



**North American Association of Christians in Social Work**  
*A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work*

PO Box 121  
Botsford, CT 06404  
[www.nacsw.org](http://www.nacsw.org)  
888.426.4712

## **ORPHAN CARE IN THE EARLY CHURCH –A HERITAGE TO RECAPTURE**

**By: Joanie Gruber, MSW**

**Presented at:  
NACSW Convention 2011  
October, 2011  
Pittsburgh, PA**

# **Orphan Care in the Early Church- A Heritage to Recapture**

Presented by

Joanie R. Faddol Gruber, MA, MSW, LISW-S

Assistant Professor of Social Work

Mount Vernon Nazarene University

**NACSW Convention Workshop Presentation**

**Friday, October 21, 2011- Session A 8:45AM-9:45AM**

## **Presentation Outline**

I. Definitions

II. Orphans in Ancient Civilizations

A. Infants in general- Greek and Roman world

B. Greeks

1. Athenians

2. Spartans

C. Romans

D. Carthaginians

E. Egyptians

F. China

G. Nigeria

H. Mayans

III. Judeo-Christian View of Orphans

A. Scripture

B. Early Church Writings

C. Early Church Practices

IV. Recapturing the Heritage

A. Modern Day Orphans

B. How Christian Social Workers can make a difference

IV. Summary

---

## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the historical issues regarding care for orphans, the current needs of parentless children worldwide, and the opportunities for Christians to have an effect on this growing concern. Using Scripture, early writings and statistical data, domains of responsibility are considered. Below is an abbreviated version of the in-person presentation at the NACSW Convention on Friday, October 21, 2011.*

## Learning Objectives

Following this workshop the participants will be able to:

1. Recognize how some ancient civilizations dealt with the problem of orphans.
2. Identify Scriptures that express God's concern for the orphan, and directives He gave toward their care.
3. Understand how the early Church interpreted and acted on these directives.
4. Explore areas of need in modern society worldwide concerning orphan care.
5. Identify ways Christians (particularly Christian Social Workers) today can make a difference regarding orphans.

## Presentation

**I. Orphan** (Noun): A person, especially a minor, both or (rarely) one of whose parents have died. A child without living parents. A young animal with no mother **Etymology:** From Ancient Greek (*polytonic-ancient Greek phonology*) **orfanos** = "without parents, fatherless"

### II. Orphans in Ancient Civilizations:

#### **A. Infants in general- Greek and Roman world**

Approximately 1/3 of all children in ancient Rome died by 10 years of age. The average life expectancy for men would have been as low as twenty-two and, for women, twenty years. We would think life would become more precious, but instead people were considered expendable.

Infanticide was universal in ancient Greece and Rome. Babies would often be rejected if they were illegitimate, unhealthy or deformed, the wrong sex (female for example), or too great a burden on the family. Female infants were particularly vulnerable.

#### **B. Greeks**

##### **1. Athenians**

The Athenians viewed care of certain orphans as an economic and patriotic duty, ordaining that children of citizens killed in war were to be educated up to eighteen years of age by the State.

##### **2. Spartans**

In Sparta, the decision was made by a public official if an infant would be allowed to live. Children were children of the state more than of their parents.

#### **C. Romans**

In Roman society an infant could be abandoned without penalty or social stigma for many reasons, including an anomalous appearance, being an illegitimate child or grandchild, or a child of infidelity, family poverty, parental conflict, or being one of too many children.

More often than not they were abandoned to the elements, and death resulted from hypoglycemia and hypothermia. Abandonment generally occurred in a public place, where it was hoped that the infant could be taken up by some wealthy person. It was probably, though, that the abandoned infant would be picked up by slavers to be sold as a slave, used as a prostitute or sold for begging purposes after mutilation.

Roman legal records indicate that foundlings were occasionally taken in by families and raised as a son or daughter. Most adoptions, however, were not of abandoned infants although that was occasionally the case

with infertility. Adoptions were usually involving a close relative, as adoption was commonly used for purposes of succession or inheritance, to keep wealth within a biological family.

#### **D. Carthaginians**

Carthaginians embraced ancient Phoenician practices such as killing children as religious sacrifices to their gods. Infants of the poor and orphaned babies were frequently used for this purpose.

#### **E. Egyptians**

The religion of the Ancient Egyptians forbade infanticide, and during the Greco-Roman period they rescued abandoned babies from manure heaps, a common method of infanticide by Greeks or Romans.

