Wholeness: Recognizing the Imago Dei in Disability

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Historical Christian views of human wholeness have limited the church's grasp of the imago Dei. A more biblically and theologically grounded definition of human wholeness as created, gifted, and called by God will expand the church's understanding and practice of full inclusion of disabled people. In his book, *Disability and the Gospel*, Dr. Michael Beates states,

> The absence of people with disabilities in the church indicates that the church has not yet grasped deeply enough the essence of the gospel; and conversely, God's people have drunk too deeply from the well of cultural ideology with regard to wholeness and brokenness.[1]

While this is the case in modern times, for more than a thousand years the church established, or was deeply intertwined with, cultures, societies, and even governments in a large part of the world. Today's cultural ideal of wholeness is based largely on what the church explicitly, and implicitly, taught for centuries. Even Jesus's disciples believed that disability was caused by sin, as evidenced by their question to Jesus in John 9:1-2 regarding the cause of a man's blindness, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus surprises them by explaining that the man's blindness has nothing to do with sin. While there is not space in this article to go into the many passages of Scripture that refute the idea of sin causing all disabilities or those that call God's people to care well for those with disabilities, such passages

[1] Michael S. Beates, *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 79.

far outnumber those implying sin causes disability. Yet many church leaders continued to preach and practice this discriminatory attitude toward those with disabilities.

Historical Christian Views on Disability

Second century theologian Origen of Alexandria believed that "…souls preexist bodies and are only grudgingly forced into disabled bodies."[2] Augustine of Hippo, a bishop and theologian from the fourth to fifth centuries, considered rationality an important aspect of the human soul. He believed each soul is created for a specific body and that the soul is rational even if the body is unable to express it. Augustine seems to be saying that each person, disabled or not, has a rational soul and is equal in the eyes of God. However, he goes on to say that rationality and the expression of it are the key differences between humanity and the animal kingdom, thus implying that those who are not able to express rationality are less than the ideal human (like animals). Augustine states that a person who has lost their rationality, what today we might recognize as dementia or the effects a head injury, does not lose their humanity, just their ability to express that humanity.[3] "Augustine wants to say that all human life is valuable, but his basic account of God and humanity problematizes his achieving his aims."[4]

Thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas had a slightly different view of disability; he believed that a person's disability may impact their ability to live out a Christian life of worship and service, but it did not affect the *imago Dei* in that person nor arrest the work of God in them.[5] In Aquinas's view, God did not work in and through a person despite their disability, rather, the imago Dei could not be disfigured by disability. Likewise, God's ability to work in a person is not impacted by a person's disability. However, Aquinas also believed that the Eucharist should not be given to people who could not in some way physically acknowledge receiving it.

To summarize Aquinas's view: *In principle*, someone who completely lacks the use of reason should not be given the Eucharist, because there is no direct way to know from the exterior movements of the body if there is or ever was an interior act of devotion on the part of the amens [people with *amentia*-dementia or intermittent symptoms of extreme mental illness].[6]

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2 Brian Brock and John Swinton, eds. *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 71.
3 Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 70.
4 Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 71.
5 Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 71.
6 Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 109.

Even Martin Luther, the great Christian reformer of the sixteenth century, struggled with the idea of profound disability. In his book *Table Talk*, Luther suggests that a twelve-year-old child who seems unable to do anything but eat and defecate should be smothered to death. His reasoning is that such a person could not possibly have a soul and must be possessed by the devil.[7]

Christian Views on Disability in the Modern Era

In 1873, President Grant signed into law what would come to be called the "Comstock Act," after Anthony Comstock, a US Postal Inspector and Secretary for the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice who was a staunch advocate for the legislation. This law stated that it was illegal for anyone "…in any place within the exclusive jurisdiction of the United States" to sell or possess "…obscene books, pictures, etc or drugs, etc, for preventing conception of causing abortion; or advertising making the same."[8] Various court cases began to dismantle the Comstock Act starting in 1936, but the law was in effect and enforced until 1965. Because of the Comstock Act and similar state laws, up until the mid-1940s, the terms "birth control" (deciding who should and should not procreate, which was legal in many states) and "contraception" (preventing pregnancy, which was illegal) were not synonymous.

In the early twentieth century the eugenics movement took hold in the United States. Eugenics researchers asserted that,

> …animal breeders had been applying disassortative mating to successfully improve their livestock for centuries. Couldn't these same principles be applied to improve the human population? Eugenics researchers thought so, and they therefore believed that by carefully controlling human matings, conditions such as mental retardation, psychiatric

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7 Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 186.

