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Signs and Wonders: Disability in the Fourth Gospel

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Abstract

Traditional interpretations of the significance of the miraculous healings in the four Gospels have often contributed to the complicated experiences people affected by disabilities have encountered in Christian communities. A more careful examination of these texts, especially in the Gospel of John, challenges these interpretations and opens up space for new insights into the liberating and counter-cultural force of the gospel. The Fourth Gospel's nuanced understanding of signs and faith provides a frame for understanding the relationship between the sign stories in John 5 and 9—of the man at Bethesda and the man born blind, respectively, both affected by what we would now call disability. These stories help us to grasp the true relationship between miracles and faith, and demonstrate that people affected by disability are critical for understanding the Christian view of healing.

Keywords: *disability, faith, healing, John, sign*

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Signs and Wonders: Disability in the Fourth Gospel

Miracles are marvelous. But what do they mean? No understanding of Jesus' earthly life and ministry is complete without an account of the significance of the signs and wonders related in the four Gospels. Many of these miracles feature healing, both physical and spiritual. Often, people Jesus healed were affected by what we now refer to as "disability," although the biblical texts use different language to describe impairments and their social consequences. There is no word or category in scripture equivalent to our contemporary use of "disability." Traditional interpretations of the significance of these healings have often contributed to complicated experiences of people with disabilities in Christian communities. However, a more careful examination of these texts challenges many of these interpretations, and (precisely because of the distance that the Christian Bible has from our own contemporary context) opens up space for new insights into the liberating and counter-cultural force of the gospel. These issues are broad and wide-ranging; here, we will focus on how the Gospel of John speaks about Jesus' signs and wonders, paying particular attention to two unnamed individuals affected by what we would now call disability. I argue that the author of the Fourth Gospel has a much more nuanced account of the importance of miracles for true faith than is often appreciated. I conclude with some brief suggestions about the significance of this portrayal for a Christian view of healing, particularly in relationship to those affected by disability.

Signs in the Fourth Gospel

The Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are full of various stories about the wonder-working miracles that Jesus performed, from exorcism and healing to feeding thousands with a few pieces of bread and fish, causing the crowds to seek him out in enthusiastic attention. The Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, has an apparently different story to relate.[1] Sign stories, tales of miraculous actions that attest to the identity of Jesus, form the backbone of the book. But the author—referred to in the third person as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23, NIV) and traditionally identified as John—has a nuanced view of the evidential value of such signs for faith.[2]

In what follows, we will focus our attention on the way John structures his Gospel around seven signs that attest to the identity of Jesus. Put simply, John thinks that signs are useful but not sufficient for faith. The nature of a sign is to point away from itself, towards its object, but the more miraculous the sign (*semeia*), the greater the likelihood that attention will mistakenly

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rest on the wonder (*terata*), rather than being directed to Jesus. This error is why Jesus is so remarkably impatient with the demand of the crowds for signs in the Fourth Gospel; they mistake the Son of God for a religious entertainer, a shallow kind of belief that is distant from the exacting cost of true discipleship.[3] John contrasts two kinds of responses to these signs throughout his Gospel, but especially at the beginning and end. In the prologue (1:9-12) the true light was in the world, coming especially to his own people (the Jews) who did not receive or believe him. Near the conclusion (20:30-31) John says that the signs are recorded for the sake of his readers' belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God—faith that brings eternal life. There are many more signs that Jesus performed, but the author has deliberately described a few select signs which point towards the identity of the Anointed One (21:25).

Speaking of narrative choice, the literary quality of the Gospel of John is often noted—and with good reason. The Fourth Gospel is written in deceptively simple but elegant Greek: Jesus gives long and eloquent speeches, exchanging ironic dialogue with multiple individuals who are vividly portrayed with deep humanity. Powerful metaphors and images reappear throughout the Gospel, as John unfolds the complex emergence of the multiple meanings of Jesus' words in ways that reward careful rereading. Yet the good news is accessible to all: God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son, not for judgment, but for salvation (3:16-17). This combination of surface simplicity and developing depth characterizes John's Gospel as a whole, and suggests that traditional interpretations of certain stories may need to be reexamined in order to properly grasp their significance.

The Gospel of John has four major components. The prologue (1:1-18) and epilogue (chapter 21) bracket what are often called two books: the book of signs (1:19 through chapter 12) and the book of exaltation or glory (chapters 13 through 20). The book of glory contains the Farewell Discourses, an account of the crucifixion and Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, culminating in his conversation with Thomas. In scripture, the number seven symbolizes completion or perfection, so there are several ways to count the seven signs in the Fourth Gospel, partly depending on whether the resurrection of Jesus is included as the capstone of the series or whether it is enumerated as the eighth sign, representing new creation or life more generally.[4] Here, I count the seven signs as follows and include Jesus' action and interpretation (often communicated through confrontation with the crowds and religious authorities) as part of the sign story:

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1. Transforming water into wine at Cana (2:1-11)
2. Healing the royal official's son in Capernaum while in Cana (4:46-54)
3. Healing the sick man at Bethesda (chapter 5)
4. Feeding the five thousand near the Sea of Galilee (chapter 6)
5. Healing the man born blind near the temple in Jerusalem (9-10:21)
6. Raising Lazarus from the dead at Bethany (chapter 11)
7. Jesus' post-resurrection appearances near Jerusalem (John 20)

Each of these sign stories deserves more attention than we can give here, but several general observations about the signs as a whole are in order. Like the rest of the Fourth Gospel, these stories include specific and concrete details that suggest an eyewitness account—the number and size of the jars at Cana as well as the fish and bread near Galilee, the years of sickness experienced by the man at Bethesda, and so on. But John is careful not to describe the actual occurrence of the sign. Rather, he focuses on the reaction of the crowd and Jesus' verbal interactions and interpretation, describing the effects of the sign rather than its mechanics. If we spoke of the Fourth Gospel as a play, we would say that the action happens off-stage. At Cana, the transformation of water into wine happens invisibly inside jars; the royal official's son is healed while the official is elsewhere; the sick man at Bethesda simply stands up; the bread and fish at Galilee multiply from one basket into thousands of hands; the man born blind goes to Siloam to wash and comes back seeing; Lazarus emerges from the tomb, still covered in strips of cloth; and no one witnesses the resurrection of Jesus—he simply appears to his scattered friends, now mysteriously alive. John clearly goes out of his way not to talk about the "how" of any sign; he is much more interested in the "why," which is a matter of faith.