#### **F. China**

China has a long history of infanticide based on sex-selection. Exposure to the elements was often the method of choice for unwanted female babies, including those abandoned by parental choice or maternal death. Orphaned males, however, would be adopted solely to perform the duties of ancestor worship

#### **G. Nigeria**

If a mother died in childbirth among the Ibo people of Nigeria, the newborn was buried alive. It suffered a similar fate if the father died. Abandoned children were often picked up for slavery.

#### **H. Mayans**

A child could become a slave if born to a slave, if purchased for that purpose or if orphaned. Orphans also could be purchased for sacrifice.

### **III. Judeo-Christian View of Orphans**

#### ***A. Scripture***

God cares about children, particularly the fatherless/orphaned child.

**Exodus 22:21-23** “Do not take advantage of the widow or the **fatherless**. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.

**Deuteronomy 27:19** “Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the **fatherless** or the widow

**Psalms 10:14** But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the **fatherless**.

**Proverbs 23:9-11** Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the **fatherless**, for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against you.

**Isaiah 1:17** Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the **fatherless**; plead the case of the widow.

**Zechariah 7:9-11** “This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the **fatherless**, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’

**James 1:27** Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after **orphans** and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

We also have an example by God Himself adopting US into HIS family.

**Galatians 4:4-7** God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive **adoption** to son-ship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba, Father.*” So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

---

## ***B. Early Church Writings***

**Eusebius, Church History** Thus was Origen **adopted**, after Leonidas, his father, had suffered martyrdom, by a pious woman in Alexandria. Again the child of the female martyr, Felicitas, **found a mother**; and of Severus, a Palestinian composer, who especially interested himself in the **orphans** and widows of those who had fallen.

### **Apostolic Constitutions (eight treatises dated from 375 to 380 (Book IV) Section 1. On Helping the Poor**

When any Christian becomes an **orphan**, whether it be a young man or a maid, it is good that some one of the brethren who is without a child should take the young man, and esteem him in the place of a son; and he that has a son about the same age, and that is marriageable, should marry the maid to him: for they which do so perform a great work, and become fathers to the **orphans**, and shall receive the reward of this charity from the Lord God. But if any one that walks in the way of man-pleasing is rich, and therefore is ashamed of **orphans**, the Father of **orphans** and Judge of widows will make provision for the **orphans**.

### **Lactantius, The Fathers of the Church- Divine Institutes, Book VI (Of True Worship)**

Nor is it less a great work of justice to protect and defend **orphans** and widows who are destitute and stand in need of assistance; and therefore that divine law prescribes this to all, since all good judges deem that it belongs to their office to favor them with natural kindness, and to strive to benefit them. But these works are especially ours, since we have received the law, and the words of God Himself giving us instructions. For they perceive that it is naturally just to protect those who need protection, but they do not perceive why it is so. For God, to whom everlasting mercy belongs, on this account commands that widows and **orphans** should be defended and cherished, that no one through regard and pity for his pledges should be prevented from undergoing death in behalf of justice and faith, but should encounter it with promptitude and boldness, since he knows that he leaves his beloved ones to the care of God, and that they will never want protection.

## ***C. Early Church Practices***

Christians worked against infanticide by prohibiting its members from practicing it, voicing their moral view on infanticide to the pagan world, by providing for the relief of the poor, and actually taking in and supporting babies which had been left to die by exposure by their pagan parents.

Later, hospitals specifically for orphans *and poor children* were built by Christians such as St. Ephraem, St. Basil, and St. John Chrysostom.

## **IV. Recapturing the Heritage**

### **A. Modern Day Orphans**

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) classifies orphans as children who have lost one or both parents due to any cause. While a child in a western nation living in a single parent family may or may not be in a crisis situation, in underdeveloped and third world countries the absence of either parent could mean an inability to survive. With the decimation in these areas caused by HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, natural disasters and combat casualties a growing number of children have become either actually or de facto parentless.

In industrialized countries like the USA a child most frequently is in need of alternative parenting as the result of a termination of parental rights (due to abuse or neglect) or an inopportune pregnancy.

The most recent estimates according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) released December 2009 was that in 2008 there were 163 million orphans worldwide. Of these 55.3 million had lost a mother and 126 million lost a father. 18.3 million lost both parents.

In Central & Eastern Europe: 6.4 million, in Latin America/Caribbean: 10.6 million, Africa: 58.4 million and in Asia: 82.4 million. India alone has estimated 25 million; China has 17 million; Nigeria 9.7 million; Bangladesh and

Ethiopia 5 million each.

