

A plea to welcome our disabled brothers and sisters into our faith communities and allow participation in the Sacraments

By Michelle Munger, MRE

According to the 2010 US census, about twenty percent of the population is disabled in some way.¹ While the parameters are wide, it bears noticing that too many of our congregations do not reflect this statistic. This is an unreached and largely unengaged people group in our society.

Stories abound of families who have experienced difficulty worshipping with the church due to physical barriers, communication barriers, and especially attitude barriers. Often churches that claim to be accessible could not truly accommodate an adult in a wheelchair unassisted. The deaf are not attending because we do not provide an interpreter. Or more commonly, ignorance that shapes our attitudes keeps most of our disabled neighbors away. Ask anyone with a profound disability and they will likely have some painful church experience to share.

For those that overcome barriers enough to find a place of worship that will welcome them, they then face the challenge of fully in-grafting into that body of believers. The sacraments are especially troubling when a family member is unable to communicate due to the nature of their disability. These family members may have been born with the disability or experienced trauma effecting speech or thought. Exclusion from participating in the sacraments contributes to a never-ending source of doubt concerning their children's eternal future. How do we address those questions? With no written pastoral guidance, family members are left to wonder on their own and depend on the collective "wisdom" of the internet or our culture to tell them what they want to hear. By not acknowledging these issues and bringing attention to these families, our ministry leaders and our discipleship efforts miss them entirely.

The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind are often spoken of in the gospels. These people were important to Christ. They need to be important to us. Let us take a hard look at our doctrine and practices to be certain we are not inadvertently excluding those whom Christ loved.

Consider the following Scripture to inform this conversation.

The covenant relationships established between God and man included the entire family for generations to come.

- Genesis 17:7 "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you through their generations for an everlasting covenant..."
- Luke 19:9 "And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.' For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."
- Acts 2:39 "the promise is for you and for your children..."
- Acts 16:30-32 "Then he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.'"

¹ Americans with Disabilities, 2010.

<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2012/demo/p70-131.pdf>

Jesus said “let the little children come.”

- Matthew 19: 13-14 “Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’”

The Body of Christ here on earth is incomplete without the disabled.

- 1 Corinthians 12:18-28 “...on the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow to greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another...”
- I Corinthians 10:17 “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

The Sacraments

Today’s sacraments of Baptism and The Lord’s Supper each have an Old Testament counterpart. The New Covenant practice of baptism has replaced circumcision. The Covenant relationship established between God and man in Genesis 17 was so powerful that Abraham did not hesitate as a man in his nineties to be circumcised. All the men including his servants and slaves and his son Ishmael who was thirteen years old were likewise. All males born thereafter were circumcised when eight days old as commanded. The New Covenant established by Christ utilizes baptism as that sign. First generation Christians were not required to be circumcised (Acts 15:1-35). Just as Abraham circumcised his whole family, we see the families of Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia (Acts 16:15) and the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:30-34) all being baptized.

Likewise, Christ replaced the Passover Meal with The Lord’s Supper. On the night the angel of death passed over Egypt claiming the first-born of the land, the meal the household shared that evening was forever set apart to remind the people of their deliverance from Egypt. Jewish children asked questions concerning the Passover meal verifying their participation. By taking the bread and the cup with the body of believers we remember Christ’s sacrifice and experience His presence. Children of Christ followers, regardless of their individual understanding, should also be able to participate. It becomes an opportunity to teach Christ’s sacrifice. Calvin suggested that the Lord’s Supper “must have the effect, . . . of making the meaning and reality of the Cross so vivid that faith is strengthened merely by beholding the action.”²

Even in Calvin’s day there was controversy about who was able to partake of the supper.³ When Calvin discusses the supper as a gift, he holds that “the body of Christ is given indiscriminately to good or bad but there is no receiving except by faith. The body of Christ is offered and given to unbelievers as well as believers, and . . . the obstacle which prevents enjoyment is in themselves.” Westphal’s idea that unbelievers receive the body of Christ but are not nourished by it, receiving it rather to their own damnation – Calvin rejects as degrading to the dignity of Christ. Augustine also seemed to not be wholly concerned about who was

² Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 211.

³ *Ibid.*, 212

participating in the sacrament because even an unworthy partaker could be challenged in his belief.⁴

We certainly cannot disregard Paul's warnings to the church of Corinth concerning the Lord's Supper. When considering this text within the context of when and why it was written, it seems unnecessary to consider it a warning that excludes members of the Body of Christ simply because they cannot fully communicate to man their understanding. Charles Hodge suggests in his commentary of 1 Corinthians that the warning is "directly against the careless and profane, and not against the timid and the doubting."⁵

According to W. Harold Mare, this warning was to help those come to the table "recognizing the importance of this Supper that commemorates the death of Christ."⁶ The judgement spoken of refers more to a disciplinary judgement rather than eternal damnation. If an individual is not able to think through these points nor even communicate any level of understanding because of their disability, an exception should be made for them.

Allowing a space for the disabled

There are many scriptural references concerning the disabled. Some of the most spectacular involved those who still were able to do great things for God, like Moses, Jacob, and Ehud. In Luke 14 we are twice told to invite the disabled. The first reference could be thought of as the picnic invitation where we are encouraged to invite because it's the right thing to do not because we will benefit. The second is Luke's version of the parable of the Great Banquet. Commentary in the Reformation Study Bible tells us "the poor, and crippled and blind and lame represent the despised Jews who are not able to observe the traditional laws of ritual purity... and those along the highways and hedges represent the Gentiles." They were excluded because they were not able to conform to the rules of man.

A beautiful allegory to this subject can be found in 2 Samuel 9 talking about David and Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, Saul's son. He was lame in both feet and personally considered himself as a "dead dog." And yet, by virtue of his heritage, he was cared for and welcomed at the King's table forever.

Christ had much to say about children and their place in the Kingdom of Heaven. Commentary concerning Matthew 19:14 in the Reformation Study Bible describes the children as distractions, yet Christ "welcomed them as subjects of the kingdom."⁷ How might Matthew 18:5 inform this conversation considering the very similar language to Matthew 25:31-46? By excluding them, even if unintentionally, could it be that we are excluding Christ? Our children with disabilities, no matter their age, are so often thought of as distractions in church settings. Can we follow Christ's example to welcome them as valued members of the Kingdom of Heaven?

⁴ Ibid., 213

⁵ Charles Hodge, *1 Corinthians* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996), 207.

⁶ W. Harold. Mare, *The Expositors Bible commentary. with the New international version of the Holy Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1976), 260.

⁷ R. C. Sproul, *The Reformation study Bible: English Standard version* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 1705

In Conclusion,

We must acknowledge that all individuals are created with gifts and abilities unique to them exactly as intended by God.

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” Psalm 139:13-14a

And God intends them to be part of a faith community.

“But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.” 1 Corinthians 12:18

A disabled child of a believer, no matter their age, ought to be baptized in accordance with a parent’s (newfound) understanding of the new covenant given to us by Christ.

As a covenant member of the Body of Christ, every accommodation should be made to allow the disabled individual’s participation in observing the Lord’s Supper with the faith community.

May we truly show love and compassion to our brothers and sisters challenged with disabilities by including them fully in every church activity knowing that Christ alone chooses whom He will.

“For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” Romans 9:15-16

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Suggested Further Reading:

When Disability Hits Home: Shannon Sproul by Joni and Friends, 2009

<http://www.ligonier.org/blog/when-disability-hits-home/>

Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace by Michael Beates

References

Hodge, Charles. *1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996.

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