipation and a spirit of

teamwork.

Each adoptive parent's narrative is unique since persons enter into adoptive

parenting through a variety of entry points, each possessing unique challenges and

blessings. This factor necessitates pastoral caregivers listening reflectively and

respectfully to the adoption stories the careseekers tell, exposing any harmful or

unhealthy beliefs as well as identifying hidden strengths and competencies that may

bolster confidence and generate hope. By establishing an egalitarian and

collaborative relationship with careseekers that emphasizes their strengths and

displays empathy regarding their hardships, pastoral caregivers increase the

possibilities for a successful outcome to the psychospiritually healing work engaged

in together.

In the following section, I propose some issues for future research that my

own research suggests. While a few of these suggestions regard ongoing research

directly relation to adoption and adoptive care, others speak more broadly to other

areas of inquiry that my research has implicitly brought to the foreground.

Issues for Future Research

The present study has only begun to initiate a focused and critical

conversation regarding the unique spiritual narratives of adoptive parents. Much

work in this particular area still needs to be completed to expand our understandings concerning adoption-related issues for each member of the adoption triad—the birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted persons. This study focused exclusively on the experiences of heterosexual, married, Church of Christ couples—which is indeed a very limited scope. Additional research needs to be completed with adoptive parents from other religious groups to accumulate more useful information regarding adoption. Moreover, in future research, the sample could include parents who are single, divorced, or in some other unique configuration of a committed relationship. I believe a generative study could be undertaken with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons who have adopted children. Another focus could include those persons who have adopted their partners' children within second committed relationships.

By more fully employing the work of narrative theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, certain pressing issues pertaining to the morality and ethics of the adoption enterprise could also be explored in future studies. One particular aspect of morality and ethics in adoption which I believe deserves attention is transracial and international adoption policies and practices. Within canonical narrative theology itself is the need for additional considerations regarding how lived experiences and various cognate disciplines may be creatively employed.

Furthermore, the four components of faith construction I mentioned earlier in this chapter—canon, Christian community, cultural context, and cognitive schemas— need significant refinement and more critical reflection. I believe that further study

into narrative psychology and its usefulness may be a worthwhile area for conceptualizing how humans format, store, recall, and rehearse narratives as well as interpret them. This social science discipline, in my opinion, holds much promise for future explorations of the human condition conducted within pastoral theology. I propose that in the future, each of these critical dimensions not yet fully explored may provide an even more complete understanding of faith development and spiritual narratives.

Postscript: Beyond Narrative

I wish to humbly acknowledge that there is much regarding spiritual experience that cannot be described in words. The existential phenomenon of true spiritual intimacy with God is something experienced so deeply that it is preverbal and, therefore, inexpressible through language. It represents an experience so marvelous and mysterious and majestic that any human person's attempt to describe it is futile and will fall short miserably.

There is much about the subject of adoptive parents' spiritual experience of God's immeasurable grace, goodness, and gift of love that transcends humanity's cognitive schemas, theology's clever constructs, and culture's political rhetoric. Thus the glory and mystery of God cannot even begin to be adequately described with the human tongue. Simply stated, it is beyond narrative. I, therefore, stand speechless and in reverent silence before the presence of the Holy One.

To God be the power and the glory—forever and ever. Amen.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM AGAPE CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES

February 10, 2009

Brite Divinity School
Advanced Programs Committee
Attn: Dr. Nancy Gorsuch
TCU Box 298130
Fort Worth, TX 76129

Dear Advanced Programs Committee,

  I am writing this letter with regards to Ryan N. Fraser's dissertation project involving the study of adoptive parents' faith narratives. Mr. Fraser, a part-time clinical therapist with AGAPE Child & Family Services in Jackson, Tennessee, has approached us with the request to have access to our West Tennessee agency's adoption records and contacts with adoptive parents for his current research purposes.

  With the stipulation that any and all extant records utilized be handled appropriately, and that any personal identifying information related to interviews with our clients undertaken by Mr. Fraser remain confidential, he has our full permission to proceed with his research. Our primary concern is that the right to privacy and human dignity of our adoptive families be upheld.

