

# CUSTOM ADOPTION

by Jim Minor



girl home. Agnes felt sad to see the little one go, but she knew that she could not look after her. She felt greatly relieved to know that her daughter would be lovingly cared for and that she would see her growing up.



## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this study on CUSTOM ADOPTION. This booklet is a supplement to the NYM *Family Studies* series.

In the past few years, many church leaders and Christian missionaries have been very concerned about the breakdown in families. They have seen a great need for Bible teaching in this area. A number of pastors, church leaders and missionaries started specific teaching on family life. In 1977 they began putting their teaching together into a set of lessons that everyone could use.

In the beginning God established the family with father, mother and children, and the father as leader. Through this system God has worked to build individual lives, communities, churches and nations.

Today as never before in our lifetime, the family is under attack from Satan. One method he uses is getting people to accept alternatives to God's plan for the family. *Custom Adoption* was written to call attention to the special problems that often arise from the adoptive process and to give hope that it can be a positive experience, as it has been for some.

## AN INUIT CUSTOM ADOPTION

Agnes lived in an Arctic village along a northern seacoast. Shortly after she turned 15 she became pregnant. Her boyfriend showed no interest in the matter at all. Her parents did not want the responsibility of raising a child and neither did Agnes. This was wrong and Agnes knew it, but there was no turning back the clock now. What could Agnes do about the coming baby?

Agnes spread the word through her family about the expected baby. A childless aunt who was known throughout the community as a compassionate and loving woman contacted Agnes' parents. With the parents' approval the aunt talked to Agnes, showing interest in adopting the baby. Agnes knew her aunt wanted a child and would love and care for the little one.

Right on schedule, Agnes gave birth to a beautiful, healthy girl with soft, black hair and big, dark eyes. Her aunt was thrilled with the baby. When Agnes and her baby were ready to leave the hospital, her aunt came and proudly took the little

## TRADITIONAL ADOPTION CUSTOMS

Custom adoption is a traditional practice among Agnes' people, the Inuit. The child is given by the biological parent(s) to another family who want the child. Typically, the child is given up by a mother who is not living with the child's father, or by a couple who feel that for one reason or another they cannot care for the child. The child is usually adopted by relatives or close friends who are childless or are looking for a companion for an only child.

Traditionally these adoptions are made "in the custom of the people." Established community rules and procedures are followed in arranging for the transfer of the child from the biological parent(s) to the adoptive parent(s). Negotiation usually begins before the baby's birth. In the past there was no official recognition of these adoptions by the government agencies. Only recently have attempts been made to keep accurate records of adoptions.

In the traditional family customs of Ojibway and Cree people there is a similar custom of the "given child." The biological parent(s) give the child to another family to raise. There are a number of reasons for this. Sometimes it is because the biological parents have a number of children and feel that they cannot properly care for another child. Or, as with the Inuit custom, a young woman who is unmarried and does not want the responsibility of raising a child gives her baby to someone, usually a relative, to care for. Sometimes a young child is given to grandparents to be a companion to them in their old age and to help them with their household chores.

Oral and customary arrangements are made between the parent(s) of the child and the adult(s) to whom the child is given. Everyone in the community knows the circumstances, and because it is a tradition the community supports the arrangement. In most cases the child grows up in the household of the adoptive parents, all the while knowing the biological parent(s). Usually there is a relaxed relationship between the biological parent(s) and the adopted child, and the child often has easy access to the home and family of the biological parent(s).



In some families the arrangement works. The child grows up and adjusts to the circumstances, and other people in the family have some benefit from the arrangement. Childless couples are blessed with a child, or families are enriched by an additional child who is a companion to another child or children in the family.

Michelle was born into a family of four children in a small northern community. Their house was next door to an older couple who were their life-long friends and hunting partners. The older couple had no children of their own, four having died in infancy for various reasons. Just three years earlier they had taken in a baby girl named Theresa, whose parents had died in a boating accident.

Michelle's parents knew how much their friends loved children and how they longed for a playmate for their little adopted daughter. After some discussion between themselves and with their friends, they decided to give Michelle to their friends to raise, to have as their own child and to be a companion to their three-year-old daughter.

Michelle and Theresa grew up as sisters, secure, well cared for and loved by their adoptive parents. They were companions and helpers as their adoptive parents grew older. Michelle had a good relationship with her biological parents, who had three more children after her. The adoption worked well for Michelle and her adoptive parents.

In the Christian world view, as in the traditional Aboriginal world view, parents are responsible for training and raising their children.

