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Editorial correspondence should be sent to the editor, Paul H. de Neui, c/o North Park Theological Seminary, 3225 W. Foster Ave., Chicago, IL 60625; (773) 244-6230. pdeneui@northpark.edu.

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Comment

Paul H. de Neui, professor of missiology and intercultural studies, North Park Theological Seminary

This issue of the *Covenant Quarterly* includes four articles focused on the largest marginalized people group on earth—individuals living with disabilities. In these essays readers will learn how at least one in four people globally are disabled and often ostracized in ways unrecognized by society. Through narrative and theological examples, these authors describe the role that church members and structures have played in that process, and how they can be instrumental in bringing about change.

In his article, "We Wanna Dance with Somebody: Three Aspects of an Ecclesiology of Disability for the Evangelical Covenant Church," disability theologian Michael A. Walker uses dance as a thematic "hook" to assert that the Evangelical Covenant Church has integrated, and can more fully embody, three important ecclesiological aspects of ministry with people with disabilities: *perichoresis*, communication, and attitudinal access. Kathryn Porten, technical consultant and disability specialist, describes in her article, "Many Members: One Body," the numerous challenges people with intellectual difficulties (ID) face within ecclesial communities. Disability advocate Pamela Christensen's "Wholeness: Recognizing the *Imago Dei* in Disability," challenges the reader to return to a biblically and theologically grounded definition of human wholeness that will expand the church's understanding and practice of full inclusion of disabled people. Finally, my contribution to this topic, "From Commodity to Community: Lessons and Confessions," narrates my personal pilgrimage in recognizing and repenting from the ways I have participated in the exploitation of disabled people in entertainment, segregated social structures, and even ministerial mistakes.

Each article encourages the reader to seek ways to participate as com-

munity with disabled persons. You will be encouraged to learn appropriate language and terms preferred by your disabled friends, realizing that what is acceptable for one group may not be for another. Together, let us celebrate that God's enriching gift of diversity comes to us in many different forms, colors, bodies, and conditions.

Thanks to all who contributed to making this issue possible. This list begins with all those who willingly shared your stories here; we are extremely grateful for who are you and how you make us more complete in the body of Christ. Thanks also to the several authors and those behind the scenes who encouraged their writing. Thanks to the North Park University Library and Publications Committee and to Develop Leaders, a mission priority of the Covenant Church, for their financial support. Many thanks to the supportive (and patient) Covenant Marketing and Communications team for your work in formatting and publishing this and every other issue. Special recognition to Will Barnett for organizing the included book reviews. Finally, a word of grateful appreciation to Assistant Professor of Old Testament Dr. J. Nathan Clayton for his dedication and service as interim editor of the *Covenant Quarterly* since 2020. Most important, thanks to you, the reader, who will take these words from the page and put them into practice.

With hope in the One who is making us into a new community,

Paul H. de Neui

We Wanna Dance with Somebody: Three Aspects of an Ecclesiology of Disability for the Evangelical Covenant Church

Michael A. Walker, project coordinator, Carleton University's Accessibility Institute, Ottawa, Ontario

From August 2018 to June 2020, I lived in a low-rise apartment building in Albany Park, Chicago, Illinois, near North Park Theological Seminary, where I taught biblical and theological courses related to accessibility and inclusion to undergraduate and graduate students.[1] I taught at North Park as part of a two-year teaching contract through the Louisville Institute.[2] In the fall of 2018, I had spoken to my supervisor about maintaining my mental health during a busy schedule of teaching and committee work; by that time, I realized that I needed to meet people outside my neighborhood in order to really feel rooted in Chicago. Thus, when two of my upstairs neighbors decided to go dancing with their classmates, I asked if I could go along. They accepted me in their group, with the proviso that I become the faculty liaison for their school-based dance club. Because of my neighbors, I met a few people at select dance venues in Chicago's North Side prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and was introduced fulsomely and quickly to the Chicago style

[1] North Park Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Covenant Church is a fascinating place that demands wider exposure. See "North Park Theological Seminary," https://www.northpark.edu/seminary/.

[2] The Louisville Institute is a religious grant-making body based in Louisville Seminary that supports pastors, researchers, and scholars whose work impacts North American religious life. See "Louisville Institute," https://louisville-institute.org/.

of blues dancing, with all its hospitality and laissez-faire.[3]

Allow me to reify my motif of dance by introducing myself. I am a Canadian theologian in his late thirties with spastic cerebral palsy, a neurological condition that affects strength, balance, and motor control. Because I bled from my brain at birth, the right side of my body is shorter, weaker, and less stable than my left, and I possess several nonverbal disabilities. Specifically, I experience constant, low-level spatial disorientation. To put it plainly, I can't always tell which way is up. That is, I cannot tell directions by the sun, as many people can, and I require landmarks to aid my navigation of 3D space. Only when I sing, pray, or perform the Eucharist do I know precisely where I am in space. The rest of the time, I sing, "*Donde estas?*" or "Where?" as the Edge does in U2's latter-day rocker "Vertigo."[4]

Because of my spatial differences, dance has helped me both personally and theologically. Personally, dancing requires that I not drop my partner onto the floor. As I have learned to dance, I have also adapted my diet and weight-training regimen. Dance has also taught me to think on my feet and to be gracious to everyone, even those who think differently from me. My neighbors taught me that "dance etiquette" eschews verbal power relations evident in other aspects of society: when two people finish a dance, one says, "Thank you," and the other replies, "Thank you," rather than "You're welcome," or "Of course." They speak to each other thus because the two parties are equals within the dance.

Using dance as a thematic "hook," this article will assert that the Evangelical Covenant Church (the Covenant) has integrated, and can more fully embody, three ecclesiological aspects of ministry with people with disabilities. Dance is our metaphor because, as I have written elsewhere, dance allows participants to engage in embodied, holistic, and affectively grounded relationship.[5] Indeed, relationships between Christians with able bodies and Christians with disabilities resemble dancing. Each party

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[3] The group with which our dance club was most closely affiliated was Bluetopia, "Chicago's longest-running monthly blues dance." See Bluetopia, "Chicago Bluetopia," https://chicagobluetopia.com/.

[4] See U2, "Vertigo," *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, recorded in Hanover Quay Studios and the South of France, Island Records, 2004, track 1, line 9, compact disc.

[5] For an interpretation of the "dance of difference"—the way in which believers with disabilities embody neurodivergence and diffuse modes of engagement and perception—see Michael A. Walker, *Embodying Community: A Transformative and Sacramental Ecclesiology of Disability* (diss., Toronto: University of Toronto, 2018), 15053, 17982.

performs physical, linguistic, and attitudinal moves to which the other party must respond. This article will contend that worshipers with disabilities "wanna dance with somebody who loves [us.]"[6] Within the social arrangements of that dance, I have experienced great hospitality through the Covenant, which will guide my argument here. My argument will occur in four stages, beginning with a series of definitions.

Defining Disability and Other Concepts

I am a theologian with spastic cerebral palsy. Thus, I am a person with disabilities. Briefly, disability represents both a marker of embodied diversity and a functional limitation on physical and social activity. Because of the ways our bodies and minds are formed, and how they interact with our environments, some human beings cannot engage in activities considered "normal."[7] Some disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, are physical; others, like the autism spectrum, manifest as intellectual difference. Mood disorders, such as anxiety and depression, are emotional disabilities.[8] Some scholars call us "people with disabilities," and some "disabled people." In most venues, I prefer the former designation because it affords us agency; that said, I often have more agency than many people with profound intellectual disabilities, who cannot always advocate for themselves in the same ways that I can.

This auto-ethnographic paper will acknowledge the *medical model of disability* but will affirm and celebrate the *social model*. According to the medical model of disability, people with disabilities require correction and remediation, because their bodies are construed as problematic. By contrast, the social model of disability, which I wholeheartedly embrace, asserts that the bodies of people with disabilities are good, rather than

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6 I cite the late great Whitney Houston, R&B and soul singer. See "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," *Whitney*, Arista, 1987, track 1, compact disc.

7 For one theological definition of disability, see Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 17; see also Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 99.

8 For this incisive and insightful definition, see John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 13–20, 62–67.

problematic.[9] The social model allows scholars of disability to critique social and systemic barriers to the full lives of people with disabilities. For the dance of embodied difference to take place in churches, people of varied abilities must dismantle systemic barriers.

People with disabilities experience embodiment differently in groups that promote *ableism*. Ableism is the systemic and personal oppression of people with disabilities, in favor of people of able body; this definition is related to, but different from, *disablism*. The British nonprofit organization Scope, a charity that campaigns for equality for people with disabilities, states the difference succinctly: "Both terms describe disability discrimination, but the emphasis is different. Disablism emphasises discrimination against disabled people. Ableism emphasises discrimination in favour of non-disabled people."[10] Accordingly, I will clarify that, for Christians with disabilities, freedom from ableism involves not only the *absence* of those oppressive tensions but also the presence of generous ecclesial welcome and opportunity.

Furthermore, people with varied abilities require *access* or *accessibility*. Access is an entryway into God's dignity and joy: this word describes the process of people of diverse abilities sharing their gifts and needs in community. This paper will note three of the many facets of accessibility. The first, which I will call *structural access*, denotes the presence of welcoming and inclusive physical aspects of varied ecclesial environments. The second, *communicative access*, denotes the ways that people with and without disabilities can understand each other in churches. Third and finally, *attitudinal access*, a subset of *affective* or *emotional access*, denotes the positive attitudes or worldviews of Christians of able body, and those with disabilities, that can create the conditions for Christlike ecclesial hospitality and solidarity. All three of these aspects of ecclesial solidarity allow the dance of difference to occur; they will form the fulcrum of this essay, along which my argument will balance and spin. All these major chords will be woven together with a resource from the Ontario College

[9] American sociologist Rod Michalko, who is blind, and his Canadian partner Tanya Titchkosky, who has dyslexia, aptly summarize and critique both the medical and social model of disability. For the medical, see, e.g., Rod Michalko, *The Difference that Disability Makes* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 6–8, 42–47; see also Tanya Titchkosky, *Disability, Self, and Society* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto, 2003), 96–113. For the social, see, e.g., Michalko, *The Difference that Disability Makes*, 47–56, 113–41; see also Titchkosky, *Disability, Self, and Society*, 64–95.

[10] Scope UK, "Disablism and ableism," https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/disablism/.

of Art and Design's Inclusive Design Research Centre, the *Our Doors Are Open Brief Accessibility Checklist*, contained in the *Our Doors Are Open Guide for Accessible Congregations*, because this checklist describes concrete ways in which churches can enter the dance of embodied difference.

A. Sense Memory and Structural Access: Perichoresis and Physical Aspects of an Ecclesiology of Disability in the Covenant and All Churches

I attended a theological college of the Presbyterian Church in Canada for graduate school. That college's chapel, a space well-suited to choral singing, perched atop a solid stone staircase. Needless to say, the stone did not grant everyone access to this sonically resonant space: one of my colleagues at that time used a wheelchair for mobility. My friend wanted to come to chapel with the other students but could not, because the stone steps denied that student structural access to the space; through my friend's persistent self-advocacy, and the compassionate efforts of the faculty, the seminary finally obtained an elevator for the chapel space. Similarly, when I performed an accessibility audit of that space in early 2018, I also noticed that the altar had a similar (though shorter) set of stone steps, which could prevent communicants who use mobility devices from fully presiding over, or assisting in, Holy Communion. Even though I could partake in communion with my colleagues, sometimes while standing in a circle (a liberating practice!), our wheelchair-user friend was excluded. As a person with mobility issues that limit some of my activities, I reflect on these powerful experiences with some frequency.

