

# Kingdom Matters in Disability

*Revised by Joni Eareckson Tada*

*The material in this paper on the role of the kingdom and the church was originally researched and presented by Paige Benton Brown at the Presbyterian Church of America's Women's Conference in 2006.*

You will often hear me say that disability ministry is all about “advancing the kingdom of Christ.” I often call those who serve in disability ministry “kingdom-minded Christians.” What do I mean by “kingdom” work and why is serving among those with disabilities a kingdom initiative? My friend in the Presbyterian Church of America, Paige Benton Brown, has helped clarify the distinctions between God’s kingdom and his church. In this paper, I have used her insights as a springboard for understanding the role of disability ministry as it relates to the church and the kingdom. Through this, I trust you’ll see how disability ministry reflects the compassion of the Savior, perhaps in a way that no other ministry can.

A glance through the New Testament will reveal that the church and the kingdom are not the same thing. The church is made up of people—followers of Jesus who have been impacted by the preaching of the Gospel of the kingdom. The church is the elect of the Father, the redeemed of the Son, and the renewed by the Spirit. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus calls us *his* church. The church has limited responsibilities outlined in the epistles—it exists to proclaim the Gospel and to call and disciple, equip and train people in the ministry of God’s Word. The church helps people worship God according to the Word, encouraging them to love Jesus Christ as they should.

A disability ministry within a church does the same. We call, or evangelize, people with disabilities and disciple them in the Word; we make certain the preaching of the Word is accessible to them, and that they have an opportunity to venerate God freely in a church worship setting. We help people with disabilities grasp what the Word of God means and the difference it should make in their lives. We mentor and encourage them to grow in the grace and knowledge of God, helping them discover their spiritual gifts, and their role of service and leadership within the church. But that’s not our only role in disability ministry. We have a kingdom role—all people with disabilities in the church have a kingdom role.

Unlike the church, the kingdom is not a group of people. It is a reign, the rule of Jesus, our Lord. When Christ came to earth, he set up his kingdom. Yes, he set it up in the hearts of those who would believe in him, but it is much more than that. When Christ set up his kingdom, he did it in a global sense as well.<sup>1</sup> “The secret of the presence of the kingdom lies in Jesus’ victory over Satan, in his unlimited miraculous power, his unrestricted authority to preach the Gospel, in his pronouncements of blessedness and the bestowal of salvation upon his people,” writes Dr. Herman Ridderbos.<sup>2</sup> And so, kingdom work is “pushing out into the world” the effects of the Gospel, reclaiming earth as rightfully the Lord’s. Kingdom work is mainly a *battle* against our adversary, the devil, who, when the Fall occurred in the Garden, committed high treason

against the rightful King by usurping God's authority and setting up his own rival kingdom here on earth. He thinks this earth is his, but he's wrong. He's only an evil tenant and his hostility is always increasing. When Christ came to set up his kingdom on earth, it meant Satan's days were numbered. This unlawful usurper only has a short time before he's cast into the lake of fire. And in this interim between the First Advent (when Jesus Christ set up his kingdom) and his Second Coming (when it will be completed), we live in tension—we've been freed from the power of sin, but not its presence; the kingdom has come, but it's yet to be fulfilled. It's a struggle, a tension, a war, and *quite* a battle.<sup>3</sup>

Christ has come, but the world has yet to feel the full impact. Paige Benton Brown uses a World War II analogy to illustrate this. The first coming of Christ was like D-Day. When D-Day occurred, it was the turning point of the war; everyone knew it was over for Adolf Hitler. Yet with victory assured, it was still a struggle as the Allies pushed deeper into the darkness of Nazi Europe. Everybody knew Hitler's days were numbered as the Allies advanced, taking back territory the tyrant thought was rightfully his; but it was still a fight. People died. People got injured. The Second Coming of Christ is like VE-Day; the day when victory is finally secured. Satan will be cast out and Christ will sit on the throne of earth restored. Until that time, you and I are pushing deep into the darkness of Satan's territory. We are making real in the world what has been accomplished at the cross. We are mopping up until Jesus comes back and reconciles all things to himself. All enemies will be under his feet. The whole universe will rejoice as Christ will rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Kingdom work is planting firmly in the soil of the world, banners of justice, peace, righteousness, joy, truth, beauty, and every other kingdom characteristic. While the church restrains and restricts itself to training and holding people to the Word, the kingdom is not limited. For example, there are limitations for Christian women in the church<sup>4</sup>—Scripture makes it clear that women are not to assume the office of pastor.<sup>5</sup> However, there are *unlimited* roles for Christian women in the kingdom—women represent Christ as leaders in hospitals, corporations, universities, courtrooms, school boards or in government. The parameters of the kingdom are everywhere. There are limitations for the church in the world, but none on the kingdom of God.