  We believe that the data Mr. Fraser collects and the spiritually related findings he discovers will ultimately be helpful to adoptive families both affiliated with our agency and with other private and public agencies. Furthermore, we understand the value of such research for those clinicians and workers in the helping professions who assist adoptive families through various struggles and difficulties. For these reasons we wholeheartedly support Mr. Fraser's research efforts.

  Any further questions pertaining to our agency's consent to this research study may be directed to my attention.

Yours truly,

David Jordan
Executive Director

pc: Louvadie King, Clinical Coordinator
  Michael McDonald, Director, Agape's Adoption Support Center

APPENDIX B

LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM FREED-HARDEMAN UNIVERSITY

Dissertation Committee
c/o Nancy J. Gorsuch, Ph.D.
Brite Divinity School
TCU Box 298130
Fort Worth, TX 76129

February 5, 2009

RE: Approval of Ryan N. Fraser's Ph.D. Dissertation Study

Dear Dr. Gorsuch and Dissertation Committee,

   Greetings to you! We are writing to confirm our awareness of and approval of
Mr. Ryan N. Fraser's dissertation study on adoptive parents' spiritual narratives.   We
give him our approval to use Freed-Hardeman University's reputable name to garner
credibility for his project. We also give him our permission to use our institution's
network of contacts to seek research participants.

   Furthermore, we approve of Mr. Fraser's utilization of his office in the Behavioral
Sciences and Family Studies Department to initiate phone contacts with respondents
as well as to conduct interviews with research participants. In addition, we give Mr.
Fraser permission to use the letterhead of the Graduate Studies in Counseling
Program to bring credibility to his written requests with any prospective and ongoing
research participants. Any questions may be brought to our attention as necessary.

Yours Sincerely,

Lisa M. Beene,   Dr. Gayle Michael Cravens,
Chair, Dept. of Behavioral Sciences   Director, Graduate Studies in
Counseling

Dr. W. Stephen Johnson,   Dr. Samuel T. Jones,
Dean, School of Arts and Humanities   Vice-President for Academics

APPENDIX C

NON-DISCLOSURE/CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT FROM
TRANSCRIPTION SERVICE

Nondisclosure/Confidentiality Agreement

Between

Ryan Noel Fraser

And

Accentance, LLC

This agreement is made effective as of the date it is executed by both parties (the "Effective Date") and is between **Ryan Noel Fraser, Texas Christian University** (hereinafter "Discloser") and Accentance, LLC (hereinafter "Accentance"), with the latter's principal place of business at Chantilly, Virginia, USA. This agreement sets forth below, the terms and conditions that will apply to any "Confidential Information" (as hereinafter defined) which may be disclosed by Discloser to Accentance.

CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

Accentance understands that through recordings and/or transcripts, it may become aware of confidential financial, business, medical, scholarly, or other information that belongs to Discloser or its clients or associates. Accentance also understands that an all-inclusive definition of such information cannot be stated precisely, but it acknowledges that such information may include contracts, data, strategic plans, financial plans, medical information, personal information, trade secrets, concepts or ideas, action plans, product or service flaws, internal information, research projects, and the like. Accentance also understands that such information may originate directly from Discloser or from Discloser's clients or associates. In this Agreement all such information is collectively called "Confidential Information."

Thereby:

Accentance agrees that all Confidential Information it develops which includes, is derived or is based upon Confidential Information supplied by Discloser is the sole property of Discloser or its client. Accentance:

(1) agrees to hold in confidence all audio media (e.g., digital files or analog tapes) from Discloser and transcripts derived therefrom; these media will be used only to create transcripts for Discloser; they or the transcripts will not be shared with or disseminated to any outside parties with the exception of contract transcriptionists. All contract personnel also will be bound by a nondisclosure agreement.

(2) understands and agrees that all transcription work assigned and all work performed shall remain the property of Discloser or its client.

