Donna Jennings

Almost ten years ago, our long-prayed-for son entered the world and, with him, an involuntary rerouting on a long and steep journey which my husband and I would never have chosen. Two years later, with our newborn daughter in our arms and toddler son on our knee, we sat in the consultant’s office holding the words “Autism Spectrum Disorder” and “Profound Learning Disability” in our heads while their implications slowly filtered down to our hearts.

Words in a label which carried the force and weight of profound loss for me, my husband, and our lives in Southeast Asia. Forced to relinquish the lifestyle we enjoyed, the friendships we had cultivated, the work in which we had partnered, and the lifelong dreams we had envisaged together, we reluctantly left our home in Southeast Asia and began a very new flavour of life, family, work, and ministry in the United Kingdom.

The challenges of “re-entry” for us were engulfed and drowned out by being plunged into the underworld of learning disability, autism, and challenging behaviours. We grappled daily with society’s prevailing intolerance of and belittling attitude towards those with such a disability, but perhaps the most painful was the struggle we experienced in our local Christian communities to see Micah embraced and included.

The scope and perspective of my familiar, tightly held Christian theological framework was no longer sufficient to answer my plethora of questions about Micah: How do we identify imago Dei in his humanity that is intermingled with such complex needs? How does a boy who understands few words engage with “the Word” unto salvation? How do we perceive the role of such a profoundly disabled individual with his obvious dependencies as an integral and indispensable part of the Body of Christ?

Reading familiar texts through the lens of disability shifted my focus from an objective, detached theological agenda, to a more subjective, relational engagement with the narrative and treated those with a disability pointed to an overwhelming disparity between theology and practice.

We observed that the attitude of our churches towards those with a disability—particularly a learning disability—is subtly but potently informed by and tinged with that of the world. Specifically, we experienced:

- The lack of personal engagement by the church family with these boys, girls, men, and women as individual people in genuine friendships,
- The low priority given to bringing these people to Jesus as seen in the allocation of effort and resources,
- The attitude of paternalism in which the “strong and able” minister to the “weak and disabled,”
- And the failure of orthodox Christian theology to engage with the type of humanity experienced by those living with a learning disability.

Re-reading Scripture through a new lens

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Those Who Seem to Be Weak: The Role of Disability within a Missional Framework

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characters of the text. My story became one with the mothers who brought their children for Jesus to bless, only to be excluded by the disciples (Mark 10:13–16); or with the father who travelled a long and challenging journey to bring his son to Jesus for healing, but the disciples argued over their failure to heal (Mark 9:14–29).

Additionally, reading Scripture with the families outside the church who walked the path of Autism and Learning Disability with us, highlighted the failure of the church to missionally speak with relevance to those “on the outside” whose lives are dominated by disability.

Disability theology

During this time, I began to investigate disability theology, which is described as

- the attempt by disabled and nondisabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities … [resulting in] a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability.

These writings transformed my grief and despair to joy and hope, and I recognised that my son’s value, purpose, and potential could be realised not only within the church, but also in the broader community, must begin to engage with these truths and demonstrate them in community.

Thus, while the implications of reading Scripture in the light of disability theology centre on the person (and those closely associated) affected by the presence of disability, the ramifications of disability theology are such that their full value cannot be unleashed until they are embraced by and embodied in the whole Christian community and applied to a wider set of issues in society.

A missiological opportunity

Disability theology has exchanged formative dialogue with various strands of theology, particularly ecclesiology, soteriology, and moral theology. However, writing in the Journal of Disability and Religion, Conner regretfully states that, “notably absent in this discussion have been contributions from the field of missiology.”

The Cape Town Commitment, endorsed by many mission agencies, urges the engagement of church leaders and mission partners with the global community of those living with various disabilities. It is not surprising that an estimated 15 percent of the world’s population, living with one or more disability, have been referred to as “an unreached people group.” 90 to 95 percent of whom have no access to the gospel. More poignant for the work of OMF is the assertion that “over the next quarter century it is likely that the Southeast Asian countries will experience the greatest international growth in the number of disabled people.” Research carried out by Chaney in ten Southeast Asian countries refers to the huge challenges faced by people with disabilities in the areas of poverty, education, healthcare, access to public services, justice and law, and employability.