This makes the church a base camp for the kingdom; a training camp where Christians are equipped to go out into the world, make Christ real, and reclaim territory under the banner of Christ. No area of society should go unchallenged for the Lordship of Christ—whether the arts, media, education, medicine, business, or politics.

## Challenging the World of Disability for Christ's Sake

Allow me to use Joni and Friends as an example. Our ministry works alongside the church to evangelize and disciple people with disabilities, train them in the Word, and teach them to be worshipers of God. What is kingdom work for Joni and Friends? It's contending for ethical stem cell research and manufacturing Regency Pediatric wheelchairs in prisons. It's writing articles against physician-assisted suicide and advocating against state budget cuts that endanger needed social services for people with disabilities. It's contending for the rights of the intellectually-disabled in Thailand who are chained to the walls of mental institutions. It's appearing on *Larry King Live* and recording awareness-raising public service announcements. It's our Policy Center at the Christian Institute on Disability. Even our Family Retreats and Wheels for the World outreach trips can be considered kingdom work. Joni and Friends' kingdom mandate is to challenge every area of disability for the sake of Jesus Christ.

You've heard the phrase "biblical worldview," but a worldview is merely an assessment. A worldview, even a biblical one, is an appraisal of the world, a point of view. But the kingdom is not a view, it's a *reality*. It's an obligation. Paige Benton Brown writes, "We may possess a worldview, but the kingdom possesses us. We may own a worldview, but the kingdom owns us. It's a view that always leads to action, forcing us to ask, 'How can I get engaged? How can I showcase the truth of Jesus Christ in this area? How can I use the gifts God has given me to effect transformation in the world?'"

The average Christian is uneasy with this. Sometimes believers assume that only ‘church work’ is spiritual activity. They think real Christian work is only that which happens in the church and “Who cares what happens out in the world?” Who cares if unborn babies with Down syndrome are aborted? Who cares if young men with spinal-cord injuries are being warehoused in nursing homes for lack of a place to live? Who cares if qualified people with disabilities are denied jobs unfairly? Who cares if people in comas are euthanized? *After all*, some Christians think, *the whole world is going to hell in a hand basket, and the best we can do is send out raiding parties into the world to quickly make converts, then bring them back into the safe walls of the church where we all just hunker down and wait and be safe until Jesus returns.*

This view is unchristian; it’s wrong. It is way too conservative. People who hold this view don’t care if a person eats, as long as he knows Jesus. At the same time, there are people who don’t care if a person knows Jesus, as long as he eats. This view is wrong, as well—it’s too liberal. It eliminates salvation from the Gospel of the kingdom. Christians who follow this view see God’s work in the world as no different from his work in the church. “We’re all God’s children,” they will say, “We’re all under the same umbrella, and teaching the Bible is really no different from teaching a literacy course. It’s all for God’s good.” Both conservative and liberal views are wrong.

The correct view is neither conservative nor liberal, but *transformational*. We are about transforming the kingdoms of this world to become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. Paige Benton says, “Transformational Christians view the church as family, as training camp, as base camp, as boot camp. The church is a place of preparation where Christians are loved and taught and supported to go out into the world to effect change.” Christians must carry Christ into the media, schools, in economics and medicine, in technology and politics. We *transform* these areas through kingdom work, and as a result, culture is *changed*.

The area of disability is in desperate need of transformation, as well. The global plight of people with disabilities is desperate, and at Joni and Friends, we encourage Christians to use their gifts to serve God where the needs are greatest. As my friend Paige says, “Go where the kingdom is weakest.” Christ should be made real where the world is at its darkest. Go into nursing homes or institutions for the intellectually disabled; bring justice and mercy, beauty and righteousness into such places. Serve as advocates in the disability community, and bring equity and fairness to unjust social policies. Serve at a Joni and Friends’ Family Retreat and bring compassion to families affected by disability. Serve on a *Wheels for the World* trip and push out the kingdom in countries where cerebral palsy is considered a curse by a witch doctor, or persons with epilepsy are thought to be demon possessed. Let’s transform lives with the Gospel . . . let’s transform cultures through kingdom initiatives!

