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Towards a Christian Model of Disability: The Bible Is for All People

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Since the 1980s, the concept of disability has come to be described through the use of "models." Readers might be familiar with the moral model, medical model or social model as ways that the experience of disability is understood. The authors have long felt that aspects of this understanding as expressed in models has been missing. In an attempt to explain these other aspects of disability, they offer a Christian perspective described by a Christian model. This model unpacks what disability is, through a biblically based description of five relationships. These include 1) the person with impairments in relation to God, 2) the person with impairments in relation to themselves, 3) the person with impairments in relation to the community, 4) the community in relation to itself, and 5) the community in relation to God. The authors' desire is that this will continue and perhaps further conversation about a Christian, biblical view of disability, while also challenging exclusively secular notions.

Keywords: *Body of Christ, Christian model, five relationships, social healing, transformation*

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Towards a Christian Model of Disability: The Bible Is for All People

Contemporary models of disability are often couched in terms of the interaction between a person with impairments and the social environment.[1] These interactions can be variously named, categorized, and described; here, we will examine five key relationships that are of particular relevance for a Christian model of disability. These five relationships are: 1) the individual with impairments in relationship with God, 2) the individual with impairments in relationship with themselves, 3) the individual with impairments in relationship with the community, 4) the community in relationship with itself and 5) the community in relationship with God. Clearly, these relationships overlap, and to artificially separate them risks being unhelpful. However, for the purposes of pulling out specific aspects of these overlapping relationships, we will distinguish between the five relationships for the sake of conceptual clarity. The following is provided as a starting point in this discussion and is in no way the final word. The Bible is replete with other passages impacting this discussion. We will pull out only a subset of passages in order to begin this discussion.

It is important to be clear about several presuppositions (for which we will not argue here, given the limitations of space) that we bring to our examination of Scripture.

First, we take Scripture to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore authoritative for those who call themselves Christians. Understanding Scripture in its original context, as canonically arranged, testifying to the full divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, the perfect revelation of God, requires interpretation, under the historical tradition of the church and illumined by the power of the same Spirit who inspired the text. This is not a simple task, but it is the ongoing work of the church to read, understand, and apply Scripture as the word of God to the people of God. If the Bible has something to say about disability, we need to work to comprehend and obey, even if those words require the church to repent and make changes to long-held traditions.

1. Older models, like the medical or moral model, tended to locate disability within the individual. The social model helpfully focused attention on the complex interaction between the individual and the environment, though some early versions were so concerned to correct that individualistic emphasis that the pendulum swung to the opposite end of the spectrum, occasionally speaking as though physical impairments did not exist. See Shakespeare (2006). While different contemporary models of disability emphasize different aspects or blends (cultural, or bio-psycho-social), the general consensus reflects the complex reality of simultaneous social and individual aspects of disability.

Second, while the Bible speaks often of individuals and (occasionally) conceptual groupings with specific impairments, there is no single Hebrew or Greek word that is exactly equivalent to our contemporary use of the English word "disability." The task of interpretation is therefore to discern the range of meaning in the biblical narratives, descriptions, commands, parables, etc., about disability, which may support and/or cut against the grain of contemporary understandings of disability. This task entails more than a simple word study; it requires patient investigation and unfolding of the specific mentions of disability and larger patterns of God's work as progressively revealed throughout the canon, discerned through God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Our thesis is that the Christian model of disability has something significant to contribute to the contemporary conversation about disability, one which is (or at least ought to be) not optional for those who call themselves Christians, and which is also relevant to the larger culture, especially those who are affected by disability.

Third, the Bible applies to all people equally; all humans are originally created in the image of God, which is an ontological statement that does not exclude any individual based on capacity (or incapacity). The dignity and determination, rights and responsibilities, privileges and pathos, of being human are not earned by the potential or actual exercise of particular abilities or characteristics. Unfortunately, at various points in the history of Christianity, people with various kinds of intellectual or physical disabilities have been judged to be lacking in some crucial characteristic and (explicitly or unconsciously) excluded from the Christian community. This social discrimination, rightly named by the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Tremain, 2002), at least tacitly flows from a mistaken set of anthropological assumptions about the limits of humanity. One of the purposes of this essay is to begin to illustrate the relational dimensions of the biblical narrative that presents people with disabilities as fully human, with all of the rights and responsibilities true personhood entails. With these goals in mind, we begin with the first of the five relationships.

1. The Individual with Impairments in Relation to God

What does the Bible have to say about individuals with impairments in relation to God? First and foremost, they are people, created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). That both men and women are created in the image of God without reference to intelligence, capacity, place in the social hierarchy,

heritage, or any kind of function that varies by degree, is revolutionary in its original context. In the Ancient Near East, where only (male) kings were said to represent or image God, the idea that all men and women are created in the image of God would have been a radically counter-cultural claim (Middleton, 2005). This relationship is primary and fundamentally defines the universal personhood of all individuals. Who we are in relation to God is more important than any ability or disability we may (rightly) regard as significant to our identity.

Yet this relationship with God is quickly damaged (as soon as Genesis 3, when sin, disobedience, and death enter creation). The arc of Scripture describes the unfolding of the redemption of God's relationship with his people, first through Abram and the people of Israel, culminating in the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who accomplishes salvation through his life, death, and resurrection. The restoration of *shalom*—more than peace understood as the absence of conflict—includes both the physical and spiritual, as the Greek words for salvation indicate (most clearly *sozo*). All people, regardless of capacity, need this salvation (Romans 3:23) which precisely cannot be achieved through anything any of us are able to accomplish. Grace is not dependent on our individual capacity, talent, or ability, all of which vary from person to person (even within the lifespan and circumstances of an individual life). The invitation to the family of God is made to all, and the name of God's children, brothers and sisters in Christ, is extended to all who respond in faith (1 John 3:1-2; Galatians 3:26). As Jesus says in Mark 3:31-33, "Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." This claim comes without caveats: adoption into the family of God has no asterisks, regardless of personal characteristics.