These experiences contain what some have called *sense memory*. This term means a form of remembrance in which the impression of the initial stimulus remains, and influences the subject, after the stimulus no longer operates.[11] When I think of that chapel in that theological college, or when I think of North Park's own Isaacson Chapel in Chicago, I have similar memories—experiences that reside within my body, even though they are no longer fully present. These memories can be both positive and negative; throughout this text, I will name both kinds, and nuance others' encounters as well. Crucially, *structural access*—inclusive physical aspects of the ecclesial environment—offers Christians of diverse abilities the capacity to turn negative sense memories into positive ones, and to use our bodies in ecclesial spaces.

[11] See, e.g., Max Coltheart, "Iconic Memory and Visual Persistence," in *Perception and Psychophysics* 27 no. 3 (1980), 183–84.

Structural access points to the Trinitarian concept of *perichoresis*, the mutually enmeshed dance of the three persons of the god worshipped by Christians. Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian devoted to peace, describes perichoresis as the divine reality of interdependence and oneness within multiplicity. The Deity contains a singular purpose of creative love amidst their infinite aspects. Volf asserts that the Church can emulate the dance of the Trinity in a social sense, because people in whom God's Spirit dwells can act out the Trinity's loving mutuality. Borrowing from German practical theologian Jürgen Moltmann, Volf argues that *catholicity*, the integrity of the Church, means that each believer includes every other. All that said, Volf reminds his readers that there is no strict human correspondence to the Trinity's dance.[12] Thus, the relationships of people of diverse abilities inside and outside the Covenant, or any church, resemble but are not identical to the triune God's mutual indwelling.

That said, perichoresis offers people of all abilities structural access to the life of the Covenant, and to all churches. Some secular resources might clarify that further: when I worked on the Our Doors Are Open Project—a fascinating venture that offers faith communities in Toronto and across the world a model for inclusion called "inclusive thinking"—our Brief Accessibility Checklist offered multiple strategies for the creation of structural access.[13] These strategies include accessible parking, high-contrast signage (signage that uses bright and contrasting colors), adequate door width, and access to every level of the building. These strategies speak to the physical arrangement of a church's space, in empathetic and engaged ways that point to the dance of the triune God.

Covenant pastoral theologian C. John Weborg, himself a person with disabilities, agrees indirectly with Volf concerning both Volf's claims about perichoresis and his insistence on the church's catholicity. Weborg makes these resonant claims by way of baptism and Holy Communion. First, after listing common theological images associated with baptism—washing or cleansing, rebirth, deliverance or safety, dying or rising, God's ownership, enlightenment or illumination, clothing in a garment, incor-

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12 For this rich portrayal of perichoresis, see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 193–94, 199–200, 208–10.

13 For a description of the whole project, see Our Doors Are Open, "About," *Our Doors Are Open*, https://opendoors.idrc.ocadu.ca/about/, accessed February 20, 2023. For architectural or structural barriers or features of faith communities, see "Our Doors Are Open: Guide for Accessible Congregations," https://opendoors.idrc.ocadu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Our-Doors-Are-Open-Accessible-PDF.pdf, 16.

poration into Christ's body, circumcision, seal, baptism in the sea, and identification by name for service—Weborg insists, "Baptism is never a private act just as one's life is never private...never can a baptized person live into an adapted version of 'what happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas'; it does not and will not."[14] Weborg clarifies Volf's point: baptism, like every rite in the church, involves multiple parties, so it stands to reason that that rite must take into account each person's needs.

More thoroughly than Weborg, Sarah Jean Barton, a theologian and occupational therapist at Duke University, argues that her friends with intellectual disabilities in Episcopalian churches feel a sense of belonging and protection within the baptismal covenant. Barton interviewed many people with disabilities and their allies about baptism; her interviewees indicated that baptism centers them in neighborly, compassionate relationships that feel like family.[15] Thus, if baptism is about secure, familial, and compassionate relations, then one facet of structural access for an ecclesiology of disability within the Covenant, and all churches, is secure attachments. In the ecclesial spaces that we inhabit, believers of varied abilities ought to feel safe and welcome, and that others have their needs and best interests at heart. That security is a critical part of the integrity of the dance of embodied difference in any church.

Weborg further buttresses Volf's ideas about perichoresis when he writes of Holy Communion as a place where wounded people heal each other. Weborg contends that people who come to the Lord's Table are wounded people, and that they wound each other. Weborg insists that worshipers of different abilities ought to let Jesus do the work of healing across time. He asserts, "Participation at the Table is…a place where, over time, the wounded free the wounders but only after they face the wounds that have been inflicted on fellow communicants or the wounds that persons bring from various times and places."[16] Weborg contends that, as believers of diverse abilities embody Christ's woundedness and wholeness, we can heal within ourselves, and go out to heal the waiting world.

The late great sociologist of religion Nancy Eiesland (1964–2009), who taught at the Candler School of Theology, would agree fundamentally with Weborg's nuancing of perichoresis. A wheelchair user by virtue of a lifelong hip condition, Eiesland knew the incivility of exclusion. In

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14 C. John Weborg, *Made Healthy in Ministry for Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 69–72.

15 See Sarah Jean Barton, *Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability and the Practice of Christian Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022), 67–69.

16 Weborg, *Made Healthy*, 81.

her riveting monograph *The Disabled God*, Eiesland recounts her experiences of shame within her own sense memory, as she was barred from full participation in Holy Communion in her Evangelical Lutheran Church of America congregation:

> The bodily practice of receiving the Eucharist in most congregations includes … kneeling at the communion rail. When I initially attended services, I would often be alerted by an usher that I need not go forward for the Eucharist. Instead, I would be offered the sacrament at my seat when everyone else had been served. My presence in the services using either a wheelchair or crutches made problematic the "normal" bodily practice of the Eucharist in the congregation. Yet rather than focusing on the congregation's practices that excluded my body and asking, "How do we alter the bodily practice of the Eucharist in order that this individual and others with disabilities would have full access to the ordinary practices of the church?" the decision makers would center the (unstated) problem on my disabled body, asking, "How should we accommodate this person with a disability in our practice of Eucharist?" Hence receiving the Eucharist was transformed for me from a corporate to a solitary experience; from a sacralization of Christ's broken body to a stigmatization of my disabled body.[17]

Eiesland's explanation of her exclusion from the Lord's Supper, one of the church's formative rituals, fills me with incendiary rage. Metaphor may serve as an outlet for that ire: following our claim that dance is a fitting metaphor for some components of an ecclesiology of disability, Eiesland's exclusion by the elders of her congregation entails an interruption of the perichoretic dance of intimacy that allows believers of all abilities to thrive. By asking the closed question of how they can "accommodate" her in the communion service—a thoroughly embodied ritual that has varied meanings for those who participate in it—Eiesland's colleagues in ministry center their own experience and deny her the

[17] Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 112.

structural access that is so necessary.[18] Eiesland feels isolated and ashamed and calls communion a "ritual of exclusion and degradation."[19] This is the opposite of how believers of all abilities should act with each other.

How can experiences of exclusion and shame like Eiesland's find remedy? I return to the *Brief Accessibility Checklist* from the Our Doors Are Open Project. If as the *Checklist* asserts, "All levels of the building are accessible from the inside," then worshipers of all abilities will have complete, or at least thorough, physical access to every structure within a church building, including a communion rail.[20] Similarly, if churches can be constructed or retrofitted in ways that allow for open-concept furniture, then more communicants can offer each other the access we need to move around—to physically dance together in perichoretic familiarity.

Structural access blends smoothly, though not seamlessly, into what we might call *communicative access* to ecclesial life for people with disabilities. This mode of accessibility integrates empathy and dignity into the ecclesial use of signs and symbols. With dance as my continued motif, I will again dip into the canons of church music and popular music to express the blessings of free-flowing, accessible communication for believers of all abilities.

B. Integrating Access into Idioms: Communication as Crucial to a Christian Ecclesiology of Disability

In another Toronto church community, the pastor understood the need for clear communication: all our service bulletins were printed on colored paper, which reduced the glare from the chapel's fluorescent lights. Every Tuesday morning between September 2012 and July 2018, we used orders of service printed on salmon-, teal-, and robin's-egg-blue paper. That colorful communication permeated the service, for every service was bookended with a pop song. In those six years, I heard and sang much Leonard Cohen, with an occasional dash of Ani DiFranco and Tracy Chapman. My friends in this participatory church practiced what I can safely call *communicative access* to ecclesial life for people of all abilities.

When I say communicative access, I mostly refer to language, signs, and symbols, but I refer generally to the ways that people with and

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[18] For the multivalent ritual meanings of baptism and communion for believers of varied abilities, see Michael A. Walker, "Caring and Covenant: Notes on a Sacramental Ecclesiology of Disability," *Journal of Religion and Disability 23.2* (May 2019), 170–73.

[19] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 113.

[20] "Our Doors Are Open; Guide for Accessible Congregations," 16.

without disabilities can understand each other in churches. How can believers in Covenant churches, and every church, tell stories that use few or no "forty-dollar words" (my lifelong struggle)? How can we print signs that people with low visual acuity can distinguish from other objects? How can we proclaim in our deeds and our discourse that every person, of every kind of ability, is welcome in our communities?

Communicative access to Christian community has two elements; the first is imagination. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this elusive quality in two pertinent ways: imagination is both "the power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses, including remembered objects and situations," and "the mind's creativity and resourcefulness in using and inventing images, analogies, etc."[21] The first definition matters because imagination helps Christians in the Covenant, and every denomination, to find innovative ways to use language and symbol in ways that invite the capacities of people with varied abilities. Likewise, the second definition applies to our inquiry because it points to the *creativity* that is necessary for communication to take place.

The second component of communicative access for Christians of varied abilities is linguistic. Communicative access requires simple language that invites people of all abilities into solidarity, understanding, and joy. Simple, direct language can enliven human imagination by speaking to people's affective parts. Significantly, direct, clear language avoids the intellectual laziness of using disabilities as pejorative metaphors. Thus, in a community that practices communicative access to Christian life, no worshiper will be "blinded by sin," "deaf to God's word," or "crippled by circumstance." Believers need to name things in ways that do not derogate their spiritual siblings with disabilities.

One entry point to direct, clear language is storytelling. From my early childhood, I loved to read and tell stories. In my 1990s elementary school, we had story time where every classmate could share a story he or she had written; my classmates would pay rapt attention when I spoke. My intense imagination lent excitement to mental scenes, and I felt convicted that my stories needed to be told. In my middle age, I still passionately desire to narrate my life; thus, writing about access for my readers gives me great joy.

