

MAN'S DISABILITY - GOD'S OPPORTUNITY

Towards A Christian Theology Of Disability

by Kurt Bangert

INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities are all around us and will always be with us. When we notice them, we are sometimes unsure about how we should relate to them and their handicap. Often, we feel sorry for them or sympathize with them - an attitude the disabled themselves detest. They want to be treated as normally as possible, without our pity, embarrassment, prejudice, or condescension. They want, and deserve, equal treatment, equal rights, and equal opportunities.

Great strides have been made over the last few decades to sensitize people about the rights of the handicapped, about equal opportunities for them, and about our attitudes towards them. But many problems still persist. When even many non-disabled people struggle for their daily living, fight unemployment, feel prejudiced and neglected, how much more will people with disabilities continue to be the victims of an uncaring society that favors the survival of the fittest!

When we ourselves are or become disabled, the chairs are turned and the roles reversed: Then *we* are the ones facing a world that is essentially designed for normal people without handicaps. Then *we* are the ones struggling with fate, disadvantage, and a biased society. Each of us is a good candidate for becoming one of them. A sudden accident, a sport injury, a disabling disease - may just be around the corner, turning our seemingly carefree life into the mother of all battles: the fight for life, for subsistence, for recognition, and for equal opportunities.

We would all do well to understand the meaning of impairments and the basic underpinnings of our relationship with the disabled. A society's attitude towards its weakest members is the touchstone for that society's social conscience without which it would not deserve its name. Speaking here of a *conscience* - a confluence of moral knowledge and information influencing our values - implies that we are answerable to a higher calling. Our attitudes and acts towards people with disabilities can never be divorced from the cultural and religious heritage of our upbringing through which we are conditioned.

It cannot be mentioned early enough that *disability* is a relative concept. The distinction between those labeled *disabled* and those considered *non-disabled* is a rather artificial one. In a way, all of us are both disabled and abled at the same time. Those often looked upon as *disabled* no doubt have numerous abilities, and those who are ordinarily presumed to be *non-disabled* suffer from an abundance of limitations and disabilities. To err is human, we say, and there are limits,

imperfections, and disabilities in all of us. These limits may be part of our inherent human nature, or they may be constraints in connection with our upbringing, our education, and the opportunities that we have missed. Many of our limitations are self-inflicted. Conversely, there may be innumerable opportunities waiting to be seized upon and many hidden talents to be discovered. Human nature is essentially open-ended. For this reason, the questionable and unnatural dichotomy of disability/ability is in need of careful re-thinking.

In this manuscript, I wish to develop what may be considered the rudiments of a *theology of disability*. It is written primarily for, but of course not limited to, people engaged in the profession of rehabilitation and for people with disabilities. In fact, the idea for this topic surfaced during a meeting of specialists who had come together to discuss policies and concepts of rehabilitation. A need was felt to take a deeper look at the spiritual aspects of impairment and rehabilitation. Those who are disabled and those who are not may both benefit from such theological reflections.

But, so the reader might inquire, what is meant by a theology of disability? The answer to this question constitutes already the basic content of that theology. And by outlining here the fundamental presuppositions of such a theology, we shall even now be covering its essential ingredients.

Theology Of Disability Asks For The Spiritual Dimension

A theology of disability will attempt to look at the *spiritual* rationale of rehabilitation. Is there a divine consideration which drives on those who call themselves rehabilitationists? From a Christian-theological point of view, leaving out the spiritual dimension would be tantamount to removing the very foundation of our work. We would be building on the soft sand of our own machinations, not on the firm and sure ground of the divine imperative.

The spiritual or religious viewpoint is only one approach among many legitimate perspectives, all of whom have their respective right and place. One must not presumptuously subsume other approaches under the religious one. Rather, the religious viewpoint is an appropriate and fitting perspective which offers insights and truths that might otherwise escape us.

I see spirituality not so much in the sense of an added dimension among others, but as the totality of dimensions. A panorama view, as it were. Inquiring into the spiritual, or divine, dimension of our work with disabled people, means that we are placing our activity and assistance into the largest possible context. Spirituality, in its best sense, encompasses all others aspects, however legitimate each of them may be in itself. It may be regarded as a holistic, universal view of things.

In terms of disability issues, it may mean that our thoughts be directed from the immediate necessity of medical, physiological and vocational rehabilitation to the wider perspectives of psychological, sociological, political, economical, global, even historical and eschatological considerations. Spirituality may not constitute so much the *holy* or *sanctified* as opposed to the *profane* or *secular*, but rather the *whole* as

compared to the *singular part*, bearing in mind the truism that “the whole is more than the sum of its parts.”

Theology of Disability Asks for the Deeper Meaning of Disabilities

In theology, we like to ask for the deeper meaning of things. Meaning signifies matters of definition, nature, causes, and purpose. Hopefully, asking for the deeper meaning of disability issues will give us a better understanding of impairments. Could it be that the deeper meaning of disabilities has something to do with a higher purpose, an underlying cause, a nobler effect and perhaps also with a more refined definition of impairments?

All handicaps have causes. We shall touch upon some of them. But there may be more behind disabilities than the causes we seek to prevent or remedy. Are there deep-rooted causes underlying disabilities? Is there an ultimate cause to which theology can lead us? And given the fact that impairments have not only causes but also effects, can our discussion lead us to effects other than the ones we are normally confronted with? Can we think of effects and purposes which are undeniably spiritual in nature?

Theology of Disability is a Christian Philosophy of Disability

In our endeavor to find a deeper meaning for disabilities and for dealing with them, we shall attempt to develop a *Christian* philosophy or understanding. This is partially implied by the usage of the word *Theology*. When non-Christians such as Hindus or Buddhists talk about aspects of their religion, they often prefer the term philosophy over theology. The latter seems to be a word generally reserved for the monotheistic religions of the Near East: Islam, Judaism, and especially Christianity. It would surely be worthwhile to investigate the holy writings of other religions to ascertain what they teach about handicaps and people with disabilities. But this assignment must wait for another opportunity. Here, we shall limit ourselves strictly to a *Christian* theology of disability.

