



TALKING
ABOUT

DISABILITY,
CHURCH
AND
FAITH

FEATURES

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All of the following articles are part of the Disability Justice Group area on the Baptists Together website. This area of the website contains a number of posts, contributed by members of the Baptist Union Disability Justice Group, and others. The purpose is to help churches, pastors and anyone else who wants to think more deeply about disability from the point of view of Christian faith and church practice. Find them with this link: www.baptist.org.uk/djblogs

An Introduction

If we are honest with ourselves, disability is an unsettling thing. We are most comfortable with people who are like us. For the majority who currently do not consider themselves disabled that means people who fall into a fairly narrow range of statistically typical bodies and brains. On the whole, our services, worship and preaching are directed towards people we imagine to be just like us. The presence of people with a disability confronts us with people who are different from 'us' in a whole variety of ways. It presents us with people who speak, hear, move, sing, think and perceive in ways outside of the narrow range we think of as 'normal'.

Because we find disability unsettling, we are tempted to rush to a quick response to

this challenge, so that we can move along into less troubled waters. That quick response includes saying things like: "surely we're all made in the image of God", or "surely we all have disabilities of some sort." Statements like these are not completely wrong, but they fall far, far short of actually tackling the often quite deep questions disability raises for us as Christians and churches. Similarly, the idea of including people with disabilities in church life certainly involves, say, physical access to the building and facilities, but it surely goes far beyond getting in and being in the congregation. We also must grapple with our attitudes to people with disabilities being involved in worship, in sharing God's word, and in leadership. That includes thinking about how we preach in a way that gathers in those with disabilities, and how we

approach the many passages in the Bible that specifically involve disability.

For ministry and church life to be actually inclusive, to go beyond 'we are including them in what we do' and move towards 'we are all doing this together', our approach to disability must be built on what we believe about God (what we call our theology). It must begin with what we believe God's relationship is with humanity that, as we see all around us, includes disability. It must explore what God has done, is doing and will do in the lives of all people, including those who are different from 'us'.

The following features and resources aim to explore these sorts of questions so that Christians and churches can include and minister more confidently and effectively with disabled people.

DISABILITY AND GOD

A PLACE TO BEGIN

This article explores quite a fundamental question: whether God's attitude towards people with disabilities is as positive as it is towards everybody else. That is related to the persistent and troubling question of whether or not disability has something to do with sin. If we are honest, that question has led to a history of those whom we label as 'disabled' being regarded as less than perfect (whatever that means) and as in some way of less value.

There are lots of questions related to this one, such as how we go about reading and interpreting the parts of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, that involve disability, or what we think the resurrection body might be like. However, before tackling those it would be useful to see whether we can find a solid anchor for an underlying

confidence that people with or without disabilities stand before God just the same – that the good news of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus is for everyone. Can we have confidence that when we say that we are not just overlooking an awkward sense that there is something 'wrong' about disability? That confidence can then shape how we explore those other questions.

To get straight to the point, as Christians our faith is in Jesus Christ. As Colossians 1:15 puts it, **'He is the image of the invisible God'**. It is Jesus who reveals God and God's character to us most vividly. To be more focussed still, it is perhaps to the cross and resurrection of Jesus that we go to discover God's fundamental attitude towards humanity. There God addresses once for all the whole human condition and we find that God is for us

(Hallelujah!). He is willing to pay the cost of saving us from death and offering us life and new creation. What we find out about God through the cross and resurrection should shape how we interpret all the rest. As Jürgen Moltmann has put it, the cross is 'the foundation and criticism of Christian theology.'¹

So, the question becomes: what do we think the cross has to say about disability? Again there are related things to explore later, like the disabled state of Jesus' body on the cross, or the presence of the wounds of crucifixion after he is raised. But the core point here is what God deals with through the cross of Jesus. There is no doubt whatsoever that the cross deals with sin. We know that people continue to act in sinful ways, but we believe that the power of it, and the power of death, have

been broken and we look for evidence of that in changed lives. In describing that, whether we use language of sacrifice, justice or victory, Jesus takes our sin on himself and offers forgiveness.

But that does not seem to say enough. If the cross is only about sin, the moral failures of humanity all the way back to the Fall in Genesis 3, and is only expressed in terms of sin, then for the challenges and often suffering related to disability to be dealt with there, we can feel pushed into saying that disability is also somehow a matter of sin. We need to say more about what it means for disability and all sorts of variety, accident and risk to be part of what is to be human.² These can be sources of joy and of suffering. They can make us feel cut off, or alienated, from God and each other, but it seems too simplistic just to put them in the 'sin' box. Where do they fit into being human, into being God's creatures?

Going back to creation, we believe God created out of nothing. Creation is not just more of God and it is not perfect in the way God is perfect, although it is good and full of potential. For these things to be meaningful, it has been said that God in a sense must have limited himself to allow for that 'nothingness' into which he created.³ This is similar in a way to God being willing to limit himself to place his presence in the Tabernacle, or the Ark, or most dramatically in Mary's child. This picture creates a tension that we recognise in life. There is a constant pull back towards that nothingness, that perishing. There is a moral part of that picture, the risk of sin. Sin involves choice and we are accountable for it and need forgiveness. But there is a wider aspect to the picture. God's creation out of nothing in this

way also allows space for variety, accident and in the present case disability. Things have turned out one way, but might have turned out another. A word often used for that is 'contingency'. Some aspects of this are very positive, as people with disabilities will testify. Some are not, and many of our experiences are wrapped up in a complex way with society's often poor response to people who are different.

The main point, though, is that if we take what we believe about creation seriously, we ought to disentangle disability and sin. Each has its own place in a creation that is full of risk, which is why it is so important that God is always accompanying and caring for his creation. That brings us back to the cross. At the cross God is for everyone. There, in Jesus, he deals with the whole human condition, and bears the cost of all the consequences of the way that creation is, because no one else can. And he is as passionate about people with disabilities as anyone else. The cross deals with everything that alienates us, or cuts us off, from God and each other. That definitely includes sin. But it also includes this complex mix of pain, loss and frustration. In Jesus, God deals with all of that, and everything that is positive about any life, whether lived with disability or not, is preserved and fulfilled through the resurrection.