Three common worries about the scope of this understanding of salvation are often expressed with respect to disability. First, is disability the result of sin? Second, is the persistence of an impairment or continued disability a sign of insufficient faith? Third, what about people with profound intellectual disabilities? These worries can be traced to distinct but overlapping misunderstandings of Scripture, combined with an inadequate grasp of the gospel, as refracted through aspect(s) of the trajectory of the Christian tradition.

First, regardless of how we define disability, it seems clear that most physical impairments in Scripture are very broadly (in the literally cosmic sense of Romans 8) understood to be the result of what is typically called the Fall—the entrance of sin and death into the world. It is important here to distinguish between the social constructions or devaluations of people

who are different, and actual impairments—which is often much more complicated than many initially assume. Nevertheless, physical impairments are generally described in Scripture as contrary to God's original good design, in both literal and metaphorical senses, particularly in the prophetic literature where Israel's disobedience is often described as culpable blindness or deafness to the deeds or words of God (most famously in Isaiah, especially chapters 42-43).

Such "deficiency" language picks up on the consequences of the covenant relationship into which God graciously entered with Abraham, reaffirmed with the patriarchs despite their failures, and articulated in the written law with Moses as representative of Israel at Sinai. The consequences of obedience (and correlative disobedience) to the terms of the covenant are vividly depicted in very material terms of "blessings" and "curses," one aspect of which is physical health. While prosperity theology (the "health and wealth" gospel) simply applies this logic to contemporary believers without nuance, a canonical Christian reading of Scripture appropriately distinguishes between Israel and the church and balances covenant blessings/curses with the unsettling story of Job. Job's physical health, financial wealth, family, and social status—indeed, everything but his continued existence—is taken away from him without explanation, justification, or desert. Despite his friends' theology of retribution, which might be described as a caricature of the Deuteronomic description of covenant consequences, Job's innocence is affirmed by God; even in his anger and rage at a silent deity, Job is proclaimed to have spoken rightly of God (Job 42:7-8). Honest lament and furious complaint about the apparent success of the unjust is powerfully inscribed in most of the Psalms; why difficulty, hardship, sickness, poverty, impairment, or any other painful feature of life occurs cannot simply be equated with personal sin.

One fundamental sign of the future restoration of Israel evoked by the prophets is the healing of physical impairments (Isaiah 29:18 and 35:6; Jeremiah 31:8; Micah 4:7). However, even here there are intimations that salvation does not require the cure of all physical impairments (see Isaiah 56, which the Ethiopian eunuch is reading when Philip encounters him on the road in Acts 9). This is the correct context for understanding Jesus's miraculous healing: he deliberately claims the mantle of the promised Messiah in the announcement of his public ministry in Luke 4, restoring sight to the blind and setting captives free, which is rightly discerned by John the Baptist despite his confusion about being jailed himself (Matthew 11). Just as the Baptist was not set free, many seeking healing were not cured: as Jesus says

to his baffled disciples after ducking the thronging crowds in Mark 1:38, he came to preach the gospel.

The story of the man born blind in John 9 is the clearest refutation of the assumption that disability is caused by individual or generational sin. In a richly complex text that illustrates the interplay between physical and spiritual sight, Jesus straightforwardly rejects the causal link between disability and sin. His counter-explanation, expressed in intentionally ambiguous Greek which admits of multiple readings, is that blindness is an opportunity for the works of God to be displayed. That may be through the miraculous healing Jesus performs, or it may also be demonstrated through the response of the community to the man's blindness—it is likely that we are meant to think both (Rhodes, 2016).

Second, in stark contrast to much contemporary preaching about the prosperity gospel (roughly, that the good news of salvation necessarily entails financial wealth and physical health, a crudely materialistic reading of the blessings of the gospel), the New Testament is clear that suffering is an expected and normal aspect of the Christian life. The evangelists are straightforward: following the crucified Christ means being willing to be similarly persecuted (perhaps most clearly in John 15:18-25). Paul is relentlessly consistent, especially in his prison letters: trials and tribulations are to be expected. In a powerfully poignant personal reflection, Paul describes his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). One of the greatest persons of faith in the history of the world has a "thorn" that he asks three times to have removed. The response from God? No healing, along with the statement, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The hand of God cannot be forced; there is no magic formula that guarantees healing. Those with great faith are sometimes healed and sometimes not. In Luke 7:1-10, Jesus responds with surprise at the great faith of a centurion who asks him to heal his servant. It is easy to gloss over Jesus' shock that a Gentile would evidence such faith. On the other hand, the man born blind in John 9 is healed before he says a word; the man's faith gradually grows before ever physically perceiving Jesus, and his response of worship reveals the correct coincidence of physical and spiritual sight, in painful contrast to the Pharisees who physically perceived Jesus without discerning the spiritual significance of his actions, recognizing him as Messiah. Healing is a divine choice, quite often for mysterious reasons which we cannot comprehend. It is not predicated on sufficient faith, pedigree, qualifications, or status.