Incidentally, the term *theology* has a double meaning: It may, in its narrow sense, refer to reflections about the nature of God¹ or it may, in its wider context, pertain to the entire range of Christian-Biblical research and reflection. When using the term in conjunction with a topic such as *disability*, we declare our intent to look at this subject within a wider theological context, although our theological grasp of disability will also have a bearing on our understanding of God.

The investigations and studies that follow below are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. They are only a cursory overview which, at best, will prompt the readers to do their own subsequent research and reflection.

Theology Of Disability Is The Biblically-Oriented Viewpoint

¹In the German language also termed *Gotteslehre* in distinction to *Theologie*

Having defined theology of disability as a *Christian* philosophy, we must further qualify that statement by asserting that such a theology also ought to be *Biblical*. Although Christian thought draws on a variety of sources, its primary reference has always been the Bible. It has been the starting point from which any Christian theology has been developed. One need not be a Biblicist or Fundamentalist to assert that a theology, in order to be truly Christian, must be Biblically-oriented. A theology of disability is not just a Christian-flavored philosophy, but must draw its basic lessons from the great book on which Christianity was founded.

For many Christians, there can be no other sure foundation on which to build a theology. They assume that these texts have something vital to reveal to us; that they are a safe and sound guide for our thinking and beliefs; and that they disclose to us insights and discernments that we would otherwise find difficult to acquire.

Theology Of Disability Is Based Upon The Life And Teachings Of Jesus Christ

True to its name, a Christian theology of disability must be hinged upon the person of Jesus Christ. Any theology, to be truly Christian, must focus upon the central and crucial person after whom Christianity is named. How Jesus lived and died - and what he effected beyond his death² - constitutes the yardstick by which Christian theology must be determined.

The Christian religion is based upon the premise that there is no higher religious revelation than Jesus Christ, and that all truth must be judged by the truth as it is revealed through the teachings and preachings of Jesus, and by the God who is said to have revealed Himself in the life and death of the man from Nazareth. This is Christendom's most basic presupposition, its first *a priori*, its indisputable axiom. Is also good Lutheran theology, because the great German Reformer himself laid down the principle criterion: "*Was Christum treibet*," he said (which can be translated "Whatever advances Christ", or "Whatever Christ advances"). Christ, then, is our first and foremost teacher in our quest to develop a theological understanding of disability.

Theology and Spirituality

Theology is a science, but the pursuit of truth is more than a scientific preoccupation.

"It is important to distinguish between theology and spirituality. While theology is a disciplined science and study, spirituality refers to the inner life of a person which makes one able to come to grips with reality and respond according to one's ultimate insights and decisions. While a certain theology can be an influence on one's spirituality, the two are obviously distinct and different."³

Theologians would not be entirely happy with this distinction as they wish to believe that their own theological pursuits are closely interwoven with their spirituality. But the truth cannot escape us: there is a distinct difference. Theological expertise may

²The German term *Wirkungsgeschichte* looks at the efficaciousness of historical events.

³Sian Tesni, deafness consultant, in an unpublished paper "Theology of Disability."

not be everybody's cup of tea, but individual spirituality is anybody's prerogative. Theology may even cloud one's unassuming religious sincerity and integrity. The contemporary theologians of Christ's time were told:

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." (Mt. 23:23)

Translated into modern language that would mean: You may pursue theological studies and religious practice, but don't neglect kindness, fairness, justice, and compassion! Boast not in knowledge and your ability to use pious language but aim to develop an upright character!

The Gender Issue

I am conscious of the fact that our language is still largely male-oriented. This sometimes gives the impression that we are bias against women. The English language does not distinguish clearly between man as a species and man as male.⁴ Even the title "Man's disability ..." may irritate some Gender-conscious readers. Also, the Bible itself appears at times to have some male chauvinistic tendencies in the way it uses language. This is of course due to the fact that Biblical societies were largely male-dominated, as are most societies even today. This must be borne in mind when we look at Biblical texts whose language seem to disregard or overlook females.

There is an even more important reason to mention the issue here: Women often take a backseat in society. So do people with disabilities. When a woman is disabled, this discrimination is further compounded, and a female with an impairment is most often relegated to the outer periphery of society. Women issues have come to the forefront over the last 50 years. Disability issues have been brought into focus especially during the last 25-30 years. But few groups anywhere suffer from discrimination and a lack of recognition and opportunities as much as do women with disabilities. They are "the least of these my brethren" (note the language of Mt. 25:40⁵). From a Christian viewpoint which is supposed to put first those who are last, impaired women ought therefore to become our priority!

⁴French and other languages have similar problems, while German, for instance, can clearly distinguish between *Mensch* (species) and *Mann* (male).

⁵Some text variants omit "my brethren" altogether, suggesting that these two words might have been added later.

PART ONE: THE MEANING OF DISABILITY

Here we shall try to focus on matters of definition, nature, causes and purpose of disability. The word *meaning* is used here as a generic term under which the others are subsumed. Let's start with the issue of definition.

1 The Definition Of Disability

When it comes to disabilities, words have far-reaching implications. They are not empty sounds and ineffectual or inconsequential utterances. They can label, denigrate, condemn, exclude, or otherwise hurt people with disabilities. Words often carry nuances and undertones which may enforce biases or endorse discrimination. They have not only *denotative* (semantic) meanings but also *connotative* (insinuating) implications.

That is why, within the field of rehabilitation, there is a constant review of definitions and utilization of words. We no longer talk of the blind, but of people with visual impairments; the "deaf and dumb" and those hard of hearing are now generally referred to as people with hearing impairments; mentally retarded individuals are properly called "people with intellectual impairments" or "intellectually challenged people".