The seven signs as a whole are structured with a particular direction (like every sign itself). They build towards the resurrection, which itself (like all the signs) points to Jesus himself. The beautifully human, sovereignly powerful, shockingly loving, and eternally living Lord is the object of all his signs. They testify to who he is. We must restrict our observations about their sequence to one aspect: what we might call the *transience* of the sign. Jesus turns water into wine, which is drunk in celebration and not replenished. The royal official's son is healed, but is presumably still mortal. The sick man at Bethesda is able to walk, but he does not respond in faith. The hunger of the five thousand is assuaged but merely for one meal. As Jesus cryptically explains in the Fourth Gospel's version of the institution of the

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Lord's Supper, Jesus' body and blood are true food and drink, the kind that satisfies for all time. Continuing, the man born blind is given sight, and then physically and (more importantly) spiritually, sees Jesus as Lord. Even the raising of Lazarus from the dead, as climatic and astonishing as it was, is temporary—Lazarus eventually died again. And while some of the crowd responds in belief, others run to the Pharisees, who plot to kill this wonder-worker (11:45-53; see also 12:37-50 on the mixed response to Jesus' signs). But when Jesus is resurrected, his life is eternal. The divine life that he is cannot be overcome by death, and by his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus defeats death and grants eternal life to those who believe in his name.

Even this climactic sign is not sufficient for all. John encapsulates the ambiguity beautifully in the closing section of the Fourth Gospel. Thomas was not present at the first appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the disciples. He protests that he must personally see and feel Jesus in order to believe: Thomas is an early empiricist—a forerunner of scientists! Jesus appears again and offers his wounds to Thomas, who (without actually touching Jesus' resurrected body) confesses his faith. Jesus' reply is timeless: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29). John wrote his Gospel, recording the signs that we later Christians have not witnessed personally, in order that we may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and "that by believing [we] may have life in his name" (20:31). Our faith is not dependent on physical sight.

The Sick Man at Bethesda and the Man Born Blind—A Study in Contrasts

What do all of these signs have to do with disability? Two of the sign stories in the Fourth Gospel powerfully describe Jesus' interactions with individuals affected by what we would now call "disability." Both of these stories have played influential roles in the development of theologies of disability. Both contain one profound but confusing verse that is too often superficially referenced when describing the biblical perspective on disability. In order to appreciate what John is actually communicating about disability, we need to dig deeper than just a surface reading, and we need to read the stories in relationship to one another. Keeping in mind the larger frame of the sign stories in the Fourth Gospel described above, we turn now to a deeper reading of John 5.

The story opens in John 5:1 with Jesus, who was in Jerusalem for a feast, making an appearance at a pool called Bethesda where many individuals

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with various impairments waited for healing. Legend held that an angel would periodically appear to stir up the water, after which the first person into the pool would be healed. Jesus asks a man who had been sick for long time if he wants to be healed; the man replies that since no one has been there to help him into the pool when it was stirred, others have always descended into the water before him. Jesus responds by telling the man to rise, collect his mat, and walk, which the man does. This provokes a controversy with the religious authorities, who interpret carrying a mat as work. Work is prohibited on the Sabbath (most famously in the Ten Commandments; see Exodus 20:8-11), and the religious authorities accuse the man of sinning. The question of how to properly honor the Sabbath is a matter of frequent conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities throughout the Gospels. The man deflects the accusation, telling the authorities that he was told to do what he did by the man who healed him. He does not know (or want to know!) anything about Jesus, or his identity. Later, Jesus seeks the man out in the temple and tells him to sin no more, so that nothing worse happens to him. The man's response is to report to the authorities that it was Jesus who healed him (on the Sabbath), which prompts a long sermon (5:19-47) from Jesus about his unique, equal relationship with God. This relationship authorizes Jesus to transgress the human regulations that the religious authorities had placed around the divine command to honor the Sabbath by not working. Jesus' claim provokes accusations of blasphemy (5:16-18).

This short summary indicates that the larger purpose of the sign in John 5 (a "sick" man is made able to walk) is to testify to Jesus' identity and subsequent authority over religious interpretations of the Sabbath; his work validates his claim of equality with God. What are we to make of this "sick" man? He is never named, and some think that he simply functions as a passive object of theological controversy, moving the plot of the Fourth Gospel along at the expense of his personhood and agency.[5] Is he merely a prop for Jesus' preaching? What is the significance of Jesus' comment that he should sin no more lest something worse happen to him (5:14)? Is it a threat? Does this mean that the man's illness was a result of some unnamed sin? If so, does this contradict what Jesus appears to say later in John 9:3 (that neither the man born blind nor his parents sinned)?[6]

A deeper look reveals that the sick man is not a passive prop but is crucial to the sign precisely in the way he exercises his agency. This story has significance not only for Jesus' identity but also contributes to a biblical understanding of disability that is consistent with the rest of John's Gospel: sin is not the cause of disability, but people with disabilities can reveal God's glory.[7]

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First, we need to clear up some confusion about terms. Many English translations have introduced awkward difficulties through their word choices in John 5:3, saying that there was "a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered" (KJV) or "invalids—blind, lame and paralyzed" (NRSV and ESV). The NLT and Message prefaces "blind, lame and paralyzed" with "sick people," which is better, while the NIV over-interprets and supplies "disabled people." While it is certainly true that scripture does not use the kind of "people-first language" that many disability advocates now prefer (though even this is a matter of frequent debate and quickly changing terms), some of these English terms are unnecessarily offensive because John simply says that there was a crowd of the sick or weak (*asthenounton*), blind (*tuplon*), lame (*cholon*), and withered (*xeron*) waiting for the waters to be stirred up.