(3) further understands and agrees to keep all matters related to the transcription work assigned, audio media heard, including references to individuals or organizations, and any further information provided by Discloser, anonymous and strictly confidential.

(4) agrees to maintain the audio media and related materials in a safe and secure location at all times. The media and their use will be available only in fulfillment of the transcription service for Discloser. After one month the files, copies and derivative materials shall be deleted and/or destroyed.

The following shall not be deemed to constitute Confidential Information and shall not be subject to the restrictions set forth in this Agreement:

(1) information that is known by Accentance at the time of receipt from Discloser, and that is not subject to any other nondisclosure agreement between the parties; and

(2) information that is now or hereafter becomes generally known to the general public through no act or failure to act by Accentance or is later distributed or generally disclosed to the public by Discloser.

Accentance agrees to indemnify Discloser for any loss, expense or damage Discloser incurs as a result of any claim or lawsuit arising out of any breach of the foregoing warranties.

This Agreement shall be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of Virginia, Texas, and Tennessee, USA.

By signing this Agreement, I have read and agree to the above statements and promise to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants in the audio recordings. I agree to be bound by all of its provisions and obligations.

Signed by: Patrick Chisholm, Principal, Accentance, LLC

Signature: _____

Effective Date: _____

Signed by: Ryan Noel Fraser, Primary Researcher, M.Div.

Signature: _____

Effective Date: _____

APPENDIX D

STATEMENT CONCERNING USE OF TRANSCRIPTION SERVICE

Statement Related to Use of Accentance, LLC Transcription Service

When it comes to conducting the face-to-face interviews of the research subjects (human participants), I, **Ryan Noel Fraser**, will be completing the interviews myself. The interviews will be digitally recorded and not be videotaped. Accentance, LLC will provide me with the transcriptions and then, as described clearly on page 1 of their Nondisclosure/Confidentiality Agreement, "After one month the files, copies and derivative materials shall be deleted and/or destroyed."

Please review the Nondisclosure/Confidentiality Agreement between **Ryan Noel Fraser** and **Accentance, LLC** for a detailed description and outline of how the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of research participants will be protected according to state law.

APPENDIX E

INITIAL REQUEST LETTER

Dear [names of prospective research participants],

I extend my warmest greetings to you. My name is Ryan N. Fraser and I am an instructor in counseling at Freed-Hardeman University, as well as a doctoral candidate at Brite Divinity School (Texas Christian University) in Fort Worth, Texas.

I am writing to request your help with a PhD dissertation study that I am undertaking on the subject of the spirituality of Christian adoptive parents. Such a project has never been undertaken, to my knowledge, among members of the Church of Christ. In fact, a study of this nature has not been completed to any large extent by any religious group.

This study has to do with exploring the spiritual effects of the adoption process upon Christian adoptive couples. I am asking that you, as a couple, consider being subjects (or participants) in this research study. Agreeing to assist me will mean a few things. First, it will entail filling out the informed consents and returning them to me in the stamped envelope provided. Second, you will have a confidential survey mailed to you that you will need to fill out and mail back (postage paid). Third, if you are selected out of a larger pool of potential interviewees you will be contacted by phone to schedule a face-to-face interview with me that will last approximately two hours. I will be selecting 20-25 couples to interview. Finally, following the interview, there may be follow-up phone conversations for clarification.

All interviews will either take place at my university office at Freed-Hardeman University in Henderson, TN, or at my counseling office at AGAPE Child and Family Services in Jackson, TN. The interviews will be digitally recorded, but your privacy and anonymity will be respected and protected. In other words, all documents and/or audio materials containing personal identifying information will remain strictly confidential, and will be destroyed after 5-7 years. The present study will last approximately 12 to 18 months and will be conducted under the supervision of my dissertation committee at Brite Divinity School, TCU.

I am hoping the information that is collected will result in raising awareness within the church about the spiritual dynamics involved in adopting children. I also pray that the study will ultimately inform and improve ministerial care and counseling services for adoptive families. If you agree to be a voluntary participant in this project please return the attached informed consents by November 20, 2009.