Exploring this certainly stretches our thinking, but it is good to do so. It affirms that when we come to the point where God and his character are most revealed, we find that all people, including those with disabilities, are included in God's purposes from the outset. Subsequent articles will consider some of the questions raised here, and others, about disability in the Bible and in church. But they will

do so with the benefit of this knowledge that the existence of disability is not inherently a badge of the Fall and the gospel really is for everyone.

Disability and God was written by David McLachlan. Find all articles at baptist.org.uk/djblogs

*David and his wife Mary are joint pastors of Dormansland Baptist Church in Surrey. For many years, David was involved as a governor of Young Epilepsy, an organisation providing care for young people with complex neurological conditions. He has been researching disability and theology since 2013 and is author of *Accessible Atonement: Disability Theology and the Cross of Christ*.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What has been your experience of attitudes towards disabilities (physical or otherwise) in church? These might be positive or negative?

What have you heard said about the suggestion that disability is a result of the Fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3?

What do you think about the idea that creation contains both a risk of sin and other risks and variety that can cause suffering but are not a result of sin?

JESUS AND THE BLIND MAN

PART ONE

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who had been blind since birth. Jesus' disciples asked, "Teacher, why was this man born blind? Was it because he or his parents sinned?" (John 9:1)

Every time we view a human body our minds recognise it as such because, for all the years of our conscious existence, we have viewed countless thousands of bodies and have laid down a mental pattern of what one normally looks like. It takes a millisecond to match the body we see with the embedded pattern stored in our brains and the whole process is completely subconscious. When we scan a crowd or meet someone for the first time, we subconsciously match our store of embedded

images to search for features we recognise. This is the point at which people who look different is experienced by us as a shock to the system.

Human disability therefore creates a tension. We will all tend to stare at a bodily difference we've not seen before simply because something that is usually a subconscious act (viewing a body and recognising it as such) is being drawn to our conscious awareness and we are thus forced to deal with the unusual visual data that is before us.

As a physically disabled person I am very aware that, when I am walking in a public place, my very presence is disturbing to everyone I come into contact with, sometimes profoundly so. My arms were damaged by the thalidomide drug prior to my birth and they look different. So people who notice me are forced to make an instant decision about which they have not been forewarned. Many stare, others look away, some do a doubletake, children ask questions of their parents, and occasionally people ask me why I am different. The most humorous example was a teenage American boy who encountered me in a restaurant in San Francisco and asked, in all seriousness, "sir, are you an alien?"

The disciples noticed a man with glassy eyes, or maybe with no eyeballs at all, and, fascinatingly, the very first question that entered their minds was a theological

one: "why was this man born blind? Was it because he or his parents sinned?"

In the culture of Jesus' day, the disabled, the diseased and the afflicted were more visible than they are within the societies in which many of us live. This is because they were forced onto the streets by economic necessity.

'In traditional Middle Eastern society beggars are a recognised part of the community and are understood to be offering 'services' to it. Every pious person is expected to give to the poor. But if the poor are not readily available to receive alms, how can this particular duty be fulfilled? The traditional beggar does not say "excuse me, mister, do you have a few coins for a crust of bread?" Instead, he sits in a public place and challenges the passer-by with "Give to God!" He is really saying: "My needs are beside the point. I am offering you a golden opportunity to fulfil your obligations to God. Furthermore, this is a public place and if you give to me here, you will gain a reputation as an honourable, compassionate, pious person. When a beggar receives money, he usually stands up and in a loud voice proclaims the giver to be the most noble person he has ever met and invokes God's grace and blessing on the giver, his family, his friends and associates, his going out and coming in, and many other good things. Such public praise is surely worth the

small sum given to the beggar.' (Kenneth Bailey – *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 173-4)

The problem created by such a tradition is that the beggar was forced to expose the part of himself that sets him apart from others in order to make a living. In doing so, he is in great danger of being defined in his own eyes by his limitations rather than his abilities. He also has no opportunity to receive genuine grace from others within such an arrangement since he becomes the net receiver of money in exchange for honour. Which of these, money or honour, is more important to our sense of dignity?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Why do you think John begins this human encounter with a theological question?

How do these cultural insights help you to view this familiar encounter differently?

What happens within you when you encounter bodily difference?



PART TWO

Returning to the encounter with the blind man, the question posed by the disciples reveals something about the way they were re-processing the world as a result of their journey with Jesus. Within their theological system there were two options: the sin that caused the disability was either located with the parents or the man himself. They were about to discover that there was at least one more option they'd not thought of but, before we get to that, I want to touch on the issue of the way we do our theology when faced with difficult questions.

Disability is only a theological question for those of us who believe in both a good and sovereign God. Yet, in my experience, most people tend to avoid this sort of hard question, maybe out of fear that the map they use to make

sense of the world might not be up to the job. The disciples ask the very question I wanted answers to throughout the whole of my early years as a Christian. Yet, for me, this was a high stakes question for at least four reasons:

- It risks upsetting the relative harmony of the present moment
- It risks putting the other person in an embarrassing situation
- It risks creating a scenario where 'any answer' will be dragged in as a stop-gap
- It risks unmasking the possibility that no satisfying answer exists

I have encountered numerous painful comments and actions from Christians who, on meeting me, clearly sensed the need to restore balance to their view of God and his relationship with the world as quickly as possible. These range from a worshipper who was overheard asking exactly the same 'sin' question the disciples asked as I led a service in her church, to Christians who jump straight to the insistence that I should be 'healed' (ie made to look like them) even before they have got to know me.

The lesson I learned from numerous encounters like these in my younger years is that I was an embarrassment to some and that it was therefore unsafe to explore questions that would make

people feel even more uneasy. Later in the gospel story we discover that the religious leaders had already bolstered their theology against any breach, a fact that is revealed by their response to the recipient of Jesus' grace: "You Mamzer" they shout, a term used for a person entirely born in sin and therefore beyond redemption. Neat and tidy theology is not only invariably wrong. It also has little place for any degree of compassion.

