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Red Cups and Orphans

Abstract

"If Christians are truly called to welcome in the orphaned and parentless, then I believe the church - all of us, as a whole - must also answer the call along with these brave parents."

Posting about the needs of adoptive families from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/red-cups-and-orphans/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Red Cups and Orphans

▫ inallthings.org/red-cups-and-orphans/

Liz Moss

Social media blew up on Monday morning with the report of Christians' apparent disbelief on Starbucks' move to take Jesus out of Christmas by removing snowflakes and reindeer from their traditional red holiday cups. I didn't know reindeer were at the birth of Jesus. I didn't realize it snowed in Bethlehem that day, either.

A few hours later in my next scroll through Facebook, it seemed to me that my Christian friends were ashamed by other Christians who would dare to be upset by something as silly as a red cup. They were outraged about an outrage, which in the [end wasn't even really an outrage](#).

My newsfeed was flooded by eye-rolling friends who clearly thought they knew the best way to live as a follower of Jesus Christ: feed the homeless, care for the orphan and the widow, welcome the stranger — quoting Scripture passages from [Psalm 82](#) and [Romans 12](#). According to my social media newsfeed, *real* Christians shouldn't care about red cups. Rather, social media implied that *real* Christians should be concerned about the number of children within the U.S. borders stuck in the foster care system or the number of orphans waiting for forever homes around the world.

My colleague calls this “spiritual A.D.D.” Sometimes Christians have the tendency to jump from one issue to the next. Starbucks red cups at 7:30 am to the world's orphan crisis by 10. First we worried about the loss of Christmas, then we were outraged by other Christians, then we moved our emotions to how Christians should really act by adopting an orphan.

It just so happened that Monday was also World Orphan Day. I hope no one on Facebook decided to adopt simply because they saw a picture about the orphan crisis on social media.

According to the UNICEF '[orphan statistic](#)', there are 132 million orphans in need of a new family, shelter, or care. Thirteen million of these children have lost both parents, while the rest have lost a father or mother and are living with a parent, grandparent, or other family member. Ninety-five percent of all orphans are over the age of five.

The latest statistics from the [Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System \(AFCARS\)](#), 415,219 children were in foster care by the end of 2014 in the United States, while 264,746 children entered into care for the first time that year. That means a child entered into the system every two minutes in 2014. Not all of these children are eligible for adoption into another home. Some wait for a long time with many unknowns — living with loneliness, trauma, and long-term attachment concerns.

Orphaned children — in the United States and around the world — become a statistic through famine, neglect, poverty, abandonment, and death. All five of these reasons (and I realize there are many more)

quickly lead to grief, loss, and long-term trauma. These children are hurting, emotionally scarred, and forever changed.

If one family out of three churches in the United States is really willing to answer the call to change the statistics and to welcome the orphans into the fold of their congregations, these well-intentioned people must also be aware of the depths of these deeply hurting children. Hurting children who have seen more than our minds could ever imagine. Hurting children who have lost more than a child should ever lose. Hurting children make poor decisions, lack trust in others, and search for love with a traumatized mind. Welcome these orphans into your home, but be fully aware of what you will face together as a family.

Admittedly, my husband and I *didn't know what we didn't know* when we adopted our boys. Of course, our adoption agency tried to equip us with tools to adequately care for our children. But, we naively thought if our boys were adopted as babies, our sweet boys wouldn't know or remember their families. Therefore, we also naively believed there wouldn't be any major grief or loss on their part. We enfolded them into our warm and loving home, provided the love and care they were missing during their stays in care centers, and hoped for a smooth ride into their adulthood. We were wrong.

With any crisis pregnancy, both the birth mother and the child are affected long-term. Even within the womb, small developing babies can feel the stress of a mother. It can be toxic to the child. And, once born, babies can tell if they have been separated from their birth mothers within hours after their birth. [Infants can feel grief and pain.](#)

By the time our son was placed in our arms at eleven months old, he had been cared for by his birth family, by nannies at the in-take center in southern Ethiopia, and then by different nannies in another care center in Addis Ababa. He had likely heard and was cared for by people who spoke at least two different languages (there are over 80 different languages in Ethiopia) before he heard us speak to him in English for the first time. He was held by a variety of people, poked and prodded by doctors and nurses who did not know him well, and slept in a variety of different places all before he turned one year old. It is no wonder he cried and screamed the entire first week after we took custody of him in Ethiopia. He didn't know us, while we so badly wanted to know him. Then we flew on an airplane to a different climate (hello, Iowa!) with different smells, food, and crazy people who were so anxious to see him but whom he was not too anxious to see himself. It is no wonder he still screams and cries five years later.

I confess I cringe when I see people advertise World Orphan Day on social media and encourage its followers to adopt the world's orphaned children without giving a clear disclaimer: If you are called to adopt, you are not just saving the world's children. The adoption into your home will be hard, challenging, and painful. Potential adoptive parents, please be warned — this will be one of the hardest things you will ever do in your life. It will also be one of the bravest and most beautiful things you will ever do in your life.

Solving the world's orphan crisis is not something we can have “spiritual A.D.D.” with on Facebook or in our everyday lives. Adoption takes a long-term, in-depth commitment by families, churches, and the entire faith community.

If Christians are truly called to welcome in the orphaned and the parentless, then I believe the church — all of us, as a whole — must also answer the call along with these brave parents. Here are a few ways the church can answer this call:

- 1. Educate yourself.** Learn about the long-term effects of trauma in children and the importance of healthy attachment. Some good resources for your church can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- 2. Support mental illness treatment and therapy.** Treatment and therapy is expensive and traumatized children cannot be healed with just a few therapy sessions. Our family has been in and out of therapy for at

least four years now and will likely be in therapy for many more years to come. I encourage churches to find ways to support families who find themselves in need of therapeutic services for a season of their lives (due to adoption or not) — support these families by offering financial grants, providing therapy services within the church, or by being a strong advocate for families who are going through crisis. Encourage therapy rather than shaming those within it.

3. Be the church. A friend recently pointed out there are two different kinds of families: families who have adopted, and everyone else. Churches with adoptive families (so every single church in the United States) can work to change this differentiation. They can work to find a balance between giving new families space to nurture and bond with one another and supporting families living with a traumatized child, because all adopted children are children living with trauma. These parents are trying to navigate the world with this child or children. In general, parenting is exhausting. Parenting a traumatized child can be beyond exhausting. Be willing to provide respite and rest for the family. Find ways to lend a helping hand with meals, yard work, or car pool — but ask first, don't assume. Do not be afraid to enter into the mess of life along with the families. Families walking through the "thick of it" need to know their church has their back. Be the church. Be Jesus to them.