To be sure, the purpose of choosing the correct wording has not only to do with prejudicial connotations which certain words may convey but also with the fact that they may exclude certain groups of people who should, for good practical reasons, be included. For instance, referring only to *the blind* would automatically count out those with low vision who are neither blind nor fully sighted. Or speaking of the deaf only, would keep out the hard of hearing. Likewise, amongst people with intellectual impairments are those with mild mental limitations as well as those with severe retardation. Using the appropriate parlance conveys an understanding for certain sub-groups of disabilities as well as a sensitivity and respect for people with disabilities.

But I must also issue a warning here. Some people seem obsessed with terminological correctness. While arguing against the damaging effect of certain terms, they also seem interested in proving their own erudition. They have advanced a proper terminology to the point where the mentioning of certain expressions, if only for the sake of variety, becomes a serious offense. The term *handicapped* for people with disabilities is an example. To many, it has taken on a negative connotative meaning and consequently been declared taboo. The correctness is sometimes carried so far that the handicapped are referred to only as PWDs⁶, an ugly abbreviation found in many recent documents. I am not sure if the usage of such an

⁶PWD=People with Disabilities

acronymous label is much better than any of the other expressions no matter what their connotation.

Also, a correct and unbiased terminology, if used frequently and lightly, may quickly deteriorate into a disparaging language, unless it is accompanied by a sensitive attitude and a tolerant mind.

In this manuscript, while I am also concerned about correctness, I do take the liberty of using a variety of labels, mostly for the sake of diversity. I feel that whatever expressions I use will implicitly be loaded with all the bias, prejudice and intolerance which I carry in my own head. Or, conversely, the less bias we have in our minds, the less discriminatory will the words we use eventually become to the hearer. We must recognize that the disparaging effects of our words rest more with the speaker than with the words themselves. The word are but vehicles for the meanings we explicitly or implicitly convey.

So while we must guard ourselves against a discriminatory usage of words, we must also be reminded that words are an expression of who we are. They indicate our thinking and attitude.

Below, we shall first look at the Biblical words used to describe the disabled. We shall use the words as found in the King James Version, but also give some clues about the meaning of the original Greek or Hebrew terms.

1.1 *Biblical Terminology*

The words handicap, disability, and impairment - frequently and interchangeably used today - are absent from the Authorized Version. In most cases, where the Biblical writers wished to mention disabilities or persons with disabilities, they enlist the various disabilities such as blindness, deafness, lameness etc. as happens on several occasions in the New Testament. Leprosy is often added to the list.

Once in the King James Bible we find the expression *impediment* (Mark 7:32), referring to a person with a speech problem. The Greek word *mogilalos* denotes somebody who "hardly speaks". The English word *impediment*, literally denoting an obstruction of the foot, can be used for any disability, and I find the word quite useful, although it may seem a bit obsolete to some.

Another quite antiquated word used to describe impairments, is the word *blemish* found in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word *mum* probably means "spot" or "imperfection" and is used to circumscribe a number of disabilities. In Lev. 21:18-20 a "blemish" refers to "a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose⁷, or anything superfluous or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded, or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish⁸ in his eye, or be scurvy⁹, or scabbed¹⁰, or hath his stones¹¹ broken."

⁷meaning is uncertain

⁸different from *mum*

⁹leg stiffening through Vitamin C deficiency

¹⁰crusty skin spots

¹¹i.e. testicles

According to the New English Bible, the word “blemish” is replaced by “physical defect” and the rest of the text reads like this: “... a blind man, a lame man, a man stunted or overgrown, a man deformed in foot or hand, or with mis-shapen brows or a film over his eye or a discharge from it, a man who has a scab or eruption or has had a testicle ruptured.”

Such “blemish” or “physical defect”, therefore, seems to encompass not only any disabling impairment, but also those abnormal conditions which, while they do not in any way handicap the person to perform normal functions, may nevertheless be subject to stigmatization by society. Having a flat nose or something superfluous such as a sixth finger, suffering from a rash on one’s skin, or being a dwarf may not disable the person in any way except by the manner he or she is looked upon and treated by the community.

The definition of *blemish* (hbr *mum*) gathered from Lev. 21 seems to imply that most societies consider as disabled whoever appears to be abnormal or deviant, regardless of whether such a person really has a handicapping or functionally restricting defect. We have a tendency to reward the normal and to punish the abnormal, to favor the ordinary and to disapprove of the anomalous. The deviant is often taken to be devious. We must recognize, however, that it is perfectly normal to be different. None of us are identical, none of us are completely alike. Normality is but a fictitious quality attributed to a theoretical average that does not exist *per se* or in any particular individual.

There is another Biblical term which I would like to mention, although it does not exactly denote a disability but rather a weakness: “Infirmity,” also somewhat obsolete, is quite an accurate translation of the Greek word *asthenia* which literally means “absence or lack of strength” and which happens to be a modern medical term referring to a physical weakness or general loss of strength or energy. The Apostle Paul speaks of himself as having an infirmity which he also calls a “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know whether this condition, which seems to have given him constant or at least repeated trouble, was a disability, a recurring sickness, or perhaps some weakness of character. We shall return to Paul’s infirmity later, when we hope to draw a lesson from it.

1.2 WHO Definition

I leave aside Biblical terminology to discuss what amongst rehabilitationists is considered a standard definition suggested by the World Health Organization. In fact, the WHO definition has received worldwide recognition and acclaim. By presenting this definition here, we are already moving into a discussion of the *nature* of disabilities, which is the title of the next chapter.

According to the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH), published by WHO in 1980, there is a distinction to be made between impairment, disability and handicap:

“Impairment: Any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function. Disability: Any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within

the range considered normal for a human being. *Handicap*: A disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability, that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal, depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors, for that individual."¹²

The way I understand this definition is best illustrated by Eugene, a 12-year old polio victim in the Philippines who was left neglected by his family for many years and who, languishing in the darkness of their hut, hardly ever saw the light of day. Due to his immobility he acquired a contraction in his legs which would not have occurred with proper medical intervention, but now prevents Eugene from standing up and walking around. Worse still, it has prevented him from going to school, participating in play with other children or from developing skills which would have allowed him to develop into a useful and recognized member of his family and society.