Jesus, as we might expect, saw things differently. Once again, he refuses to begin with the question of sin. He sees the individual through the lens of the Kingdom of God and seems also to be aware of the opportunity to recalibrate the grace equation:

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."
(John 9:3-5)

Such a question may be perceived as a threat by a religious teacher who saw it as his task to leave no loose ends within his theology, but the disciples seemed to have known they could be honest with their Rabbi and were confident Jesus wouldn't fudge the issue. Jesus' response thereby shifted the question from the realm of academic theology and

created a learning opportunity for the blind man and the crowd. Theoretical theology thereby became practical action in the same blink of time others would have used either to stare, turn away, do the double-take or ask the kind of question posed by the disciples.

*Jesus and the blind man was written by Craig Millward as part of the *Jesus, disability and discrimination* resource series.*

Find all articles at baptist.org.uk/djblogs

Craig is a Baptist minister based in Yorkshire, and is an Associate of the Northumbria Collective (northumbrian.org). He is the convener of the Baptists Together Disability Theology Hub.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

In what ways do you see disability as a theological question?

How do you feel when people raise questions about disability and Christian faith?

What prevents the religious leaders acting like Jesus?



HOW I JOINED THE DISABLED COMMUNITY

So I became a hemiplegic wheelchair-user three years ago when I randomly had a brain haemorrhage. It was very dramatic and I nearly died and I spent a year in rehab, during which I wrote a blog called *How To Walk*.¹ Since then, I've regained a lot of mobility and learned a lot of new skills, but I still use a wheelchair to get around.

Short story is, I've never been very sad about having to use a wheelchair and I'm kind of honoured to join the club (like have you SEEN a wheelchair backflip??). Jesus said the first shall be last and the last shall be first, so being in a minority

is hardly a bad thing. It's not just becoming disabled, it's joining a new community. That's quite a fun thing? I'd grown up as a Christian and done most of my angsting with God as a teenager, and I decided God could have my body long before I suddenly found myself in hospital. I'd been well-equipped by the church to face challenges.

I left rehab for the real world full of the self-confidence of youth, going back to finish my last year of uni. The poor rehab staff were put into a mini-panic to learn I wanted to leave so soon. I decided university was more important for my career than a skill like being able to walk. I dedicated my undergraduate dissertation to the neuro-psychologists who were more worried about me doing a dissertation than I was.

The world is expectedly not suited for me. I had pretty low expectations of the world's access, but it's one thing to know society is stacked against you as a disabled person (but there are people trying to change that!), and another to experience it. Hopefully I'll be sharing some stories of situations I've been in which made my wheelchair awkwardly obvious. I'm very aware of how fresh I sound, and I hope it's at least entertaining.

GOING BACK TO CHURCH WITH A WHEELCHAIR NOW!

The weird thing about returning to church with a big visible disability is that people assume you're not happy with who you are. I get that a lot of people secretly are not happy with themselves, but that's not true for me. I'm as God intends, no more or less. God is in control and he'll do what he wants to do, when he wants to do it.

Someone said to me on Sunday, "- but I bet you wish you were well."

I said, "Oh, I am well."

They said, "Well, it's very brave of you to say that."

That conversation challenges me to be grace-filled and humble (and not sassy and salty). I love Jesus' prayer when he says "Lord, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." I think of it a lot. I knew this person who spoke to me was a lot older than me and hadn't seen me in years. They don't really know me and their attitude is just a product of a more patronising view of disability which doesn't separate disability from illness. I get, I *was* ill, but that was a long time ago and I've really not been ill since.

Kids are funny. Kids accept things being different. They don't hold onto the illusion that they know why things happen, let alone believe they can change them. Yes,

sometimes they have no filter and say whatever is in their head, but there is no assumption about how the world should be behind what they say. Once a kid pointed at me in my wheelchair in the shop and yelled to their mum "What's THAT?" I just laughed. I think it's a good question to be honest.

WHAT A WHEELCHAIR USER IS THINKING WHEN THEY GO TO CHURCH

Ok, I'm really not the most experienced person to write a blog like this as I've not used a wheelchair for very long. Every disabled person has a different experience of church, so ask them! Here are some of the things I'm paying attention to:

When I see any public building from the outside, my eyes will look for the access. Nothing says 'disabled people are welcome here' like a disabled car-parking space and step-free access. I like my entrance to be as average as possible eg I'd like to go into the front like everybody else. I know some buildings have ramps they can put out on request, but I'd still have a little thrill of belonging to see a ramp ready and waiting.

When I'm inside, I'll always notice if the building has a lift or not. (I know they are super-hard and expensive

to install in old buildings, so don't worry, I get why many don't). An obvious accessible toilet is a beauty, and a space in the main hall as inclusive as possible. I'll quietly get myself to my seat with as little fuss as possible, looking (and feeling) for level-access. And if I'm in a manual wheelchair and I want to be pushed, I will ask someone, probably a friend. Otherwise, I'm fine and don't require help.

When I get to my place, I would just like to stay seated in my wheelchair, though many people would want to transfer into a normal chair. This is not because I'm afraid of making a mistake and falling when changing chairs but because I don't want the FUSS caused if I accidentally fall. I don't care if I randomly hit my elbow, I care if everyone frets on my behalf (embarrassing!). I'd rather avoid the possibility and not transfer.

I'm also initially subconsciously alert in case I'm accosted by a 'kindly prayer warrior' who may be lurking in the wings, ready to pounce with their prayer for my healing. If this does happen and they go ahead with praying for my ability to walk (won't work, the problem is in my brain, not my legs!), it's okay because I can pray to God as well. Two can play at that game ("God, ignore what they want you to do. Do what **you** want to do"). I know God can do whatever he wants, I'm ready for it, but please don't pray for something unless you feel super-super-**super**-specifically called to it, and even then, ask me! See what I want prayer for! Chances are it won't be prayer for healing.

Now I know most churches these days have good access and good teaching about prayer, and so for you guys I'd say just keep treating your disabled people as normal! We're not fragile Fabergé eggs or unfeeling cybermen, just average citizens trying to live our lives. And to everyone who has been my friend, and treats everyone the same, thank you.