Yours Sincerely,

Ryan N. Fraser, M.Div.
Primary Investigator

INFORMED CONSENT

Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Research: The Spiritual Narratives of Adoptive Parents: Constructions of Christian Faith Stories and Pastoral Theological Implications

Funding Agency/Sponsor: Funded by researcher

Study Investigators: Ryan N. Fraser, M.Div.; Nancy J. Gorsuch, Ph.D.

What is the purpose of the research?
To explore the spiritual and/or faith narratives (or stories) of Christian adoptive parents.

How many people will participate in this study?
The first wave of the research will involve up to 150 persons. The second wave will involve 40-50 persons (20-25 couples).

What is my involvement for participating in this study?
First, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire related to your adoptive parenting experiences. Next, if your family is selected by the researcher and you are willing, an interview date would be scheduled and you will be interviewed along with your spouse. You will be asked to answer questions related to how your faith and spirituality have been affected by the adoption process. A follow-up interview either in person, or over the telephone, may be required for further clarification of the first interview and more exploring of your faith story.

How long am I expected to be in this study for and how much of my time is required?
You will be expected to be a part of this study for up to twelve months. Including your taking time to fill out the questionnaire and participate in the interview and any follow-up calls, this could require up to a total of 2 ½ hours of your time. The questionnaire (elsewhere also referred to as "written survey") will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The face-to-face interview will require

around 1 ½ hours to complete. If deemed necessary by the researcher, a follow-up interview (most likely via the telephone) may require an additional fifteen to thirty minutes of your time.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will they be minimized?
Participation in this study may come with some risks and hold the potential for unintended personal discomfort. Some of these risks could include feeling like your privacy is being invaded by the researcher and becoming embarrassed or uncomfortable in some way. When talking about your experience of the adoption process, various unexpected emotions may come to the surface. There may also be other unforeseen physical symptoms related to talking about such intensely personal and emotionally charged issues. Filling out questionnaires on the relationship with your spouse and child(ren) may remind you of some conflict in your relationship which may be upsetting. Appropriate follow-up with a counselor will be recommended if needed. Also, you will be free to not answer any questions you feel uncomfortable with, and you may end the interview at any point, for any reason, without any negative consequences from the interviewer.

What are the benefits for participating in this study?
Participation in this study will give you the opportunity to tell your adoptive parenting story in a unique way that may serve to deepen your faith and strengthen your relationship with God, your spouse, your child(ren), and others. You may feel very satisfied knowing that you are contributing valuable information to the helping professions of pastoral care and counseling. Participation may provide the opportunity for you to do some personal growing in your Christian faith as you find new ways to speak about, understand and interpret your relationship with God and with the church.

By telling your story to a third party who is carefully and respectfully listening, this activity may turn out to be a therapeutic exercise for you in and of itself, though it is not to be confused with therapy. As a result of participating in this study, some parts of your adoption story that you have not, to this point, come fully to terms with may now be understood in new, empowering and encouraging ways. Because of your willingness to be a research participant, once the study is complete and published, you can (if you wish) receive a condensed version of the study findings. Furthermore, this research study may result in further research projects being conducted in the adoption field.

Will I be compensated for participating in this study?
There will be no monetary compensation for participating in this study.

What is an alternative procedure(s) that I can choose instead of participating in this study?
You can opt to not participate in this study without penalty and continue with your regular activities.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
You will be assigned an alphanumeric code to conceal your identity and maintain your anonymity. Any person handling your information in any way will be responsible to maintain strict confidentiality concerning your name, age, address, phone number(s), and any other identifying information. If ever research findings are shared at a later date in a public presentation or written publication, names and any other identifying information will be altered significantly to protect your privacy.

All confidential records and materials that contain private information related to you and your family will be stored in a locked filing cabinet located in the researcher's office located in the Behavioral Sciences and Family Studies Department at Freed-Hardeman University in Henderson, TN, throughout the duration of the research project. After the completion of the study, all confidential documents and recordings of interviews will be retained in a locked filing cabinet located in a faculty member's office at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. Following a period of five years, all written documents will be shredded, and after seven years all electronically recorded materials will be destroyed to protect the confidentiality and privacy of research participants.