*"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right...Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord"* (Ephesians 6:1, 4).

Proverbs, a biblical book that speaks a lot about the relationship between parents and children, says, *"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn away from it"* (Proverbs 22:6). In the normal course of events God looks to the parents of a child to provide the nurture and training for the child.

For many children, as it was for Michelle, custom or informal adoption has been a good experience. For others it has been an unpleasant experience. Verna's story is an example of an unpleasant adoption process.

Verna does not remember living with her father and mother as a small child. She was the first child but her parents gave her to her maternal grandparents when she was still an infant. The grandparents were alone and looking for companionship in their house and the parents were not sure they wanted the responsibility of a child. They had other things they wanted to do, like going to parties.

Verna lived with her grandparents until she was thirteen. Her father and mother lived close by but did not have much involvement with her. They gave birth to three more children whom they kept. Verna knew they were her biological family, but she never felt welcome to be with them, sensing strong rejection from both her father and her mother. Her grandparents cared for her well and really loved her.

Verna remembers the lonely feeling as a child of being on the outside looking in. She could never understand why she was not accepted in her parents' family. She knew she was born into that family, but no one would accept her there.

Shortly after Verna turned thirteen her grandmother died. Grandfather was old and feeble and could not care for her. So Verna went to her parents' home, now headed by her mother, as her father had died. It was not a pleasant place to live. Her mother was physically and verbally abusive to her, using her as a slave to do the housework. She often scolded Verna mercilessly and even dragged her across the floor by her hair. Verna was made to look after the three younger children and was made responsible for whatever they did.

Verna left home when she was sixteen, going to work in a larger town. She was a good worker, learning new skills, gaining good work experience. She came back to her home community some years later to work at the nursing station.

In her early twenties Verna had a short relationship with a man from another community. He fathered a son, whom Verna raised by herself.

Verna was never accepted by her family. All of them treated her as an outcast, blaming her whenever something went wrong in the family. Verna now lives in the city. She has problems relating to her son, who now lives on his own. She finds it difficult to get along with her mother, who has also moved to the same city. Verna longs to be free to sit and laugh and talk together with her mother over a cup of coffee as she sees other families do. She is still trying to sort out her deep-seated feelings of abandonment and anger toward her mother. At times she wishes she could die, but for now she just numbs the pain of abandonment by keeping busy and trying to avoid the people and situations that remind her of the past.

In some families grandparents are called to carry the extra burden of raising a child who has been abandoned or given up by biological parents. Usually grandparents love their grandchild, but the stress of caring for a child's physical and emotional needs is beyond the strength of most older people. The child does not get the active care needed. The child also feels keenly aware of being left out of the biological family setting if living in the same community as the biological parents.

A child who has been given to the grandparents to raise often goes through two experiences of abandonment. First is abandonment by parents. Then, because the grandparents are elderly, they quite often die before the child reaches adulthood. Children adopted by grandparents who die in the child's adolescence and early teen years (10–15 years of age) experience a very traumatic loss. Even if they try to go back to their biological family they are either turned away or not accepted as equal family members by their parents and siblings. This leaves very deep emotional wounds.

Children are very impressionable and easily hurt. They are like the new and tender plant in Isaiah 53:2, which needs care and gentleness. They are more vulnerable to abuse. They need the constant care and protection of loving parents or guardians. When children are adopted out or “given,” there is a great danger that they will be left without protection either by adoptive or by biological parents.

Robert was the fifth child in a large family. When he was four years old he went to live with his aunt and uncle, who had a house nearby. He never did know for sure why his parents gave him to his aunt and uncle, other than that they felt the pressure of too many children. Possibly his aunt and uncle, with two children, wanted more in their family.

Robert quickly became the little errand boy. He was made to carry the wood and the water. The two older children soon learned that they could get out of household chores by making Robert do them. Their parents made no move to protect Robert, and soon he took the role of the household slave. In addition, as Robert grew a little older, his birth family began to use him to do many of their household chores and to babysit the younger children.



As Robert grew into his teen years he began to rebel against the unfair treatment. He ran away from home a number of times. He started hanging out with a gang of older boys and soon was into heavy drinking and drug use. Robert became leader of a gang of teens who were doing a lot of vandalism and gang warfare with other groups of young people.

One of Robert's skills was painting. He moved away from his home town to a city and tried to make a living selling his paintings. His art sold well, but his drinking and violent living caused him much grief. One violent fight left him with a permanent disability. His left hand was so seriously damaged that the doctor had to amputate it.