## Evangelism in the Kingdom

People wonder how evangelism fits into this view of the church and the kingdom. When we begin living out Christ among artists, politicians, educators, and health care professionals, it will trigger the question, “Why do you live the way you do?” People want to know what makes transformational Christians so *different*. Kingdom work prompts the salvation question. It’s what Jesus did. People were drawn to him. Whenever people spent time with Jesus, they experienced a hunger for his message. When in the world, we live as Christ would have us live, it prompts the question of “What must I do to be saved like you?”

Recently I met Eunice Im who attends the youth group at the First Mandarin Baptist Church in Los Angeles. Her youth group, led by Arthur and Sandra Hsieh, supporters of Joni and Friends, often serves as stewards when we hold Disability Ministry Training Summits. Under the Hsieh’s leadership, this group of young people also volunteers at Joni and Friends’ Family Retreat at Murrieta Hot Springs in Temecula. And they raised over \$80,000 for *Wheels for the World*. I learned that Eunice has a younger sister, Karen, with autism. Up until Eunice’s family attended Family Retreat, she had never looked at her sister as a friend, but as her “autistic sibling.” Eunice wrote me recently:

I want to celebrate your life because through you and specifically through the *Family Retreats* I now experience more of the abundance of life in Jesus Christ. For me, it has meant accepting and loving my sister. Now, when I interact with Karen, I see a person. I see a person that I want to get to know, a person that I care about, rather than as a person who has a diagnosis of autism.

Eunice is an honors student at UCLA where she is studying medicine. This remarkable young woman plans to go into research to find a treatment for autism. *That* is kingdom work. And as she makes Christ real to all those around her, her work—her *ministry*—is as “spiritual” as the activities her youth group participates in at her church.

Joni and Friends connects with hundreds of young people like Eunice. When I go to a Family Retreat, I meet so many college freshmen and sophomores who are serving as volunteers. At the close of the week, it is soul-stirring to hear them say, “I’m going to declare a major in special education!” Or recreational therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy or physical therapy. That’s kingdom work. Just like medical researchers like Eunice, or the Christian businessmen that hire the disabled. When Eunice finally graduates out into the world, I know she will be a transformational Christian; she’ll see First Mandarin Baptist Church as her family, her training camp, her base camp. She’ll remain strong doing kingdom work in the world because her church will have restrained itself to its God-given role of mentoring, discipling and training her.

What role does the church have in politics? None. What do Christians attending a church have to do with politics? Everything. I hope some in the Hsieh’s youth group will one day run for the California state assembly. I hope that my young friend, Emily Shanahan, who has cerebral palsy and is a senior at Cedarville University might one day consider going into constitutional law. I can envision the day when Emily, like Eunice, will carry the kingdom banner into the world, provoking life-transforming questions from non-believers.

I can just picture Eunice one day among her fellow researchers. They will be in their lab coats working alongside her and asking, “What makes you so dedicated? Why are you living like this? How can I have the peace that you have? Who is this Jesus that you follow?” Eunice will be out in the world shaking salt, shining light, sowing Gospel seed and making people thirsty for more than this world can give. She won’t be viewed as a “right-wing radical who only cares about saving people then retreating within the confines of their church walls . . . or a Christian who just sits on her hands until Jesus comes back.” No, her co-workers will view her differently because she *cares* about this world.

## Redemption Is Greater than We Think

Jesus loves this world. He created its beauty and variety; its people of various tongues and nations. True, the Fall marred its image and stained its landscape; it produced a world filled with sin, but it’s still *God’s* world. He’s the rightful owner and ruler, and he invites us to partner with him in reclaiming it under the Family banner. Never be pessimistic about this world. God requires that we be optimistic and know that good will ultimately triumph. We are to be his change-agents in this awesome divine plan to advance the kingdom, reclaim the earth as rightfully the Lord’s, and push back the kingdom of darkness, preserving culture, influencing society, and transforming culture. The Gospel of the kingdom is about setting things—*all* things—right.