What efforts are being made to move towards those commonly labelled as “the disabled”, in our church communities, field strategies, and leadership discussions? How will we begin to listen to their voices, so long silent in our missional thinking and outside of the scope of our ministry? What place have we given to the disabled experience in our missiological hermeneutics and analysis of gospel, culture, and church?

From Belfast to Bangkok to Beijing, those who bear any responsibility for the formation, growth, and leadership of the global Christian community, must begin to engage with the barriers in our communities for those living with disability, both structural and attitudinal. Barriers which create the prevalence of an “us and them” scenario, which devalue individuals because of their disability.

Missiology offers the opportunity of identifying and addressing cultural barriers to disability within local cultures, local church contexts, and to cross cultural boundaries by suggesting a contextual ecclesiology, inclusive of those with disabilities. Is it time for the strands of missiology and disability theology to blend in response to “one of the major opportunities and challenges for mission in the twenty-first century” and form a disability missiology?

Against this backdrop, church leaders and missiologists must jointly ask: What is the biblical perspective of disability? How should the Christian faith and our Christian communities impact and include the local disabled community? What biblical message about disability must we convey to our society?

The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, relationships, and priorities are heavily dominated by his engagement with those living with some form of disability. Indeed, he defined his own identity and mission with reference to releasing humanity from various forms of disabilities (Matt 4:18; 11:5). Working towards an informed response to the questions above, requires that we adopt a new hermeneutical stance from which we reread Scripture, no longer to those with disabilities, but alongside them, rereading passages in a new light. Understanding passages through the lens of disability, we are enabled to see real people with real issues, move beyond our tendency to spiritualise references to disability, or to read a healing passage and solely extract a proof of the divinity of Christ.

A divine encounter

For the purpose of this discussion, it is helpful to take two passages of Scripture and merge the two incidents together. Mark 10:46–52 and John 9:1–41 record episodes in which Jesus encounters and heals a man with visual impairment—a man described as “blind”. How do we carry that one word? Factually and objectively with a theological detachment, or do we perhaps jump directly to the spiritualisation of being blind, as Jesus himself uses the experience of blindness to highlight our inability to perceive what God is doing? Or can we pause, listen, and attempt to enter in to the weight of that one word for the individual man whose total existence has been defined and shaped by its implications.

Held within this dramatic episode are four main players. Three of these players will be discussed now and the fourth player will become evident in the conclusion:
Mainstream Society: Those who belong on the inside of the city walls, those who create the buzz of city life, those holding value extending to the business and relational networks within it.

The disabled man: Excluded from the city networks, is a sub-section of society, wherein the blind, lame, deaf—the disabled—belong together, condemned to the roadside, outside the city gates. Perhaps this man, hoping that one individual in the busy crowd, having made a lucrative business transaction, might fulfill the Mosaic law of almsgiving in his direction.

In the Southeast Asian city where we lived, men and women, with similar needs from families without state benefits and with restricted capacity to provide, were literally transported to the edge of the marketplace early each morning where they were left to procure whatever means of charitable income they could manage.

The disciples and the “great crowd following”: Jesus’ followers walk past this man and his associates, hear his cry for mercy directed to Jesus, but silence him. There is no place for this man in the city, and there is no time for his voice in their agenda for Jesus. The disciples, unwilling to engage with this man as a fellow human being, fail to appreciate the experience of being blind, place him as nothing more than the object of a theological discussion, asking the question: who sinned—was it this man or his parents—that he was born blind?

In our post-Enlightenment cultures, the prevailing question of disability is “how”: a focus on the neurological, genetic, physiological, and behavioural causes and cures of disability. This is accompanied by Western individualism’s more nuanced cries of “why me, why must I suffer?” Yet, for many hearts in our Asian contexts, the question of disability is phrased, Why am I being punished this way? Who has cursed me? Or, Who sinned, that this man would be born blind?