Is my participation voluntary?
Yes.

Can I stop taking part in this research?
You may conclude your involvement in the project at any stage in the process for any reason without penalty. If at any stage you feel uncomfortable or unsafe you are encouraged to address these concerns with the researcher so that he can work with you to correct the problem. But even so, you will still have the right to decide for yourself that you no longer wish to participate. If you, indeed, do decide to end your involvement in the study, you will not be thought less of or judged negatively in any way. Your decision to end your participation will be respected.

What are the procedures for withdrawal?
In order to withdraw from the study, either call or correspond with the researcher, so that he will know your wishes. Your participation will effectively end at that point.

Will I be given a copy of the consent document to keep?
Yes.

Who should I contact if I have questions regarding the study?
Principal Investigator: Ryan N. Fraser, M.Div., Ph.D. candidate
Freed-Hardeman University, Graduate Studies in Counseling
158 E. Main Street
Henderson, TN 38340-2399
Email: rfraser@fhu.edu
Phone: (731) 989-6646

Project Advisor: Nancy J. Gorsuch, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Counseling
Brite Divinity School
TCU Box 298130
Fort Worth, TX 76129
Email: N.Gorsuch@tcu.edu
Phone: (817) 257-7590

Who should I contact if I have concerns regarding my rights as a study participant?
Dr. Meena Shah, Chair, TCU Institutional Review Board, Telephone 817 257-7665.
Dr. Janis Morey, Director, Sponsored Research, Telephone 817 257-7516.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, you have received answers to all of your questions and have been told who to call if you have any more questions, you have freely decided to participate in this research, and you understand that you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Participant's Name (please print):
_____

Participant's Signature: _____   **Date:** _____

Investigator's Signature: _____   **Date:** _____

APPENDIX G

HIPAA RELEASE FORM

Protected Health Information Authorization

As a subject in this study entitled "The Spiritual Narratives of Adoptive Parents: Constructions of Christian Faith Stories and Pastoral Theological Implications," you will be asked to provide protected health information about yourself. The information may be obtained by either verbal question and answer format (e.g., one on one interview) or by a questionnaire. For the purpose of this research project, you will be asked information in relation to: emotional and psychological challenges for you and your child(ren). Your protected health information will be confidential by being de-identified and coded in such a way that it will not be able to be identified by your name or initials. Your information will be stored in a locked cabinet when not in use and only the appropriately designated research personnel will have access to your protected health information. All of your protected health information will be kept private. Your data may be reported in publications or presentations but will be expressed as an average for the group without any reference to your individual results. There may be the possibility that your protected health information may need to be accessed once the study has ceased. If so, your information will be re-identified using a different coding procedure such that your information continues to remain confidential.

This form is designed to inform you of the procedures involved in the collection and use of your protected health information to be utilized in the study, and to obtain your authorization to collect and utilize the information. If you still have questions, please feel free to ask them now or at any time during the study.

Your health information will be shared at TCU with people who are involved in the research project. We may also share your information with others outside of TCU who are sponsoring the research.

By signing this form, you are agreeing to allow Ryan Noel Fraser (insert P.I. name and his/her team) to use and share your health information in this research study with the following person(s) or organization(s).

> Accentance, LLC, which is a professionally licensed
> transcription service. Qualified transcriptionists will
> supply word-for-word verbatims of interviews as needed.

If you change your mind later and do not want us to collect or share your health information, you should contact the researcher listed below by telephone or by letter. You need only say that you do not wish to have the researcher collect and share your health information.

I _____ authorize collection of the protected health information outlined above. I have read the description of the procedures in the collection and use of my protected health information, the procedures have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

The chair of the TCU Institutional Review Board is Dr. Meena Shah; Dr. Shah can be reached by phone at 817.257.7665. The director of Sponsored Research at TCU is Dr. Janis Morey; Dr. Morey can be reached by phone at 817.257.4877.