Theologians and other scholars examine the human need to share, and embody, stories as part of community. For instance, American music therapist and theologian Brett Webb-Mitchell claims that "stories tell

[21] See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., "imagination, n.," https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/91643.

us who we are."[22] Outside the religious establishment, American and Canadian Indigenous novelist Thomas King asserts, "The truth about stories is, they're all we are."[23] Both Webb-Mitchell and King are suggesting that stories can help human beings to transform our actions and our identities. Let me be plain: *imagination can help human beings to change*. I recognize that, as a person with graduate degrees, I can tell a different story from a person with Down Syndrome who has limited verbal capacity. Even so, people with physical and intellectual disabilities require loving communities to help us tell our stories, because stories help people to live out God's radical welcome. Stories offer us evocative visions of Jesus's life and the lives of those who emulate Jesus; they let believers glimpse the life of God at second hand.

Jesus's earthy and direct narratives and his compassionate listening display God's vivid, vivacious openness. Also, when the Lord tells a story—be it about an indiscriminate sower of seeds, a lost coin, a dishonest manager, or a treasure in a field—less is more. Jesus's parables, compact and concise stories that share oblique symbolic connections, portray God's topsy-turvy reign.[24] For instance, in Lk 10:25–37, Jesus illustrates the extravagance of God's mercy to an audience that includes tradespeople, scribes, and lawyers, with a story about a man on the road to Jericho, beaten and left for dead by robbers. The one who saves him from encroaching death and delivers him to safety is neither a priest nor a Levite, but a Samaritan—someone on the margins of Jewish society. Two meanings of this parable are pertinent. First, God's grace can be conveyed to people in need by unlikely sources, and second, God's compassion breaks in from life's periphery.

The parables raise another point: ecclesial narratives about disability need to be authentic if believers with disabilities are to embody the dance of difference. People with physical and intellectual disabilities tell stories that convey God's grace in surprising and indirect ways. Thus, it is not enough that Brett Webb-Mitchell tells the stories of children with disabilities he has loved, like Sal the "hugger" who

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22 Brett Webb-Mitchell, *God Plays Piano, Too: The Spiritual Lives of Disabled Children* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 153.

23 Thomas E. King, *Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (New York: House of Anansi, 2003), 2.

24 For one linkage of Jesus's parables to God's reign, see Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1975), 13–15, 22, 68–71; see also Walter Brueggemann, e.g., "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," *Christian Century* 116, no. 10 (March 1999). Brueggemann argues that Jesus's parables entangle readers and hearers in moral issues to invoke their imaginations.

knows an American Sign Language version of "Jesus Loves Me,"[25] or that Jean Vanier recounts his remembrances of communal joy and belonging in L'Arche and other communities.[26] While it is helpful for our allies to tell our stories, people with disabilities need to tell our own stories too, as uncomfortable as some of those stories may be.

We have asserted that Christian use of communication and story must change to include imagination and narrative to welcome and include people of all abilities. The *Brief Accessibility Checklist* from the Our Doors Are Open Project offers relevant and refreshing suggestions to make that possible. It strongly suggests the thorough use of plain language in faith-based services and gatherings, as well as sign-language interpretation, assistive-listening devices, alternative formats for printed materials (e.g., Braille, electronic devices, or pen and paper), and large-print captions for video transcription.[27] All of these adaptations allow for the flourishing of the imagination in churches inside and outside the Covenant.

Significantly, too, these suggestions can create the conditions for written, spoken, and tactile concepts to touch the heart. Changes to structural and communicative access portend, and point to, the change in *attitude* and *affect* that is necessary for people with disabilities to flourish within the Covenant and other Christian communities. Thus, the final major section of this essay will articulate the tacit speech of the heart, and consequently address the transformation of attitudes that will stimulate a flourishing ecclesiology of disability.

C. A Waltz of Worldviews: Attitudinal Access to Christian Ministry

In the preceding two sections, I have delineated the ways that dance serves as a metaphor for a functional ecclesiology of disability in terms of both structural and communicative modes of access to church life for Christians with varied abilities, inside and outside the Evangelical Covenant Church. First, Christians with and without dis-

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[25] For Sal's touching story (pun intended), see Webb-Mitchell, *God Plays Piano, Too*, 130–31.

[26] I mention Vanier while fully acknowledging the import of the multiple heart-breaking reports on his sexual abuse of women in L'Arche communities (on which I will, for reasons of space, not elaborate here). That said, Vanier's insights on belonging are still relevant, because he invokes belonging as a concept in gentle and insightful ways. See, e.g., Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 324, 315.

[27] "Our Doors Are Open: Guide for Accessible Congregations," https://open-doors.idrc.ocadu.ca/guide-for-accessible-congregation/, 15.

abilities can perform the perichoretic dance of difference most easily when we feel safe and welcome in church spaces and structures. For instance, gently sloping ramps, bright colours, and intuitive way-finding make Christians with disabilities feel welcome, whereas stone steps, low lighting, and uniform, drab-coloured walls may not.

Second, the dance of difference is easy to do when people tell their stories simply, imaginatively, and using inclusive and plain language. Sermons with numerous forty-dollar words and strict beliefs about people's ability to comprehend the baptismal covenant do not usually resonate with many believers with disabilities; by contrast, narratives that begin with smiles and welcome and end with dance, music, and tasty food may be much easier to integrate into the longer story of our journeys of faith. These changes evoke the dance of difference.

These prior modes of access to church life within and without the Covenant apply equally to *attitudinal access*, a subset of what I have elsewhere called *affective access* to divine equity.[28] Attitudinal access entails an examination of the attitudes or worldviews of Christians of able body, and those with disabilities; such an evaluation can create the conditions for Christlike hospitality and radical solidarity in churches. Some attitudes are positive, and some negative.

Able-bodied believers have not always wanted to dance with the difference of disability in authentic ways. Many Christians of able body—the kind that speaker and Christian accessibility advocate Amy Kenny calls "prayerful perpetrators"—claim that disability reflects God's will, is a punishment for sin, is a test of someone's character, or has a deeper meaning or purpose.[29] By contrast, throughout Christian history, many practitioners, healers, and theologians have reflected on and embodied God's love by demonstrating loving-kindness.[30]

My own experience of affective access and its lack is germane here;

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[28] For thoroughgoing definitions of affective access to God's equity, see again Walker, *Embodying Community*, 179–82, 200–204.

[29] For images of "prayerful perpetrators" of ableist discourse, see Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), e.g., 2, 5; for other incomplete explanations of disability as part of God's purpose, see Black, *Healing Homiletic*, 23–31.

[30] Brian Brock and John Swinton survey the entire Christian tradition to draw together strands of reflection with threads of compassion; their exegeses of the patristic era, John Calvin's thought on disability and illness, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life experiences are instructive, because they demonstrate both their subjects' erudition and their empathy. See Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), e.g., 1–37, 216–26, 353–68.

well-meaning believers can say and do hurtful things that do not accord with the compassion Christ commands. On one hand, for example, in summer 2015 at a major intersection in Toronto, a lovely young woman observed that I had trouble walking and offered to pray away my perceived "difficulty." She did so twice without success and left me hurt and confused. I felt as though our short interaction was negative, rather than positive; I often wonder what misguided impulse led her to seek me out, and whether she had reflected on the love of Christ in simply offering others a ministry of presence like that described elsewhere in this article.

On the other hand, I clearly remember that, sometime in 2010, a friend from church asked me if my disability "hurt." I thanked him for his attention, and told him no, because – rather than pain—I most often experience confusion and a lack of sensation. (Naturally, I told my friend a harmless lie—I feel pain constantly, and the intensity of that feeling is a question of degree.) Whatever I do, occasionally my muscles will simply not do what I ask of them. My paralysis makes parts of the dance of friendship difficult for me because I feel anger and sadness at my body's reluctance. That said, when I feel that others accept me, welcome me, or listen to the cries of pain (like this article!), the dance of friendship is much smoother.

In her warm, gentle, and incisive book *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* Catholic disability advocate Jennie Weiss Block recounts one (imaginary) Eucharistic service that welcomes people with disabilities and one that does not. The one that includes and welcomes embodied difference has an usher with Parkinson's disease and a priest with mobility issues.[31] Block's vignette suggests strongly that affective access builds from the structural and communicative access we have examined. When it is shored up by concrete thoroughgoing acts of inclusion, the mode of belonging that comes from the human heart offers believers of all abilities entry into the Trinity's loving dance.

The *Brief Accessibility Checklist* from the Our Doors Are Open Project can offer some concrete guidelines for the empathic and energetic engagement of people with disabilities in Covenant churches, and every denomination. The first four guidelines are most apropos: in communities that practice the dance of difference, first, all community members feel that they have been included "in worship, leadership, and other programs." Second, in such communities, people with disabilities and those without have equal opportunities to lead; third, leaders and vol-

[31] Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 114–15.

unteers know how to engage compassionately with newcomers who are disabled or otherwise vulnerable. Fourth and finally, when accessibility advocacy is the work of an advocate or a committee, a community displays adequate levels of attitudinal access to church life.[32]

These activities display the change of heart that is necessary for people with disabilities to feel included in Covenant churches and other faith communities. Just as Jesus asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51, NRSV) before restoring his sight, church leaders need to ask worshipers with disabilities how welcome they feel in church leadership, in volunteer roles, and in programming. We want to feel that our differences contribute to the good of the community, that our friends and neighbours know how to help us if we need their help, and that we have the ear of a person or group who will defend our dignity.

I have sometimes had that experience of fulsome attitudinal access where I felt wholly welcomed by a church community. One of my Torontonian communities would gather every month for a "Rock Eucharist," a celebration of the Lord's Supper saturated with the music of a particular contemporary artist. In that gathering, I recall both praying corporately on behalf of the community and singing along to Van Morrison and Mavis Staples, hearing fiery preaching book-ended by searing songs by Bob Dylan, and (one wonderful time) dancing in the aisles, with loved ones, to a show-stopping rendition of Bruce Springsteen's "Promised Land." In surreal and small moments infused with the varied modes of access to ecclesial life I have described, this community exemplified the Lord's perichoretic and pathos-driven dance of intimacy.

D. Concluding with Compassion: Dancing with Somebody

In this short article, I have described three aspects of the dizzying dance of intimacy in which believers of varied abilities must engage to live into an ecclesiology of disability, in the Evangelical Covenant Church and every church. First, believers with and without disabilities begin the perichoretic dance of desire with sustained structural accessibility—access to the buildings, furniture, and structure of church life together. Furthermore, believers of diverse abilities create a communicative web empowered by imagination. When we engage empathetically with each other's stories, and use language appropriate to our audiences, believers

[32] For these four marks of attitudinal accessibility, see "Our Doors Are Open: Guide for Accessible Congregations," 14.

of every capacity can forge the bonds of friendship that lead to energized and caring community. Finally, when we make certain that everybody and *every body* feels welcome in a congregation in work, play, and all of life together, believers of diverse capacities can dance joyfully with each other, and offer cacophonous communal praise to our Maker.

Many Members: One Body

Kathryn Porten, technical consultant

> As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable (1 Cor 12:20–22, NRSV).