Third, while there is an important discussion to be had about the role of intellectual understanding in an individual's response to the offer of

salvation through Jesus Christ, many contemporary (especially doctrinally conservative) Christians operate with at least a tacit overemphasis on the importance of cognition in faith. Many of the stories of salvation in the Gospels, Acts, and the depictions of faith in the rest of the New Testament display the at best limited intellectual understanding of new believers. The classical threefold Reformed description of faith as intellect, assent, and trust does a better job of capturing the biblical pattern. In short, faith is not simply a matter of cognitive understanding, or even the articulation of that understanding in certain linguistic terms (like creeds or confessions). As James pointedly observes, even the demons have a correct intellectual understanding of God's unity: but that is a far cry from true faith (James 2:19). Faith involves our entire selves, including our will, emotions, affections, obedience, and so on. The test of true faith is a changed life, deeds that embody love, the fruits of the Spirit, not simply intellectual comprehension of an infinite God who exceeds our cognitive grasp.

Personal characteristics also do not impair our being complete in Christ (Colossians 2:10). Disability does not cause me to be lacking, from a spiritual perspective. I may not be able to read or walk, but I am just as complete in Christ as anyone who can do those things. As stated in 2 Corinthians 5:14-16 (*NLT)*, "Since we believe that Christ died for all we also believe that we have all died to our old life. He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them. So, we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view." We are all on the spectrum of varying levels of ability. Disability does not impact one's status of being related to God and complete in Christ.

2. The Individual with Impairments in Relation to Themselves

First-person reflections about the experience of disability and the social model of disability have made it clear that cultural responses to people with impairments inflict deep wounds, defining disability as deficiency, without purpose or meaning. While there are passages in Scripture that may at first glance suggest this understanding of disability as deficiency, a closer look reveals that individuals with impairments are incorporated into the canon precisely because of the divine purpose in their impairments. Interpreting what we now call disability as an aspect of divine diversity, caught up into the history of salvation, and existing within God's mysteriously sovereign

intention opens up a new way to understand individuals with impairments in relation to themselves.

A touchstone passage for discerning divine intention in disability is Exodus 4. God calls Moses to confront Pharaoh and tell him to free the Israelites, a vocation with a low anticipated survival rate. Not surprisingly, Moses resists, clinching a series of excuses by explaining to God: "O Lord, I'm not very good with words. I never have been, and I'm not now, even though you have spoken to me. I get tongue-tied, and my words get tangled." The Lord responds in an interesting manner. God asks, "Who makes a person's mouth? Who decides whether people speak or do not speak, hear or do not hear, see or do not see? Is it not I, the Lord?" The phrase "who decides" implies a purpose. Moses' speech impediment was part of God's design, and his apparent deficiency is redeemed in a profoundly counter-cultural way by being used to liberate Israel. That God's representative spoke poorly testifies to the singular power and glory of God; sending a stuttering speaker to say to Pharaoh "Let my people go" means that God chooses to speak through a human whose speech is "weak" (Koblitz, 2016; Yeung, 2018). God's strength is demonstrated more clearly by being channeled through fragile and unremarkable people—the "earthen vessels" or "jars of clay" Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 4:7.

This is clearly a pattern throughout the Bible, where God uses perceived weakness to accomplish his purposes. We see this, for example, in the story of Gideon, who assembles a large army that God whittles down to 300 men to go up against an attacking army whose "camels were like grains of sand on the seashore—too many to count" (Judges 7:12). God gives Gideon a victory and God receives the praise. It is as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9 about God's power working best in weakness, or in 1 Corinthians 1:28-29 how "God chose things despised by the world, things counted as noting at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God." God delights in working through those who appear to be weak, in exercising power through despised agents.

One of the authors of this article was part of a group that had the opportunity to visit a harsh institution for persons with disabilities in Serbia. We were introduced as "experts in theology and disability from America who will answer all your questions," a frightening manner in which to be introduced. The interpreter then asked, "Do you have any questions for these experts?" Here is how this author wrote about that interaction in 2009:

> We then went in and chatted with these three ladies. They were all very physically disabled but of normal intelligence. We once again

> tried to be encouraging. One of them asked, "What would you tell a person with a physical disability if they asked you why God made them that way?" .... I told them, that this is a mystery, but John 9 tells us something that is not intuitive. We look at people with disabilities and think that the disability is somehow bad. But when Jesus was asked why the blind man had a disability, he responded that this occurred so that the Glory of God might be seen in his life. So I told them someone might have a physical disability so that the Glory of God might be seen in her life. They were kind of stunned. One began to cry softly. After an extended period of silence, one of the others said, "I have seen the Glory of God in my life" and then shared about how she prays for her family. (McNair, 2009).

A Christian perspective reveals a deeper truth about the identity and purpose of those who have disabilities, those who are often regarded as "less than," or whose impairments are described in purely tragic terms. It is unfortunate that some Christian communities (to say nothing of the larger cultural context) do not communicate this surprising story. Yet even this point about purpose is not the end of the contribution of a Christian model of disability.

3. The Individual with Impairments in Relation to the Community

The social model of disability emphasizes how communities shape the experience of people with impairments, creating "disability" by structuring physical and social environments that are inaccessible, unwelcoming, or actively hostile to those with different capacities. This is true in relation to the social environment both inside and outside of the church.

In most developed societies it is now widely recognized that the severe economic and social deprivations encountered by disabled people cannot be explained simply with reference to individually based functional limitations. (Barnes, 1995, p. 9)

One may not care about the perceptions of the social environment and have little desire to be "normal"; however, there is often a price to pay for being outside of the norm. Sometimes the cost is that one is not chosen as a friend. At other times people experience discrimination in employment or other areas of life which also cannot be understood solely in terms of the impairment one experiences. The environment—both physical and

social—plays a significant part. A multi-story building with no ramps or elevators "disables" wheelchair users. A community that requires compliance with elaborate social rituals "disables" those who are impatient or unable to comprehend the dance of complicated etiquette. A society that privileges (and pays more for) specific abstract cognitive skills "disables" those who think more concretely or who are good with their hands. A church that expects the congregation to sit passively during a long sermon "disables" those with different neurological abilities.