The initial polio would be his *impairment*. The contraction through ignorance, neglect and non-intervention resulted in a *disability*. And the ensuing lack of equal opportunities as well as the disregard and disrespect in the eyes of his surrounding society constitutes his *handicap*.¹³

I myself have a minor impediment which few would even regard as an impairment because of the timely assistance I received. I am short-sighted. I cannot clearly see faces farther away than three to five meters. I cannot decipher any handwriting on the blackboard. Of late, I have also acquired a complication of this impairment in that I have trouble reading except at extremely close range. Had I not been so fortunate to have had easy access to an optician, when I was a young school boy, I might not have received appropriate glasses when I needed them. Without them, I probably would have had difficulties making it through school, not to speak of university training. Without proper spectacles, I would have limited education, less job opportunities, and be regarded by some as stupid.

Fortunately, it did not happen that way. A pair of glasses prevented my small impairment to develop into a disabling condition, neither has such disability evolved into an ostracizing or stigmatizing handicap: Society treats me graciously, and my bespectacled appearance perhaps makes me appear more intelligent than I really am.

The WHO definition has brought into focus two important necessities: For one, the urgency to identify impairments as soon as possible in order to allow for early intervention which can prohibit the impairment from developing into a disability that severely limits a person's functionality and activities; for another, the necessity to create awareness among the population so as to avoid any unnecessary stigma, deprecation or discrimination that would turn the disability into a handicap.

One might add at this juncture that parallel to the terms impairment, disability and handicap, one has defined actions aimed at forestalling these conditions:

¹²The quote is taken from the *World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons*, published by the United Nations in 1983.

¹³In the German language, the tripartite distinction is achieved by using the terms *Schädigung*, *Behinderung* and *Benachteiligung* (defect, impediment, disadvantage). A distinction has also been made between *Benachteiligtsein* (being disadvantaged) because of one's impairment, and *Benachteiligtwerden* (becoming disadvantaged) because of society's bias (Ulrich Bach).

“Prevention” seeks to avoid the initial impairment, “rehabilitation” tends to contain the impairment and its worsening into a disability, and “the equalization of opportunities” is directed at society in order to avoid the handicap.

This triple definition described above is certainly of fundamental significance.¹⁴ Rehabilitationists and laymen alike would do well to be aware of these definitions.

2. The Nature of Disability

In addressing the *nature* of disabilities, we shall attempt to throw additional light upon their meaning, essence and manifestations:

2.1 *Physical Impediment*

The first thing that generally comes to mind, when we hear the word “disability” or “handicap” is a physical impediment: a one-legged man, for instance, who walks on crutches, a paraplegic in a wheelchair, or a thalidomide child. A visible bodily impairment catches our attention immediately and often elicits our sympathy. Some experts lump orthopedic, visual, and hearing impairments together as being *physical*, in distinction from *mental* impairments; but the term *physical* more often than not refers and is limited to people with orthopedic handicaps whose disabling condition is restricted largely to their lack of mobility and dexterity.

2.2 *Mental Impairment*

In the Bible, we read little to nothing about intellectual disabilities, and it may well be that in former times mental retardation was not seen as a handicap at all. Even today, when surveying villages for disabled people, mental disabilities often go unnoticed, at least the mild cases. The more we learn about mental disabilities and intellectual impairments, the more we find of them in any given population. Also, the identification and the disadvantage of learning disabilities increases with the level of education in a given country. Incidentally, we usually do not count among this group the senile ones who are fast losing their intellectual capacities due to the aging process.

2.3 *Psychological Illnesses*

When talking about mental disabilities, we might also consider those with psychological or psychotic illnesses: those with schizophrenia, paranoia and other forms of psychosis and mental disorders. We normally do not include them among the disabled. But there can be no question that such people have difficulty living normal lives within their society. People afflicted with these illnesses usually suffer

¹⁴In this manuscript, the various terms are often, but not always, used according to their WHO meanings although I have reservations about the etymological correctness of the WHO parlance.

much more than the mentally retarded or physically disabled. Psychologically ill people may be physically healthy, and they may be quite intelligent, but they do endure mental anguish and psychological disturbance. In Biblical times, they have played a role in the life of Jesus who is reported to have healed some of them.

2.4 *Restriction of Perception*

A handicap would not be such a big problem, were it not for the fact that many, if not all, disabilities involve a restriction of perception. Man has evolved, or been created, to have a number of senses which allow him to discern the reality about him. These human senses, in conjunction with his reasoning brain, have assured his survival and even his dominance over other creatures, and they make up much of what man is all about.

The severity of a handicap is often judged by the extent to which it affects a person's perception of his environment. A visually-impaired person elicits particular sympathy as the serious restriction to his perception is immediately apparent. A deaf person also suffers from a similar constraint, although it is less visible and not as conspicuous as blindness. The person with a mental impairment certainly has a limited recognition and understanding of reality. Such perceptual limitation may not be so apparent in a polio victim but the lack of mobility surely can be a severe restriction in terms of traveling and understanding the surroundings. If left uneducated, people with physical impairments definitely have a limited reality perception. That leads us to a deeper, or theological, meaning of the nature of disabilities.

2.5 *Distorted Reality and Limited Perception of Truth*

Whenever our perception of truth and reality is restricted in any way, we may be said to have a disability. Whenever we fail to adequately interact with the world around us - nature or society -, we have a handicap. Whatever hinders us to understand truth, is a severe impediment. Whatever prevents us from experiencing or granting love, friendship, or compassion is as serious an impairment as any physical one.

In the Bible, defects of character and lack of spiritual perception are often compared to physical impairments. For instance, Isaiah 56:10 reads:

“His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber.”

And in another place we read:

“We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noonday as in the night . . . For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us . . . In transgressing and lying against the Lord, and departing away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood . . . for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter. Yea, truth faileth.” (Is. 59:10-15)

Hence, whoever fails to see the truth, is blind and disabled. Whoever discerns the truth and adheres to it, is essentially non-disabled.