The Apostle Paul clearly emphasizes that every member of the body of Christ is needed to build kingdom churches, including those who may appear to be the weakest. The question is, do we genuinely believe this to be true? In his book *Living Gently in a Violent World*, the late Catholic priest and founder of L'Arche[1] Jean Vanier asks us to consider whether anyone truly believes this. He stresses that God's message in 1 Cor 12:22 is at the "heart of faith" of what it means to be the church.[2] The church, however, often excludes from the heart of the body of Christ

[1] Jean Vanier, Founder of L'Arche: https://www.larcheusa.org/who-we-are/jean-vanier/.

[2] Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 74. "Jesus came to create a body. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, compares the human body to the body of Christ, and he says that those parts of the body that are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the body. In other words, people who are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the church. I have never seen this as the first line of a book on ecclesiology. Who really believes it? But this is the heart of faith, of what it means to be the church."

those whom our culture perceives as weaker.[3] In 2007, late Covenant pastor and disability advocate Jim Swanson preached the following in a sermon at North Park Theological Seminary.

> People with a variety of disabilities are lost to much of the Church. Far off, cast off, exiled. They are lost to the worship life of the Church. They are lost to the fellowship life of the Church. They are lost to boards and committees. And lost to the roster of the ordained and commissioned….God knows where they are, and to God, the Church is incomplete until all of us are found and placed together in community. Without this completeness valuable gifts are also lost to the fellowship.[4]

Spending time with people considered cognitively challenged is often thought to be too frustrating. We find it easy to ignore them and limit our involvement to making sure someone else is caring for their basic needs. As Swanson points out, this leads to them being lost to the church. In this, everyone loses. Hans Reinders, professor of ethics and mental disabilities explains, "What ultimately prevents people with intellectual disabilities, from full participation in our society is the fact that they are generally not seen as people we want to be present in our lives….They are rarely chosen as friends."[5]

When teaching his students how to build a healthy Christian community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned that "the exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from a Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ."[6] Bonhoeffer continues later in this text, "In Christian community, everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain….The elimination

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[3] Based on year 2018 data from the Center for Disease Control, Ryan Faulk of the organization Joni and Friends, writes: "Multiple studies show that, all things being equal, people with disabilities are less likely than their peers to attend church even once a month. Of the 61 million American adults living with some sort of disability, there are about 2.25 million who—statistically speaking—should be attending church, but don't." https://www.joniandfriends.org/the-largest-unreached-people-group-youve-never-heard-of, https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html.

[4] Jim Swanson, "Un-disabling the Church" (Sermon, chapel, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, 2007). Swanson was a strong advocate for services to people with disabilities.

[5] Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 142.

[6] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 38.

of the weak is the death of fellowship."[7] God embraces weakness and integrates it into his plan for creation, encouraging believers to do the same. God's provision of strength demonstrated through human weakness is vividly portrayed through stories in scripture, such as a young David fighting the giant Goliath, Mephibosheth receiving honor though he was physically vulnerable, and Moses confronting Pharaoh in spite of his speech impediment. Through these stories, believers learn that vulnerability is not something to fear, loathe, or reject. It is not from God that believers learn a distaste for those who are weak or vulnerable. Cultural values and a perceived need to be in control have led Christians to accept this false standard as truth.

Unfortunately, instead of heeding these warnings from scripture and scholars, the church often submits to the appetites of Western culture—a culture that values strength over weakness and excess over moderation. As a result, we become distracted from building God's kingdom by a culture that promotes the achievement of personal goals through individual strengths and abilities. Systematic theologian Jürgen Moltmann clarifies the loss we incur when we allow this to be our truth:

> The one-sided orientation toward accomplishment and success makes us unjust and inhuman in our dealings with others. We exclude the sick, the handicapped, the unaccomplished, and the unsuccessful from public life…it does give privileges to the healthy and capable over the retarded and the weak. Instead of an open and vulnerable society, we have a closed and unassailable society with apathetic structures. The living, open, vulnerable life is poured into steel and concrete. That is the modern death called apathy: life without suffering [*Leiden*], life without passionate feeling [*Leidenschaft*].[8]

Living an "open and vulnerable life" is one of the essential qualities people with intellectual disabilities (ID) bring to the community. Our exclusion of people with ID is one of the "valuable gifts lost to fellowship." The idea that people who appear weaker can actually thrive in a culture that devalues them is compelling. Being in life-giving relationships with people with ID demonstrates, in real-time, the truth of 2 Cor 12:9–10:

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7 Bonhoeffer, 94.

8 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle* (Kindle Locations, 131-135). Kindle Edition.

"When I am weak, then I am strong."[9] We need to embrace vulnerability to understand and integrate the beauty of this scripture. We need to be in relationships with people with ID to receive the blessing God has prepared for us. Instead of embracing these truths, we turn away.

The problem rests not with people who have ID but with the church that lacks awareness of each church member's value as an image-bearer of God. Beth Felker Jones submits, "To know what it means to be human; we must know what it means to be created in the 'image of God.'"[10] Author and theologian Jim Bruckner explains that first, the image of God must be understood as descriptive of every human being. All people are made in the image of God and "imbued with dignity, deserving of respect and of love as an image bearer of God." Second, everyone has a choice to "bear God's image as it was intended, that is, to be a blessing to others and give honor to its Source."[11] Bruckner adds a critical but often neglected detail concerning this image: just as it is given to each person, it is given in relationship with God. According to the Christian scriptures, all of humanity shares this special connection with God. John Kilner adds that this is the standard God intended for Christians to use for how we live and mature in our faith.[12] Tom Reynolds corroborates Bruckner's and Kilner's assertions, adding that human wholeness is only possible in relationship.[13] Being made in God's image "is the innate dignity of being human in relation to the creator."[14] Therefore, Christians understand that the image of God is held as inalienable by all humans, that it upholds God's high value of relationship, and that to be completely whole, every human must be seen through this lens. Hans Reinders writes that this holds specific importance for people with disabilities because

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9 2 Cor 12:9–10, NRSV, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

10 Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 98.

11 James Bruckner, *Healthy Human Life: A Biblical Witness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 9.

12 John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2015), 140–141, 143, Kindle.

13 Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 118. "Only in relationship is human wholeness possible, a wholeness that comes not despite but through disability and vulnerability."

14 Bruckner, *Healthy Human Life*, 8.

this is how humans were created to live.[15] God has created every human being in the Divine image, offering us relationship with him through membership in his church.

The church lacks awareness of its responsibility to provide an environment that honors and values each member of the body of Christ. Devaluing any member of the body of Christ has serious consequences. Theology of disability author and practitioner Amos Yong writes, "The holiness of God is itself at stake in this regard: the ongoing subjugation of innocent people with disabilities by the non-disabled world perpetuates the profanity of that world and desecrates the land, the people, and, finally, even God."[16]

Moral theologian Brian Brock explains the experience of people with ID and the church as one where people with ID are "buffeted daily by disparaging comments, the stares of strangers, and the shrinking of their social worlds as those around them refuse to enter into meaningful friendships."[17] Brock continues by stating that God, through the crucified Christ, promised to fight against this unholy experience. Through God's mercy, the inhospitable community will be broken open. Yong agrees, stating, "They [intellectually disabled] are certainly seen more as encumbrances than as viable members of ecclesial communities."[18] Often families who have members with ID will stop worshiping in the Christian community or find care for their disabled loved one while they go to church without them.

The Christian church has been lagging behind government, medical, and academic institutions in integrating people with disabilities, specifically, for our conversation, people with ID. While, as Christians, we believe that all human beings are made in God's image, Western culture holds to a more ableist point of view. The fact is that believers emulate Western culture more thoroughly than we may think, which stands in direct conflict with how God created the church to operate. One major problem is that believers live in a society that values human beings contrary to God's intentions or design. Historian of Anabaptism Donald Kraybill explains the problem this creates for us. "The values and norms of our society become so deeply ingrained in our mind that

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15 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 143.

16 Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 45.

17 Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 225.

18 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 13.

it is difficult to imagine alternatives."[19] However, this is just where the church is fortunate. Kraybill explains that a primary reason for the incarnation of Jesus Christ was to set us straight in the kingdom's way. Jesus preached that the old ways, values, and assumptions need to be upended. He taught us a new way, a new kingdom order. As a result, we received a whole new structure with Jesus. "The upside-down lens sharpens the distinction between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of the world."[20]

In order to see humanity beyond the restrictive values of our culture, twenty-first century believers can use Kraybill's upside-down lens analogy to align our definition and valuation of humanity with God's original intention. This will take effort from everyone. Our cultural milieu keeps us steeped in an ableist society; hard work is needed to become aware of our unconscious bias and its effects on our communities. Theologian of disability Hans Reinders suggests that our problem is less about "inclusion" than about the effects of ableism. "The real problem is not that we need a concept of human nature that includes persons with intellectual disabilities; the real problem is that our ableist culture is informed by views that are oppressive to people with disabilities."[21]

So where do we start to correct this situation in the church? We start by seeking God's direction. We often forget that the church must be divinely created, built on spiritual values and goals, not human desires and needs.[22] When motivated by human love we operate out of a desire that seeks self-fulfillment. When we are motivated by spiritual love via the Holy Spirit, we operate out of Christ's desires. The church's ability to thrive depends on how seriously the community understands this. Humankind cannot, through its own power, create unity in a community. Jesus makes clear in his farewell discourse in John that unity originates from God and is modeled in and through Jesus Christ (Jn 17:20–23). Jesus Christ must be the mediator in our relationships. Referencing this same scripture, Felker Jones explains the importance of unity to the body of Christ. She reminds us that the church's role is to share the gospel with the world

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19 Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press 2018), 261, Kindle.

20 Kraybill, 261.

21 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 12.

22 "Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men." Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.

and that unity in the body of Christ is part of the Christian witness.[23]

Nurturing and developing our Christian community in this way creates the spiritual depth needed for the community to stand firm. If we maintain this focus, Bonhoeffer assures us that everything else between us will recede. Our discomfort at another's disability or fear of not communicating well with those not "like" us will be healed and transformed. Jesus Christ and God's will become the essential bond of the community. This is how God expected the body of Christ to live.[24] Throughout scripture, God expresses the importance of unity for believers, vertically with the Trinity and horizontally within the Christian community.[25] As a living organic entity, the church is not made up of a number of individuals but rather a body that grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its life-giving work.[26] First Corinthians 12:26 states, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (NRSV). Richard Rohr reminds Christians that they exist as part of a whole and not independently, adding, "An autonomous Christian is as impossible as an independent arm or leg."[27] Inherent in the many members of the church is a glorious diversity that purposefully exists in God's creation.[28] God created humanity with many different gifts, strengths, weaknesses, and challenges to be united and part of the body of Christ.

> As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it. But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a *part* of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own (1 Cor 12:24b–26, MSG).

Assuring the full inclusion of everyone who comes to our church can be challenging for several reasons. Many factors contribute to the difficulty people with ID face in ecclesial communities. Stigmatizing

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23 Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine*, 198–200.
24 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 26.
25 Ps 133:1; Jn 17:23; 1 Cor 1:10; Eph 4:11–13; Col 3:13–14.
26 Eph 4:16.
27 Richard Rohr, "The Body of Christ," *The Center for Action and Contemplation*, May 19, 2017, https://cac.org/the-body-of-christ-2017-05-19/.
28 Rom 12:4–5.

and discriminating against people with ID leads to social isolation and exclusion, and potentially to a lack of social skills and acumen. People with ID can have difficulty understanding social cues and norms not only because of their disability but also because they are not exposed to social interactions necessary for building these abilities. Their relationships are often limited to family and institutional workers. Studies have shown that creating inclusive environments helps mitigate isolation's impacts.