John is intentional about his word choices, but he is not using precise medical terms or supplying the kinds of diagnoses to which we are accustomed in the twenty-first century. *Tuplon* and *cholon* are broad terms; the closest contemporary equivalents might be "those with visual impairment" (blind) and "those with mobility impairment" (lame), respectively. *Xeron* literally means "the dry," here used in the sense of withered: a limb or organ deprived of natural fluids, like blood, and therefore unusable (see Mark 3:3). We gain a better understanding of the meaning of these words by reading about their reversal when Jesus heals various individuals: the blind see, the lame walk, and the withered are restored or made well. From the context, it appears that the man in John 5 has impaired mobility since he cannot get into the pool without assistance. Yet, John uses none of these three words to describe the man who is healed; he is simply the weak or sick man (*astheneo)*.

In the Synoptic Gospels, *astheneia* is usually translated into English as "sick"—a nonspecific physical ailment, often the object of healing by Jesus or the disciples (Matthew 8:17, 10:8, 25:36, 39; Mark 6:56; Luke 4:40, 5:15, 8:2; as well as Acts 9:37, 19:12, 20:35). Paul often uses *astheneia*, either literally in terms of illness (Philemon 2; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20; see also James 5:14) or metaphorically, to describe his own weakness (1 Corinthians 2:3; Galatians 4:13; and throughout 2 Corinthians 11-13) or the strength (or lack thereof) of faith in the churches he addressed (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8). Paul is very well aware of the potential ambiguity, as he notes that those members of the body which seem to be weaker are in fact indispensable (1 Corinthians 12:22). The author of Hebrews says that Jesus is the perfect high priest because he experienced human weakness (Hebrews 4:15, 5:2, 7:28; see also the power of faith to make strength out of weakness in 11:34).

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John's use of *astheneia* is similar to Paul's, in that he plays with the overlapping contrast and comparisons between physical and spiritual senses of the term. We need to keep the multiple senses in mind in order to understand the significance of these signs. John certainly uses *astheneia* as a generic term for sickness or illness (the royal official's son is sick in 4:46; the crowd follows Jesus because he is making the sick well in 6:2; Lazarus is said to be sick five times in John 11:1, 2, 3, 4, 16), but there is more going on in this story than mere physical infirmity.

Consider Jesus' opening question in 5:6—"Do you wish to be healed (*hygies*)?" Many commentators pass over the question or regard it as a rhetorical opening to set the stage for the miracle.[8] Those accustomed to robust physical health may find the question odd or irrelevant. But those who have grappled personally with chronic illness or who have worked with those living with chronic illness, such as in a healthcare or counseling setting, may hear the question differently. The question concerns identity.

Much of the literature in disability studies circles around questions of identity.[9] The word "disability" is a label with social, economic, political, and personal consequences. For example, within the last few decades in the United States of America, upon official bestowal of the label, benefits are granted by governmental entities—certain (tightly constrained and highly specific) financial benefits accrue to the recipient, alternate educational resources are bestowed, parking permits are obtained, etc. Behind this machinery is a compensatory assumption: because disability makes things difficult, the state grants extra assistance. The extent of that assistance is a matter of frequent and passionate debate, all of which I will pass over, simply noting that labels matter, not only symbolically but also practically. This significance is not only a matter of government assistance—underneath is a philosophical issue about whether disability defines me. This question of identity lies at the root of discussions about "people-first language"—am I a person with a disability, or am I a disabled person? Since disability is a blanket term, a somewhat artificial category that lumps all sorts of impairments together, many people affected by disabilities resist the generic term (especially since social discrimination and approbation are often more oppressive than any physical difficulty). With more nuance, we might ask instead about *how* the label of "disability" defines us.

Personally, I have lived with a diagnosis of Type I diabetes for the last decade. The disease was late onset (as is increasingly common) and without any identified cause or family history. A century ago, prior to the manufacture of artificial insulin, this diagnosis would have been terminal. Nowadays, with

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the proper prescriptions and monitoring, Type 1 diabetes can be managed, and the odds are good that I will die of something else. I hate the disease, the treatment, and the limitations it imposes on my life. If Jesus asked me whether I wanted to be healed, I would respond with a loud yes! I want the disease removed and my pancreas restored to "normal" functioning, so that I no longer have to inject insulin to live, or monitor my eating, exercise, or stress levels. I would say yes even though I have learned an enormous amount about faith in the midst of difficult circumstances. Walking the path of daily dependence on God, I have caught glimpses of some of the ways in which he uses our experiences of suffering to transform us into increasing conformity with the image of the suffering Savior. I have (reluctantly) grown through experiencing the disease of diabetes as part of the brokenness of the sinful cosmos we inhabit (Romans 8).

Early in my journey, I resisted the self-description "I am a Type I diabetic," preferring to say that I had Type I diabetes; I did not want the disease to dominate me. Part of that instinct is sound—I am more than my disease, and allowing it to wholly define me can rob me of my agency and my responsibility for managing a chronic illness. But part of coming to grips with having Type I diabetes means internalizing the truth that (at least for now) the disease is part of my identity. From eating to exercise, there are activities that I can no longer participate in without adequate preparation; as I have learned while recovering in hospitals, ignoring that reality has consequences.[10]

An imbalanced appropriation of chronic illness would be over-identification, allowing the disease to define me. I suspect that many readers will have met individuals who have done so. Think of a friend or relative who always declines invitations with an appeal to their illness—"I can't do X, because of my___..." even if their physical stamina is actually sufficient to participate, and even if joining that activity might distract a mite from their suffering. While writing this article, I had a conversation with a friend of mine, a social worker active in public health, who shared the following story with me (identifying details have been altered to protect the individual's privacy). On a support line, a woman was complaining about her three-year illness, which she claimed was impossible to diagnose; no doctor had been able to help her. The main presenting symptom was excruciating stomach pain: temporary relief was available only by eating a meal. My friend asked whether there were any side effects of eating. No, a simple sandwich would mostly relieve the pain and cause no other unpleasant symptoms. After a series of bemused queries, it appeared that this woman, who had previously reported unhealthily low body weight, was effectively starving herself. When

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asked what barriers prevented her from eating, the woman reported that she simply did not want to get up to make herself a sandwich, even though she knew that would help, saying "sometimes I just prefer to sit here and suffer." She then quickly changed the subject to complain about the incompetence of the medical establishment that was unable to cure her disease and no longer listened to her pleas of pain.