Date_____

_____
Participant's signature (please place your initials to the
right of each of the previous paragraphs indicating that the
consent form has been verbally discussed with you.)

_____
Principal Investigator

_____
Signature of Witness

WRITTEN SURVEY OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Return Address:
Ryan N. Fraser, M.Div.
Graduate Studies in Counseling
Freed-Hardman University
158 E. Main Street
Henderson, TN 38305

Office Phone: 731-989-6646
Email: rfraser@fhu.edu

SURVEY OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
Project Title: *The Spiritual Narratives of Adoptive Parents*

1. PERSONAL INFORMATION:

A. Adoptive Father's Name _____ Age _____

D.O.B._____

Race_____ Place of Birth_____

Your Address

_____

City, Zip Code _____

Phone numbers OK for a message: (home) _____

(work) _____(cell)_____

Highest level of education _____

If you attended college, what was your major and degree? _____

Current employment/job title _____

Length of marriage _____

Have you ever been divorced?   [ ] yes   [ ] no

B. Adoptive Mother's Name _____ Age _____

D.O.B._____

Race_____ Place of Birth _____

Your Address

_____

City, Zip Code _____

Phone numbers OK for a message: (home) _____

(work)_____ (cell)_____

Highest level of education _____

If you attended college, what was your major and degree? _____

Current employment/job title _____

Length of marriage _____

Have you ever been divorced?   [ ] yes   [ ] no

2. CHILDREN'S INFORMATION:

Names/birthdates/sex of Children from current marriage (put "*" beside any adopted child)

_____

_____

_____

Names/birthdates/sex of Children from previous marriage (put "*" beside any adopted child)

_____

_____

_____

How old was your child at the age you adopted him or her? (give name and age at adoption)

_____

_____

_____

How many years ago did you adopt your child(ren)?

_____

      What year was each adoption legally

finalized?_____

_____

───

Did you have any biological children of your own <u>before</u> adopting your

child?_____

If so, how many?_____ What were their ages at the time you adopted

another child or children?_____

Did you have any biological children of your own <u>after</u> adopting your

child?_____

If so, how many?_____ What was the age of your adopted child(ren)

when your first biological child was born?_____

Through what means did you adopt your child or children (i.e., the state, private

adoption, relative)?

_____

_____

_____

What race is/are your adopted child or children?_____

_____

From what country did your adopted child(ren) originate?_____

_____

_____

Why did you choose to adopt? (i.e., Were there any extenuating circumstances?

What motivated you to do so?)_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. SOCIAL NETWORK AND SUPPORT

A. Outside of your marriage, where do you find your strongest support, understanding,

and encouragement as adoptive parents? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

A. **Adoptive Father:**

How long have you been a Christian?_____

In what religious group, if any, were you raised?

_____

What church are you presently a member of?

_____

How frequently do you attend church services?(circle) 2-4 times weekly

1 time weekly

2-3 times monthly

1-2 times monthly

Other:_____

What ministries or areas of service are you involved in?_____

_____

_____

B. **Adoptive Mother:**

How long have you been a Christian?_____

In what religious group, if any, were you raised?_____

What church are you presently a member of?_____

How frequently do you attend church services? (circle)   2-4 times weekly

1 time weekly

2-3 times monthly

1-2 times monthly

Other:_____

What ministries or areas of service are you involved in?

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. OTHER

Is there anything else you would like the researcher to know at this time?

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What led you to the decision to pursue adoption as a means for growing a family?

2. Describe the process you went through in adopting a child.

3. Describe your relationship with God prior to going through the adoption process?

4. In what ways has your view of religion, spirituality, and God changed due to the adoption process?

5. What have been the spiritual challenges or struggles related to your experiences as an adoptive parent?

6. How did you experience the presence or absence of God before, during, and after the adoption process?

7. If you were writing a letter to God, what one thing would you ask related to your family or child(ren)?

8. If the story of your adoption experience were a chapter in a book, what would the title of the chapter be?

9. How do you think God feels about adoption? About you as an adoptive parent?

10. Would you describe your adoption experience as "waiting for God to act," "relying on your own efforts," or "partnering with God no matter what the outcome"?