When SWDs[29] are taught in the general education context with their peers, they are provided positive social and behavioral role models so they can learn social and behavioral skills that occur in a natural setting. This promotes both explicit and incidental learning, which has been shown to increase social skills and positive behavior.[30]

Isn't non-inclusion one of the cultural norms Jesus came to upend? Early in his ministry Jesus challenged the social boundaries that people had constructed. Consider the group of individuals he chose as his most intimate group of followers. He selected both men and women, fisherman and tax collector, skeptic and zealot, sinner and righteous Jew. He socialized with members of the Sanhedrin and people who did not follow a system of faith. He reached out and touched people labeled as unclean and embraced those caught up in sexual sin. Jesus confronted not only the social norms of the time but also Jewish law. One obvious lesson we learn from this pattern in Jesus's ministry is to value and love our neighbor.

One example of the difficulty of integrating people with disabilities into mainstream cultures was experienced through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In 1990, the ADA became law in the United States.[31] Practical theologian Jennie Weiss Block, a strong supporter of this legislation, explains that while this law strove to legislate inclusion for people with disabilities, it rapidly became clear that the government could not mandate changes in people's attitudes. Her experience informs

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29 Students with Disabilities (SWD).

30 Deborah Taub and Megan Foster, "Inclusion and Intellectual Disabilities: A Cross Cultural Review of Descriptions," *The International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education* (IEJEE) 12, no. 3 (Jan 2020): 275–281.

31 "An Overview of the Americans with Disabilities Act," ADA National Network, accessed February 10, 2020, https://adata.org/factsheet/ADA-overview. "The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990. The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The ADA is divided into five titles (or sections) that relate to different areas of public life."

her that laws and programs are not enough. Personal relationships are imperative to the success of healthy and sustainable integration and full inclusion of all members of the body of Christ. "Liberation and real access to the community will only be realized through personal relationships that develop into genuine friendships. Without true friendships, disabled persons will enjoy the new opportunities created by their equal rights, most likely as 'strangers in a strange land.'"[32] Block believes that one of Christian's highest callings is to friendship.

In agreement with Block, Reinders adds that legal rights are incapable of building the intimacy needed to produce the essential sense of belonging. "Put simply, disability rights are not going to make me your friend."[33] The ADA has successfully opened doors and provided opportunities for physical accessibility through the removal of material barriers. However, some supporters of disability rights feel that the changes imposed by the ADA law have had a negative effect. By making some buildings physically accessible, society has deluded the general public into thinking nothing more is needed for the inclusion of people with disabilities. Since people with disabilities can enter church buildings and other public spaces, no further change is necessary.

Therefore, the church's initial question is whether physical accessibility is sufficient when welcoming people with disabilities into the community. More to the point, how can believers of able body befriend and support believers with disabilities, such that everybody gets part of what they need to flourish? Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong points out the flaw in assuming only physical and sensory issues must be addressed for full inclusion. Being hospitable and welcoming is as important as physical accessibility. As the church discerns appropriate Christian hospitality, it needs to determine what changes are fitting to welcome people with disabilities into the church. An attitude that expresses honor and respect is vital for including people with disabilities lest they be objectified as people needing charitable care rather than valued as equal members. Yong admits that while it is often the case that people with disabilities do need care, "the goal must be the full inclusion and edification of others."[34] Able-bodied Christians must not be under the "illusion that interpersonal change is less important than infrastructural improvement."[35]

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32 Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 158.

33 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 43.

34 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 79.

35 Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 1.

Able-bodied people must stop seeing difference as a deficit and become more comfortable with diversity. Nancy Eiesland, in her theology of the disabled God, insists that the church must find new ways to interpret disability. "The historical moment of remembrance is embodied in Jesus Christ, the disabled God, present in resurrection and in the church and broken anew at each eucharistic reenactment. The symbol of Jesus Christ, the disabled God, is both gift and enigma, enabling a two-way access through his broken body."[36]

Through the church, there is hope. Christian communities must lead the way in removing barriers that block full inclusion for people with disabilities by adjusting their narrow definition of what is currently considered normative for human beings in the church. According to Reynolds, the definition of normalcy Christians generally employ has a "narrowing effect that is dehumanizing and disabling, not only disconnecting persons from the nourishing fulcrum of dependent relationships with others but also reducing persons to their consumptive and productive capacity."[37] To transform narrow attitudes on acceptable behavior and abilities, members of the church must examine how they value the divinely created spiritual body of Christ.

Reinders offers that the issue is simple. Friendship is a critical element of God's desire with and for creation. God chooses us as friends, and the expectation is that we will do the same within our communities. As a reflection of the *imago Dei*, every human being is worthy of being called a friend. "We need friendship if we are to flourish as human beings. The theological justification for this claim is that friendship with our fellow creatures is our vocation. This is what we are created for."[38]

The way of being together in a community needs adjustment as well. In the human self-focused way of life, Christians' approach to each other can be politely cold and, sometimes, off-putting. Succumbing to society's norms of appropriate social behavior, members of Christian communities often keep each other at arm's length. By contrast, God's way is to show each other love and compassion, creating communities with hospitality. Covenant pastor and theologian Donald Frisk reminds us that we are together with God in the act of creating loving communities: "One of the implications of being in the image of God is that we are called to

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36 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 23.
37 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 98.
38 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 162.

be co-workers with him."[39] Able-bodied Christians can offer believers with disabilities, particularly those with profound disabilities, something missing in most of their relationships. The able-bodied believer can offer the honor of being chosen as a friend.[40] C.S. Lewis, twentieth-century Anglican writer and lay theologian, asserts:

> A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christian friends, "Ye have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another." The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others.[41]

Being in mutually respectful relationships, regardless of abilities, could lead non-intellectually disabled believers to understand the truth of the scripture that the weak are essential to the body of Christ. Brock suggests that offering friendship could be the beginning of building a redeemed human community. Suppose Christians understood that all believers are in need and are in the recipient's role? In that case, their eyes could open to the similarities; the differences could fade.[42] In community, the Holy Spirit is given the space and the opportunity to work through each member to mature each other's faith and build up the community.

An excellent, free resource to help churches evaluate their communities' responsiveness to people with disabilities is the Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability, developed through collaboration with many advocacy groups.[43]

One might wonder what would happen if the church turned to God and truly welcomed intellectually disabled people into the body of Christ despite all their differences. Yong wonders, "What would happen if the public discovered that church communities were creating inclusive educational and liturgical environments because they valued the presence of

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39 Donald C. Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations: This We Believe* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 55.

40 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 5.

41 C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960, reissue ed. HarperOne, 2017), 144, Kindle.

42 Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 203.

43 "Five Stages: The Journey of Disability Attitudes," ELIM Christian Services and Dan Vander Plaat, 2014. https://www.wheaton.edu/wheaton-center-for-faith-and-disability/disability-foundations/the-5-stages/.

children and people with intellectual disabilities?"[44] The church's witness to the world is a critical point to notice. Christians' responsibility is not only to the church but to the whole of creation.

[44] Yong, *The Bible, Disability*, and the Church, 112.

Wholeness: Recognizing the Imago Dei in Disability

Pamela Christensen, disability advocate, Seattle, WA

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.

From Commodification to Community: Lessons and Confessions

Paul H. de Neui, professor of missiology and intercultural studies, North Park Theological Seminary

In the United States we are part of an entrepreneurial culture that loves to commodify. This trend remains a major barrier in our ability to form genuine community.[1] Commodification can be defined as, "the process of converting human, social, or cultural value into market value, applied to goods, services, ideas, and other forms and products of human creativity that do not initially possess a market value."[2] What the definition subtly alludes to is our country's historic pattern of commodifying people through all forms of marginalization be it color, race, creed, age, gender, religion, or ability. Because we commodify one another we move farther apart and farther away from the concept of community.

One sector of our society that has frequently been commodified throughout our history is that of the disabled. Because other avenues of integration into society have often been closed to them, disabled people have been denied opportunities, exploited, and conveniently ignored. Judith Heumann, the late disability activist, and John Wodatch wrote:

> People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the United States, but for the most part, we remain invisible. We represent about 20 percent of the population. We live in every state and in every community; we are members of all social and racial and ethnic classes; we are present in most families. But we are still often subject to the same unthinking responses to emerging problems that ignore the needs, issues,

1 Other countries commodify people as well. This article is primarily written for the temporarily-abled United States Christian audience.

2 "Commodification." Riches Resources, November 27, 2014, https://resources.riches-project.eu/glossary/commodification.

> or concerns of disabled persons. In most cases, we remain an afterthought.[3]

The many ways our culture commodifies the disabled are also often invisible to the beneficiaries for whom those structural systems were designed, but certainly not invisible to those living with disabilities! Reading about the amazing legacy of advocacy pioneers such as Judy Heumann has caused me to reflect on my own complicity. Disabled persons have deeply shaped me and continue to impact my life. Yet for the most part, I have failed to see how important the aspect of disability as part of the personhood of these individuals and groups has been to me and to my sense of community. I don't believe I am alone in this. As someone on the journey of discovery, I share how I am beginning to recognize my participation in the commodification of the disabled in the following three areas: entertainment, social segregation, and the misuse of Christian ministry.

Commodifying the Disabled as Entertainment

In Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, entertainment is not listed.[4] However, through watching others we reinforce our personal sense of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Through the process of being entertained we achieve a sense that these higher needs are being addressed at least temporarily. Disabled people have been used in this way in the entertainment industry for generations. The legacy of commodification of the disabled to fascinate and entertain has a long and shameful history in the United States and elsewhere. Paralleling the Age of Industrialization, society's ever-present need for diversion became an economic industry of its own and remains so today. Between 1840 and 1940, physically disabled persons were commodified into objects in what disability justice scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson, calls "the culture of American freak shows."

> Physically disabled bodies that qualified as prodigies—the conjoined twins, the spectacularly deformed, the hirsute, the horned, the gigantic, and the scaled—were always presented by priests, greedy or desperate parents, agents, philosophers,

[3] Judith Heumann and John Wodatch, "We're 20 Percent of America, and We're Still Invisible," *New York Times*, July 26, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/07/26/opinion/Americans-with-disabilities-act.html.

[4] Elizabeth Hopper, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," *Thought Co*., Feb 24, 2020, https://www.thoughtco.com/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-4582571 .

> scientists, showmen, and doctors. Consequently, the concerns and careers of these mediators determined the narratives and the fates of these unique people. Indeed, extraordinary bodies have been so compelling—so valuable—as bodies throughout human history that whether they were alive or dead had little consequence. If live exhibition was enhanced by animation and performance, the display of a dead prodigy embalmed as a spectacle, pickled as a specimen, or textualized as an anatomical drawing derived from dissection was equally profitable, and often more readable and manipulable. Freaks and prodigies were solely bodies, without the humanity social structures confer upon more ordinary people.[5]

Stripped of their humanity, the disabled were displayed as "other than" in order to establish social standards of beauty, gender, and civilization.[6] Disabled bodies, living and dead, became commodities that held cultural fascination and market value. Any concept that these objectified people were part of our community was removed to reinforce "our" sense of belonging to a so-called "normative" society.