WHEN DO WE STOP PRAYING

I totally get why people pray for healing for people when they've had a life-threatening illness, especially when the person has not been able to speak for themselves and it falls to everyone they know to spread the word in praying for them. I find it very moving to think about all the people in the world who have prayed for me without knowing me. But when do we stop praying for healing for someone once it's been established that the person is going to have a lifelong disability? Especially if they have accepted that fact and are okay with it? Maybe it just wouldn't occur to able-bodied people that someone might be okay with being disabled? Maybe they just haven't asked?

I personally don't really like the idea of being the centre of attention and the idea of being singled out in people's prayers. If people

still want to pray for me, I'd probably ask them to pray for God using me in my career, not that God will restore me to an able-body. If asked, I'd say I've always prayed that God's will be done in my life, and I know God can use me whatever my body looks like!

I don't want to just get rid of the bad things. I want to learn from them and become stronger because of them. And if that means a disabled body, I believe in a God who can use that.

The series *How To Walk* was written by Elizabeth Starr. Elizabeth is currently studying an MA in Children's Literature.

How To Walk (howtowalkbyelizabethstarr.blogspot.com) is her account of her rehabilitation after a brain injury.

She attended The Well when she was an undergraduate in Sheffield

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What is 'wellness'?

Do I really believe God is in control of my body?

Is my church inclusive architecturally and emotionally in welcoming people to the building?

Am I treating everyone equally?

Am I praying for what someone wants, or what I think they should want?

Am I praying for God's will in my life, whatever that looks like?





DOES JESUS HEAL TODAY?

It was at university that I had my first encounter with Christians who believed that Jesus was still healing people, and that physical healing was a possibility for me.

I had become part of a city-centre Anglican church which was known to be a centre of charismatic renewal. One Sunday evening, in response to a word of knowledge,

I found myself at the front of the church being prayed for by members of the prayer team. Despite the fact that the word of knowledge I responded to had nothing to do with my disability I soon discovered that members of the prayer team believed God had told them that my arms were going to grow to normal length and strength as a result of prayer. We prayed.

In fact a team prayed for me on many subsequent occasions. Nothing happened except that I became increasingly confused and self-conscious.

Looking back it is clear to me now how vulnerable we are when we come to believe something with a deep and durable conviction. In my own case I was led along by

others who believed God had something for me that was apparently not the case. Those several months of seeking God for a miracle we believed had been promised but never came led to deep disillusionment and eventually depression. As my psychological defences against further disappointment became stronger, I began to sit on the edge of worship gatherings. This did not stop others with a similar faith approaching me on numerous further occasions, bringing further confusion and more questions. I even began to fear that my wariness was doing damage to other aspects of my journey of faith.

‘Some people,’ writes Brian McLaren, ‘seem to develop an addiction to dramatic experiences that disrupts their life as other addictions would.’¹ Addicts of any kind tend to be self-deluded and manipulative and I have met so many who seek a healing ministry in order to add credibility to themselves or their ‘ministry’. The problem with miracles, if ‘problem’ is the right word to use, is that they can lead us to place too much attention upon the possibility of ‘gifted’ people impacting other ‘less gifted’ recipients without the need for a long-term relationship that is necessary for true discipleship to become possible. Jesus, I believe, wants to create close connections between people that result in changes that are, arguably, more profound than restored bodies.

I’m honestly not sure what I believe about the possibility of physical healing today. Jesus seemed to do all he could to ensure that the miracles that flowed from him spoke of purity of heart and the love of God.

I conclude that a truly Christ-like community must be ruthless in making such pure love its primary goal and that our definition of healing must include far more profound experiences than restored bodies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How do you define healing after reading this reflection?

How do you feel about expressing honest doubts alongside faith?

How can healing best be experienced within a Christian community?

JESUS AND HEALING IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

“Words mean what I want them to mean” said Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*. The same could be said, it seems, of the way people understood Jesus’ miracles. Just after John records Jesus’ first run-in with the authorities he tells us that ‘while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name’ (John 2:23). In the following chapter we are told that Nicodemus’ secret visit to Jesus began with the confession, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no

one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him” (John 3:1). John then tells us that a whole Samaritan village believes in Jesus following the woman’s testimony of his prophetic ability and that he finds a similar welcome across Galilee for ‘they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival’.

Yet, ‘Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person’ (John 2:24-25).

The first indication that Jesus is aware of the ambiguity of his miracles occurs in Cana, the town that had witnessed the turning of water into wine: "Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told [the government official who asked him to heal his son], "you will never believe" (John 4:48). Although, in the NIV version of the text, it may seem that Jesus is expressing little more than mild frustration, the official takes Jesus' words to be a rebuke. Textual critics tell us that the form of words chosen by John is a traditional Hebrew expression which makes little sense when posed as a question as the NIV does. The official's son is healed and the whole household believes, but Jesus' deeper misgivings are clear.

In the chapters that follow, Jesus continues to meet needs (John 5:1-15; 6:10-13), crowds follow him as a consequence (John 6:1-2), and many people believe (John 6:14). He even points Jewish leaders to the signs as evidence of his credentials (John 5:36). Yet it was the argument about the self-centredness of those seeking miracles that led to Jesus' insistence that those who considered themselves true followers should "feed on me" and "live because of me" (John 6:57). This seems to be a watershed moment in the Gospel. Following this showdown John tells us that Jesus holes himself up in Galilee to the degree that his brothers taunt him: "Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may

see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world" (John 7:3-4).

Jesus knew that, despite being exposed to his miracles and his teaching, even his own brothers didn't have the faith that was required to be a disciple (John 7:5). Onlookers continued to accept that he may be the Messiah but this judgement was merely based upon the subjective opinion that there were no greater miracles possible than the ones they had witnessed. I conclude that a faith based on miracles may be as commendable as it is understandable (John 14:11) but is also incomplete unless it also calls people to follow as a disciple (John 2:23). As Jesus said to Thomas, admittedly in a different context: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

Does Jesus Heal Today and Jesus and Healing in John's Gospel were written by Craig Millward as part of the Healing resource series. Find all articles at baptist.org.uk/djblogs

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

The church is divided in many ways over the question of healing.