Through the witness of a friend Robert accepted Jesus Christ into his life and became a Christian. He married and had children. Robert and his wife had serious relationship problems. A lot of the old emotional hurts from childhood and teen years came to the surface whenever problems arose between them. The need for personal esteem and security that was severely lacking in childhood still caused major problems.

Robert and his wife are working toward healing. The minister and a counsellor are helping them. The family is suffering through some severe struggles. The emotional damage done to Robert by being given away is deep. It will take time, determination and help for emotional healing and spiritual maturity to occur.

### THREE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

To have a good foundation for life, a child should have three basic human needs met. Those three are a need to belong, a need for self-worth and a need to be competent.

Children who sense that they belong feel part of a group, that they are cared for and enjoyed. Children who have healthy self-worth feel that they count, that they are liked and are right. Children who have a basic sense of competence feel that they are adequate to handle tasks and get along with people. They can get help when they need it.

When children are treated as objects to be used for getting a job done, serious damage is done to their sense of self-worth. They will feel unwanted and may feel that they don't belong anywhere.

A young single mother with two children had a baby girl whom she called Ashikaa. The mother felt that she could not look after another child and offered Ashikaa to her married sister.

It was soon evident that the sister used Ashikaa only as a slave for her family. She and her husband permitted their own four children to treat the newcomer with unkindness and cruelty. As soon as Ashikaa could walk, she was called on to do errands

for everyone else in the family. If she didn't obey quickly she was brutally punished.

When Ashikaa started school she began to visit her biological mother, who lived near the school, saying that she did not want to go home. Noticing that Ashikaa often had bruises and even cigarette burns, her mother called the authorities. After an investigation, Ashikaa was removed from the aunt's home and placed in a foster home. By this time, Ashikaa wondered why she had ever been born. No one seemed to want her. She became shy and withdrawn.

In her new home Ashikaa felt safe, well-treated and adequately provided for. It was a long time, however, before she could begin to trust anyone. She hoarded food, since prior to this she usually had to steal to eat. She never lost her particular survival technique, "Try not to be heard or seen. Maybe if no one notices me, no one will hurt me."

Ashikaa is still shy and feels alone in her own little emotional cage.



## REMEMBER THE PARENTS' FEELINGS

Not only can custom adoption leave the baby unprotected. It can also overlook the rights and feelings of the mother. This can cause long-lasting emotional damage to the mother.

Jill is sixteen and pregnant. Her boyfriend does not seem to care what she does with the child.

So Jill chooses a good home for her baby, with a couple she knows will be attentive and loving parents. They are excited and happy about having the baby. They have bought a supply of diapers and baby formula, baby clothes and blankets. They have even set up an area for the crib and baby things.

The long awaited day arrives. Then as Jill goes into labour, the biological father's parents suddenly show up to say, "If it's a boy, we want him."

Even if the expectant mother makes plans to adopt out her baby, the biological father's family can sometimes interfere. This interference could also come from the girl's parents, an older brother or other relative. The mother of the baby feels obliged to comply, no matter what she might think about the quality of life for her baby's future. Those who ask for the baby might be alcoholic, psychotic or have a record of child neglect. The mother may still feel that she cannot refuse.

Often birth mothers seem to have little influence over the future of their children if someone in the family with traditional authority contradicts their wishes. It is important for the birth mother's emotional and psychological well-being that she be deeply involved in the final decision about her baby.

The needs of the father should also be considered. Often the young man has protective feelings toward the baby. He feels that the baby is part of his flesh and blood and that he has some responsibility for its future. Sadly, the unmarried father is too often ignored. People assume that he is the cause of the problem in the first place, or that he is selfish and does not care. If there is any sense of responsibility and fatherly protection for the baby, ways should be found to involve the father in the baby's care. In any case he should know what responsibilities the community expects of him.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING ADOPTION

Following are some suggestions of ways to make the adoptive process more effective.

- Keep the process as simple as possible.
- Form a group of respected people in each community to screen out unsuitable parents.
- Provide more education on child rearing, and services available for adoptive homes.
- Do not force unwed mothers to give up their children. It is important for psychological well-being to be able to decide for themselves what to do without undue pressure.
- Do not allow couples to adopt if they have a history of abusing their own children or adopted children.
- Do not allow immature women or couples to adopt, especially if they are unstable, have little child-rearing experience or are unable to support a child financially.