As scientific inquiry, medical advances, and legislative control began to debunk the myths of the prodigies, and uncover the inhuman treatment of the disabled, freak shows began to lose their appeal.[7] Most would consider such demeaning exploitations as tasteless and repulsive today. The legacy, however, remains. Physical determinants were used as justification for familiar concepts still very much in use, such as "race," "ethnicity," and "disability."[8] At the same time as the demise of the American freak show, US culture found other ways to commodify those living with differences to entertain the masses and still make money. Several examples can be found in the world of sports, music, and live theater; for this discussion I focus on the screen sector of the entertainment industry, namely film and television.

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5 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 56–57.

6 Thomson, 55–56.

7 I would like to say that Christian influence impacted the demise of the freak show in America in the same way that history tells us that the early church brought an end to dehumanizing gladiatorial entertainment, but I have failed to find that in my research. If early Christians were anything like we are today, my suspicion is that most Christians of that era who went to fairs, exhibitions, or the theater would have bought tickets to freak shows along with everyone else.

8 Thomson, 61.

Characters on the screen who demonstrate their victory in, over, or through some physical, intellectual, or social disability strike that familiar chord of self-actualization. To some degree, everyone can identify with feelings of unacceptance for who we are. When the struggling disabled protagonist achieves affirmation (cue great applause), our cultural preoccupation with personal recognition is satiated, at least momentarily. It becomes our story, and tickets sell. Disabled heroes in the entertainment world do this well for us through three popular tropes: the magicure, the sacrificed savior, and the super savant.

The "magicure" relies upon the marketable metaphor that superpowers sell. Popular culture teaches us we all have at least one superpower—we just have to find it! In film, some of our favorite disabled heroes demonstrate this discovery through the magicure. Sometimes the disability disappears with the magicure such as in the case of the disqualified underweight asthmatic youth with high blood pressure who with one injection of Super Soldier Serum becomes the brawny Captain America. In other cases, the magicure brings on the superpower *because* of the disability such as in the development of Daredevil,[9] who when blinded by radioactive ooze, acquires a sixth sense that empowers him to learn ninjitsu and fight crime. In the magicure meme, the superpower is what gives the disabled person identity and status but with it comes a host of other internal crises which add to the appeal of the hero who still shows his or her human side.

The theme of the magicure for the disabled to entertain us is not new. Earlier versions of such acts of miraculous interventions were often portrayed as against the will of God and brought about horrific results such as that created by Dr. Frankenstein.[10] Was his "monster" disabled or simply a commodification of the damning results when we try to play God? What about the case of the failed attempts of Dr. Jekyll to use his magicure tincture to control his evil side, better known as Mr. Hyde?[11] Was his failure a frightening revelation that all of us have disabilities we wish to disguise, but the process of doing so can only bring us disaster?

Modern interpretations forsook such menacing theological meanderings in the magicure. In the bright light of modernity, we were assured that no matter the disability, "we have the technology, we can rebuild him" and

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9 The character of Daredevil was produced by Marvel Television in association with ABC Studios in 2015.

10 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2018) First published 1818.

11 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Kingsport: Readers Library Classics, 2022) First published 1886.

thus produced the Six Million Dollar Man. Shortly thereafter, creative screenwriters re-enacted creation and brought along his Eve in the form of the Bionic Woman whom he marries in the final season.[12] Note that in this case, the two magically cured are conveniently paired off together, carefully commodified to avoid suggesting that normative community would accept an integrated couple wherein one member is disabled and the other is not.

Following closely on the heels of the magicure are the "sacrificed saviors," a popular facet of North American films. Disabled protagonists initially introduced by their struggles with society, ultimately fulfill their destiny through some heroic act that saves others (without, unhappily, saving themselves). Kevin "Freak" Dillon in the 1998 film *The Mighty* is a popular example in which his heroic acts finally result in his personal fulfillment and (sadly) his death.[13] Following market trends that same year (an indication of how commodification can be organized by the industry), a similar motif was popularized in the movie *Simon Birch*, based on the John Irving novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*:

> Simon Birch: Does God have a plan for us?
>
> Rev. Russell: I like to think he does.
>
> Simon Birch: Me too. I think God made me the way I am for a reason.
>
> Rev. Russell: Well, I'm glad that, um, that your faith, uh, helps you deal with your, um...you know, your, your condition.
>
> Simon Birch: That's not what I mean. I think I'm God's instrument—that he's gonna use me to carry out his plan.[14]

In the end, the disabled person often makes the ultimate sacrifice for a greater cause, thus fulfilling his or her final destiny. In film, the most popular of these tropes follows the formula: disabled character = savior

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12 "Bionic Ever After." *The Bionic Wiki*. https://bionic.fandom.com/wiki/Bionic_Ever_After%3F#:~:text=First%20broadcast%20in%201994%2C%20Bionic,Steve%20Austin%20and%20Jaime%20Sommers.

13 *The Mighty*, directed by Peter Chelsom, Miramax Films, 1998.

14 *Simon Birch*, directed by Mark Steven Johnson, Hollywood Pictures, 1998.

= death.[15] The savior in this case does not resurrect, and the resulting impact of the heroic act by the disabled on formative community is reduced to warm and pleasant memories. Since the disabled is no more, we can move on with life as it should normally be.

From the unattainable magicure and the dying savior motif, screenwriters and producers have commodified disability in another creative way that I label "the super savant." This superpower actually requires that bodily and social disabilities remain evident, but the intellect amazes everyone. Note the plethora of screen characters on the autism spectrum where demonstrations of "savant" ability saves the situation, often at the cost of being commodified. In the movie *Rain Man*[16] the self-centered younger brother, Charlie Babbitt (Tom Cruise), comes to recognize his own inner failings when he meets his autistic savant brother, Raymond (Dustin Hoffman), after using him for selfish purposes.[17] Similarly, true stories such as the biographical film *Temple Grandin*[18] amaze and inspire, while at the same time making plenty of money for their producers. For six seasons of *The Good Doctor*, Freddie Highmore has played the role of an autistic surgeon who could visualize the pages of every medical textbook he ever read, thereby bringing about timely interventions.[19] More recently, Netflix is streaming the Korean production *Extraordinary Attorney Wu* where the talented Park Eun-Bin plays an autistic savant lawyer who similarly flips through law manuals in her head, able to recall what no one else can to win the case, but with growing self-awareness of her limitations (and the help of whales!)[20] Audiences have shown appreciation for the portrayal of Christ's disciple Matthew (Paras Patel) in the biblical series called *The Chosen*. Matthew is shown as a character with Asberger's Syndrome and a savant with

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15 Katrina Arndt, Julia M. White, and Andrea Chervenak, "'Gotta Go Now': Rethinking the Use of The Mighty and Simon Birch in the Middle School Classroom," *Autism and the Concept of Neurodiversity*, 30 no. 1 (2010). https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1014/1227.

16 *Rain Man*, directed by Barry Levinson, MGM/UA Communications Co., 1988.

17 Raymond doesn't die in the film but is institutionalized in the end after "saving" his now-redeemed brother. While the relationship with his brother improves, he never integrates into the community.

18 *Temple Grandin*, directed by Mick Jackson. Ruby Films, Gerson Saines Production, 2010.

19 *The Good Doctor* (TV), directed by David Shore, Shore Z Productions, 2017–present.

20 *Extraordinary Attorney Wu*, directed by Lee Joo-Ho, KT Studio Genie, 2022.

numerical ability.[21] Even with these extraordinary demonstrations of savant superpowers, all the above demonstrate their ongoing struggle as disabled people to become part of their communities in meaningful ways. Acceptance and a sense of belonging for these characters remain elusive.

Moving from acting to employment, the film industry increasingly features people with disabilities in roles portraying someone with their actual condition. Disabled actors who embody various challenges are now taking roles that previously the temporarily able-bodied used to play. These portrayals include all aspects of humanity including addictions, athleticism, aspirations, sexuality, emotional stability, economic insight and struggle, intellectual prowess, and even murderous intent. Many include a character with Down Syndrome: of recent note are Daniel Laurie (*Call the Midwife*, 2017 to present), Zack Gottsagen (*Peanut Butter Falcon*, 2019), and Academy Award winner James Martin (*An Irish Goodbye*, 2023).[22] Jordan Walker Ross, an actor with cerebral palsy and severe scoliosis, was cast as Little James in The Chosen. The writers interpreted this character as a disciple with a severe limp that Jesus intentionally does not heal.[23] In another entertainment industry, Victoria's Secret hired Sofía Jirau as their first model with Down Syndrome in 2022.[24]

Entertainment is a potent shaper of cultural worldview. Most Americans today will remember movie lyrics word for word but have difficulty remembering what they have read. Film shapes our stereotypes and the way we view one another as "community" or as "other." Educators and disability activists Katrina Arndt, Julia M. White, and Andrea Chervenak write:

> Regardless of the accuracy of its portrayal of disability characteristics, film functions as a major information source on the nature of disabilities….Since audiences are consumers of movies, not only are the representations in these movies reflections of societal values, but they are also "politically

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21 Kevin Keating, "Matthew in The Chosen (Adapting Biblical Characters)," *The Bible Artist*, June 6, 2020. https://www.thebibleartist.com/post/matthew-in-the-chosen-adapting-bible-characters .

22 "Oscars 2023: An Irish Goodbye wins best short film Oscar," *BBC News*, March 13, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-64903140.

23 Jordan Walker Ross, "What's Your Limp?" https://www.jordanwalkerross.com/.

24 Deepa Shivaram, "Victoria's Secret features its first model with Down syndrome," *NPR National*, February 17, 2022. https://www.npr.org/2022/02/17/1081444040/victoria-secret-down-syndrome-model .

> charged commodities that movie makers are asking audiences to buy." Thus, audiences not only buy the tickets to watch the film, they may also buy the representations and the values associated with them.[25]

For much of its history, the entertainment world's commodification of people living with disabilities has not shaped our culture into a more compassionate community but rather continues to contribute to the fact that this is the largest marginalized group in the world. One in four people in the world live with some kind of disability. A very small minority of them will get a call from Hollywood—much less a job with living wages—despite equivalent education.[26]

I personally enjoy a good redemptive story, but I also recognize that portrayals of people with disabilities by the entertainment industry do primarily that: entertain me. Any feelings of enlightenment and cohesive unity are temporary and unreal. Watching films together lends a sense of existential *communitas* as if the struggle on the screen is mine. We feel we have experienced this struggle together and exit feeling empowered, successful, and affirmed. Watching a show about a disabled hero can be a liminal experience, but its impact is far from transformative. It may reinforce or re-engender certain positive emotions, but those will soon pass. M. Scott Peck labels this pseudo-community, only the first step in the more arduous journey toward true community building.[27] Entertainment is not wrong. The danger lies in a false sense of having achieved oneness or (to use the *mujerista* term) "kin-dom"[28] when we have merely mollified our minds to think that we have been through it together and we're good now. Those brief voyeuristic moments might make us feel better about ourselves and our society, but entertainment fails to inspire tangible action, like a dedication to advocacy or a growing desire to reach out and learn from the disabled we actually meet, such

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[25] Arndt, White, and Chervenak, "Gotta Go Now."