11. What spiritual and/or religious resources did you draw upon prior to the adoption experience?

12. What spiritual and/or religious resources do you draw upon now?

13. How has your view or understanding of Scripture changed, if any, as a result of adopting a child?

14. How has the fact that you adopted a child altered or informed the spiritual dimension of your relationship as a couple?

15. How do you think becoming an adoptive parent has affected or informed your faith?

16. If your adoption story was made into a movie, what do you imagine the ending would look like?

CONTACT INFORMATION SHEET

CONTACT INFORMATION:

<u>Return Address</u>:
Ryan N. Fraser, M.Div.
Graduate Studies in Counseling
Freed-Hardman University
158 E. Main Street
Henderson, TN 38305

Office Phone: 731-989-6646
Email: rfraser@fhu.edu

Adoptive Father's Name _____
                                     Last   First   M.I.

Mailing Address _____

City, Zip Code _____

Phone numbers OK for a message <u>including area-code</u>:

(home) _____

(work) _____

(cell)_____

Adoptive Mother's Name _____
                                     Last   First   M.I.

Mailing Address _____

City, Zip Code _____

Phone numbers OK for a message <u>including area-code</u>:

(home) _____

(work) _____

(cell)_____

APPENDIX K

DATA FORMATTING

With the prior permission of the Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Counseling
Program at Brite Divinity School, TCU, as well as the approval of the TCU
Institutional Review Board, I used the services of a professional transcription service
called Accentance, LLC, to transcribe each of the interviews. I would send digital
mp3 files of the interviews to Accentance, LLC, and they would send me back Word
document files with the interview transcription. These transcriptions needed to be
checked for accuracy and then they were formatted in the following manner: The
headers were formatted and included the type of transcript, the date of the interview,
the alphanumeric code assigned to the adoptive couple, the pseudonyms of the
participants, and the total number of the total pages. At the bottom of each page was
a footer including the alphanumeric code and the current page number. Margins of
one inch for the top, bottom, and left margins, and 2 inches for the right margin were
formatted. The larger margin on the right allowed for hand-written memos beside the
typed text. Paragraph numbers and spacing were added.

I used grounded theory method as a research protocol to organize and code
data. First came *open coding* wherein raw narrative data were laid bare to identify
relevant categories. Second came *axial coding* in which the tentative categories were
refined, developed, and related. Third, came *selective coding* in which central
categories that tied other subcategories together were identified and linked.

APPENDIX L

FIELD NOTES/MEMOS

Date:_____   Participants' Code:_____
Time:_____   Interview Location:_____

1. **First Impressions**
   Dress/Appearance/Grooming

   Personalities

   Non-Verbal Behaviors (i.e., gestures, eye-contact, facial expressions, vocal tones)

2. **Psychological/Relational Assessment**
   Oppressive Dominant Narratives

   Exceptions (i.e., stories of empowerment, agency, & liberation)

   Stories of Connection and Support

3. **Key Themes/Motifs**

4. **Pastoral Theological Assessment**
   Key theological themes/dynamics

   Problems/Concerns

5. **Any Surprises**

6. **Recommendations for Future Interviews**

APPENDIX M

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Age Frequencies of Adoptive Parents

What follows is a brief summary of some relevant statistical and demographic information concerning the adoptive couples from this study and their families. The sample consisted of twenty heterosexual married couples of which nineteen were Caucasian and one was black. The current adoptive fathers' ages ranged from thirty-six to seventy-four years of age. The mean (average age) of the adoptive fathers' current age was forty-nine. The age of the adoptive fathers at the time of their first (or only) adoption ranged from twenty-seven to forty-nine years of age, with the mean being forty years of age.

The current adoptive mothers' ages ranged from thirty-five to seventy-one years of age, with the mean being forty-eight years of age. The age of the adoptive mothers at the time of their first (or only) adoption ranged from twenty-seven to forty-five years of age, with the mean being thirty-six years of age.