In developing countries it is not uncommon for parentless children to live on the streets or in exploitation arrangements in brothels, gangs, begging or other illegal operations. When orphans in care in those countries "age out" of orphanages (16-18 years old depending on country) they have had no preparation for life, no jobs and little support. A large majority turn to prostitution (60% of girls), hardened criminals (70% of boys), drug trafficking and use. In some countries if they are bright enough the boys may enter a lifetime in the military. The suicide rate among young people who grew up as orphans is staggering (10-15% by age 18) . They have no family and no safety net.

In the United States, the term orphan is rarely used, except to describe those children whose parents have both passed away or for use in official government documents. When describing the population of children in U.S. government care, the term "foster children" is used even when these children are living in group homes or institutions, rather than in traditional foster homes.

There are approximately 500,000 children in the United States foster care system currently, and approximately 115,000 of these children in 2009 considered "waiting" children- meaning those which have been determined to be available for adoption. There were 57,466 adoptions with public agency involvement that year. Over 57,500 still waiting. Particular issues include age (school age or teens), emotional and behavioral problems (MH diagnosis, conduct disorders, abuse survivors), physical disabilities (from poor prenatal care, little dental and medical care, developmental delays).

## **B. How Christian Social Workers can make a difference**

### **1. *Micro-Practice Level***

#### **a. Care for birth parents**

Consider working, as a volunteer, contractually or possibly in a full-time career in agencies or practices that reach out to and counsel women in crisis pregnancy situation. Women in a pregnancy crisis need support whether they decide to make an adoption plan or raise the child themselves. Support must be present for both birth mother AND father as an increasing number of birth fathers want involvement and willing to take on responsibilities involved.

Care is also needed for those who are post-abortion. Abortion creates invisible parents- someone who once was a mother or father but is no longer. They frequently need post-abortion counseling and help with future lifestyle decisions.

#### **b. Care for adoptive/foster parents**

The unique perspective of social workers regarding valuing cultural diversity, along with our person-in-system approaches can be invaluable as a family integrates a new member. Consider pro-bono or paid opportunities with agencies or practices (including hospitals and doctors) that assist fostering and adoptive families at every stage in the process- pre-placement, placement, post-placement. There is also a need for promoting and encouraging prospective foster and adoptive parents with informed information on the need for families and what to expect once a child is placed.

#### **c. Care for the child**

Working directly with the child to help resolve common feelings such as confusion, abandonment and anger as well as assisting child and placement family with behavioral issues that may present is a possibility for social workers with clinical skills. Christian social workers may also act as a mentor, particularly with older school age and teen adoptees.

---

#### **d. Prevention**

Promoting and modeling Godly lifestyles, including abstinence, ought to be the responsibility of all Believers. Those in the social work profession may also have the opportunity to working with organizations that encourage youth toward life goals and education, which studies have shown decrease rates of adolescent sexual involvement and pregnancy. Involvement with ministries that assist women in crisis situations with practical help and support may prevent situations that lead to child abandonment, neglect and abuse.

#### **2. Mezzo-practice level**

Supporting and assisting agencies and ministries working with women in crisis and/or children in care situation domestically and internationally.

##### **a. Fund raising and promotional activities**

- crisis pregnancy centers
- maternity services/homes
- orphanages and children's homes
- adoption and foster care agencies
- counseling sources

##### **b. Initiating and facilitating groups**

- informational
- support

#### **3. Macro-practice level**

Bringing the need to the attention of society at large and especially to the Church.

##### **a. Societal Changes (domestic)**

- Discouraging behaviors that produce children who cannot be raised by birth parents.
- Assisting parents with unexpected pregnancies to be able to take responsibility for, and raise their child.
- Effective programs and support for families involved in neglect and abuse situations.
- Funding for and effectual oversight of fostering and adoption programs.

##### **b. Societal Changes (international)**

- Supporting organizations that attempt to influence human rights, peace, justice and honesty in governments
- Involvement in organizations and agencies working to raise awareness and care for vulnerable children worldwide, particularly parentless children.

##### **c. Conscience of the Church**

- Emphasize personal and corporate responsibility.
- Recruit other supporters, potential parents, workers.
- Prompt increased establishment involvement (financial, ministry, vocalization).

#### **V. Summary**

Being pro-life is more than being anti-abortion.

As Christians we worship and serve a God to whom people are uniquely and individually important. First and second century Christians recognized that just as God showed mercy by adopting US into His family, they were responsible to adopt those who were orphaned.