A Christian model of disability begins with a different image of community. Faced with confusion and rivalry in the early church about socially impressive spiritual gifts, Paul wrote to the Corinthian (and Roman) congregations with an alternative picture. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul insists that the many different spiritual gifts are all from the one Holy Spirit, who gives to each individual for the sake of the common good. He describes the church as the Body (of Christ), with various members who all have their own spiritual gifts, just like each body part fulfills different functions for the good of the whole. God designed the church—just like the body—with complementary difference, divinely intended diversity. Instead of prizing certain socially spectacular abilities (like speaking in tongues), Paul exhorts the church to value sacrificial love which restructures all the different gifts into a harmonious whole, serving one another. At the center of this counter-cultural picture of humble service is an explosive insight. The members of the Body we believe to be weaker are in fact indispensable—the Body cannot do without those "weaker" members. This pattern applies to more than just people with impairments, of course, but those with disabilities are almost always regarded by the surrounding society as deficient. The word "disability" or "impairment" itself speaks of a comparison to a norm—a lack, failure, or problem. People with disabilities are widely thought of as "weaker." Yet Paul says that the Body of Christ is incomplete without the presence of people with disabilities. To extend the metaphor, we might say that the Body of Christ is disabled (lacking important members whose function is required for health) without the presence of people with disabilities. They are necessary to the good of the whole.

Presence can be revelatory of the character of those around us. Consider the famous story that Jesus tells in Luke 10:25-37, usually known as the parable of the Good Samaritan. In response to a question from a teacher of the law about how to inherit eternal life, Jesus replies that the whole law is summarized as loving God with all our selves and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Looking for an exemption, the teacher asks who his neighbor is,

which prompts the astonishing tale of a man beaten and left for dead on a dangerous road, ignored by the religious authorities and men of influence (priests and Levites) but rescued by a traveling Samaritan (despised as an ethnic half-breed and religious heretic by the sorts of observant Jews who had crossed to the other side of the road), at some personal risk and significant financial cost. The man is unable to do anything; he is (at least temporarily) disabled. This sort of beating quite likely would have entailed long-term physical consequences: perhaps a permanent loss of sight, hearing, or mobility. Yet without saying a word, the man reveals the character of "good" religious people and that of the Samaritan (who was gut-stricken by compassion). Jesus offended his listeners by holding up the Samaritan as a model of true neighbor love, a negative critique of socially approved beneficence, and a positive picture of risky care for others. Yet, among the many sermons we have heard preached on this passage, we have never heard about the disabled man on the road, whose mere presence revealed the character of those who avoided him. The presence of people with disabilities is revelatory of the character of their community—for good and for ill.

To return to Paul's metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ: when a member of the body that has been long absent returns to active presence, disturbing things may occur. After all, Paul is talking about spiritual gifts, not simple appearance: different parts do different things, in and for the body. If a nose has been missing, the body may discover that a disgusting odor has been undetected. If an ear has been absent, the body may have ignored the noise around it. If a mouth has been lacking, what has gone unspoken? The Body needs to realize that the so-called weaker parts are not only necessary, they have power (McNair, 2014). Realizing this reality should prompt a change in behavior, starting with repentance and then (no matter how painfully) reintegrating these missing members, with their own distinctive functions, into the Body. This takes time, and may not immediately be obvious: after all, discerning spiritual gifts requires relationship, familiarity with one another, and willingness to risk failure, to experiment, to see how a member of the Body may have talents which are not apparent on the surface of what we are accustomed to valuing.

A ministry leader tells the story of trying to get members of his ministry to adults with intellectual disabilities to pray. Whenever asked, they would mostly refuse. He finally realized that they would hear the prayers of pastors given with flowing thoughts and language and felt they could not pray in that manner, so they didn't pray. In response, he taught them the simple prayer, "Help me!" or "Help (someone's name)." Reflecting on verses stating

that God knows your prayer before you say it (Psalm 139:4) and that he is not impressed with your many words (Matthew 6:7), the leader felt this was a perfect prayer. The class members must have thought so, too, as they were then all willing to volunteer to pray. But one Sunday, a severely disabled woman approached him. "I pray you, Jeff," she said. He responded. "Thank you, Amber!" To which she replied, "No, I pray you now!" The leader sat before her as she placed her hands on his head. "Help Jeff. Help Jeff. Help Jeff. Amen," she prayed. Thus began an amazing prayer ministry for this woman. Her potential as a prayer warrior was always there; the leader just hadn't seen it. This is only one example of how we can unleash the gifting of people if we see them for who they are, not limiting them by our wrong, inhibitory perceptions of them.

We may go further. In the middle of deep reflections about how God can use suffering to shape our faith and character, Paul says that we do not know what to pray for, but that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words (Romans 8:26). Many contemporary Western church traditions tend to emphasize the power of verbal and expressive prayer, which is not in itself wrong. But just before giving the Lord's Prayer, Jesus cautions his followers not to pray like hypocrites, who speak to impress the listening crowds (Matthew 6:5). Earnest petition to the Father —undistracted by those around us—is the essence of true prayer. What if people with severe communication impairments, those who are non-verbal, are actually "better" at prayer than those of us with expensive theological degrees or prominent pastoral positions, those of us Christians who adorn their public prayers with soaring speech and rich rhetoric? What if the most powerful prayer is the one articulated in the power of the Holy Spirit in groanings too deep for words, uttered by those our society deems useless because they cannot speak in language we understand?

In 2 Corinthians 12:10, Paul talks about his life experiences related to devaluation. He says, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." This is the closing statement of a section where Paul describes the "thorn in my flesh." The experiences Paul had in his life related to the quote above are at least in part due to his "thorn." It is interesting to read the list of the four experiences that he places under the heading of weaknesses and to think of how his experience of the thorn at least in part is reflected in the social consequences of disability. At times those with disabilities will say that the hardest part of having a disability is not the disability, but the way one is treated because one has a disability.