Educational and Vocational Backgrounds of Adoptive Parents

The education level of the adoptive fathers was as follows: one possessed a twelfth grade education, one had a couple of years of college training, two held associate's or technical degrees/certifications, four held bachelor's degrees, ten held master's degrees, and two held doctorate degrees. The education level of the

adoptive mothers was as follows: two had some college training, one held an associate's degree, eight held bachelor's degrees, eight held master's degrees, and one held a doctorate degree. The adoptive parents were primarily from the middle to upper-middle socioeconomic classes. They ranged in vocational backgrounds from being in education, the medical professions, helping professions, ministry, insurance business, manufacturing, engineering, professional assistants, professional drivers, and homemakers.

Adoptive Family Configurations

Fifteen out of the twenty couples had pursued adoption due to health concerns related to fertility issues, miscarriages, or other physical maladies. The other five families had received children for adoption for reasons unrelated to medical issues, often out of a sense of divine calling and compassion for children in need of families. Twelve families were comprised exclusively of adoptive parents and adopted children, while eight consisted of adoptive parents plus both biological and adopted children. Four couples had received children through state foster-adopt programs. Two families, however, had adopted through the state without first providing foster-care. Nine couples had used private agencies to adopt domestically in the United States. Five couples had adopted internationally from China, Korea, and Guatemala. Eight couples shared a similar racial heritage to their adopted children. Twelve couples were racially dissimilar to their children in that they had adopted children of different racial/ethnic heritages than themselves.

Demographics of the Children

Of the eight families that had both biological and adopted children, three of these families had one biological child and five of them had two. Ten families had one adopted child, nine families had two adopted children, and one family had three. The combined totals of children (i.e., biological and adopted) in families were as follows: Five families had one child, seven families had two children, seven families had three children, and one family had four children. The current ages of the adopted children ranged from two to forty-three years of age. Their racial demographics broke down as follows: Caucasian—13; Asian—3; Latino/Hispanic—3; Black—3; and Bi-racial—9. The age of the adopted children at the time of adoption ranged from just a few hours past birth to sixteen years of age.

APPENDIX N

VITA

Ryan Noel Fraser was born in Henderson, Tennessee, on February 10, 1968. His parents, Allan and Aileen Fraser, both citizens of the Republic of South Africa were in the United States at the time while Ryan's father was studying to become a minister. At the age of one, Ryan's family returned to Cape Town, South Africa as missionaries. Ryan attended primary school there until age twelve when his family came back to the States for a ministry in Detroit, Michigan. After three years, the family returned to South Africa where Ryan matriculated from high school in December 1985.

In January 1986, Ryan returned to the United States to begin his college education at Freed-Hardeman University in Henderson, Tennessee, his father's alma mater. It was there that he met and married his wife, Melissa Ann Housel, in 1988. Ryan completed his Bachelor of Arts in Bible in December 1989. He continued his studies earning a Master of Ministry in August 1991. Upon graduation, Ryan entered into full-time youth ministry in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. After three years, he and his wife moved to Wichita Falls, Texas, to another youth ministry. He began his work in the spring of 1995 on a Master of Divinity at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas. While pursuing his M.Div., Ryan was called to a ministry in Henrietta, Texas, where he served as the pulpit minister of the Henrietta Church of Christ for eight years. Ryan completed his M.Div. in May 2002. He began his doctoral studies in the fall of 2002 and completed the required coursework for the *Ph.D. in Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Counseling* at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University in May 2006.

In August 2006, Ryan was offered a full-time faculty position in the Graduate Counseling Program at Freed-Hardeman University. He presently serves as an assistant professor at this institution in counseling and psychology. Ryan is a Certified Pastoral Counselor in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) and works as a part-time clinical therapist at AGAPE Child & Family Services in Jackson, TN. Ryan and his wife Melissa are blessed to have three adopted children, R.C., Olivia, and Austin.

Permanent Work Address: Freed-Hardeman University
Graduate Studies in Counseling
158 E. Main Street
Henderson, Tennessee 38340-2399

This dissertation was typed by the author.