

Orphan Care and the Christian's Role

Reflections from the exposé Child Catchers by Kathryn Joyce

The vulnerable

It is wholly uncontested that Scripture calls us to care for the poor, for the vulnerable, for the needy. The social justice 'gospel' so popular today (particularly among ours and younger generations) highly prioritizes the care and support of those disenfranchised, poor, and exploited. Inherent in this biblical command is also the acknowledgement that the vulnerable are both present and significant in both local and international landscapes.

No small part of Biblical commands and social justice agendas alike is the importance of caring for the orphan. However, not surprising in a broken world with sinners (even well-intentioned), is that our delving into the "orphan crisis" has also led to significant and deeply harmful problems.

Locating the problem

The "orphan crisis" is so often held out of context, focusing solely on the child and not the child in his community and familial context. The very definition of orphan itself is slippery—the US State Department recognizes an "orphan" anywhere from a child with a single living biological parent (a "single orphan") down to the baby abandoned in a garbage heap. Some research even suggests that up to 80% of children in orphanages have living family members.

We often fail to ask questions like, "Why does the 'orphan crisis' exist in these communities? What circumstances are vulnerable families experiencing that are leading to abandonment, death, or relinquishment?" If we are serious about caring for vulnerable families, we must regard this as means to support families *in* community context. Instead, the landscape of international adoption has presented a set of deeply troubling consequences.

What is in reality "a complex and persistent development and poverty crisis has been transformed into a crisis solely about the poor's vulnerable or orphaned children...it treats adoption as the go-to solution for family crises. Although the Christian movement pledges to bring the 'end of orphans in the world,' making adoption the answer, it often leads to unethical practices in a supply-and-demand trap. Meanwhile "families are mired in a cycle of devastating poverty, and in the absence of a working child welfare system, [they] continue to relinquish children they still have inadequate means to care for" (152).

Good intentions end up running amuck and even wreaking havoc. Whereas the mission was originally conceived to care for orphans, the lack of attention, carefulness, professional excellence, and modesty in practice is replaced with professional laziness, neglect, inattention, and a focus on business profit. We find that many agencies and adoptive families are "strong on zeal, thin in knowledge." The well-meaning mission backfires as the agency loses focus and accountability. "Adoption is supposed to be about giving a child a family. When that happens, adoption becomes an amazing thing. But when adoption is not about the child, then it becomes very twisted and disgusting. Adoption isn't wrong, but adoption done wrong is worse than nothing at all."

Exacerbating the Problem

Because agencies and adoptive families often don't invest the time and energy to truly engage in the real issues, humbly seeking to learn first, we have in many cases exacerbated a problem with unethical results. The Christian adoptive parent often becomes the demand-side of the market. The ill-equipped nature of agencies to ascertain (at the least) the true social history of children and the unwillingness when ethically necessary to disappoint adoptive families' expectations both contribute to the harm inflicted on all—biological families, vulnerable communities, adopted children, and adoptive families alike. In this, ignorance, incompetence, and negligence equate to harm and actually become proactively dangerous and destructive. "This type of eager, well-meaning naiveté is, in many respects, more dangerous for appearing so benign" (34).

With blinders on and a focus only to "save" the children (often masking a grossly profitable business), several harmful results occur: "The common denominator in all of these is that the birthmother is invisible" (xvi). "Children were written about as though they had no unique past, no personal history deeper than their evident need" (2). "Children don't grow in cabbage patches, just waiting for us to find and rescue them...In order for the 'rescue' narrative to work, you really have to erase the families of origin" (98). In short, children become commodities, and birthmothers simply the means to an end.

As a resulting goal for promoting as many international adoptions as possible, many mothers stuck in and desperate because of poverty lack understanding of the permanency of adoption. Often agencies, seeking to fill the supply for the adoptive parent demand, seize on what is lost in translation or otherwise coerce mothers in desperation to relinquish their children. Consequently, "Adoptive parents—almost always a more privileged cohort than birthparents—have access to an adoption system that legitimizes their parenthood over that of the poorer women who birthed their children" (95). We end up actually contradicting the command to care for the poor and the widow by rendering her illegitimate and without integrity.

The cycle of international adoption grows and consequently, the vulnerable in these 'sending countries' bear the strain. "This type of progression, leaping from one country to the next, has become a common spectacle in the international adoption world, where advocates lobby hard for the needs of children from a specific country, only to move swiftly to another nation when the hurdles of adopting from the first are too large...[Herein], the idea of 'orphans' are defined most of all by their status as charity objects for prospective US parents" (29). Again and again, the international adoption landscape has presented a "...five stage process of adoption-boom countries. The first stage begins with a legitimate need for large numbers of children facing a particular crisis. In the second most of the original children have been placed, but adoption demand has grown as a result of pro-adoption advocacy that recruited potential parents. As a result, paid "child finders" enter the scene. In the third stage pressure to find children increases to keep pace with demand, and bad players begin to appear...In the fourth stage adoptive parents begin to come forward with their experiences of corruption or fraud, and governments and adoption agencies begin to respond..." (171).

If we as Christians and the church are to set things to right, we must be willing to take a hard look at ourselves and the blinders we often willingly keep intact.