There are so many forms of insult that persons who are affected by disability experience. Not just straightforward verbal cruelty, but the quiet jokes, subtle (or obvious) mockery, childish or age-inappropriate treatment, general disregard, studied avoidance, and casual mistreatment that many people experience because of their impairments. Hardships are part of life for people with disabilities, often regardless of the type of impairment one has. Many hardships would be avoidable if only society were different, refraining from devaluation. There is much in the professional literature which describes the experience of persecution that people with disabilities face. And, should they be Christians, they can only expect that persecution to increase because of their faith. Persecution is without a doubt a social consequence of disability.

Paul understands the experience of living with the social consequences of disability. But his response to this is amazing: "I will boast gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." That is his response to God's telling him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

We all should work to lessen the social consequences of disability to the degree we are able. God's power can be seen in weakness and resulting insults, hardships, persecution and difficulties, but we should not be the agents of these experiences. It could be that part of the grace God dispenses in the lives of persons experiencing disability is what people in the environment do to attenuate the social consequences of disability.

"Social healing" (McNair, 2008) is a phrase that has been used to describe how the environment changes in either preventing, attenuating or stopping the wounding of devalued people (Wolfensberger, 1998). First, the environment is as flexible as it can be in overlooking aspects of someone's impairments over which they have no control and for which there is little chance of improvement. These may be things like social skills, which one may not have the ability to understand due to one's impairments and which are therefore unattainable. Perhaps there are aspects of someone's appearance over which they have little control. There are those who will drool, for example, for reasons that are beyond their control. There are those who are either not habit (toilet) trained, or may not be able to control their bowels or bladders. The social environment must learn to overlook these differences and see the person. Second, there are other aspects of the environment that can be addressed with environmental change. The specifics of the changes that need to occur will range from the social environment ceasing to do some things, to the environment beginning to do other things or changing

the way it does things. The result of this change in the environment is that the person with impairment would find him- or herself in a place where the social consequences of disability are lessened or removed. Someone might not experience physical healing of their impairment, but the removal of negative social consequences of disability would feel like healing of a sort. The environment itself is also "healed" in that constituents refrain from sinful discrimination.

All of us, as members of the social environment, should be in a process of transformation—and this transformation is not a once and for all occurrence but a process of maturing and renewing. Transformation is in part evidenced through the experience of persons with disabilities in our Christian community. Tumeinski and McNair (2012) describe a process leading to observable change planned through responses to the question, "What would be better?" Once the principles for developing maturity and the goal of maturity in a general sense are in mind, we become aware of how we are progressing toward transformational maturity, in the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). This is comparable to spiritual development, both individually and corporately. Individuals will grow to no longer reflect the patterns of the world, instead becoming more like Jesus, while the environment—the Body of Christ—also grows to become something different from the surrounding society. This, once again, is a healing of the environment. The environment grows in love. The individual experiencing impairment feels that change, and both the individual and the environment experience social healing.

The Christian model of disability can also be thought of in terms of completeness: completeness within the individual and completeness among the larger group or Body, to use the Christian metaphor. What also needs to be considered is what it means to be complete or incomplete. The Christian perspective on disability would say that all people are in every way complete in Christ as they are (Colossians 3:20). However, they are also in need of being a part of the larger Body of Christ. I have been created under the sovereignty of God and am acceptable as an individual with the typical or atypical characteristics that I possess. However, at the same time I am entirely incomplete by myself if I don't recognize my dependence upon other people and my dependence upon God. So, using that criteria, people with disabilities and people without disabilities in their most basic nature are identical. The difference between those with disabilities and those without disabilities may come in the need for support that could potentially be placed on the environment by an individual. Although we are all on a continuum of support needs, some individuals with disabilities place greater demands on their

environments while others place very limited demands on their environment. Correspondingly, some people in the environment, be they disabled or not, have been given much—and in a Luke 12:48 kind of way: "...when someone has been given much, much will be required in return." Arguably, they have been given much in order to address the support needs of those who need assistance, whereas those who do not have the "much" given to them would be those of whom less might be expected.

Society uses words such as "disabled" and "defective" to describe people with impairments. From a Christian perspective, we may choose to reject this terminology in favor of terms such as "different characteristics" or "different abilities," particularly when we consider the fact that God is behind the way people are. Christians believe that God is sovereign in the lives of people. As stated earlier, the story of Moses relates how God says he makes people as they are. So, to use the term "defective" in reference to a creation of God doesn't seem right. If God creates an individual in a particular way, is it fair to characterize that individual as defective, impugning both the individual and God's sovereignty? Defectiveness implies that the individual is not fulfilling the purpose for which she was created. For someone to imply that a particular individual is defective, then, means that the person making that implication understands the larger purpose of an individual within themselves and the Body of which they are a part and on which they are mutually dependent. For Paul to say in 1 Corinthians 12:22 that the parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable implies that as human beings, we might characterize as defective what God characterizes as indispensable. So people may be "atypical" by a standard, but God refers to these same individuals as indispensable. Much of the understanding of differences between people boils down to an understanding of the sovereignty of God. If God is not sovereign, if things just happen totally apart from his control, then potentially we could use terminology such as "defective" or whatever the term might be. However, if we take a Christian perspective that God is indeed sovereign and that nothing slips through his grasp or occurs apart from him determining that it should occur, then that gives a totally different perspective to this type of categorizing.