While the stark expression of deliberate choice may seem unbelievable, this is not fiction, and the pattern of behavior is more common than we may prefer to admit. Chronic illness or decades of being affected by disability has psychological consequences.

We lack the space to examine complicated issues of body image, eating disorders, public health challenges, or the physical consequences of psychological issues, all of which (and more) are undoubtedly involved in the complex reality behind this story. While there is an enormous body of research on these issues (for a sampling, see Locker 1984; Charmaz 1995; Asbring 2001; Karnilowicz 2011; Larsen 2014), I simply want to say that chronic illness or long-term disability can and often does become part of our identities in both harmful and beneficial ways. Disease can come to define us, deficiency swallowing our agency and producing apathy and excuses. I know that there are times that I have succumbed to that temptation.

With this background in mind, the truly liberating force of Jesus' query can be recovered. He is asking whether, after thirty-eight years, the *astheneo* (who is never named) wants to be healed. Notice that the *astheneo* does not answer the question, either in the affirmative or negative—instead he talks about how there is no one to help him, how he is isolated and alone, much worse off than the others, who at least had someone to assist. Perhaps the question is too frightening—losing his identity as a sick man is a risk he cannot face after such a long time. What is certain is that self-pity and resentment characterize the reply of the *astheneo*, a pattern repeated when he later responds to the religious authorities' accusation of working on the Sabbath by blaming the one who healed him, one whose name he never bothered to learn (5:11) and then by reporting Jesus to the religious authorities as the troublemaker who healed him on the Sabbath (5:15). When someone is locked into a pattern of narcissistic self-pity, something needs to change—a drastic alteration to their circumstances to shock and shift behavior. Jesus' miracle is that interruption, removing the physical limitation that had contributed to the man's illness. From that point on (verse 8), John no longer uses the word *astheneo*. He is now simply the man (*anthropos*, vv. 9 and 15), the man who was cured (*tetherapeumeno*, v. 10) or the healed man (*iaomeis*, v. 13).

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True healing would include embracing his new identity, living in his new name and forsaking the old patterns, following Jesus rather than returning to his old ways. He does not. John is not only relating a miracle story—he is also criticizing the religious authorities. Like the *astheneo*, the religious authorities do not recognize Jesus—they do not take the time (or have the humility) to ask Jesus who he is, to learn his name, to listen to what he has to say. They remain content in their sickness—not even a miraculous healing can jolt them out of their lethargy. Like the crowds, the focus remains on the physical surface, the miraculous cure, without breaking through into the spiritual depth, the true healing. But we must not simply spiritualize this story, as it has real relevance for a theology of disability. Physical cure, miraculous or otherwise, is not the same as healing. Jesus is interested in more than a miracle.

We can now begin to appreciate properly the sense of Jesus' comment in verse 14. First, Jesus seeks out the man (calling him the healed man) and finds him in the temple—a holy place which was previously inaccessible to him. Sadly, this is not an image of restoration to community—the man has used his restored physical ability and newfound agency to return to that which is destined to pass away. The Fourth Gospel persistently contrasts the physical temple, rebuilt after exile as the glory of Jerusalem, with Jesus as the true spiritual temple (1:14; 2:19-22; 4:19-24; 7:37-39). In this setting, Jesus reminds the man that he has been healed (but not by the temple or religious authorities!) and then warns him to sin no longer, so that nothing worse happens. It is sometimes suggested that Jesus' warning implies that the *astheneo* was impaired because of prior sin, yet Jesus heals without condition, without a suggestion of required forgiveness or even a call to repentance. For that matter, Jesus never makes healing contingent on repentance; at no point in the Gospels is being made well depicted as a reward for good behavior. The simplest paraphrase of "sin no longer" is "repent." It is repentance to which Jesus calls the man after curing him—but he returns to the religious authorities who are bent on persecuting the one who healed him.

Jesus' warning reinforces the point that John is at pains to make throughout his Gospel. Whether or not someone can walk—even for thirty-eight years—is much less serious than the stakes of eternal life (*zoe aionios*), over which Jesus says he has been given authority (5:22-29). True healing is about more than a mere physical cure. On this point, scripture speaks with a unified voice. In the Old Testament, health is described in holistic terms, including all aspects of human existence. *Shalom* is the rich expression of a right relationship with God, including well-being, peace (more than just

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absence of conflict) and strength. Throughout the Old Testament, "health consist[s] in the wholeness of being and holiness of character which found their origin in the human relationship to God and reached full flower as that relationship developed and deepened... [it was] not static but dynamic as human beings walked with God and reflected his nature in their being and expressed his character in their actions."[11] The New Testament builds on this conception by focusing on the perfect person of Jesus Christ, who conquered death by his crucifixion and resurrection, coming to offer humanity overflowing and abundant eternal life. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the quality of heavenly existence shines out of mortal and humble human beings. Through union with Christ we partake of true life, even in dying bodies, the fellowship with God for which we were originally created.