Heaven is the final restoration of earth under the authority of Christ. People often ask me what I am looking forward to in heaven. If I were self-centered about it, I could easily say, “Oh, I can’t wait to get my new body. I’m going to jump, dance, kick around and do aerobics. I’m going to see all my friends and relatives. I’m going to see my mom and dad who have long-since gone home to be with Jesus.” We’re so me-focused—even about heaven. Rather, let’s be excited that in heaven, we will celebrate the crowning of Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We’re going to be in that great choir who will sing, “*And he shall reign forever and ever!*”

So the goal of redemption is the renewal of all things, not just our souls and bodies. This means that the Fall is bigger than personal salvation, and redemption is bigger than forgiveness. There's much, much more wrong with this world than our personal sin. *Everything* is poisoned, everything fell under the curse in the Garden of Eden, and one day *everything* will be restored—a new earth *and* new heavens where peace and justice and love and righteousness are realities. We kingdom-minded Christians live our lives in view of that goal.

I encourage you to go where the kingdom is weakest, where Satan's domain is most fierce. Be salt and light in your communities, in nursing homes, mental institutions, and residential facilities for disabled people. Make the kingdom strong there. And may your efforts be like the mustard seed becoming a tree that fills the whole garden, like the leaven that permeates through the whole loaf. As my friend Paige says, "We're not about maintenance." I agree; we're about *marching*. I love to sing as I leave the International Disability Center each evening. Wheeling down the ramp I'll sing, *We've a story to tell to the nations . . .* or *We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion*. Those are energizing words, principles with which I inform my conscience, keep my spirit right, and sharpen my perspective so that I don't become a pessimist in this warped and poisoned world. I'm not about maintenance and I don't want you to be either.

I trust that this message has given you a bigger picture about disability ministry in the church and in the world. I hope you have better grasped the role of the church to equip you in worship, prayer, and Bible study. But I also hope you see your kingdom role. So sign up as a short-term missionary for next year's Family Retreats, go on a trip with Wheels for the World, become an ombudsman at a local nursing home where elder abuse is a nasty secret, minister in residential care facilities, become informed on stem cell research, write letters to the editor of your city's newspaper, call your senators and congressmen—and do it as a transformational Christian.

## Notes

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1. Jesus talks about the kingdom and what it's like in the parables of the sower (Matthew 13:18–23), of the tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:24–30), of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31–32), and of the leaven (Matthew 13:33). These kingdom parables describe the impact the preaching of the Gospel has on the world.
2. Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1962), 82.
3. This is why not every person with a disability who prays for healing experiences a divine miracle. The Bible never guarantees that every person who requests physical healing will be healed. Why should we single out disease—just one of the results of man's Fall—insisting Christians shouldn't have to put up with disabilities. Why not? We put up with hurricanes and other catastrophes of nature. We put up with the sinful attitudes and actions of people around us. When Christ came to earth to set up the kingdom, He began to put it into motion. But it won't be completed until Jesus returns to close the curtain once and for all on sin, Satan and suffering. Then, the eye of every eye will be opened, the ears of all those who are deaf will be unstopped, and every lame person will leap for joy (Isaiah 35:5–6).
4. 1 Corinthians 11:5; 1 Corinthians 14:34; Ephesians 1:22; 1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 2:4
5. The Presbyterian Church of America often allows women to team-teach with men, as well as in mixed audience settings. Women missionaries serving on the field often assume leadership positions until such time as men are equipped to serve as pastors and elders.

## About the Author

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**Joni Eareckson Tada** is a global Christian stateswoman and an internationally renowned advocate for people with disabilities. She is the Founder and CEO of Joni and Friends International Disability Center, a nonprofit organization with a worldwide outreach to people with disabilities and their families. A diving accident in 1967 left Joni, then 17, a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. Since then, Joni's wisdom and influence have been shared with the world through Christian books, the media, speaking, and her service in disability advocacy. She served on the National Council on Disability under two U.S. Presidents; during her tenure, the Americans with Disabilities Act was drafted and passed into law. Joni has also served on the Disability Advisory Committee to the U.S. State Department. Her driving desire is to see every person with a disability find hope, dignity, and their place in the body of Christ. Joni and Ken Tada have been married since 1982.