Three examples:

a) The bible does not describe actual miracles but recounts stories that have grown taller in the telling.

b) Signs like healing were once made available to Jesus and the early church, maybe they have ceased now that the scriptures are complete.

c) God heals people today just as he has always done.

In what ways have you wrestled with this question?

Jesus seemed to struggle with the attitudes of those who wanted to follow him. In what ways can you sympathise with him?

How is the faith produced by witnessing something you cannot explain incomplete?

A reflection on a baptism

Reflecting on a real situation often encourages us to inspect our true convictions, and to reassess things we have never previously questioned. I recently baptised my 19-year-old daughter who has severe and complex special needs. Some friends asked me to write about the baptism in case it is of use to others in ministry.

A child of the manse, our daughter has attended church since she was two weeks old. As a family we have been members of five different Baptist churches during her lifetime (of these I have been in pastoral charge of two). At each she has been welcomed into the fellowship as fully as possible, for which we have been grateful.

In these churches a variety of cultures existed regarding the two key practices of baptism and communion. For example, some allowed children to receive communion, while others preferred not. Moving between two churches with different views showed us that problems can arise when you move either a child or someone with learning difficulties from a church that permits receiving bread

and wine to one that doesn't. They may not understand why things are different.

I want to focus on baptism and not communion in this article, but I mention it to illustrate the key question of how we understand, and put into practice, the concept of the body of Christ, which I believe has profound implications for those with learning difficulties. Is the body of Christ a group of *individuals* who self-selectively coordinate themselves, or is it the *integrated* body of a Person?

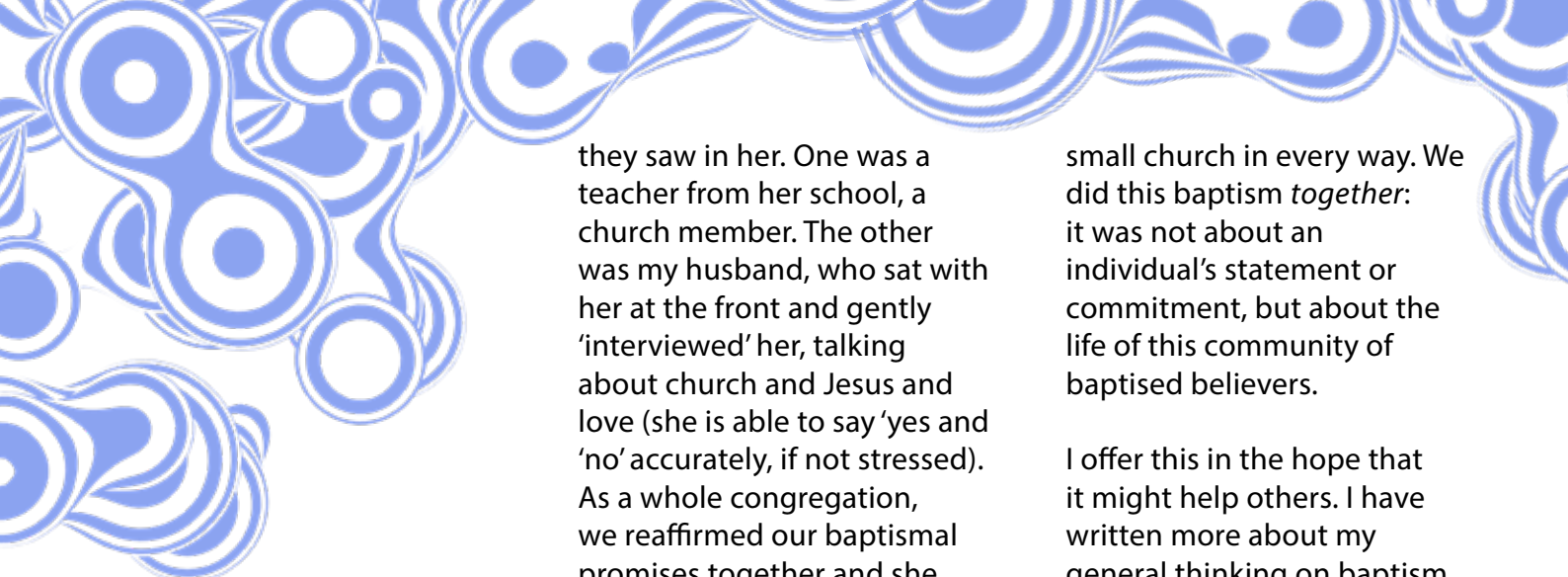
As she grew older, our daughter's delight in attending church and joining in worship became evident. The question of baptism and membership became pressing for us. There was never any issue about, or objection to, her baptism in our fellowship, but I was anxious to think through the practical and theological implications.

First, the practical matters, which were the least difficult. She is wheelchair-dependent with physical hypersensitivity. Our church meets in a school and has no baptistry. We considered the options of the swimming pool and of hiring

a baptistry (and a hoist!) and decided against both on the grounds of her dignity and of the possibility of causing her pain. Pouring water over her would have been another option, but her hypersensitivity made that seem unkind. In the end we settled for sprinkling as the only compassionate way.

What about her cognitive, and speech and language, difficulties? Normally a baptismal candidate can profess his/her faith either by testimony or by standard responses: she could do neither. Here several more questions arose, of relevance to baptistic communities.

- Did she truly understand the commitment of faith to which she was called?
- How could she profess her faith? She is verbally unable to tell her story and she can't read or write.



If I had asked closed questions in the tradition of profession of faith, her 'best' word under pressure is 'No'—not the ideal response when asking if Jesus is her Lord and Saviour.

- How could she publicly commit herself to the community of the baptised?

These matters were resolved as follows.

We decided that the cognitive reception of her faith was not, and could not be, a prohibitive issue. There is plenty she can't understand, but she is evidently able to enter the spirit of worship within our community, and she has a heart of gold, hating to see anyone in pain. She thus satisfies Jesus' summary of the commandments: love God and love other people. Had even this level of demonstrable faith been missing because of greater cognitive damage, I still think, on reflection, that I could not have denied baptism to faithful members of the community if the body of Christ metaphor is taken seriously.