Along these lines, it is important to distinguish between something being bad and something being difficult. If God has purpose in the way people are, it changes one's perspective. Someone's life experience may be extremely difficult. But if God has purpose in it, by faith we accept that experience. That same experience, if there is no purpose behind it, is intensified in its difficulty. Without purpose, it is simply bad. Understanding that God is

sovereign in our lives, coupled with his promise that his grace will be given and will be sufficient (2 Corinthians 2:9), changes everything.

4. The Community in Relation with Itself

When reading the Gospels, a good rule of thumb for contemporary Western Christians (particularly those who have been raised in churches) is to assume that we would have been the Pharisees or pious folk who were the target of Jesus' criticisms. The relevant characteristics God cares about are usually different than our religious values (this explains the surprised responses of the sheep and goats in Jesus' parable in Matthew 25). Another way to phrase this uncomfortable reality is that the kingdom of God is upside down, contrary to our expectations and assumptions. Followers of Jesus need to keep this in mind when we think about how we regard ourselves as communities of faith: who are we valuing and why do we regard them as worthy of our time, attention, or resources? When it comes to people with impairments, what community values structure who is a member and who is outside (or simply an object of mercy)?

In John 9, Jesus gives sight to a man born blind, a man whom he encountered (likely begging) on Jesus' way out of the temple precincts. After the man returns to his usual place, now seeing, there is a debate amongst his neighbors (John 9:8). Some literally do not recognize the man because he is now able to see: they had defined him in terms of his disability (blind) and resulting social role (beggar). As the story goes on, the author ironically plays with the contrast between physical and spiritual sight, understanding, and recognition. Here it is important to note how the man advocates for himself, even in the face of communal and religious pressure, eventually responding in worship to Jesus' self-disclosure, becoming a model of pure confession in the tradition of the early church. He stands in stark contrast to the unbelieving response of the Pharisees, who ought to have recognized Jesus "on sight" as Messiah.

The degree to which we conduct "church" and exclude people indicates a problem with the way in which we do things. Just stepping back and looking at the church, one could imagine that many of the traditions of the church, the way the community operates, were developed without persons with disabilities being present (in the church). So even church buildings were not accessible, nor did they have accessible bathrooms. Arguably, the same percentage of people with disabilities were present (in society) in the past. Why did it take governmental legislation for churches to become accessible?

This is just one example of traditions causing barriers within the church. Jesus addresses this idea of man-made traditions being syncretized with commands of God. Mark 7:1-13 highlights how traditions can get in the way of obeying the commands of God. Our starting point is to remember that the Bible's two most important commands are to love God and to love your neighbor. When we are confronted with having to love our neighbor or keep our traditions, too often we and our religious leaders can be like the religious leaders Jesus confronted, who held to traditions and eschewed the commands of God. It is interesting how Jesus points out three ways we avoid the commands of God—for our purposes, the command to love your neighbor.

In Mark 7:7 Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13, saying, "Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as the commands from God." We start by understanding that there is a clear difference between what God commands and "man-made ideas" (like many of our traditions). When these two collide, we must hold to God's commands. But Jesus goes on to describe responses he saw when the two were in conflict. In verse 8 he says, "For you ignore God's law and substitute you own tradition." Our first dodge is to act like we don't know what we are supposed to do. To ignore implies that you know something is there but you pretend like it isn't. So, we know we are to love all our neighbors, including those with impairments, but we ignore them.

In Mark 7:9, "Then he said, 'You skillfully sidestep God's law in order to hold on to your own tradition.'" When we can't ignore our responsibilities anymore, as they begin to intrude upon us (perhaps both intellectually and physically), we come up with ways to sidestep our responsibilities to love our neighbor. So, clever ways of minimizing the demands placed upon us—like segregated ministries, or those that meet on different days when no one is around, or claiming we cannot do anything because we haven't the training or resources, are ways we can sidestep loving our neighbor.

Finally in Mark 7:13, Jesus says, "And so you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition. And this is only one example among many others." When we can't ignore or sidestep, we just flat-out cancel the word of God. On a trip to the Philippines, a man who works with pastors told of an occasion where he was talking to a pastor about including people with disabilities in the church. The pastor's response was, "I know we should be doing this but we aren't going to." That is the place where some leaders have ended up. When they can no longer ignore or sidestep, they just decide to cancel the word of God. The *NIV* ends verse 13 by saying, "and you do many things like this." The implication is that too often we substitute traditions

of the community for the commands of God, to the detriment of people who have already experienced devaluation.

The relationship between a person with a disability and the Body of Christ should be one of love and acceptance, one in which the conflict between loving our neighbor and our traditions results in our revising our traditions in order to love our neighbor.

The story is told of a family who typically celebrated Christmas together. One year, a daughter and her husband who lived a long distance away related that for financial reasons, they couldn't be home for Christmas. Of course, the parents were sad but sent their gifts to the couple and made other plans. But to their surprise, the young couple was present at a Christmas Eve party! What then was the response of the parents? Did they say, "I'm sorry but we already have made plans. We have not cleaned up your room in the house. We were not expecting you to be here, and we are not about to change just because you are here!" Of course that was not their response. Rather, they said, "We are so happy you are here! We had plans but now everything is on the table and we will change what we were going to do because you are here and we love you!" Now, imagine a family with a child with severe autism were to arrive at the door of a church. What would our response be? Would we say, "We are not equipped and did not plan on you being here. We have specific ways that we do things and we aren't going to change them. Perhaps you can find a different place to go." Or would our response be, "We were not expecting you, but because we love you and want you here, everything is now on the table!" Traditions, if they are barriers to loving our neighbor, need to be changed. As stated above, could the inclusion of persons who, under God's sovereignty experience life as they do, potentially be a corrective for the traditions of the church? Arguably, they should be.