This is the life from which the man in John 5 walks away. But it is the life that the man born blind in John 9 comes to see. The contrasts in their character and response are deliberate, and we will better grasp the meaning of the portrayal in John 5 after seeing its reversal in John 9.[12]

Every attempt to present a Christian theology of disability includes at least a nod to John 9, because Jesus very clearly rejects any causal connection between sin and disability. We must not lose sight of that clear statement, but understanding the larger context of John 9 considerably strengthens the force of this rejection. In this story, John's love of allusion, multiple meanings, and the interplay between literal and metaphorical senses of words is on masterful display. Unfortunately, this amazing literary art has sometimes been misunderstood and received as offensive by people with visual impairments (see Hull 2001). The misunderstanding is tragic, all the more so because it is unnecessary. While the Bible is certainly written within a culture that devalued people affected by what we would now call disability, it not only contains theological resources for a radically different perspective, but often directly challenges erroneous social understandings. A proper understanding of John 9 exemplifies that challenge.

The scene opens in 9:1 with Jesus seeing a man born blind, a deceptively obvious observation that repays closer examination. In both English and Greek, to see something or someone is a very simple expression with symbolic depths. Sight is of course one of our five senses, but it is philosophically privileged: sight is often used as a metaphor for knowledge. To see is to understand, to grasp or comprehend (it is interesting to note how easily synonyms move from visual to tactile terms). Throughout the story, Jesus plays on the irony of the Pharisees—those who can physically see and who have assumed religious authority over the people of Israel—being

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spiritually blind: they are unable to see who he is, to understand his identity as Lord (consider the interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus in 3:1-21). As many commentators have noted, the main meaning of the sign of Jesus miraculously healing the man born blind is the contrast between physical and spiritual sight. Jesus says to the man but also to the listening Pharisees, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see and those who see may become blind" (9:39).

The slippage between physical and spiritual senses is characteristic of John. We need to be careful when using such metaphors, because sloppy application can be tremendously hurtful. Using individuals with visual impairments as an illustration of the truth that some (sighted) people are spiritually blind is in fact precisely the opposite of what Jesus is teaching. It is the man born blind who truly sees Jesus—recognizes and confesses him as Lord—whereas the physically sighted Pharisees are unable to see Jesus.

It is unfortunately easy to read the story of the man born blind as ending in chapter 9, but John closes the story in 10:21, when the Jews debate the significance of Jesus' action and discourse—some claiming he is demon possessed, others observing that a demon cannot open the eyes of the blind. The verse and chapter divisions in English translations of scripture are not original but have been inserted for ease of reference, which is very helpful so long as we do not read them as the author's intended transitions. The New Testament was originally written without sentence-level punctuation, much less verse or chapter divisions. In the hands of the literarily sophisticated author of the Fourth Gospel, this flowing style can substantially increase the level of nuance and multiple meanings, as we will witness shortly.

Within the story of the man born blind, Jesus shifts from a visual to an aural metaphor (at 10:1), attempting to explain to the offended religious authorities that sheep recognize the voice of the true shepherd—himself. The sheep to whom Jesus refers are not only the surrounding crowd but also includes all subsequent listeners. As those who have not physically seen Jesus, we rely on the testimony of others and, in the direct speech of Jesus contained within the Fourth Gospel, likewise hear the voice of the shepherd.

Reading the story as an extended whole (ending at 10:21) helps to relieve some of the pressure that is often felt from the singular focus on sight as a privileged mode of knowledge. Jesus contrasts vision (which can be mistaken, interpreting superficial and external differences as definitive) with sound. We should notice at least three points of importance here. First, while John is playing on the difference between physical and spiritual senses, he is not simply using the man born blind as a metaphor or plot device—as we

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will see, the man exercises surprising agency, particularly in resisting social pressure from his community. Second, John is expanding our horizons: physical characteristics are not the most important issue for followers of Jesus, and the importance that we sighted disciples place on physical vision is misguided. Even within the story, sight is not the philosophically privileged mode of knowledge that we often assume it to be. Third, truly welcoming communities do well to imitate the creativity of Jesus, the master teacher who readily shifts modes of address (from visual to aural) in order to reach his audience—sheep at risk from thieves masquerading as shepherds.

With these general observations in mind, we can turn to a few key details of the story. Returning to 9:1, we should observe, first of all, that Jesus *notices* the man blind from birth (*anthropon tuphlon ek genetes*): he *sees* the man. The contrast between Jesus and his disciples is typically stark: they do not see a man but a theological puzzle. Within first century Hellenistic Judaism, as within many other traditional cultures, impairment was believed to result from sin. Congenital impairment then raised an intellectual question—who sinned? Either the child sinned before birth (for Jews, that would mean within the womb, though other cultures might blame the pre-existent soul sinning prior to conception or in an earlier life) or the child's parents sinned.[13] As the title Rabbi (teacher) indicates, the disciples are looking for Jesus to solve their interesting intellectual problem, but Jesus rebukes them by rejecting their premise. The man's blindness is not a result of sin, either personal or parental. It is hard to overemphasize how important this claim is: Jesus breaks the causal connection between sin and disability, an assumption that remains powerful and pervasive within many cultures. While his negative claim is clear, Jesus' positive point is a little more difficult to discern, particularly because the Greek in the next three verses is ambiguous.

The NIV is fairly representative of most English translations: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:3-5). There are at least three difficulties here. First, Jesus' reply about working in the day seems like a total *non sequitur*—what does that have to do with this man being born blind? Second, the two halves of Jesus' reply fit together awkwardly because there is no object in Greek that corresponds to the object of the positive explanation ("this happened," NIV) in English. The ESV tries to fix the awkwardness by supplying an extra clause "*he was born blind* so that God's works might be revealed," but this conceals the problem: the Greek is odd.

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The third difficulty is that some ancient manuscripts have "We must work the works..." instead of "I must work the works..." Given all this confusion, how should we understand Jesus' reply?

Consider this literal translation of John 9:3-5: "Jesus answered: Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But so that the works of God might be revealed in him, I (or we) must work the works of him who sent me while it is day, for night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."[14] As usual, recalling the context is a great help. This sign story is about spiritual and physical blindness. Before the discovery of electricity, work took place during the day, when the light of the sun made it possible to see (lamps were expensive, small, and did not cast enough light for farming). In the presence of Jesus, the dark world is spiritually illuminated. That is why the religious authorities are without excuse: of all people, they should have been able to see, to understand his divine identity as revealed in the light of his signs. Depending on which manuscript we read, Jesus is either saying that he is revealing the purposes of God in this man's life by his whole interaction with him (not merely by curing him) or that we (the disciples and the subsequent Christian community, including us as readers) are called to reveal God's purposes within disability by the way we respond to such individuals. As is often the case, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase gets at the heart of the passage:

> Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world's Light" (John 9:3-5, The Message).