The truth we are talking about is the truth about reality, about our surroundings, our society, and about our world, about the spiritual realm. Whoever opens himself up to look beyond himself to take in the grander panorama, is developing his or her abilities. But whoever limits his view, looks only inwardly, selfishly, egotistically at himself while disregarding others, is disabled.

“Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.” (Rev. 3:17)

Selfishness, self-indulgence and egotism are the greatest disabilities. Altruism, selflessness and love are the noblest of abilities. Paul has taught us that three things will last forever: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of them all is love.¹⁵

2.6 *The Ultimate Reality and Ultimate Ability*

If perception of reality is tantamount to ability, and lack of such perception corresponds to disability, then it follows that the knowledge of the true God, the ultimate reality, is also the ultimate ability. In the Old Testament, those who did not believe in the true God were considered blind, deaf and imprisoned in darkness. Contrary, whoever accepted the true God, was sighted, hearing and enjoyed the light of day.

“I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house . . . And I will bring the blind by the way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them. They shall be turned back, they shall be greatly ashamed, that trust in graven images, that say to the molten images, Ye are our gods. Hear, ye deaf; and look, ye blind, that ye may see. Who is blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger that I sent? Who is blind as he that is perfect, and blind as the Lord’s servant? Seeing many things, but thou observest not; opening the ears, but he heareth not.” (Is 42:6)

3. **The Causes of Disabilities**

¹⁵1 Cor. 13:13

Discussing the causes of disabilities will help us understand more about their nature and meaning. We shall first look at erroneous causes which have been presumed to cause disabilities but in actual fact do not.

3.1 *Erroneous Causes*

Several invalid causes have been ascribed to disabilities which have not been confirmed by modern scientific knowledge.

In the New Testament, some disabling conditions were said to have been caused, or at least accompanied, by *spirits* or *demons*. Among them are several incidents obviously involving psychotics, i.e. persons with mental disorders; then there was one with a speech impediment, a deaf-blind person, and a crookbacked woman (see Math 8:28; Math 9:32-33; Math 12:22; Luk 13:11). Math 17:15 describes as “lunatic” or “moonstruck” a boy who, by the description of his symptoms, evidently suffered from epilepsy.

There is, to be sure, a certain truth in that Biblical parlance: If we assume that the Biblical language of demon or spirit possession is a way of describing a severe restriction of perception or distortion of reality, then a deaf-blind person or a hunchbacked woman both of whom have a narrow view of their surrounding, may be said to be demon-possessed. That assumption is not far-fetched for if divinity has to do with reality, then “demonism” or “spirit possessions” can be associated with the distortion of reality and truth.

Of course, today it would never occur to us, if we are in our right mind, to label a deaf-blind person as spirit-possessed or somebody with a speech problem as being troubled by a demon. Neither would we request exorcism for a hunchback or an epileptic. However, there are still some fanatic religious people who believe that certain psychotic illnesses, some of which may yet be difficult to diagnose or explain, are caused by demon or devil possession.¹⁶

Another widespread superstitious misconception about the causes of disabilities is the notion that either the disabled person himself or his parents have sinned and consequently are being punished by God. “Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” asked the disciples of Jesus according to John 9:2.

We must admit: Many illnesses and even some disabilities are self-inflicted. A teenager racing recklessly with his motorbike bears some guilt about the accident in which he loses a leg. Parents who neglect to feed their children the proper vitamins and minerals, are partly to blame in case the offspring suffers from impairments due to nutritional deficiencies. Many disabilities are aggravated by negligence and carelessness. Hence, guilt is a factor in disabilities. Ignorance certainly too; and ignorance does not preclude guilt.

¹⁶There are, however, numerous reports even today of what is often interpreted as *spirit possessions*: where individuals have been cursed and were subsequently affected by disabling forms of anxiety, abnormal behavior or other mental disorders, which can often be counteracted only by more powerful convictions, beliefs and “exorcisms.” Generally, such phenomena seem to occur in unstable and immature personalities. Also, these incidences apparently happen more often in animistic societies in which people have very strong beliefs in the world of spirits and demons.

Even today, uneducated people in some societies tend to attribute disabilities to God punishing the person or the family for something evil they may have done. The notion that disabilities have their origin in the sin or guilt of either the parents or the disabled person, contains two serious fallacies: For one, many disabilities have their proven origin in circumstances beyond the influence and control of either the parents or the individual. They befall mother and child unawares and uninfluenced. For another, it is presumed here that God would punish sin and guilt by inflicting a disability. That portrays a cruel, revengeful and vicious God. It is not the kind of God pictured in the New Testament or the Christian God we should be conveying.

3.2 Primary Causes

Leaving aside the erroneous misconceptions of the causes of disabilities, I wish to enlist the actual causes of impairments as we can categorize them today. Following the tripartite definition of WHO, we can distinguish primary, secondary and tertiary causes of disabilities:

I shall list some of the primary causes here, without warranty of completion. These causes correspond to what WHO has defined as *impairment*. They can be said to be caused by any or several of the following:

- | | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| a. Diseases | b. Genetic damage | c. Accidents, injuries |
| d. Inheritance | e. Parasites | f. Intentional maiming |
| g. Prematurity | h. Consanguinity | i. Wars, shootings, land mines |
| j. Brain damage | k. Old age | l. Side effects of medical treatment |

Hunger and malnourishment are also primary causes and affect millions if not billions of people each year, giving rise to physical weakness and sickness that eventually lead to death.

When talking about causes, we must needs also talk about prevention. The avoidance of these primary causes may be achieved through: early medical diagnosis and treatment, genetic counseling and, possibly, termination of pregnancy, immunizations, safety precautions in traffic and work place, general sensitization, peace-keeping and peace-making efforts as well as prohibition of land mines.