Slippery theology and the mess of good intentions

Adoptive parents enter the process with good intentions; many times the emotions of the experience override what we know to be right. Adoption becomes “a field in which humanitarian concerns are intertwined with and frequently overridden by business imperatives and where naive would-be parents enter agreements in blind trust, certain they’re saving the life of an orphan” (xvi). We all acknowledge that every child needs a family, but we must also acknowledge when family *already exists* and when alternatives besides international adoption may truly be in the best interest of the children. While sticking one’s head in the sand may seem to protect the emotions and lead to a “guilt-free” process, we as Christians are called to such higher standards.

Even in our own experience, the demand of blind trust was said to facilitate the process. However, such a blind trust only enables unethical practices. “Let’s say you’ve been referred a child from any country, and then you start to suspect that things aren’t right. What do you do? Do you walk away, do you report it, or do you close your eyes and pray that nothing is really going wrong? In some instances we know that families have closed their eyes” (228). In other cases, Christians use their ‘call to save children’ even to justify unethical steps...”sometimes Christians are the worst about the ends justifying the means. ‘I will do something to save this one child’s life, no matter what it costs everyone else’” (228).

Among the spiritualized language Christians use in the “orphan crisis” discussion, we can unfortunately cause unintended harm. Our spiritual identification as “adopted sons,” for example, can be dangerous in that we minimize the pain and trauma that adoptees grapple with in reality. The vertical (heavenly) adoption we as all believers experience seems to put horizontal (earthly) adoption in an “untouchable” realm in which many ask or expect to be recused from any reproach. A focus on simply mimicking the heavenly adoption we have received can lead to difficult results whereas we can be regarded falsely as savior figures, and in the most dangerous scenarios regard ourselves in that light, ultimately to the harm of true earthly orphans who struggle with difficult pasts.

While we must not diminish the orchestration of the Lord in our lives, even in seemingly circumstantial events, we simultaneously must not ignore the realities we choose to engage in, namely that of the loss adopted children have experienced. “The sort of comforting declaration, that adoptive families come to love their adopted children so deeply as to make the relationship seem fated, was becoming a source of theological assurance for adults who might otherwise question how adoption creates families in the wake of tremendous loss” (75). In this, we cannot blindly trust flawed people and agencies (who inherently have a conflict of interests) in the realm of adoption. For the sake of our own families, but more importantly for the sake of the vulnerable children and parents, we must be willing to search for the truth.

Instead, just as all Truth is God’s Truth, all Scripture is in context. The very verse that is the chorus for the contemporary church’s “orphan ministry” (James 1:27) states, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” In this passage, the passage portrays widows and orphans *together as a unit*. Therefore, when adoption of orphans becomes the only solution, “the root problem remains the same: the unwillingness to recognize that the need is less children requiring adoption than poor families desperate for support” (238).

The hard questions

The indwelling Holy Spirit and our God who promises to work all things together for good calls us up out of failed, sloppy, and askew “mission.” What, then, does Biblical, selfless, humble love—that grants dignity to the vulnerable—look like? How are we to truly care for those in need? Shrinking away from adoption doesn’t solve the problem, and even worse it allows the bad players to prey on the vulnerable. Adoption certainly is *part of* the answer for some vulnerable children who are true orphans—and it represents (both in reality and in theology) beauty from brokenness. However, adoption must be only a component of a multi-pronged approach.

“One of the mistakes I think the US movement made early on was in terms of it being focused primarily on the beauty of adoption rather than the beauty blended with the difficult and complexity that comes with adoption...adoption movement must mature to present a more holistic vision of the ‘continuum of care’ and must address children’s varying needs—international adoption for some, local adoption for others, family preservation for most” (234).

We must focus on the context of the vulnerable families and how, without causing further harm or crippling effects, we can enable a community to care for itself in God-honoring ways. Often, erred agencies and ministries “place self-serving goals above the best interests of the children and lending their power to a frequently corrupt industry—[when] the community is capable of working in ways that lead not back to the familiar cycle of adoption boom and bust but instead toward sustainable development in partnership with local leaders” (257). “Too often, well intentioned mission groups will launch themselves into a local community in a developing country, determined to complete a simple, concrete plan; instead, they end up dominating the process without taking local opinions, talents, or labor into account...Rather, they should tap local human resources and support local goals...replacing drop-in charity with self-sustaining local leadership” (256). Offering the support and resources needed for sustainable transformation in the lives of the vulnerable becomes an act of granting dignity and honor as those created in the image of God.

As a word of caution, “Adoption may be a wonderful outcome for many families and many children, but much more often than we acknowledge, this win-win scenario is not the case. Well-meaning people can enable tragedy with their good intentions or their lack of understanding of what an adopted child needs. For adoptions undertaken without preparation, for serial adopters who may be attending to their own emotional needs rather than those of the children they adopt, or for those driven by a sense that adoption is a good deed for which they will be rewarded, the outcomes are often painful. For the child a bad or an unnecessary adoption can be worse than none at all” (290).

Instead, let us be light bearers!—In justifiable adoptions to echo restoration and honor for the precious children the Lord has created; in ministry to grant mothers and families in need support the integrity and resources to transform their own and their children’s lives in God-honoring lifestyles; in partnership with communities to see them becomes a light upon a hill.

—Wellon Bridgers
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