Jesus does not answer the disciples' question about the cause of impairment. Rather, he reframes their perspective on disability, pointing out the possibilities of what God can do in the midst of our lives. This power includes a miraculous physical cure, but it is not limited to that sign—Jesus is interested in changing the way we respond to those affected by disability. This becomes clearer as the story unfolds.

The details of Jesus' making mud from spit (9:6) are less important than his directions to the man: go wash in the pool of Siloam.[15] There is probably an echo of Elijah's healing of the leprosy of the Syrian general Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Elijah's instructions are equally offensive and absurd, which

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highlights the point of miracles: they testify to the sovereign power of the one true God in opposition to all competing claims to authority. Likewise, the mechanics of the miracle are merely a distraction to John—what matters is that the man obeys Jesus' strange directions and that the terms used are the same as Jesus' commands elsewhere to his disciples. All instances of commissioning, both in John and in the Synoptic Gospels, start with the direction to "go." Disciples are the ones who obey and follow: first Jesus when he originally calls, and then what Jesus subsequently says to do. The man is *sent*—even the name of his destination means "sent"—and he goes. No description of the healing is given; all that we know is that the man returns seeing (9:7). We are then treated to a comedy of errors that would be hilarious if it were not so tragic.

The man's neighbors have only ever seen him as a blind beggar. Jesus encounters him outside the temple gates on a Sabbath (a prime spot, as worshippers were thought more likely to give after experiencing the presence of God), when begging is not permitted, which hints at his desperation. After his sight is restored, some of his neighbors literally do not recognize him because they have defined him as the blind beggar (9:8-9). What more painful commentary can there be on the debates about how disability can define identity, about the negative effects of deficiency being determinative? The man even has to interject himself into the debate, saying "I am the man" (9:9). Alert readers will have begun to grasp the emerging parallels: this man, defined by his neighbor's disparaging expectations, is exercising agency, opposing the crowds, and beginning to speak in terms that are reserved for Jesus alone—*ego eimi* is the classic form of Jesus' famous "I am..." statements that are scattered throughout the Fourth Gospel.[16]

The amount of repetition in this story is remarkable, but John uses every detail to illuminate the development of the man born blind into a witness of Jesus unparalleled in the Fourth Gospel, with the possible exception of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 (itself an explosively countercultural story). This unnamed man becomes a more impressive evangelist than any of the twelve disciples.[17] After simply relating what happened to him, his hostile neighbors take him to the Pharisees, who also refuse to believe his story and scornfully reject the man's identification of Jesus as a prophet. The Pharisees go so far as to seek out his parents to determine whether this sighted man could really have been born blind. In fear of rejection from their community, they abandon their son, and the man who received his sight (*anablepo*) begins to speak for himself, displaying a theological awareness that defeats the Pharisees' invincible ignorance. He can discern the significance of the

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sign—after all, God does not listen to sinners, so Jesus' healing demonstrates his origin from God. The Pharisees' response is to curse the man, throw him out of the synagogue (*ekballo* is the same word used for Jesus' exorcism of demons) and brutally reiterate the cultural belief that to be born blind is a result of sin (9:34).

As in John 5, Jesus seeks the man out and (in contrast to Bethesda) asks him whether he believes in the Son of Man (9:35). The man asks who that is (keep in mind that he has not yet physically seen Jesus, but the voice may be familiar), and Jesus replies that he has seen Him and He is the one talking to him. Physical and spiritual sight come together in the man's confession "Lord, I believe" and worship (9:38). His response is powerfully contrasted with the Pharisees' proud refusal to see (acknowledge) Jesus as Lord (9:40). Metaphorically, Jesus comes for those who cannot see (Isaiah 61), which has the consequence of causing those who think that they can see to become blind. Yet, simply admitting spiritual blindness absolves all guilt; it is in the defiant insistence on knowledge (like the Pharisees who claimed distinguished discipleship of Moses against Jesus in 9:28-29) that sin is committed, not in the fact of having an impairment. Here again we see the slippery senses of spiritual and physical sight and are reminded that our response to revelation is more important than any particular physical characteristic we may possess.[18] This man born blind—a deeply shameful and "sinful" situation in his culture—bests the religious elite of his day in faithful witness to Jesus as Lord. The significance of the sign of his restored sight is less about the physical miracle and more about the spiritual truth of sight, obedience, and salvation. John drives the point home by switching to an aural image—faith comes via recognizing the voice of the true shepherd, rather than from identifying the shepherd by sight. That creative openness to the embrace of faith through multiple modes of knowledge is something Jesus' followers ought to imitate.

It is fascinating to note that *astheneo* is never used in John 9. The man born blind, the one who received his sight, is not called *astheneo*—either physically or spiritually. Instead, he is the man (*anthropos*), identified in terms that are startlingly similar to Jesus' own self-identification. He is the man who speaks for himself, in defiance of the lack of recognition or welcome from his neighbors, his parents, and the religious authorities. Despite social rejection (which is even worse after his physical cure!), he speaks successfully for Jesus against the Pharisees and is the only figure in the story who truly sees Jesus for who he is.