As for the modern life-saving medicine, there are critical and delicate ethical issues at stake which cannot easily be solved. A good example is the survival of premature babies which often runs the risk of brain damage or other disabilities. Should a doctor allow a premature baby to die without medical assistance or should he assist in the survival at all cost, regardless of the ensuing disability? We cannot here go into the whole issue, but the decision will always be dependent upon the individual situation, on the measures to be taken to ensure the survival, on the probability and severity of the disability anticipated, and upon the reaction and preference of the parents.

Speaking of ethics in connection with medical prevention of disabilities, we may also touch upon the possibility of premature termination of pregnancy in cases where a disability becomes a probability or possibility through genetic inheritance. As genetic counseling becomes more widely available, the possibility of abortion to avoid a

disability also increases. This prospect has become an important issue in China where parents are allowed only one child which they would want to be able-bodied. If a genetically-caused impairment can be avoided in China, it probably will. The questions to ask here are: How undesirable are disabilities? And must disabilities be prevented at all cost? We shall return to that question later.

3.3 Secondary Causes

The secondary causes correspond to what WHO has defined as *disability*. These causes do not give rise to the initial physical defects but can cause their aggravation which leads to a functionally disabling condition. Again, I shall list some of them and give no guarantee of completion:

- a. Ignorance
- b. Negligence
- c. Lack of early intervention
- d. Lack of expertise
- f. Lack of facilities
- e. Lack of rehabilitation
- g. Lack of funds
- h. Lack of education
- i. Lack of vocational training

The measures needed to prevent these secondary causes constitute the core of what rehabilitationists or CBR¹⁷ field workers are supposed to be doing. Generally speaking, rehabilitationists will have little personal influence to actually prevent the onset of an impairment, and their services are most often requested only after an impairment has been diagnosed. Hence their activities are geared to dispel ignorance, avoid negligence, encourage early identification, facilitate early intervention and treatment at appropriate institutions, plan and oversee appropriate physical exercises to minimize the disability, and finally ensure the education and vocational training of the disabled person to allow him or her to function as normally as possible within family and society.

3.4 Tertiary Causes

The tertiary causes correspond to what WHO has defined as *handicap*. They are the reasons why an existing impairment becomes a social, rather than just an individual problem. These causes hinder the unfolding of a disabled person's potential abilities. They result in the stigmatization of the disability through society, and such discrimination isolates and ostracizes the disabled person. It give rise to the lack of equal opportunities within society for that individual. These causes are found in society at large:

- a. Bias and prejudice
- b. Ignorance and indifference
- c. Egotism and arrogance
- d. Misconceptions and misunderstandings
- e. Preference for the rich and influential, not the poor and needy
- f. Emphasis on productivity and effectiveness, rather than on social equity and humanitarian justice.

¹⁷CBR: Community-based Rehabilitation

We can easily see that a rehabilitation worker would have more difficulties dealing with these ethereal causes than with the immediate physical effects of the original impairment. The prevention of these intangible causes necessitates widespread public sensitization, awareness campaigns, education, and the development of a social conscience. Legislation is an important factor as is also the advocacy through self-help groups which empower the disabled themselves and force society to re-think its priorities and values.

A community in which these tertiary causes are rampant, is in and of itself disabled. A society which excludes or neglects certain sections of its population, is *per se* dismembered, for society defines itself by including all its members. The well-being of a society ought not to be measured only by the prosperity of its strongest and richest constituents but also (or perhaps primarily) by the health and wealth of its weakest members. If a society shows disregard for the weakest, it is itself crippled, lame, deaf and blind.

3.5 *God, the Ultimate Cause of Disabilities*

We have above already rejected the erroneous notion that a disability is God's punishment for evil conduct of either the individual or his/her parents. I am returning to this idea here to deal with some problematic Biblical texts but also to put the phenomenon of disability into a wider theological context.

In Exodus 4:11 we find a Biblical text which, if taken at face value, might lead to a misconception. The passage, incidentally, constitutes the first mentioning of disabilities. And such first occurrences are often of particular significance, not only because they reflect very early Hebrew thinking but also because they provide an important backdrop against which later theological meanings must be understood. It reads:

“And the Lord said unto him [Moses], Who hath made man's mouth? Or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord?”

If God is said to be the originator of the disabled, if he is even quoted as stating so, then God does cause disabilities, does he not? Is he to blame? Does he accept the blame?

The text reminds me of another puzzling verse in Isaiah 45:7:

“I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.”

What are we to do with such texts? Discard them as outmoded Old Testament thinking? Disregard them as relics of prehistoric misconceptions which have inadvertently infiltrated the Bible?

First: There has been a old tendency amongst believers of all faiths to ascribe to God the causation of things which we have not been able to explain. God is the creator of wind and rain, storm and hail, of the multi-colored rainbow, of light and darkness, of the moon and the stars. As long as we do not have scientific explanations for their origin, God is taken as author and originator. God is the creator of anything whose origin we cannot explain. That makes God a temporary stopgap measure for our

intellectual deficiencies and scientific mysteries. Once we can give scientific explanations to these phenomena, we tend to discard God as their causes because we no longer need him as the originator. God becomes a tiny little impish god constantly on the run, being chased by scientific discovery; Speedy Gonzales being run after by Albert Einstein and Company. It is the reason why modern man has no need of God any more. That is why God has retreated with the same speed as science and technology have advanced.

However, God's power and creativity must not be denied every time we find an explanation for a phenomenon heretofore unexplained. God is not the immediate cause for everything. But he may be said to be the underlying cause of everything. God is not God unless everything else is subsumed under his greatness. He is larger and more comprehensive than the world and the universe. He is not denied or disproved by any explanation or evidence, neither can he be confirmed or documented by one. He is invisible and mysteriously in and behind any reality and potentiality. He is the sphere in which existence and non-existence flourish; the realm for being and non-being; the soil in which good and evil, abilities and disabilities grow side by side. God is all and in all and beyond all.

If we believe in God as the creator, we thereby not necessarily make a statement on scientific origin or development, but a statement about each ourselves: We come from the mind and hand of God, we have been his creation the way we are, we are created in his image, with our talents and limitations, our abilities and disabilities.