Against this cultural backdrop, Jesus cuts through the fatalistic ambience of devalued exclusion, the barriers to society, and, in one statement, verbalises the nucleus of a theology of disability. In this divine encounter, which encompasses so much more than a proof of Christ’s divinity, and more than a helpful illustration of spiritual blindness, Jesus presents, in word and deed, a radically different perspective, a new truth about a humanity flavoured by disability—a truth which ripples out and impacts each player: “it is not that this man sinned nor his parents, this happened that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Blind man: Those with disability: Image of God

Central to Jesus’ engagement is the man born blind. Whereas others ignored and silenced him, Jesus notices him and creates a place for his voice. For this man who was excluded, on the periphery, Jesus brings him near and draws him into a personal interaction. While he was previously devalued, dependent, the recipient of obligatory almsgiving, Jesus gives him dignity, by asking “what do you want me to do for you?” Finally, Jesus heals the man by removing the impairment, allowing him to see, and transforming his life.

This incident also deeply impacted the man’s family, those ‘disabled by association’. The disciples’ question reflects the perception of societies and cultures around the world which seek to attribute blame, point out fault, and label with sin. Cultures shaped by honour-shame, in which the community’s response to the stigma of disability is as burdensome as the disability itself.

Had Jesus’ focus been limited to this man, had his interaction with this man been a direct and discreet removal of the disability, the medical model of disability might have been embodied. This model of disability focuses on the individual and the impairment in which treatment of the disability is channelled in a single direction.8

Eiesland describes the parallel attitude of the Christian Church as being shaped by the goal of “normalisation” of those with disabilities: “Our bodies have too often been touched by hands that have forgotten our humanity and attend only to curing us…Healing has been the churchly parallel to rehabilitative medicine.”9 Have we focussed so heavily on the labelled diagnosis, the impairment, the deficiency, the atypical shape of their bodies, or behaviours that we fail to see and appreciate the boy, girl, man, and woman in the breadth of their humanity? The narrow criteria by which we understand the wholeness of the person leads to a limited understanding of healing that, in turn, fails to engage with shalom—the wellness of physical, intellectual, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of personhood.

Pivotal in my own search for theological understanding was to seek out the shape of imago Dei integral to Micah. Arguably, orthodox Christian theology limits our understanding of the person, character, and capacity of God, which is formulated according to the criteria and experience of an able bodied, able minded humanity (e.g. humanity has strength, but God is infinitely stronger; humanity can love but the love of God is infinitely purer and broader).

Within this framework our systematic theology volumes generally locate the “image of God” in humanity under the categories of being logical/rational, having capacity and desire for relationship, and enjoying a level of creativity—none of which can be easily defined in my son! By limiting imago Dei to criteria experienced in a humanity exclusive of disability, the Christian church effectively implies that the image of God can be diminished in the presence of profound disability.10

From this stance, the Christian church “assumes that getting rid of…disabilities is the chief concern of people who are disabled and the ideal for all people.”11 Is our subconscious hermeneutic for understanding disability too closely bound up with sin, lack of faith, and “the Fall”? Does the lack of engagement with disability in our churches reflect our unwillingness to grapple with these theological issues? How do we understand the image of God in my son, Micah, who can be more destructive than creative, whose mind’s logic we fail to understand and in whom the traits of Autism form barriers to him forming meaningful, two-way relationships?

Could it be that Micah’s vulnerability points us to another aspect of the divine character and modus operandum, highlighting that God chose to make himself vulnerable, in creation, in the cross and in the church?12 Can Micah’s high level of dependency point us to an understanding of the divine beyond independent, perfect,
powerful transcendency, and towards his character of dependency outlined in the Triune community. Inclusive Christian communities become the context for the recognition that “rather than being inequitable with the image of God, it turns out that the lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities actually reveal God.” Highlighting some forgotten aspects of theology. In doing so we formulate a broader understanding of who God is.

The image of God has traditionally been interpreted within an anthropological and a creationist framework, but a theology of disability may extend our understanding of *imago Dei* through the lens of Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology, wherein “the image of God begins to be restored in the body of Christ when each individual is affirmed for that they have to attribute to the total image.” Within this framework, the type of healing advocated by Yong occurs in inclusive Christian communities when “people with disabilities find redemption from disability, not when they are healed, but with the removal of societal barriers.” Yong’s use of the term “redemption” points to the vision that God is active in creating something beautiful from that which society perceives as defunct and broken.

**Disciples: Church: Body of Christ**

In light of this, we return to Jesus’ encounter with the man born blind. It is vital to note that in this (and many other occurrences in the Gospels), Jesus did not act alone; this was no discrete, direct interaction solely focused on one man. Jesus chose to mobilise his disciples, instructing them to engage with this man, commanding: “call him to me.”