The way in which the community understands itself should demonstrate God's command to love one's neighbor. The degree to which the community does not reflect love for their neighbors is the degree to which the community is not as it should be. Disability just happens to be one characteristic that a person might have that can result in a discriminatory response from the social environment. There are no excuses that can be provided that would permit an unloving response to one's neighbors with disabilities.

Luke 4:18-19 is just one of the many examples of Jesus speaking of helping devalued people. He begins his ministry by quoting Isaiah 61:1-2, saying the passage is fulfilled in their hearing: he will "bring good news to the poor... proclaim that captives will be released... the blind will see... the oppressed will be set free... and... the time of the Lord's favor has come." In a similar

fashion, when John the Baptist is in prison and sends his followers to Jesus asking, "Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?" Jesus replies, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Luke 7:20-22).

We have already discussed God's purpose in the way people are. As a member of the Body of Christ, there is purpose for oneself in the way one is. But there is also purpose in the way one is for the Body of Christ, the community. One might wonder about how broadly this notion of God's sovereignty might be applied. In thinking through this idea, it is interesting to reflect once again on passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:23, which states, "some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary." Necessary to the body, that is. Under God's sovereign design people are the way they are for the community. They bring something necessary, even indispensable, to the community. This implies purpose. One must not be glib about the challenges, often brutally hard challenges, that people face. Our response is to try to live in faith when God's sovereignty is hard. If God is in control, then everything we experience is either directly caused by him (Exodus 4:11) or is permitted by him (an example of this is provided in Exodus 21:13). If things happen that are beyond his control, then he is clearly not the all-powerful God. Once again, God's sovereignty might be very difficult, but we should face our experiences together. As it is stated later in the 1 Corinthians 12 passage, "If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it..." (v. 26). Understanding that God is sovereign and purposeful should cause us to enter into the suffering of others. "Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself. Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own bodies" (Hebrews 13:3). We may not feel the actual pain, but we can be with others as they move through it. We may not experience the challenges of having a disability; however, we can be with those who do face challenges associated with a particular impairment.

In his famous *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, J. R. R. Tolkien describes an all-powerful ring that, if destroyed, will strike a tremendous blow to the evil Sauron. But the holder of the ring gradually gets taken over, coming under the power of the ring by carrying it. As the heroes, Sam and Frodo approach the end of the story, where they have the opportunity to destroy the ring, Frodo, who carries the ring, runs out of strength and can go no further. Sam realizes he cannot take the ring and carry it because of its hold on Frodo, so he comes up with a solution.

"Come, Mr. Frodo!" he cried. "I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well. So up you get! Come on, Mr. Frodo dear! Sam will give you a ride..."

Frodo opened his eyes and drew a breath... "Thank you, Sam" he said in a cracked whisper. "How far is there to go?"

"I don't know," said Sam, "because I don't know where we're going."

(Tolkien, 1965, p. 218).

In many ways, the true hero of the *Lord of the Rings* is Sam, Frodo's friend. He shows us the power of friendship in the life of someone who is suffering, and through that friendship how one's gifting can be evidenced. Like Sam, if someone is suffering, you might not be able to take on that suffering or carry it for them. However, you can enter into their suffering and use your physical presence to carry them. Presence in the lives of people who are suffering is so critical.

Regarding John the Baptist, Jesus says in Matthew 11:11, "I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived none is greater than John the Baptist." John was predicted before he was conceived. He probably grew up with his parents telling him, "you are the one who will prepare the way for the Lord!" His whole life was about that promise. Finally, the day arrives and he sees Jesus coming to be baptized by him—the culmination of his life. He hears the actual voice of the Lord about his son Jesus. But ultimately, he finds himself suffering in prison, perhaps seeing that his life is about to end. This amazing man, the greatest who ever lived, is reduced to sending his disciples to Jesus to ask in verse 3, "Are you the Messiah we have been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?" If this is where suffering can take someone of John's stature, it can easily lead each of us into doubting our Lord. This is, once again, why presence, entering into the suffering of others, is so critical. We help them to be obedient when we love them as we should.

Even Jesus himself desired this type of companionship as he faced suffering leading up to his crucifixion. In Mathew 26:36-46, upon entering Gethsemane, Jesus tells Peter, James and John, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." He returns to find them asleep and, in apparent disappointment at their not being present with him, says, "Couldn't you watch with me even one hour?" Jesus knew what was ahead and that his disciples could not stop what was set in motion. But how much better, perhaps, had he returned and found them agonizing with him in prayer. Would he have been encouraged by this? They could not remove his burden, but they could support him with conscious presence, pouring themselves into prayer for him.

The presence of those who are suffering is essential to the life of the larger Christian community. It is not important that you do not know where the suffering will lead; it is only to be present together. The suffering of others is likely purposeful in a variety of ways, including the way it changes community life.

Wolfensberger (1998) uses the concept of "18 Wounds" to describe the social consequences of disability. The experiences he describes are universal. Wherever in the world they have been taught, listeners relate that his observations are true in their context. The ninth of the wounds states, "Absence or loss of natural, freely given relationships and substitution with artificial/purchased ones" (p. 18). That is, people with disabilities are often not invited to friendship. People who are in their lives either have no choice to be with them, or, in more affluent societies, are paid to be with them. Generally, no one chooses to be with them. In many ways, friendship is the most important thing that someone could offer someone with a disability. Friendship will enhance the lives of those engaged in the friendship, and often advocacy grows out of the relationship, potentially leading to a change in the social environment.