[26] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics–2022," *News Release*, February 23, 2023. Also refer to Andrea Dobynes Wagner's story as told by Deborah Jian Lee, "My Disability Is My Superpower. If Only Employers Could See It That Way," *Elle*, June 24, 2021. https://www.elle.com/life-love/a36688889/my-disability-is-my-superpower-if-only-employers-could-see-it-that-way/.

[27] M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) p. 86.

[28] Cuban-American theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz (1943-2012) popularized this term in her work. *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

that we can build community together. Without realizing it, we have bought into a certain level of commodification.

Commodifying the Disabled through Segregation

Fear can also cause us to commodify and reinforce our tendency to otherize the disabled. Fear is one way of filling the gap produced by ignorance. This was certainly the case in my growing years. Physical characteristics, mental abilities, communication levels—actually, anything different from what we know—can be frightening, causing us to question our personal level of "normalcy." This brings to mind a vivid childhood memory.

The back corner of the field behind Richmond Street Elementary School where I attended primary grades was fenced off with high security gates. Behind the chain link fence rose a dark building with bars on the windows and heavy doors, with a small yard that faced our field. We knew it only as "The Retard School." Occasionally some child was let out into the fenced yard, usually alone, arms and hands folded protectively around the body or head, swaying, uttering unintelligible sounds. We on the other side would stare transfixed. To us that fence divided "us" from "them." They were not people, they were a commodity, a human zoo exhibit we didn't have to pay for. Whenever our recesses coincided, we would peer into their cages and yell in order to get some reaction from the other side. I can still hear the groans and cries they made and how we laughed. That is, until the recess monitor spotted us and, furiously blowing her whistle, demanded we get away from that fence. The memory of one groaning boy swaying back and forth with a long string of snot swinging from his nose like a pendulum, sickens and haunts me still.[29]

I remember once when our ball went over the fence to the other side. I might even have been the one that caused it to happen. That morning their small yard was empty, but no one dared retrieve it. Kickball was over. We all knew that once we were on the wrong side of that fence there would be no escape, and the thought was terrifying. We didn't even want to touch a ball that had been over "there" for fear that something unimaginable would spread among us and we would become like "them."

> Disability is around us more that we are willing to recognize or notice, and those of us who are temporarily able bodied

[29] That site is now a paved parking lot on the corner of Virginia and Palm Avenue. I could find no record of when the facility was demolished, sometime after we moved away.

> may hold anxieties about the possibilities of disablement, of themselves or someone close to them. What we fear we stigmatize, stereotype, and avoid.[30]

The physical segregation that fenced us from each other at Richmond Street School reinforced our ignorance and fear. As a result, what we projected on "them" began to infect us as well. Like chickens in the pen, we pecked at any little forms of difference among ourselves (who were all white). We commodified each other in the cruel ways that children can contrive. Taunting and vicious teasing spread so much among us that Marie, a very quiet girl who wore a hearing device in my third-grade class, was often a target of verbal abuse.

However, I will never forget the day when our teacher, Mrs. Porter, asked Marie to come up to the front of the class. She had obviously been prepared beforehand because she walked up smiling! After a brief introduction by Mrs. Porter, Marie shockingly but discreetly unbuttoned the blouse she wore over her T-shirt. She then proceeded to show us how the battery pack strapped to her chest worked and what it did for her hearing. This was long before we knew what a Bionic Woman was, but from then on, we viewed Marie differently. In that brave act she demythologized our stereotypes and destroyed our fears. It explained why she spoke the way she did. Carrying a battery pack around sounded cool and it explained a lot of things, including why Marie did not go swimming with us. After that, she was "in." It took a sensitive teacher to recognize what we really needed to resolve our commodification of Marie: Mrs. Porter helped us to create a relationship and build community. Thank God for the Mrs. Porters of the world.

I wonder what would have changed in the shaping of our young minds if the school officials had ever taken us on a tour inside what we called the "Retard School" and we met the children and got to know them as people? What unacknowledged fears, prejudices, and biases that we carry in adulthood could have been prevented in our formative years? I also wonder who thought it a good idea to originally place this program for children with disabilities behind a chain link fence next to a playing field where other kids would be curiously peering in?

Most of the fences we build to separate ourselves from "others" are not as easy to deconstruct as chain link fencing. Commodification may not always lead to commercial exploitation, but when we commodify people, we destroy not only the humanity of "them" but also our own. We deny

[30] Arndt, White, and Chervenak, "Gotta Go Now."

the reality of our common bonds; community becomes impossible. This is the one of the most subtle results of human segregation of all the types perpetuated by our dominant cultural narrative. Most of our methods of commodification are invisible to us because we have been enculturated not to see them. As American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher Edward T. Hall states, "Cultures hide more than they reveal."[31] Only when we step outside of our narrow definitions of "normative" can we start to see what all of us are missing when we commodify and segregate from one another. The words of W.E.B. Du Bois apply here; "The greatest human development is going to take place under experiences of widest individual contact."[32] It is only through intentional, trusting, and committed interactions that we destroy stereotypes and get over our fears of one another.

Christian Commodification of the Disabled

As followers of Christ, we are repulsed by these examples of commodifying the disabled. Christians should recognize and reject marginalization of fellow human beings in all forms, whether from the entertainment industry or the secular social structures in which we live. Unfortunately, we too can commodify the disabled in subtle ways. This commodification is not typically to monetize; rather, to do what Christians are commanded to do—love. However, love that is imposed is not loving; it is an imposition even if we label it "ministry." I was reminded of this when, as an eager doctoral student studying mission strategy, I was corrected by my mentor. Reviewing a particular part of my research proposal, he caught a phrase I had included which mentioned "reaching the target audience." In his no-nonsense voice Dr. Sögaard kindly reprimanded me, "No one wants to be a target."

Without careful consideration, our words become our actions. Well-intentioned Christians can manipulate people for their own purposes using a biblical mandate to "reach" other people with the good news. Sharing who we are in Christ and giving testimony to what God has done in our personal lives is important when the opportunities arise, but "targeting" people to provide prayer or preaching when it is not

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31 Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1959), 53.
32 David Levering Lewis ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 558.

requested is another form of the messiah complex.[33] Far too often this type of commodification is done by Christians toward those who live with disabilities, whether they be fellow believers or not. When Christians no longer see individuals as a sister, brother, or fellow human being, but as a target for "ministry," they commodify the disabled.

This victimization takes place in the form of unsolicited spiritual "help." David Husby, former director of Covenant World Relief and Development, used a phrase following the disastrous earthquake in Haiti, saying that country didn't want any more SUVs (spontaneous uninvited volunteers). People with good intentions arrived in the aftermath, but their expectation of care and appreciation was detrimental and unwanted. In a similar way, many who live with outward manifestations of some physical impairment—visual, auditory, mobile, or other—have shared with me their painful experience of an encounter with an SUV Christian (spontaneous uninvited visitation). This visitor is usually a total stranger who, without asking, may not simply offer to pray but will actually intercede on the spot for divine healing. Amy Kenny describes this painful process in detail in her book, *My Body Is not a Prayer Request*.[34] Some Christians may insist further upon transporting the individual to a healing service. Yet when the expected cure fails to appear, the individual is often further victimized (commodified) by her lack of faith. The treatment could not possibly have been inadequate since people were praying to God, for God's sake! Therefore, it must have been the disabled person's fault, another victim of commodification by a Christian SUV.

In my family's story, the sudden onslaught of Parkinson's in our mother at age forty-four stirred up an evangelical flurry of prayer services, trips to healing conferences, medical treatments, and eventually, experimental brain surgery at UCLA. The miraculous results of the latter lasted all of two weeks. After several rounds of these futile efforts, our mother refused further treatment and learned to live as a whole person in ways that amazed and frustrated me as I continued to encourage her to pursue other cures. Finally, after countless futile entreaties to ward off well-meaning but insensitive Christians like me, Mom created a small brochure that she would hand to people, entitled "Pointers and Helps in the Ministry of Suffering." That small pamphlet, her personal collection of favorite tips, book titles, scripture, and quotations gave her a sense of agency that we

[33] As the saying goes, the only difference between God and you is that God doesn't think he's you.

[34] Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).

all needed to understand. Even more impactful was how she lived with this progressively disabling condition for twenty-two years. As she wrote, "But for God…a lonely, separate realm. With God…a time for growing, experiencing, and sharing God's peace." The brochure never stemmed the tide of those of us who prayed for her healing, but recognizing what had happened in her heart changed the way we prayed. With that small act she refused to be commodified.

There is a great moment in the movie *The Big Kahuna*, when senior lubricant salesman Phil Cooper (Danny DeVito) addresses the rookie salesman after his failed attempt to snag a major client at a convention because he was witnessing about Jesus instead.

> You preaching Jesus is no different than Larry or anybody else preaching lubricants. It doesn't matter whether you're selling Jesus or Buddha or civil rights or "How to Make Money in Real Estate with No Money Down." That doesn't make you a human being; it makes you a marketing rep. If you want to talk to somebody honestly, as a human being, ask him about his kids. Find out what his dreams are—just to find out, for no other reason. Because as soon as you lay your hands on a conversation to steer it, it's not a conversation anymore; it's a pitch. And you're not a human being; you're a marketing rep.[35]

There is a place for prayer and sharing. Even more important than what we do for others is first remembering that all people are made in God's image. Physical ability, intellectual challenges or any other condition does not change that. Disabilities do not turn "normal" people into a commodity to be fixed. Unsolicited prayer can be a demeaning form of commodification masked as ministry.

Ultimately, Christ followers have an abiding hope that resurrection will (and must) include the entirety of our being, including our body (Rom 8:23; Phil 3:20–21). A simplistic theology that in heaven the "soul survives whatever the state of body or brain, and that all the wrongs of this world will be put right in the next"[36] fails to acknowledge the complexities involved in many cases of those living with disabilities. Prayer for the healing of bodily issues and diseases, such as cancer, which can be eliminated without eliminating the person is entirely different

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35 *The Big Kahuna*, directed by John Swanbeck, Lionsgate Films, 2000.

36 Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 59–60.

from those cases, such as Down Syndrome, wherein, "To eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject."[37] Amos Yong expands on this theme theologically from his own life experience with a Down sibling.

> For Paul, resurrection is neither resuscitation (which preserves continuity) nor re-creation (which severs identity); rather, since "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 15:50), Paul teaches a resurrection of the body that preserves but also transforms personal identity.[38]

A rethinking of the biblical doctrine of resurrection hope that includes a resurrected identity retaining the personal characteristics of the disabled is long overdue. We know that Christ's resurrected body continues to bear the marks of his physical suffering which some refer to as God's disability.[39] Pertinent to our topic, it is precisely an erroneous belief of the total disappearance of any traces of disability in heaven that propels such unsolicited "ministry" resulting in the commodification of the disabled in a "Christian" way.