As mentioned previously, scripture does not have a precise equivalent for our contemporary category of "disability" (which intentionally gathers

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together disparate impairments under one term for the sake of advocacy and awareness). Exploring the full significance of that difference is beyond our present scope, and I have deliberately refrained from commenting on the distinction at length here. However, it is worth noting that John's use of *astheneia* is probably the closest New Testament equivalent to the contemporary use of the somewhat artificial category of "disability"—it comprehends multiple impairments, is linguistically slippery, and is often deployed with a clever sense of rhetorical inversion. Paul's usage of *astheneia* is broadly similar. If we simply substitute "disability" for *astheneia* in these two sign stories, we are left with the surprising conclusion that the man in John 5 remains disabled (despite being cured) and refuses to walk (spiritually) in the freedom of salvation to which Jesus graciously calls him. On the other hand, the man in John 9 is not disabled, even while unable to see physically, and though his community rejects him when his physical characteristics change, he is able to truly see the world for what it is, through the lens of the Lord Jesus, Savior and Son of Man. All of these seeming opposites are true, and we should dwell on the startling reversal the stories present. In important ways, John prefigures a key insight urged by the social model of disability—that "disability" occurs in the intersection of impairment and individual or social responses of rejection or exclusion to that impairment. But there is more in the Fourth Gospel, because John is primarily interested in spiritual realities.

True Healing—Disability and the Gospel

We have already seen that there is a distinction between physical cure and spiritual healing in John (to say nothing of scripture as a whole). Spiritual healing is about the restoration of relationship between a person and God, with consequences for communities. *Shalom* is not something we possess as isolated individuals. John is also remarkably ambivalent about the evidential value of miracles—signs and wonders—for faith. The more spectacular a sign, the more likely that it will draw excessive attention to itself, rather than directing witnesses to its object. More modest signs may be more effective because faith in miracles is shallow, while faith in Jesus brings eternal life. The Fourth Gospel itself is a kind of sign, relating a story of signs Jesus performed and interpreted, signs that we as readers have not seen personally. Taking Jesus at his word in John 20, subsequent generations of Christians who believe are more blessed than Thomas, who saw Jesus himself in the flesh and resurrected body. Any Christian understanding of disability, therefore, must take John's deflation of miraculous cures seriously: faith is not

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dependent on miracles, any more than it is dependent on physical sight. The entire structure of the Fourth Gospel cuts against interpretations which elevate miracles as necessary to faith. God can and does accomplish miraculous cures, but the assumption that sensational signs are more efficacious is not supported by John. People affected by disabilities, who are by any definition clearly those who have not been physically cured by a miracle, are neither privileged in nor prevented from gaining access to the reach of the gospel. If anything, the Christian community needs the presence of people affected by disability to remind all its members that their health is more than the sum of their physical capacities and that God delights to work through our perceived weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:9). But this reminder can easily be misinterpreted, so we should instead insist that, as the community of those who claim to follow Jesus, Christians ought to be at least as intentional as their master in seeking out those affected by disability, preaching the gospel (which is a matter of word and deed; see James 1:22-2:26), ministering to their needs, and welcoming all into the body of Christ as pilgrims on the way to the city of God (Hebrews 11:13-16). What we call disability does not need to be removed, cured, or fixed in order for the truly redemptive force of the gospel to be experienced. God's glory is on display through the lives of people with disabilities, both in mundane and miraculous ways. The miraculous ways seem more memorable, but it is through the mundane (the Latin root means this everyday, earthly world) that the works of God are revealed moment-by-moment to point us to the Savior.

> Father, give us the sense to perceive where your Spirit is at work, and the willingness to meet you there.

Notes

1. The question of the relationship between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel is complicated and beyond our present scope. I believe that the four gospels are consistent in what they affirm about the person and work of Jesus Christ, and are not contradictory in their variously differing details. The early church was remarkably unified in insisting on the necessity of having all four different perspectives on Jesus, rejecting attempts to reduce any apparent contradictions by composing a single synthetic gospel. We need to read and contemplate each of the gospels (individually and together) in order to begin to grasp the full truth about Jesus: each is equally inspired and worthy of attention. Due to limitations of space, I will focus solely on the riches of the Fourth Gospel in this essay.
2. I will follow the traditional identification of the author of the Fourth Gospel as John, though there are good arguments for (as well as against) this position. The current scholarly consensus is probably best described as divided, though (more importantly) the author overwhelmingly appears to have been an eyewitness to the events described in the Fourth Gospel.

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3. The Synoptics deploy the descriptive phrase "signs and wonders" with some frequency. John only uses *terata* once, when Jesus laments the crowd's unending desire for "signs and wonders" (4:48 most English translations), which supports the argument that the Fourth Gospel both has a distinction between wonder (a showy miracle that distracts from true faith) and sign (an understated miracle that points to Jesus as the Son of God) and a nuanced understanding of how signs can detract from the object to which they testify. A witness testifies, just like a sign points; for John, that is the role of John the Baptist, all the signs described in the Fourth Gospel, and the book itself. Witnesses and signs should not draw attention to themselves—as John the Baptist says about Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (3:30, ESV).
4. A more traditional method of enumeration is as follows (reading the resurrection of Jesus as an eighth sign):

    1. Transforming water into wine (2:1-11)
    2. Healing the royal official's son in Capernaum (4:46-54)
    3. Healing the sick man at Bethesda (5:1-17)
    4. Feeding the five thousand (6:5-14)
    5. Walking on the water (6:16-24)
    6. Healing the man born blind (9:1-7)
    7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45)