The disciples’ response to Jesus’ command required them, as individuals and as a group, to turn their attention to this man, formulate appropriate words, move towards him, place their hands on his arm and guide him through the crowd towards Jesus. By engaging the disciples in this way, Jesus effectively shifts the position of this man from being the object of their detached discussions, to the focus of their personal interactions. In doing so, Jesus used his intentional commands of inclusion to teach and shape his disciples to know and follow him to a deeper level.

By shaping the engagement of his disciples with this man, Jesus’ management of the situation is comparable to the social model of disability. This model highlights that the actual impairment is only one strand of suffering associated with disability. It is hugely augmented by the barriers imposed on the individual due to society’s perceptions of his or her disability.

Integral then to any discussion on disability and the church are the Pauline reflections on the Christian church as the body of Christ (Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12). No longer holding an attitude of “them and us,” leading to division and exclusion, the Christian church embodies a new community, wherein each member is part of the divine arrangement, connected and interdependent. Paul, understanding our natural but fundamentally flawed default towards the strong, extends this image with the radical statement that “those who seem to be weak, are indispensable” (1 Corinthians 12:12–27) and require a special honour, dignity, and respect.

Even where Christian communities and missional enterprises have responded to include those with a disability, the ministry is generally directed from the strong and able to the weak and disabled, based on the one-sided premise that people with disabilities need the church. Engagement with the world of disability has been one strongly shaped by paternalism, denying the individual any contributory role in the body of Christ, any responsibility as an image bearer, defining them merely as the recipient of others’ strength.

Missiologically, we must acknowledge and act on the recognition that the global disabled community is largely “unreached”. However, the engagement envisaged under The Cape Town Commitment acknowledges the reciprocal relationship that exists between the church and people with disability. This document, key to missiological strategies and discussions, outlines a mandate to “minister to people with disabilities and to receive the ministry they have to give…to think not only of mission among those with a disability, but to recognise, affirm and facilitate the missional calling of believers with disabilities themselves, as part of the Body of Christ.”

Our missional engagement with this “unreached people group” has a two-pronged motivation: both to bless those with disabilities and to be blessed through them.

Each person, with or without disability, has been assigned a role to bear the image of God within the body of Christ. As we reread Scripture and revise our theologies, missional structures, and traditions alongside those who offer us the lens of disability, it is worth exploring how the church can perceive and empower each member’s contribution to the body of Christ not only despite any disability, but also through any disability.

The human default veers towards power, strength, and ability and yet the biblical metanarrative reiterates that God’s strength is made perfect in weakness. Shifting to such an attitude of inclusion requires “our own conversion, so that our eyes can truly see, our ears can really hear, and our other senses can be fully activated to receive and be transformed by what such people have to offer.”

Our focus within OMF must not only include the geographical spread or the theological depth of the church, but also carefully consider the shape of the church in our various Asian contexts. Conner asserts, “the expansion of the gospel, in terms of ‘*missio dei*’ is more about the Gospel expanding toward a fuller expression” and “what is at stake in contextualising is the fullness of the body of Christ, the very diversity of Christian humanity is necessary in order for the church to be complete.”

Consequently, it is not an option for our Christian communities, our missional strategies, and our theological discussions to opt out of efforts to include people with disabilities. Jennie Weiss Block highlights that this is an integral characteristic of the church which is the “quintessential inclusive community” because “the gospel of Jesus Christ is a call to a new world where outsiders become insiders” and our identification with Jesus Christ, as our “copious host”, necessitates our role as his “co-hosts.” Inclusion of those with a disability in our churches is a natural outworking of the Great
Commission. As we “go out” missionally towards “panta ta ethē,” we should expect the result to be the cultivation of a diverse and pluriform church.

**City: Society: Kingdoms**

Returning to our Gospel passages, we focus now on the general public who tolerated this man in exclusion, overlooked, and largely ignored him. He, in turn, was wholly dependent on them. Jesus steps into this social order and demonstrates the kingdom values he proclaimed, values which radically challenged values prevalent in the wider, observing society.