8 42nd Congress, "An Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use," chapter 258 in *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 – 1875, Statutes At Large, 42nd Congress, 3rd Session* (United States Library of Congress), https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=017/llsl017.db&recNum=0639

illnesses, and physical disabilities could be eradicated.[9]

Many Christians and denominations supported the eugenics movement and more specifically, the American Eugenics Society (AES). The eugenics movement sought to improve the human race by limiting the reproduction of "undesirables": immigrants, People of Color (particularly African Americans), and those with disabilities. It was believed that these groups of people were less intelligent, had criminal tendencies, and were a drain on societal resources. The concern was that if people in these groups had children, those undesirable attributes would be passed on to another generation and would eventually outnumber the "desirables": white, middle class, English-speaking, typically abled people. An article by Melissa J. Wilde and KaJaiyaiu Hopkins shows that some Christian denominations of the pre-WWII era supported the idea of eugenics and birth control, and conversed about it in their annual meetings and denominational newsletters. These denominations include some of the precursor denominations of the UCC, UUA, UMC, PCUSA, and Episcopal Church, among others.[10] The Women's Problem Group of the Social Order Committee, a committee of the Society of Friends (Quakers), put forth this statement at their annual meeting in 1929:

> Sociology and eugenics emphasize birth control continually as an important means of basically improving the quality of the human race. Obviously, there should be a relatively large number of children from those parents who can support and educate them, and a relatively smaller number from less qualified parents.[11]

A statement from the Presbyterian Church in the USA (a Southern precursor to today's PCUSA) said of birth control in 1931, "…healthier children, healthier mothers, and that human stock would be greatly improved…quantity would lessen and quality would increase."[12] A report in *The Christian Leader*, the periodical of the Universalist General

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9 Karen Norgarrd, "Human Testing, the Eugenics Movement, and IRBs" *Nature Education* 1(1) (2008), 170, https://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/human-testing-the-eugenics-movement-and-irbs-724/.

10 Melissa J. Wilde and KaJaiyaiu Hopkins, "From Eugenicists to Family Planners: America's Religious Promoters of Contraception," *Family Planning* (2018): 19.

11 "A Statement on Birth Control," from the Women's Problem Group of the Social Order Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (15 Mar 1933): 4.

12 H. Marlin, "Presbyterian Commission Approves Birth Control," *The United Presbyterian* 89 (1931): 3.

Convention, shared this statement with its readers in 1930:

> The most alarming tendency of our time is found in the low birth-rate among the superior breeds and the high birth-rate among the inferior. Without much question we are breeding twice as fast from the worst as from the best. No observing and thinking person can overlook this problem.[13]

While the popularity of eugenics faded with the rise of the Nazi party and its rhetoric (much of which was taken from the American eugenics movement), the church's interpretation of inclusion and the *imago Dei* was tested again in 1989, as a new piece of legislation began to be debated in Congress, the Americans with Disability Act (ADA). As of July 1989, twenty-one religious organizations confirmed that they supported exemptions of religious entities from the ADA, with another five listed as "likely."[14] Among those listed as supporting this exemption were the National Council of Churches, the American Association of Christian Schools, the American Association of Bible Colleges, the Center for Catholic Policy, Concerned Women for America, Focus on the Family, and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Members of the NAE included denominations such as Assemblies of God, Baptist General Conference, The Church of the Nazarene, Evangelical Free Church of America, Evangelical Mennonite Church, Pentecostal Church of God, and Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. In a letter to Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, one of the co-sponsors of the ADA, the director of the NAE, Dr. Robert P. Dugan, laid out some of the organization's concerns, the foremost of which were detailed in what became Title III of the ADA, those that required structural changes to buildings, arguing that those requirements would be a financial burden for congregations. In addition, Dugan strongly disagreed with classifying addictions as disabilities, since the members of his organization saw addictions not as illnesses to be accommodated,

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13 N. Fletcher, "Social Issues," *Christian Leader* 32 (1930): 514.