During the service we asked others to speak of the faith

they saw in her. One was a teacher from her school, a church member. The other was my husband, who sat with her at the front and gently 'interviewed' her, talking about church and Jesus and love (she is able to say 'yes and 'no' accurately, if not stressed). As a whole congregation, we reaffirmed our baptismal promises together and she was a non-verbal part of that reaffirmation: here truly was the body of Christ.

One of the church leaders helped me to sprinkle the water (something we'd practised at home so that it wasn't a surprise) and to pray for her. Our church secretary presented her with a fine purple Bible (her favourite colour) on behalf of the church, which she brings proudly each week though she cannot read it.

We had plenty of music, which she loves; a quiz about water and an offering for Water Aid (to connect water with life in a practical as well as a spiritual manner); a lunch for everyone afterwards. Our small fellowship swelled to three times its normal size, with many non-believers present because they loved her. Jesus was glorified.

I believe this baptism took seriously our corporate life as the body of Christ—and in a manner that is truly baptistic. Her faith was demonstrated and articulated by *the body of which she is also a part*, and she will be supported by this fellowship in her commitment to Jesus. She is a part of our

small church in every way. We did this baptism *together*: it was not about an individual's statement or commitment, but about the life of this community of baptised believers.

I offer this in the hope that it might help others. I have written more about my general thinking on baptism in a chapter in the recent festschrift for Chris Ellis, *Gathering Disciples*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What struck you most in Sally's account of her daughter's baptism?

How do you feel about the idea of a faith that cannot be explained verbally?

Thinking about the body of Christ, to what extent is faith a corporate thing, as well as personal?

Was there anything here that you think might enrich anyone's baptism, whether disabled or not?

Reflection on a Baptism is a copy of an article by Sally Nelson, from *bmj* October 2018, pp 28-29.

Sally is Dean of Baptist Formation at St Hild College and Hub Tutor in the YBA for Northern Baptist College.



The idea of the image of God often comes up quite early in discussions about disability and Christian faith. We find in the Bible, as early as Genesis 1:27, that people are made in the image of God. That seems to be a crucial part of our worth as human beings, as well as part of our calling by God to be stewards of creation and, in some way, his representatives within it. But disability, whether physical or intellectual, challenges what we think it means to be made in God's image. We rightly want to claim that people with profound intellectual disabilities, or born without

certain limbs or organs, along with everyone else, is made in God's image. So, what is that image and what can we really say about it?

This article offers some ideas to help with this discussion. Each idea is only part of the picture, and because of our particular personal experiences, some people will find one idea more useful or less useful than others.

1 The disabled God(!)

Nancy Eiesland, a pioneer of disability theology, asked us to think how we would react to the possibility of God in a sip-puff wheelchair. That is the

type of chair used by people who are paralysed and that is controlled by the person's breath, using a tube, or 'wand'. Eiesland was challenging our image of God himself and raising the possibility that we have simply conjured up an image of God that looks like the 'typical' or idealised person, albeit usually male. We often think of God as elderly (the Ancient of Days), but rarely do we think of him as disabled. Eiesland's discussion about the possibility of a 'disabled God' is an imaginative, disruptive idea to get us thinking, but it only takes us so far. After all, we cannot look into heaven

and see whether the Ancient of Days does indeed have any such impairments.¹

More useful is to think about Jesus. After all, borrowing some words from Paul (Colossians 1:15), '**the Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.**' As many a sermon has told us, if we want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He is Immanuel, God with us. He lived a real life, with all the knocks and risks that entailed. We are not told that he had any impairments we would label as disabilities. However, through his passion, and crucifixion, Jesus was treated very badly, and we can see that he was progressively disabled to the point of death. Therefore, if Jesus reveals God to us, and if the deepest revelation of God is on the cross, where we discover that God would even choose to die in our place, what do we find there? At that moment, the image of God we find is of an impaired human body that seems to speak powerfully of solidarity with disability. The image of God we find on the cross shows solidarity, not only with the fact of being disabled, but with a sense of shame, humiliation, and the hostile stare of those around him that so often, sadly, can accompany it.²

2 The wounds of the Cross

Of course, the story hardly ends with the broken body of Jesus on the cross. There is more to filling in our idea of the image of God than that. Christ is risen! If we have faith in Jesus, then we are 'one in Christ' as Paul puts it in

Galatians 3:28, or in Jesus' own words in John 14:20 '**I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.**' So what sort of risen, ascended, reigning Christ are we 'in'?

Luke (24:39-40) and John (20:27) tell us clearly that after the resurrection, Jesus bears the wounds of crucifixion in his hands and feet and side. This is how the disciples know that it is him - both that it is the crucified Jesus that is meeting with them and that he is real, physical, present, and not a ghost or figment of their imagination. We should be honest here and recognise that Jesus is not making a point about disability and inclusion (at least from the way the gospels describe these meetings). But nonetheless, this is definitely the image of the risen, triumphant Son of God, and this image includes impairment. It seems reasonable to assume that when Jesus ascends to sit at the right hand of his Father in heaven (eg Colossians 3:1), he retains those wounds. They are now part of what it is to be Jesus. That raises two suggestions. The first is that the risen Jesus also shows solidarity with all humanity, inclusive of impairment. It was not just a transitory thing on the cross. We can say quite clearly that the image of God, in which humanity is made, is incomplete unless we recognise impairment within it.³ The second suggestion (to be explored in another post!) is the possibility of impairment continuing to exist in some form in heaven, in the new creation.

3 The image of God and 'reason'

People have wrestled for centuries with what it means for humanity to be made in the image of God. A common approach has been to ask what it is that sets humans apart from the rest of creation. Perhaps that is what makes us special in God's eyes, and lets us say we are made in his image. Much of that discussion has focussed on the fact that humans, 'unique' in the animal kingdom, have reason, the ability to think independently and rationally, solve problems and explore abstract thought. We also have self-awareness and 'agency', the ability to set goals and work towards reaching them. However, that train of thought rather hits the buffers when we consider people with intellectual impairment. Whatever criteria we set for measuring this reason and agency, there will be some people who do not meet those criteria. That leaves us scrambling for arguments that those people are equally made in God's image and of equal worth.