The point of the practice of prayer in the present is not that we order God's activity in the world or in our bodies but that we align ourselves with our vocational identity in Christ in the here and now. Jesus never commodified others. The timing and the agenda of life is not ours to arrange; instead, we must seek to recognize that the initiatives of redemption are already at work in our world, our cultures, even in our bodies and minds. Disabilities of all types do not dismiss God's ability and do not change the way God sees us as embodied people. We pray to be better aligned with God's purposes to bring the "kin-dom" community here and now.

Demanding divine healing over the minds, bodies, and lives of others puts the practitioner in a dangerous posture of assumed authority over God. Spirit-led supplication is something else entirely. We are commanded to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests (Eph 6:18). Scripture assures us that when we don't know what to pray, the promised Advocate will be present.

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37 Stanley Hauerwas, "Marginalizing the 'Retarded.'" in *The Deprived, the Disabled, and the Fullness of Life*, Flavian Dougherty, ed. (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), 69.

38 Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 272. I encourage readers to delve deeper into this critical theological rethinking by reviewing this text.

39 Refer to Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

> In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God (Rom 8:26–27).

Prayer of this type is not manipulation; it is not self-serving. It may not be fulfilling either, from a human perspective. Rather, it means placing ourselves and those for whom prayer may be offered into the hands of the Creator once again, recognizing that a higher authority holds greater wisdom, power, and love towards us than we can express toward ourselves or one another.

No one wants to be a target or a commodity to be used for human purposes, however economically viable, normative, or missional that may appear. We may (and should!) request prayer from one another, but let us remember to give dignity to disabled people whose bodies are also temples of God. Loving our neighbor as ourselves means respecting one another in love, seeing those who embody difference as also carrying the imago Dei with the same diverse uniqueness found in all of us.

Moving from Commodity to Community

It is only through committed relationships that we can build real community. Rather than suggesting solutions, I close this article with an acknowledgment of those impactful individuals who, through their disabilities, have shaped me. These are the bold ones who noted my commodification of them, were willing to speak to me about it, and forgive. They have corrected and inspired me. For Mike and Bonnie Conrad, a godly and independent vision-impaired couple who during my teenage years of angst would patiently ask me what I was so concerned about. For Mrs. Dieglemann who, from her bedside, radiated the peace of Christ for so many years. For the developmentally disabled men and women of the Kainos Home and Training Center in Redwood City with whom I had the privilege of working together in the garden; they taught me so much about beauty, acceptance, and love. For the Rev. Dr. John Weborg who freely integrated his post-polio experience into his theological teaching and ministry. For my student and now Covenant pastor Tyler Menssen, born with Goldenhar Syndrome, who wrote in his thesis, "All of us are intended to live together in community under the grace of God and that grace not only allows us to be friends with one another in spite of our

differences, it is a grace so strong that it can propel chronically shamed [disabled] people to become agents of grace themselves."[40] For Mom, who when Parkinson's finally masked her dimpled smile, yet insisted we sing "It Is Well with My Soul." For the young woman sitting next to me on my last flight who explained her condition of constant pain, and delicately warned me that the ordinary takeoff and landing would negatively impact her hypermobility. And especially for my friend and former colleague Dr. Michael J. Walker who inspired me to write this article from the heart.

Many thanks to all of you and many others. You are part of my life. I wish the blessing of people like you in the lives of those who have not yet had the privilege of a genuine friendship with a disabled person, not as commodity but as community. If you are reading this and personally have not found how disabled people are enriching your life, you may be suffering from the devastating effects of commodification. Don't cut yourself off from what God is doing in the world through people you would not normally notice. Sometimes, people with disabilities are the agents of grace you need.

[40] Tyler Menssen, "From Shame to Community: Restoration in the Midst of Chronic Shame," Unpublished thesis manuscript (Chicago: North Park Theological Seminary, 2015), 83.

Book Reviews

Bo H. Lim, professor of Old Testament,
Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington

"Joey" Alan Le, director of spiritual formation,
First Covenant Church of Oakland, Oakland, California

Paul E. Koptak, *Circles in the Stream: Index, Identification, & Intertext: Reading and Preaching the Story of Judah in Genesis 37–50* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 148 pages, $38.

Paul E. Koptak, professor emeritus of homiletics at North Park Theological Seminary, has written *Circles in the Stream* to help people read and teach the Bible, particularly its narratives and poetry, more effectively. The book transgresses the genre categories of typical academic publications. It includes intellectual memoir, introduction to the literary analysis of Kenneth Burke, introduction to hermeneutics and homiletics, exegetical study of Gen 37–50, and homilies on Gen 37–50. While these topics may at first seem disconnected, they all serve Koptak's overriding concern that Christian ministers gain more insight into the biblical text and better connect the teachings of Scripture to congregants' lives. The interdisciplinary nature of this book is not surprising given that it reflects Koptak's own ministerial vocation as a professor of both the Old Testament and communication while at North Park Theological Seminary.

The title of the book, *Circles in the Stream*, is a metaphor summarizing Koptak's thesis. He likens the ripples that extend outward from a stone cast into a river to the ongoing impact of Scripture upon its readers. While he acknowledges the need to acquire exegetical skills, Koptak's main concern is to train ministers to be excellent interpreters of both Scripture and peoples' lives. Koptak believes the text invariably connects to life; he writes, "Still, deep study of the text is akin to careful study of human relations, asking what brings joy or sorrow, confusion or conviction, despair or determination" (2). He goes on to state that "this book is more than a theory of interpreting texts; it is a practical literary-rhetorical-theological pathway that leads to those connections" (3). These "literary-rhetorical-theological" connections are determined through the following three steps: 1) Find the connections within a given passage by making an index; 2) Find the connection with the life issue by attending to identification; and 3) Find the connections between this text and the rest of the biblical canon by tracing intertexts (4). Koptak attributes this method to the insights of literary critic Kenneth Burke, who sought to identify the symbolic logics within literature and how they were adopted by readers. According to Koptak, it is Burke's process of identification that connects biblical interpretation to biblical proclamation. This move includes Koptak's addition of the step of Intertext, where based upon his commitment to a canonical and theological interpretation, he identifies relationships between texts within the biblical canon. Following the introduction, the book consists of three chapters, each explaining one step in his method, a commentary on a passage within Gen 37–50, and a sermon on the passage. Chapter one explores the step of Index through a study and exposition of the story of Judah and Tamar in Gen 38, chapter two addresses Identification and the story of Judah and Joseph in Gen 43–45, and chapter three explores Intertext through the story of Judah's blessing in Gen 48–49.

Circles in the Stream reflects the thought of a mature scholar and an experienced teacher. It is ambitious to address such a wide range of topics in a relatively short work, but Koptak successfully accomplishes this task and offers compelling instruction on how ministers can be better readers and preachers of Scripture. Students of Scripture often struggle to make the connections between hermeneutical theory, exegesis, and preaching, while books are typically written to address only one of these topics. In this work, Koptak pulls the curtain back to reveal a process that may appear a mystery to many. Those familiar with canonical and

theological interpretation will find Koptak's method runs parallel to theirs. Kenneth Burke's influence on Koptak's thinking is similar to the influence of Erich Auerbach, another literary critic, upon theologian Hans Frei. To Koptak's methodology with its focus on the "literary-rhetorical-theological," I would add "the contextual." Given the importance of personal and communal identity within Koptak's method, additional teaching on contextual hermeneutical and homiletical methods will be needed to supplement his work. Seminarians, pastors, and teachers will greatly benefit from this book. *Circles in the Stream* will certainly influence the manner I teach Old Testament courses to seminarians going forward.

BO H. LIM

Sarah Jean Barton, *Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability and the Practice of Christian Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022), 252pp., $45.

Baptism is one of the most significant milestones in the life of a Christian. Yet, in some churches, this sacrament is withheld from individuals who apparently lack the capacity to verbally repent of their sins and commit to Christ. This obstruction is a source of great pain and alienation. *Becoming the Baptized Body* helps to overcome this quandary by laying out biblical and theological reasons why people with intellectual disabilities may be baptized. Most important, the rationale comes from the very people affected: persons with disabilities and those who care for and about them.

Little has been written about baptism for people with disabilities, and none from their perspective. As a practical theologian and pediatric occupational therapist, Sarah Jean Barton amplifies the largely unheard voices of people with disabilities. *Becoming the Baptized Body* is an attempt to fill a gap in the field of disability theology by means of theological ethnography. Through interviews and participant observation, Barton assembles reflections of disabled Christians to challenge and expand existing understandings of baptism (44). The intent is to reshape the church's imagination about human identity so that all people can experience baptism into Christ-centered community (14).

The chapters are logically organized. Chapter 1 reviews the academic

discourse on baptizing individuals with disabilities. Chapter 2 inquires, what do people with disabilities and their caretakers say? Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the Bible. Chapters 5 and 6 ask, what do baptismal liturgies say? Finally, chapter 7 ponders, what are some practical ways to reimagine baptism as the expression of God's love for all?

Barton's thesis is that regardless of their capacities, each person is a conduit of the Holy Spirit's gift to the church. As such, the sacrament of water baptism can rightfully be administered to a person with disabilities. Distilled, there are at least five reasons to support this claim: 1) Through baptism, a person participates in Jesus's death and resurrection (66) and, consequently, joins the body of Christ (64); 2) Just as the Father pronounces Jesus as his beloved Son, the church can name and uphold a person's belovedness at baptism (89); The person's status as God's beloved, and their new identity in Christ, are radically dependent on Jesus rather than on personal merits or competencies (95); 3) Baptism is both the local church's public welcome of an individual into the Christian life and its commitment to provide a place of support, acceptance, and belonging (67); 4) In the body of Christ, human differences, such as advantages and abilities, are set aside for a radical inclusion of all people (100–01), marked by dependency (97); and 5) Therefore, the priesthood of all believers involves acknowledging that each person is a gift to the community (109). Taken together, these are good reasons to baptize individuals with disabilities.

One area deserves explication: How exactly does the person change by being baptized? Being baptized into Christ means that the old self was crucified with Christ, so now the new self is alive to God (Rom 6:1–14). One interviewee stated: "Baptism marks a turning point in someone's life.…They're transformed from being turned to self to turning now to Christ" (66). Had Barton included a brief study of church history, it would have shown that Christian baptism in the third and fourth centuries practiced a radical renunciation of much of one's prior life—what one has known and who one has been. At times, baptism in Christ risked the scorn of one's unchristian neighbors, or persecution from authorities. How, then, might a person with an intellectual disability severe enough to impair their sense of morality and, therefore, diminish their culpability, express the change they experience when they are baptized? What do they repent of? What have they given up? How will their lives look different? What did it cost them? How is baptism a turning point for them?

All that said, *Becoming the Baptized Body* is a recommended resource for pastors, church leaders, and the families and caretakers of individuals with disabilities who want to be agents of healing and hospitality. This simple yet profound claim will particularly challenge readers in the credobaptist tradition. Every person is God's beloved, and every person—including those with disabilities—is an irreplaceable member of the body of Christ.

"JOEY" ALAN LE