Christian social workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have numerous opportunities to apply this truth to the defenseless parentless children today

---

**Orphan Care in the Early Church- A Heritage to Recapture**

**NACSW Convention Workshop Presentation**

**Friday, October 21, 2011- Session A 8:45AM-9:45AM**

**Bibliography**

Bartholomew, J. (2005, October 26) The war orphan's pension in ancient Athens. *The Welfare State We're In*. (The website of the book by the author).

Retrieved from [http://www.thewelfarestatewerein.com/archives/2005/10/the\\_war\\_orphans.php](http://www.thewelfarestatewerein.com/archives/2005/10/the_war_orphans.php)

Boswell, J, (1988). *The Kindness of Strangers*. NY: Pantheon Books.

Colón, A.R. and Colón, P. A. (2001) *A History of Children: A Socio-Cultural Survey Across Millennia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood

Donaldson, J. (Translator), Roberts, A. and Coxe, A.C. (Eds.) (1866) *Apostolic Constitutions (Book IV) Section 1. On Helping the Poor*. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol.7. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company

Durant, W. (1944) *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization & of Christianity from their Beginnings to A.D. 325*. In *The Story of Civilization Vol. 3*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Farrar, F. (1883). *The Early Days of Christianity*. London, England: Cassell

Fletcher, W. (Translator), Roberts, A., Donaldson, J. and Coxe, A.C. (Eds.) (1866) *The Fathers of the Church Lactantius Divine Institutes, Book VI (Of True Worship)*. Ante-Nicene Father, Vol.7. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company.

Hausfater, G. and Hausfater, S. (Eds.)(1984). *Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives*. New York, NY: Aldine Publishing Company.

Infanticide (2011) Retrieved June 8, 2011 from Wikipedia : <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infanticide>

Kovacs, J. (2009, December 18). Updated Global orphan Numbers. (The Abba Fund Blog). Retrieved from <http://abbafund.wordpress.com/2009/12/18/updated-global-orphan-numbers/>

Lammens, H. (1929/1987). *Islam. Belief and Institutions*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Lendering, J. (2005). *Mothax*. In Livius.Org. Retrieved from <http://www.livius.org/mo-mt/mothax/mothax.html>



List of U.S. states and territories by population (2010, April 1). Retrieved June 8, 2011 from Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_U.S.\\_states\\_and\\_territories\\_by\\_population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_U.S._states_and_territories_by_population)

McKenna, C. (1911). Orphans and Orphanages. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York, NY: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11322b.htm>

Menski, W. (2000). *Comparative Law in a Global Context: The Legal Systems of Asia and Africa*. London: Platinum Publishing.

Miller, T.S. (2003). *The Orphans of Byzantium: Child Welfare in the Christian Empire*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2004) Orphan. *Merriam Webster Mass Market; Revised edition*. Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster Publishing

Price, C. (2004) Pagans, Christianity and Infanticide by Christopher Price , *Christian Colligation of Apologetics Debate Research and Evangelism* . Retrieved from [http://www.christiancadre.org/member\\_contrib/cp\\_infanticide.html](http://www.christiancadre.org/member_contrib/cp_infanticide.html)

Schaff, P. and Wace, H. (Eds.) (1956), *Church History, Eusebius. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Volume I, Book 6, Chapter 2*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company

Smith, P. (2001, January 18). Adoption growing among evangelical Christians. *Louisville, KY/Southern Indiana Courier-Journal.com*. Retrieved from (archived)

[http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/courier\\_journal/access/2242024871.html?FMT=ABS&date=Jan+18%2C+2011](http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/courier_journal/access/2242024871.html?FMT=ABS&date=Jan+18%2C+2011)

Stager, L.E. (1991) *Eroticism and Infanticide at Ashkelon*. *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 17(4) p. 35-53

Stark, R. (1996). *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Teeter, E. (1999). *Egypt and the Egyptians*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press

The Spartan Family. (1998-2008). In HistoryWiz.

Retrieved from <http://www.historywiz.com/didyouknow/spartanfamily.htm>

Thinkquest Team 26602. (1988-89). Ancient Rome: Roman Society and Culture. *SPQR Online: The Life, The Times, The Legacy*: Oracle Think Quest Education Foundation.

Retrieved from <http://library.thinkquest.org/26602/society.htm>

UNICEF (2011), Orphan Estimates. (ChildInfo.org).

Retrieved from [http://www.childinfo.org/hiv\\_aids\\_orphanestimates.php](http://www.childinfo.org/hiv_aids_orphanestimates.php)

Uhlhorn, G. (1883). *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

Yu-Lan, Fung (1952). *A History of Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: [Princeton University Press](http://www.princeton.edu/)

---