Obviously, the Biblical quotations cited above are theological statements. But, lest we forget the scriptural context, the verse in Exodus 4:11 is not so much about God as it is about disabilities, although the two are delicately and intricately woven together here. Moses had a disability problem: "O my Lord, I am not eloquent ... but I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue." (Verse 10) Then God responds with our text, and I shall add the next verse:

"Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say." (11-12)

To say that God is the originator of our disabilities is to confirm that He is also the mastermind of our abilities. We cannot take our abilities for granted, for disaster may strike any time and make us disabled. Neither must we allow ourselves to be limited by our disabilities, for enormous possibilities, capabilities and abilities are ours. God's hidden reality and our unseen potentiality are mysteriously intertwined. He elicits our faith from which spring forth our possibilities and capabilities. God is the great Disabler and the principal Enabler.

4. The Purpose of Disabilities

Disabilities not only have causes, but may also be seen as having a purpose. As part of the discussion about the meaning of disabilities, we now move on to what I call

the purpose. The notion that a disability has a purpose may be regarded as cynical by those who do not believe in the spiritual realm or a divine dimension of things. They may readily accept the fact that some things are the result of coincidental or accidental occurrences, with no particular meaning or purpose.

And yet: a disability may give rise to one of those existential moments in life when we look for the meaning of something that for all appearance does not have a meaning or make sense to us. We tend to ask: Why? and hope that some sense, some meaning, some purpose, some sense will unveil itself to us. When happy and full of joy, we do not ask for life's meaning but spend our energies living it. Yet when downtrodden and desperate we all become philosophers who probe into the meaning of life and death and suffering.

The question Why? can be answered by pointing to the causes as we have done above; Hence, it is an answer which looks back to explanations about the origin of disabilities. We can call this the issue of *genesis* or *etiology* (origin and history). Yet the question Why? can also be responded to by looking forward, at the purpose, the end, the effect of disabilities. We might label this the issue of *teleology* (study of the end or purpose) or even *eschatology* (study of the last or ultimate things).

While we often fail to detect a purpose in life's blows that trouble us, we can either resign in their meaninglessness or give them purpose and meaning through the imputed values we resolve to impute to them or the goals determination we draw from them.

But let us look at two possible interpretations relative to purpose

4.1 *Disability as a Biological Necessity*

It cannot be denied that biological development can be seen all around us and has certainly taken place in the past. Even so-called creationists who deny biological evolution but believe in the one-time fiat creations, admit that many forms of life can only be explained by the biological development that is based upon the adaptation of the species to their environment and hence the survival of the fittest. That survival hinges on the ability to adapt to changing environments and the ability to fend off predators. Many species, such as the dinosaurs, have become extinct because the environmental changes were quicker than the species' ability to adapt to them.

The life of plants, animals and man is designed to allow for biological changes and development. There is a certain leeway for adaptation without which survival could not be assured. That margin of change may come in several ways: (1) physiological adaptation (such as the weasel adapting its coat for winter or summer environments), (2) selection through preference (choosing a mate best fit for survival), or (3) genetic selection based upon spontaneous mutations (such as acquiring an immunity, previously not existing, against a life-threatening killer virus).

The purpose of this inherent potential for change and adaptation is to achieve biological perfection relative to the existing environment. It is a flexibility which may ensure survival; but it also entails a dangerous vulnerability which at times may threaten survival: Not all changes are for the better. Not all mutations are desirable,

not all alterations are stepping stones towards further perfection. Some changes, in fact many, are an impediment rather than an advancement, an impairment rather than an improvement, a disability rather than an ability.

What we must acknowledge here is that life's capability for improvement implies its potential for impairment (in every sense of the word!). Life's vulnerability is inherent in its adaptability. Hence, the conclusion is forced upon us that ability and disability are two sides of the same coin. One cannot have one without the other. They come in pairs. Disability, then, serves a vital purpose from which we all draw benefits. That may not comfort the person suffering from a handicap, but it may help the able-bodied to see disabilities in a different light and view them with more understanding and respect.

4.2 *Disability as an Existential Necessity*

But there is yet another dimension.

Our whole life is characterized by the tension between disabilities and abilities. The struggle to overcome these inabilities and to acquire abilities constitutes the essence of life - which, incidentally, begins and usually ends in utter weakness and helplessness, while in between lies the contest, the battle, the learning process, the period of trial and error, the overcoming of obstacles, the mastering of skills, the development of obvious and hidden talents and gifts, and the compensation of weaknesses and deficiencies.

Let's face it: the inabilities of those who call themselves *non-disabled* are more numerous than we care to admit: I, for one, cannot sing, I don't play a musical instrument, I cannot speak Spanish, I cannot fly like a bird; others cannot swim, cannot dance, or speak in public. Some cannot be patient, or kind, or faithful, or at peace with one another; some people cannot believe, and others cannot love. Our disabilities and inabilities are legion. But they need not crush us. There is much potential, there are many opportunities, many talents and gifts waiting to be discovered and to be developed. The realization of our disabilities has a purpose: to help us appreciate our capabilities, our potential and our gifts.

A young baby boy, although void of many abilities, is not preoccupied with his limitations. He has an utter disregard for his many restrictions and inabilities. He fights and strives for whatever he can achieve. As long as he is loved, his limitations will not burden him down. Failure is quickly overcome by success. And tears dry up quickly to give way to smiles and laughter. He is thrilled by every talent he can develop, every success he will achieve, every gift he discovers, every skill he can master.

Our inabilities and our capabilities are intertwined to make up our identity. Without them, we would not be ourselves. They are us. They constitute our uniqueness, our singularity, our inimitability.

As inabilities and abilities are joined within each one of us to make up our very individual and characteristic personality, so a society as a whole is made up of different disabilities and abilities embodied in people. This heterogeneity and diversity is necessary for any community to function. It should not be difficult to

argue the case that a society in which all members are exactly alike could not survive for very long: Everybody would do exactly the same thing at the same time. There would be no distinction of ranks or distribution of tasks. That society would not be a living, flourishing, vital organism but a static, immobile, dead driftwood. Rather than complementing one another as living and loving members, the uniform components of such an entity would crowd out each other as unconscious and indifferent elements.