Who cares about the lives of these precious little ones? How many of these children are contributing to present or future social problems? The effects of childhood trauma are difficult to overcome. Some adopted children express their anger, frustration and confusion in violence and crime. Others bury their hurts by abusing alcohol or drugs. Many carry feelings of abandonment, rejection and low self-esteem into their own families. They often take out their deep-seated frustrations on their husbands, wives or children. Some cannot see any use in going on living.

It is much better for both parents and children when the life of a child is regarded as precious and is highly valued. The conclusion of the Psalm-writer is appropriate:

*“Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him”* (Psalm 127:3).

The lives of these little ones should be cared for and protected. The emotional and spiritual strength of the next generation depends on the vigilance of the present generation to nurture its children.

Ephesians 6:4 was quoted earlier. Colossians 3:21 gives similar advice. *“Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.”*

Parents should give proper encouragement and teaching to their children. One time Jesus’ disciples were too busy to care for the children who came to them. Jesus rebuked the disciples. Then He held the children and blessed them (Matthew 19:13–15). Should parents do any less.

Yet there are tragic times when biological fathers and mothers die and the children must be raised by others. There are also times when parents are not able to care for the child and other adults must help. The suggestions in this book can be useful when arranging an adoption.

May we always remember that Jesus’ heart longs for children to come to Him that He might bless them.

## REVIEW ACTIVITY

Fill in each blank with the correct word.

1. A child who is adopted “in the custom of the people” is adopted by relatives or close \_\_\_\_\_ who are \_\_\_\_\_ or who are looking for a \_\_\_\_\_ for an only child.
2. Sometimes a child is given to \_\_\_\_\_ to be a companion in their old age and to help them with household \_\_\_\_\_.
3. In traditional Aboriginal world view, the \_\_\_\_\_ are responsible for \_\_\_\_\_ and for raising the child.
4. Ephesians 6:4 says, *“Fathers, do not exasperate your \_\_\_\_\_; instead, bring them up in the training and \_\_\_\_\_ of the Lord.”*
5. A child who has been given to the grandparents to \_\_\_\_\_ often goes through two experiences of \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Children are very impressionable and easily \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Three basic human needs of children are a need to \_\_\_\_\_, a need for \_\_\_\_\_ and a need to be \_\_\_\_\_.
8. It is important for the birth mother’s emotional and psychological well-being to be deeply \_\_\_\_\_ in the final \_\_\_\_\_ about her baby.
9. The feelings and \_\_\_\_\_ of the biological \_\_\_\_\_ should also be considered.
10. People need more education on child \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ available for adoptive homes.
11. *“\_\_\_\_\_ are a heritage from the Lord, children a \_\_\_\_\_ from Him”* (Psalm 127:3).
12. Jesus held the children in His arms and \_\_\_\_\_ them (Matthew 19:13–15).

## ANSWERS

- |                                  |                                  |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. friends, childless, companion | 11. sons, reward                 |
| 2. grandparents, chores          | 10. raising, services            |
| 3. parents, training             | 9. thoughts, fathers             |
| 4. children, instruction         | 8. involved, decision            |
| 5. raise, abandonment            | 7. belong, self-worth, competent |
| 6. hurt                          | 6. hurt                          |
| 7. blessed                       | 5. raise, abandonment            |
| 8. need to be                    | 4. children, instruction         |
| 9. deeply                        | 3. parents, training             |
| 10. education                    | 2. grandparents, chores          |
| 11. sons, reward                 |                                  |
| 12. held                         |                                  |

## RECOMMENDED READING

*Family Studies*. NYM Ministries. Contains readings on the worth of a child and dealing with everyday problems.

Cloud, Henry, and John Townsend. *Boundaries*. Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. 1992. A helpful book for gaining control of life.

*Accepting Myself in the Image of God*. NYM Ministries. Steps to conquering anger, shame and fear that many young adults carry because of emotional neglect or abuse.

*Youth Studies*. NYM Ministries. Things to consider in planning for marriage or a life of singleness.

### Other booklets in this series:

*Hosea, a Broken and Restored Marriage*

*When Dad and Mom Don't Love Each Other*

*Choose Life: Saying No to Suicide*

*Breaking the Cycle: Saying No to Family Violence*

*A Time to Be Pure* (Sexuality)

*When Bonding is Broken* (Attachment problems)

*Tell...Your Grandchildren*

*Taming the Tiger* (Sexuality)

*Winning the Struggle* (Forgiveness)

*The Widow and Her Children*

*Freedom From Family Spirits*

*The Single Mother and Her Children*

*Family Fraud* (Common-Law Relationship)

*Rebuilding a Marriage: an Alternative to Divorce*

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