14 Text Document "Religious Organizations Supporting an Exemption of Religious Entities from Titles II & IV of the ADA," Robert J. Dole Senate Papers–Personal/Political Files 1969–1996. Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.

but as moral failings that should not be tolerated.[15] The well-known Roman Catholic constitutional lawyer William Bentley Ball presented his arguments in a fifteen-page letter to Dr. William Roper, the director of the White House Office of Policy Development. Ball argued that the ADA would "prove injurious to religious exercise" because of its broad definitions of "public accommodation" and "disability," the potential costs to churches and religious organizations such as schools, and the "excessive entanglements between government and religious ministries."[16] He also claimed that if religious organizations were required to employ alcoholics, drug addicts, and those with AIDS (as long as they did not "pose a direct threat to property or the safety of others in the workplace or program" as stated in the first drafts of the ADA legislation), churches and religious schools would not be able to serve their students well, keep them physically and morally safe, or provide the care that the students' parents expected. Ultimately, under pressure from intense lobbying by these as well as other organizations and individuals, the final draft of the legislation made churches and religious organizations, including schools, exempt from Title III and Section 307 of the ADA, those portions that dealt directly with accommodations required for publicly accessible businesses. However, religious entities are not exempt from Title I of the ADA, the portion that relates to nondiscrimination in hiring practices.

Heather Vacek summarizes the limiting cultural and historical Christian view of wholeness well, namely that only those who are temporarily abled have full value:

> While Christian doctrine asserts that God created a world and named it good, Protestants ingest and adopt modern American social norms that indicate that only some of creation is good. Instead of biblical understandings that place all of creation in relationship with God and name creation good, albeit finite, cultural definitions of createdness name the potential for economic productivity as the primary designation of human value to society. Finally, while Christian

[15] Dr. Robert P. Dugan, Jr. to Senator Tom Harkin, 14 July 1989, Robert J. Dole Senate Papers-Personal/Political Files 1969–1996. Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.

[16] Letter from William Bentley Ball to Dr. William L. Roper, 13 July 1989, Robert J. Dole Senate Papers-Personal/Political Files 1969–1996. Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.

> belief affirms the interconnection of all of creation, the logic of stigma dictates that men and women, as independent actors, hold individual responsibility for bearing suffering. God and faith communities, under those presumptions, have little help to offer.[17]

What the Bible Says About Disability

While the church's historical viewpoint of wholeness has often been dismissive, patronizing, and demeaning toward those with disabilities, the Bible and Christian doctrine contradict this view.

Genesis 1 states that God created humans in God's likeness. Jane Deland puts it this way: "Genesis proclaims a revolutionary, democratic concept: every person is regal before God."[18] Deland posits that with this view of humanity, all people are entitled to care and honor. So, how does this apply to people with disabilities? If disabled people are made in God's image, is God disabled too? Nancy Eiesland addresses these questions in her book, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Eiesland points out that Jesus, as the first to be raised from the dead, chooses to keep the marks of his injury and torture, namely the scars on his hands, feet, and side—marks of disability.

> In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side *and the imago Dei*. Paradoxically, in the very act commonly understood as the transcendence of physical life, God is revealed as tangible, bearing the representation of the body reshaped by injustice and sin into the fullness of the Godhead.[19] (Emphasis mine.)

Sarah Melcher ties Jesus's resurrected disabled body back to creation.

> The idea that God encompasses disability in some fashion connects closely with the idea in Gen 1:26–28 that human

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17 Heather H. Vacek, *Madness: American Protestant Responses to Mental Illness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 164.

18 Jane Deland, "Images of God Through the Lens of Disability," *Journal of Religion, Disability, & Health 3*, no. 2 (1999): 51.

19 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 99.

> beings are created according to the image of God. If human disability is an unsurprising aspect of being human, it could imply that God, too, shares that aspect of disability, since humanity represents the image of God.[20]

If disabled people are created in the image of God and Christ chose to be resurrected with disabilities, then what is the implication for human bodies after the resurrection? Often, Paul's message in 1 Cor 15:42–44 is interpreted in the light of Western culture's medical model, that all our so-called bodily defects will be removed in our new, post-resurrection bodies. "The medical model's assumptions about physical normalization are often reflected in Christian thought about the bodily resurrection. The Christian future hope tends to a vision of Edenic restoration, with no imperfection."[21] Yet, while their disabilities do not define people with disabilities, the disabilities are a part of who they are. If God has created us in God's likeness, why would a portion of us be removed from our eternal bodies? "To be sure, the resurrected body will indeed be transformed; but its transformation doesn't mean that there will be no continuity between the present and future body—rather, there will be continuities amid discontinuities so that we will remain marked somehow in the next life by who and what we are in this life."[22]

What about the view that sin is a cause of disability? If Jesus was raised disabled and is sinless, then sin cannot be responsible for disability. "No longer can wholeness be conceived as physical perfection, but rather must be perceived as the affirmation of God's presence with us in our painstaking quest for survival."[23] Clearly, an aspect of being whole is being created by God and in God's image.