While Hudson Taylor’s model of the contextualised gospel is celebrated in OMF structures and strategies, less prominent is the question of how we demonstrate kingdom values in issues which confront local society and oppose local culture. At the interface of gospel, church, and local culture, we are called to expose beliefs and practices which stand opposed to the rule and reign of God. Specifically, how can we challenge the negative social constructs surrounding the perception of, provision for, and treatment of those with a disability?

Understanding the church in the light of the kingdom provides an important reminder that “the Christian community does not exist simply for its own ends. In the Asian setting, it is imperative for the church to model its Christian faith and life both within its own community and in the wider social setting of other communities.”

The Great Commission itself implies an integrated, active approach to proclaiming and demonstrating kingdom values, for “When we are expected to teach to obey everything he has commanded us, we are certainly expected to do everything he has commanded us.”

How can OMF empower and mobilise Christian communities to missionally fulfill the actions encouraged by the Cape Town Commitment to “rise up,” “stand alongside,” “resist prejudice,” “fight for,” and “advocate for” the needs of individuals and families who live with disability, not just in the church, but in the “wider society”? How does OMF’s vision for “church planting movements” embody Jesus’ proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom? Do we need to adapt our processes and structures to facilitate the sending of skilled workers to support local churches and ministries in key areas relating to disability?

How can we be instrumental in rewriting the narrative of society in regard to disability as we pray “Your Kingdom come”? Swinton points out that “the context of Jesus’ acts for justice was focused on the coming Kingdom” and this “new community is called to work towards justice, but according to its own criterion.” As the Christian church speaks into the social order of the local community, the national government, and on the global level about the issues affecting people with disabilities, we do so to point to, to reveal, and to identify with the coming kingdom—our ultimate vision. Consequently, we are missionally empowered as our Christian witness to the world is enabled. An intentional, effective, and inclusive church community (in Belfast, Bangkok, or Beijing) can “cut through cultural assumptions and reveal how the church in its theology and practice has become acculturated in ways that prevent it from functioning faithfully.”

Correspondingly, Conner states that “in this missiological way of thinking, people with disabilities are... necessary contributors to the calling of Church to bear witness to the ongoing redemptive work of God in this world—proclaiming the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Without the vital role of individuals with disability, the church’s witness is diminished. Conner quotes Newbigin who argues that, “without that witness from its own membership, the Church’s witness is distorted and deceptive, and the Church’s discipleship is irrelevant to the real world in which men and women live and suffer.”

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**Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality**

*Thomas Reynolds, (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).*

Reynolds presents disability from a theological perspective combined with the experiential perspective of bringing up a son who has multiple disabilities. He argues that the biblical story is about strength coming from weakness, redemption resulting from God’s vulnerability, and disability as a way to explore vulnerability with others and with God. Bringing together a diverse body of literature with arguments drawn from theological, philosophical, and sociological perspectives, the book includes resources to help individuals and churches to foster hospitality toward people with disabilities.

**The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God**

*Amos Yong, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).*

Yong develops a theology of disability drawn from insights of biblical scholarship on disability and his experience of caring for and engaging with a brother with Down syndrome. He rigorously examines Old and New Testament passages to highlight how disability has often been misconstrued and reinterprets the passages from the perspective of the disabled with the aim of dismantling the bias held by the non-disabled. Yong calls the church to remove the underlying stigma towards the disabled and to become healing and truly inclusive communities that value people with disabilities.
Conclusion

In conclusion, we return to the Gospel passages to identify a fourth party whose presence and purpose was intrinsic to Jesus’ encounter with this blind man: God—the One to whom our image bearing points, the One who makes himself manifest in his body, the One who reigns as King throughout his kingdom on earth. Jesus states that this man and his experience of being blind, was ultimately “that the works of God be made known.” In this divine encounter, God’s transformative power and overarching purpose were potently displayed.

In light of this, we move towards those who experience disability, hoping to facilitate more divine encounters of the same. We move forward carefully, progressively formulating a disability missiology on the journey we share with men, women, boys, and girls living with disabilities.

The parable of the great banquet depicts the Master’s servants urgently “going out” towards those on the margins. We also, must “go out” and cross boundaries so as to “bring in” those who because of their various disabilities are excluded. Why? Not primarily for the benefit of those on the outside, but so that the Master’s house—the global church—will be “full”, complete, and mature, inclusive of all men, women, boys, and girls from all people groups, whatever their ability or disability. MRT