The Bible has many passages about friendship: "The righteous choose their friends carefully" (Proverbs 12:26). Proverbs 27:17 says that "as iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend." "Carry each other's burdens and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourself" (Philippians 4:3). "Do unto others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). "Greater love has no man than to lay down his life or his friends" (John 15:13). "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). We appear to be called to be in friendship with each other. But many types of friendships, "uncustomary" ones, are left unchosen (McNair & McKinney, 2016). These are relationships with people who, for example, have social skills that are imperfect, experience mental illness, or are nonverbal. Rather than embracing the breadth of potential relationships, our lack of experience makes us uncomfortable, and individuals with these characteristics are not invited to friendship. Actually, these relationships are wonderful, and people who enter into them find that they are changed in remarkable ways. When someone says something like that, it can seem trite or just a nice thing to say—but it is absolutely true.

Henri Nouwen describes this feeling, when a pastor questioned the time he was spending with Adam, a man with severe disabilities. Nouwen states, "'Are you telling me that I am wasting my time with Adam? You, an experienced minister and a pastoral guide! Don't you see that Adam is my friend, my teacher, my spiritual director, my counselor, my minister?' I quickly realized that he was not seeing the same Adam I was seeing. What my friend was saying made sense to him because he didn't really 'see' Adam, and he certainly wasn't prepared to get to know him" (1997, p. 83). How foolish to waste your life with persons with severe disabilities. How very foolish to invite them to friendship. This is how people can perceive friendship with persons with severe disabilities. Paul says, "The man without the Sprit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). We would not say that people who do not understand these issues are "without the Spirit." However, we will say that if someone, particularly as a Christian leader, does not understand these issues, there is much room for spiritual growth.

5. The Community in Relation to God

The church is God's plan for community, and he wants his house to be full. That is the message of Luke 14:15-24. Jesus tells the story of a banquet that was planned. But when the guests were informed that the feast was ready, they made excuses (weak ones at best) as to why they couldn't attend. Upon hearing the excuses the servant was given, "His master was furious and said, 'Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' After the servant had done this, he reported, 'There is still room for more.' So his master said, 'Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you might find to come so that the house will be full." The metaphor of the church being filled comes through in this passage. We see God valuing the presence of those who have been devalued by society because of poverty or disability. He chooses them and desires them. But it is interesting that when the servant invites people, they apparently don't respond. Why would a poor and disabled person, living "behind the hedges" (as homeless people will do in our current day), not respond to the invitation to attend a banquet? Could it be that they did not trust the invitation? Maybe they thought they would be embarrassed: "Haha! You thought we really wanted you here! The joke is on you!" So, the response of the Master is to tell the servants to "urge" them to come in.

Urge is an interesting word. It implies a persistence in trying to persuade a course of action. By the use of argument, one convinces another. That is often the place where we are in encouraging individuals with disabilities and their families to come to church. They may not trust us because of their past experience. Somehow, we need to convince them that we have changed. The starting point in inviting persons affected by disability to church is repentance. "Will you please forgive us for the way you have been treated in the past? Will you give us another chance to love you as we should?" Disability ministry begins with repentance as a starting point in urging people to come and fill God's house.

We see from the example of Jesus how he acted to change the traditions mentioned earlier in relation to the Mark 7 passage. If traditions impaired the command to love one's neighbor, he ignored the traditions. Several examples will be instructive. In Luke 8:43, a woman with blood discharge touches the hem of his garment. Matthew 9:21 reveals her thinking: "If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed." According to the traditions of the day, Jesus was now unclean and could have dealt with her harshly. Instead, he says to her, "Daughter, be encouraged! Your faith has made you well." In John 4, Jesus talks to a Samaritan woman by a well. When his disciples returned, verse 27 states, "They were shocked to find him talking to a woman but none of them had the nerve to ask, 'What do you want with her?' or 'Why are you talking to her?'" Once again, Jesus confronts traditions in order to love a neighbor. In Luke 7:38, a woman with a bad reputation washes Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair and putting perfume on them, accompanied by kisses. "When the Pharisee who invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!'" Jesus knew who she was and accepted her repentant act in spite of traditions. Other examples could be provided, such as Matthew 8:3, where Jesus touches a man with leprosy before he heals him; John 5:1-15, when he goes to the pool of Bethesda; or Matthew 9:11 where the Pharisees ask why Jesus eats with sinners. In each of these cases, Jesus, as God, shows the community how it needs to change in order that all people are loved as neighbors. Jesus came, not really respecting the social context, because he wanted to change it.

Like the example of Jesus, if we say we love all people and do not do the work that should accompany that love, we are liars. "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20). It is as is stated in Matthew 25:37-40 once again.

"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'" People with disabilities are not the "least," by the way. Others may devalue them by referring to them as the least. If they are needing the help described in this passage, they are simply among the larger humanity who would benefit from that help. There is an inextricable connection between the greatest commands to love God and to love one's neighbor. The community, when it does not love its neighbors, in a very real way calls into question whether they actually love their God (James 2:1). But when the community truly loves its neighbors as itself, it brings glory to God. Loving your neighbor is irrefutable evidence of greater power and a greater motivation, because loving one's neighbor is difficult and is severely lacking in society. This is one of the most basic aspects of the Christian faith, and when the community rejects those with disabilities, the repercussions for the community itself are far reaching.

We will close with a brief reflection on a perennially provocative passage from the second chapter of the book of James. Faith without works is dead, just as love with favoritism is false. James points out that the Christian community, following the royal law of love as Jesus expresses it in Luke 10 (from Leviticus 19), cannot express favoritism, treating the rich with more respect than the poor. It is not enough to verbally confess the truth, even with theological precision. Faith is revealed to be genuine through the work of loving our neighbor equally, especially if they are in need. How we treat our neighbors with impairments testifies to the truth of our love. The simplicity of the equation is a sharp reminder that reading (or writing) many words, no matter how accurate, is finally worthwhile only inasmuch as it prepares for the work of love. May these words help those who read to love their neighbor, particularly those with impairments, as themselves.

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