    There is some debate about whether walking on the water ought to be counted as one of the seven signs. In comparison with the other signs, John only spends a few verses describing the event, and Jesus only appears to the disciples—walking on the water is not performed publicly in front of the crowds and religious authorities like all the other signs. It also reads oddly as a separate sign, since it is inserted in the middle of the sign of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' interpretation of the significance of that sign. If it is a separate sign, it receives no commentary from Jesus, and it effectively disrupts the coherence of the long discourse that John relates from Jesus about the feeding, which functions as a new Passover, and provides another perspective on the meaning of the Eucharist, of the symbolic importance of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. Textually, the quick story of walking on the water seems to function more as a counterpoint, providing the reader a glimpse that the author as eyewitness had of Jesus' action "behind the scenes"—the crowd does not know where Jesus went after miraculously feeding them and inquires about how Jesus got to the other side of the lake, but Jesus immediately redirects their attention to the contrast between physical food and the spiritual sustenance of following the Father. I therefore read walking on water not as a separate sign, but as an event within the sign story of the feeding of the five thousand.
5. In *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000), David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder influentially argue for a disability studies lens that critiques various literary and cinematic narratives for using the difficulties of individuals' impairments as a device to advance their plots (presenting a literal or metaphorical crisis which must be resolved) instead of reflecting the social complexities of people affected by disability. This idea of narrative prosthesis is now applied with some frequency to biblical accounts; I believe it misreads (at least) the Fourth Gospel.
6. Such questions and charges appear rather often in disability studies readings of biblical literature. For a representative sample, see Carter (2011).
7. Of course, sin can lead to impairment—paralysis might result from drunken driving, or a sexually transmitted infection might cause terminal illness. But since paralysis and HIV/AIDS can also be caused by an accident or medical error (e.g., diving into a shallow lake or a transfusion from a tainted blood supply), we cannot make the easy equation between sin and impairment. There is no such general causal link, as many cultures assume.
8. Throughout chapter 5, John uses *hygies* when describing the miracle that permits the *astheneo* to walk (5:4, 6, 9, 11, 14; see also 7:23).
9. There is an apparently endless stream of literature surrounding this issue. It is instructive to compare the multiple editions of *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard Davis (the fifth will be published by Routledge in July 2016), each of which offers a good sampling of essays that address the topic of identity in various and evolving ways.

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10. In a frequently quoted essay (entitled "On Being a Cripple") that marvelously captures this dynamic, Nancy Mairs (1986) said of her multiple sclerosis that "if a cure were found, would I take it? In a minute. I may be a cripple, but I'm only occasionally a loony and never a saint. Anyway, in my brand of theology God doesn't give bonus points for a limp. I'd take a cure; I just don't need one." The essay appears in a number of places, including various sites online; the quote is from the concluding paragraph of the essay, which is well worth reading in full.
11. While there are many excellent descriptions of this deep sense of the Old Testament understanding of health, I quote from *The Bible and Healing: A Medical and Theological Commentary* by a medical doctor who spent decades in Africa, and compiled a useful collection of essays on health (Wilkinson 1998, 18).
12. For a more detailed account of the relationship between John 5 and John 9, see Wynn (2007). For a very sharp rejoinder, see Avalos (2007). Avalos is right to point towards Deuteronomy 28 as more relevant background than Leviticus 21, but his wholesale rejection of any authoritative sense of scripture, much less any room for canonical interpretation (as Christians, we read the Old Testament in light of the New) limits his usefulness. I wrote the majority of this article before reading Wynn, and while I am largely in agreement with the general outline of his interpretation (for example, his observation about the social construction of disability and the "sick role" on p. 67 is excellent, though Jesus emphasizes the man's responsibility more than Wynn admits) I find myself moving in a somewhat different direction in many of the details.
13. Since the Mishnah and Talmud are records of much later rabbinical debates, we cannot use them to prove what the Pharisees in Jesus' time believed. But it is interesting that the disciples' question is one shared by later rabbis, who interpreted passages from the Pentateuch as supporting the idea of parental sin (see Exodus 20:5, where the sins of the father would be visited on several generations of descendants) or personal prenatal sin (Genesis 25:22, where Jacob struggled with Esau in their mother Rebecca's womb, which some thought to be an early attempt at fraternal murder). See the dated but useful discussion and documentation in Wilkinson (1998, 145).
14. My translation. Many Johannine specialists have argued for a broadly similar translation. For a short and accessible treatment of the technical grammatical reasons to prefer this punctuation in relation to questions of disability, see Poirer (2010). However, resolving the issue requires more literary and theological examination than Poirer adduces, as Yong (2011, 52) rightly observes. Yong's distinction between the canonical text and "normate" presuppositions that have often governed its interpretation is welcome, and an improvement on his shorter discussion in (2007, 25-27), but I think he is insufficiently critical of his own presuppositions in acquiescing to a reading of John 5 that claims Jesus links sin and disability. Frederick Gaiser (2010, 160) is more attentive to the Old Testament background of this story, but struggles to make sense of John 5 in relation to John 9. I first encountered the argument for a different punctuation of John 9 in a graduate seminar in New Testament at the University of Aberdeen in 2010; the first time I heard it suggested in relation to questions about disability was in a presentation by Jaime Soles-Clark at the Summer Institute on Disability and Theology at Southern Methodist University in 2014. A version of that presentation will appear in Soles-Clark (Forthcoming). I have learned much from and am grateful for the work of these scholars, but the argument in these pages is my own.
15. Keeping in mind the above caveat about reading later rabbinical debates into the gospels, it is interesting that four aspects of Jesus' work here would have been violations of the list of exceptions to the commandment to honor the Sabbath by refraining from work. Briefly: healing is forbidden unless it is a matter of life and death, kneading dough or paste is forbidden, anointing eyes with any substance is forbidden, and applying saliva to the eyes is forbidden (Wilkinson 1998, 148).
16. This massive topic deserves more than the cursory glance we can provide here. The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the expression *ego eimi* to translate God's name in Exodus 3:14 (and elsewhere). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus uses the same phrase without further description multiple times (4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8), most explosively in 8:58 where the Jews interpret it as blasphemy. This occurs immediately prior to the story of the man born blind. John further pairs the phrase *ego eimi* with seven main metaphors: bread of life (6:5, 41, 48, 51), light of the world (8:12), door (10:7, 9), good shepherd (10:11, 14), resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, the truth, the life (14:6), true vine (15:1, 5). For a provocative description of the Trinitarian significance of this larger biblical pattern of naming, see Soulen (2011).

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17. A point honored in many Christian traditions who take his confession as exemplary for those embarking on baptism or the stance of faith more generally. See Grant (1998).
18. The complex levels of meaning are well described by Lawrence (2013, 49), though I am more interested in positive claims about what Christian theology ought to teach on the basis of scripture than Lawrence appears to be.

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