Perhaps a better starting place is to see that our value as humans made in God's image is not something special within us, but something outside us, something that begins with God. The Dutch theologian Hans Reinders has written extremely well about this.⁴ He suggests there are two parts to this. The first is God's gift of life itself. God has chosen freely, out of love, to give us life. The second part is to do with the end purpose of life. God has given

us, through Jesus, the gift of resurrection life and an eternal place in God's new creation. These are both God's acts of friendship towards us. It is God's friendship that gives us value and that defines what it means to be made in his image. It has nothing to do with individualism, reason or setting goals, ideas that are oppressive to those who are unable to express them.

4 Revealing what it is to be human

This idea has to be handled with care. I am not currently disabled, but the testimony of many who have lived closely with family members, or those in their care, who are disabled is of profound importance. One thing often said is that people who are disabled, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, are less guarded and more open than people who are not disabled. The point here is that there is a strong tendency amongst us humans to project an image of strength, independence, resilience, and success (to varying degrees). The suggestion is that through those with disabilities, God reveals to us what it truly means to be human. In truth, humans made in God's image are vulnerable and dependent (on others and on God) and often fragile. We have taken an illusion of strength and success, imposed it on God, and reflected it back on ourselves as what we 'ought' to be. Those with disabilities help us to be more honest about ourselves.

The reason this has to be handled with care, of course,

is that we would not want to conclude from it that it is therefore necessary that some people live with disabilities in order to fulfil this 'vocation' of revealing our self-deceptions to us. Rather, God works through the world as it is.⁵

5 Going deeper: God's attitude to disability

The ideas in this article are all helpful pieces of the picture. Is there anything deeper that draws them together? One of the other articles ('Disability and God: a Place to Begin') asked about God's basic attitude to disability. It suggested that the cross, and what happened there, is really the testing place for all the things we believe about God. At the cross God reveals himself, his image, most vividly and there we discover that God is for us - he will even give himself over to death to save us.

At the cross God deals with the whole human predicament. He certainly deals with sin. But surely he deals with everything that cuts us off, or alienates us, from himself and from others. That includes aspects of disability, whether within ourselves, in others, or in society, that alienate us. Those are dealt with at the cross, and the good things about any life, including one lived with a disability, are preserved through the resurrection. If that is true, then at the cross God shows he is for all humanity, inclusive of variety and disability, right from the start. We are all 'within the camp'. Surely that is at the heart of what it means for all

humanity to be made in God's image.

The benefit of revisiting the cross like this is that it means each of the other ideas explored does not have to carry all the weight, or answer all the questions. Our main source of confidence in God's attitude to disability is the cross, the cornerstone of Christian faith. Each of the other ideas can shine a light on part of the picture, without having to be pushed too far. For example, the wounds on Jesus' risen body point to an image of God in solidarity with impairment, without having to answer all the questions about, say, what God also thinks about intellectual disability, or congenital impairments.⁶

Disability and the image of God was written by David McLachlan.

Find all articles at baptist.org.uk/djblogs

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How do you feel about Nancy Eiesland's suggestion that we might imagine a disabled God?

If the wounds of the cross identify with physical disabilities, how does Jesus identify with intellectual impairment?

How do you feel about being made in God's image really starting with his friendship towards us, not with our own reason, or other qualities?



Vulnerable Communion

— A REVIEW —

This is quite a substantial book to read, but it is also very accessible. Reynolds writes from his experience as both a theologian and having a son with Tourette's syndrome and other challenges. The book sets out very clearly the questions that disability raises for Christian faith and theology. It looks at how God identifies with humanity and what it means for people to be made in the image of God. For Reynolds, the image of God is relational. One of the book's strong

themes is that the pressure to be 'normal' can become a sort of tyranny to anyone who does not fit into a 'typical' pattern of body or brain.

Overall, Reynolds argues that through disability we can discover that all human beings are vulnerable. The model is Jesus' own embracing of vulnerability through the incarnation and the cross. Vulnerability allows true communion with God and if we embrace our vulnerability, the community of the church

can become one that offers true hospitality to all. This is an excellent, thought-provoking read.

Details:

Author: Reynolds, Thomas E
Title: *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*

Publisher: Grand Rapids: Brazos Press (2008)

Review by: David McLachlan

GOD, THE CHURCH, AUTISM AND MEN

The world is becoming a friendlier place for the 700,000 people in the UK who have an autistic spectrum (AS) diagnosis. The spectrum is varied, and whilst some individuals may display characteristics that are recognisable to those who know what to look for, there are many more on the spectrum who struggle silently. They may have learned to fit in, but often still feel the world to be an alien environment.

I know, because I am one of them. I didn't receive a diagnosis until I was in my mid-50s, and it took me a good few years to reprocess key events in my life in the light of this new knowledge. Moments of enlightenment came alongside periods of

deep mourning as I grasped the reality that, despite every extreme effort I had made to fit in, I was never going to glide as effortlessly through life as I dreamed I would. I worked hard to copy the hidden scripts that everyone else seemed to know instinctively, but every time I learned a script it changed. Fitting in is hard work.

By the time I received my diagnosis I had a 30+ year career as a church minister behind me. My natural abilities to arrange ideas in unique ways and connect disparate themes into a coherent narrative made me a popular preacher. I knew I had weaknesses, so I empowered others to fill in where I was weak. I saw instinctively that much of church culture was

foreign to those on the edge, and to potential newcomers, so I worked to change the culture whilst being blind to my own differently-wired brain.

If you Google the text 'mentalizing deficits constrain belief in a personal God' you will find an academic article that blew my life apart. It reports that 'adults who reported being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder were more likely than a neuro-typical comparison group to self-identify as atheist and less likely to belong to an organised religion'. Hans Asperger believed 'The autistic personality is an extreme variant of male intelligence... In the autistic individual the male pattern is exaggerated to the extreme'. The link between

the two quotes is profound. As a church leader I had observed, not only that women tended to engage with church services and events more profoundly, but that men are more likely to be non-believers. I am convinced there is a link.