Another element of wholeness is gifted by God. In 1 Cor 12, the Apostle Paul explains that all have been given spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit, and that these gifts are activated in everyone by the Holy Spirit. Nowhere does Paul say that people with disabilities (or anyone else) are excluded from receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts

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20 Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong, eds. *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 34.

21 Philip Thomas, "The Relational–Revelational Image: A Reflection on the Image of God in the Light of Disability and on Disability in the Light of the Image of God," *Journal of Religion Disability & Health* 16, no. 2 (2012): 9.

22 Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 123.

23 Jane Deland, "Images of God," 61.

are freely given by God for the benefit of the body of Christ.[24] Thomas Aquinas stated that each body was created for the purpose God had given to that person, knowing what that person would be called to do during their life.[25] Temporarily abled people must resist the urge to define how a disabled person is gifted and how those gifts are expressed. "Being made in the likeness of God allows for infinite variety and space to grow."[26]

Since all people are gifted, all are likewise called to use these gifts. In 1 Cor 12:22, Paul points out that those whom society would deem to be weak are "indispensable" for the function of the body of Christ as a whole. The body requires all its parts to do the work of God in this world.

Thus no gift—and no individual believer—is to be suppressed, dismissed, or minimized, and there is no hierarchy of gifts. Rather, all gifts are similarly indispensable, and each person is equally important for the health of the whole. Indeed, each with his or her own distinctive gift had been made a part of the same body of Christ by the Spirit.[27]

Even God's people, the Israelites, are named after a man who became disabled after he had "struggled with God and with humans" (Gen 32:28). Israel's father, Isaac, became blind in his old age. Moses struggled with speech. According to some scholars, Ehud's right hand may have been disabled, forcing him to use his sword in his left, a skill that proved useful in overcoming the Moabite king. "Unlike the bodily perfection of the Greek and Roman gods and heroes, the patriarchs and prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures had numerous disabilities. These in no way excluded them from being agents of God's redemption."[28]

Created, Gifted, and Called

Using the definition of wholeness as created, gifted, and called, the church can better understand the need to include those with disabilities, as well as find ways to do that. The church needs to examine and deconstruct the frequently unconscious ableism within itself.

Emancipatory transformation must include not only an examination of dominant practices and beliefs and the ways in which they maintain or challenge structures of stigmatization and marginalization, but also a

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24 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 94.

25 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (New York: Ave Maria Press, 1981). Sec. 1.91.3.

26 Jane Deland, "Images of God Through the Lens of Disability," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 3 no. 2 (1999): 54.

27 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 95.

28 Deland, "Images of God," 58.

search for and proclamation of alternative structures and symbols of religious life that can effectively challenge oppressive beliefs and values.[29]

The church needs to get used to learning from and about people with disabilities if we are to live out the Great Commission (Mt 28:16–20). "It is time for the church to take ownership and create the type of environments that attract and nurture the gifts in the disability community. Building a learning culture is essential to creating that environment."[30] By inviting people with disabilities to share their stories, gifts, and callings, the church can begin to understand what it has missed out on.

Accommodation is an area in which the church can begin to grow and change. When Moses struggled with speaking, God did not deem Moses unqualified; rather, God appointed Aaron as spokesperson.[31] In 2 Cor 12: 6–7, Paul speaks of the "thorn in his flesh," which many scholars believe to be chronic illness or disability. He frequently traveled with companions on his journeys, and while his fellow travelers were inevitably of spiritual support to him, it is likely that they also helped him physically. Paul even commends the believers in Galatia for taking him in when he was ill and not treating him "with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself" (Gal 4:14). The implication is that contempt and scorn would have been the societal norm in this situation since Paul would have been seen as cursed by the Gentiles and as a sinner by his fellow Jews because of his disability.[32]

For too long the church has reflected secular cultural norms to define wholeness, a practice clearly contrary to God's word. As Marva Dawn puts it, "There is something seriously wrong with our lives and churches if we are operating out of strength, rather than the weakness in which God tabernacles." It is time for the church to embrace God's definition of wholeness for all those created in God's likeness.

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29 Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 93.

30 Lamar Hardwick, *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 100.

31 Melcher, Parsons, and Yong, eds. *The Bible and Disability*, 59.

32 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 83.