It is because people on the autistic spectrum have great difficulty reading social and emotional messages that makes it harder for them to attribute feelings and emotions to God, and thus relate to the deity in ways many churches encourage their members to do. My experience tells me that many men experience a similar challenge.

If you Google 'theory of mind in autism' you will find an article from spectrumnews.org that I do not have space to summarise here. It explains a concept known as Mindblindness, which I think has huge implications for those of us who lead churches.

For example, when we are told that God 'loves' us, neuro-typical people who can envisage a loving being more easily, will find it easier to imagine what a being who is not visible but who loves is like. And the steps necessary to draw near and trust such a God are well rehearsed in everyday-life interactions.

Someone with AS, and some men not on the autistic spectrum, will have a much harder time and may not, in fact, find the idea of being

loved by a being they can't see an attractive proposition. Being 'loved' implies closeness, which can sometimes feel threatening. It can also conjure up fears of a lifetime of trying to interpret even harder-to-read signals, since God has no physical features.

Part of the problem with the concept of 'love' is that it has been romanticised and sexualised to such a degree that it has become largely meaningless. Christian theology tells us that, because God IS love, he acts. Men and those with AS may find it much more attractive to be called to participate in the actions that flow from God's love - which is exactly what Jesus called us to do.

Another example is forgiveness. God's love leads him to forgive. Jesus tells us that, in order to receive and participate in the experience of forgiveness we must also forgive. Obeying this instruction is very tough, but it is practical. We are forced to take concrete action which is what men often need to do in order to feel something. The same could be said of concepts like 'grace' or 'justice'. Doing becomes the means by which both sides of the brain are activated and the truth of God is experienced.

God, the church, autism and men and Worship culture, autism and men (overleaf) were written by Craig Millward

Find all articles at baptist.org.uk/djblogs

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Are there more women than men in your church? If so, why do you think this may be?

In what ways are the words we use to measure our engagement with God helpful or unhelpful?

In what ways do you find the suggestion that 'doing should be the primary route to experiencing' helpful?

WORSHIP CULTURE, AUTISM AND MEN

Many of the hymns and songs we sing, prayers we pray and sermons we engage with are, by their very nature, upbeat, encouraging, faith-filled and sometimes overwhelmingly positive. But what if there are a group of individuals who are trying to engage with us but are simply left swimming in superlatives by the end of a gathering? The feelings, emotions and exhortations spoken about, and apparently experienced, in church are as foreign to them as a random collection of Egyptian hieroglyphs. And suppose this happens every single week, bolstered by the best testimonies and stories of 'breakthrough' being experienced by other people?

Individuals with AS will tend, not just to take words literally, but to assume that people mean exactly what they say. In everyday life this can make them appear gullible. But in church it can also give rise to a great degree of frustration when they assume the words we sing about God, and about other people's experience of him, are literally true... and that, as the song will often suggest, are being experienced by everyone

else in the room at that very moment. This can be hugely demoralising if there is no way to process the accumulated disappointment that results from repeated exposure to such events.

The problem, I guess, is that there is no point writing a song about an experience that we have to admit happens occasionally. But suppose the words projected on the screen on a Sunday are never going to be experienced, in any sense of that word, by a selection of people who are standing amongst us each week? Part of the issue is that the very act of singing generates a feeling of elation in some people, and that the 'high' is often mistaken for the presence or approval of God.

I am not suggesting we should aim to keep feelings at bay when Christians gather together to seek God. I do believe, however, that it is essential that we foster an environment where questions can be asked without fear of being stigmatised and where differences in our make up can be owned and celebrated. There is a tendency within some Christian subcultures

to normalise what is, by definition, the rare experience of elation and ignore the existence of mourning at the state of our world, and even confusion and doubt found within our core scriptures. We surely don't need a person with autism to tell us that the truth is important. And I seem to recall Jesus saying that it sets us free.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

We all have differing musical tastes, but in what ways is 'worship' more than what happens when we gather?

What part should our feelings and emotions play when we sing and pray? Are negative, mournful or confused feelings ok?

How important is it that we can be honest with ourselves, others and God when we meet as part of a Christian community?

Father God, all around us we see diversity in creation which we attribute to your imagination, wisdom and sheer extravagance.

May we learn not to turn away from people who are different and not to be afraid of people who have needs, challenges and limitations that we cannot yet understand.

Teach us to open our hearts and minds so that we may create opportunities to perceive your world from new angles and perspectives.

And may we seek to incorporate what we find into our lives, our faith communities and our homes, that we may learn to live in the likeness of your Son.

ENDNOTES

DISABILITY AND GOD

- 1 From the opening reflection on Luther's statement that *crux probat omnia* in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans RA Wilson and John Bowden (London SCM Press, 1974), 1.
- 2 The disability theologian John Swinton captures this sense that disability is just another way, or mode, of being human in his article 'Many Bodies, Many Worlds'. See this and related articles at: www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/index.php?id=92612
- 3 When we talk about God's act of creation, we are always stretching our ideas and language considerably. This idea of God limiting himself, or in some way being willing to have a relationship with the 'nothingness' out of which he created is explored by various theologians. Two examples are:

Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1985), 9-15; and Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 184-219.

HOW TO WALK

- 1 howtowalkbyelizabethstarr.blogspot.com/2019/04/1-hello-and-welcome-to-my-blog.html

DOES JESUS HEAL TODAY?

- 1 Brian D McLaren – *Naked Spirituality* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011), 16

DISABILITY AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

- 1 If you would like to read more on this idea, see Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

2 The Gospels are remarkably restrained in their description of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. Perhaps the description of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, or the words of Psalm 22, which are fulfilled in Jesus, explore this image of God more fully.

3 This idea of the wounds of the cross is also explored in Nancy Eiesland's *The Disabled God*.

4 See Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

5 If you would like to read more on this idea, see: Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014).

6 If you would like to read more on this idea, see: David McLachlan, *Accessible Atonement: Disability Theology and the Cross of Christ* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2021).

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VULNERABLE COMMUNION: A REVIEW

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GOD, THE CHURCH, AUTISM AND MEN

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God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important.

1 Cor 1:27-28 (NLT)



The Baptist Union of Great Britain, Baptist House, 129 Broadway, Didcot, OX11 8RT
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