Therefore, inabilities and abilities are vital existential necessities, both for our individualities and the survival of societies.

PART TWO: THE CHRISTIAN MISSION TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

5. Our Mission

The reading of the New Testament had raised in Ernst J. Christoffel, the German pastor and founder of today's Christoffel Blindenmission¹⁸ the desire to go to a foreign land to care for blind, deaf, and otherwise disadvantaged people. The example of Christ had laid upon him a burden which he was willing, if necessary, to carry alone. When he felt the calling to go to Turkey to look for visually-impaired individuals, he first approached several German mission organizations, hoping that at least one of them would see the value of helping blind people in a Moslem country. He probably thought that the New Testament contained sufficient evidence to make these mission people see clearly these priorities. Not so!

Not only was there, within Christendom, a deep-rooted fear of everything Moslem (after all, Islam's forces had been approaching Vienna not too long before), but most European mission organizations at the time placed their priorities upon the evangelization of newly-discovered mission fields in Africa and elsewhere, where millions of "native pagans" were still stooped in heathenism and darkness and were relatively easy to convert. Furthermore, the "social" conscience of European Christian theology had not yet been aroused, and the Social Gospel was only beginning to be discovered by Twentieth Century theologians. Rehabilitation of the blind certainly was no preference or priority except for some queer individuals. Consequently, Christoffel decided to go it alone and founded his own mission organization which today has grown into a large, worldwide network of preventive, educational, and rehabilitative programs.

Christoffel's experience highlights two contradicting lessons: For one, the Bible clearly commissions us to help the blind, disabled, the poor and disadvantaged. For another, Christianity has not always recognized this as a priority. We must keep this in mind when using our own social measuring rod to judge other cultures and religions nowadays. Let us not forget that the diaconical activities of Christian churches took many centuries to develop and continued to be a point of contention among Christians long into the Twentieth Century.

However, Christian theology makes strong imperative demands on us Christians to serve the most deprived communities. Consequently, our social activities must not give us reason for conceited pride and self-congratulatory praise, but must be seen as the mere fulfillment of what is but our Christian duty and mission. The Biblical rationale for that mission will be given in later chapters. First, I wish to make some general observations regarding our understanding of mission.

There can be no doubt that we as Christians have a mission. Denying that would reduce our religion to a self-serving and self-indulgent joy-ride. It would even negate our *raison d'être*, our reason for existence. Christianity, rather than constituting a mere

¹⁸Also known as Christian Blind Mission International (CBMI)

set of beliefs, is a call away from serving self to serving God and our fellow human beings. It is, first and foremost, a commission, a calling to a mission.

Having said that, however, we must quickly add that the understanding of mission at the end of the Second Millennium is bound to be different from the mission concept that marked Christianity during most of the last two thousand years. We cannot turn back history or theology. Eighteenth Century missiology must today be seen in a critical light, and a more modern approach to our mission is indispensable as we move into the Twenty-first Century.

According to a traditional understanding, Christian mission has been characterized by the following features:

- (1) The preaching of the gospel and the evangelization (conversion, proselytizing) of non-Christian people.
- (2) The conviction that the Christian credo (set of beliefs) is the ultimate truth.
- (3) The establishment of many mission organizations, mission fields, mission stations and mission churches.
- (4) The life-time commitment of a missionary to his mission field.

A more modern concept of mission, on the other hand, would shift the emphasis elsewhere:

- (1) It would de-emphasize the preaching and evangelization, and stress instead the activities of serving, teaching and working. Instead of prioritizing conversions, it will place emphasis upon the alleviation of suffering, illnesses, poverty, underdevelopment, and rehabilitation of people with disabilities.
- (2) Today, while we still hold convictions and beliefs, we also recognize that our beliefs are subject to change, that our proselytizing may be a selfish exercise which assumes not only the superiority of our faith and dogmas but all too often also of our culture, customs, mores, and values. A modern view of mission might still argue in favor of the Christian truth but would at the same time be more humble in recognizing different approaches and avenues to truth. While God is recognized to be one, one would also admit that there may be different revelations of God. That no religion is entirely void of truth, and no religion is altogether free from falsehood.
- (3) Instead of perpetuating the justification for mission organizations, declaring foreign lands "our mission fields," setting up mission stations run by overbearing autocrats who stay in the field all their life, we work today in partnership with national organizations, strengthening their institutions and activities, allowing them to develop talent and expertise and handing over to them responsibility, authority, and accountability. Above all, the preaching of the gospel and the persuasion of the Christian faith is left to national Christians who often understand their own people better than foreign evangelists.
- (4) Today's missionaries, rather than being life-time evangelists, are experts, specialists and teachers who don't stay for life but are to work themselves out

of their jobs, being replaced by the ones they have trained. Their success is evidenced by their own superfluity.

Whatever our Christian understanding of mission, whether working in our own country or in a distant land, there can be no doubt, as we shall learn from studying the New Testament, that the prevention of disabilities and the rehabilitation of disabled persons is a major focus of our Christian mission constituting the very touchstone of the Christian truth in which we believe.

But before expounding on this, I wish to cover the important topic of the relationship between faith and works, word and deed:

6. The Paralytic: Spiritual Redemption and Physical Regeneration ¹⁹

“Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Rise up and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house. And immediately he rose up before them, and took up that whereon he lay, and departed to his own house, glorifying God.” (Luk. 5:23-25)

This story of Jesus healing a paralytic man entails a message about spiritual and physical healing. Based upon this narrative, I wish to address the relationship between these two aspects.

The two types of healings are of a different kind. The spiritual healing which is the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and the promise of redemption, came through the word; whereas the physical healing, which is essentially the regeneration of the body, was effected through an act of compassion.

Christianity has at times been sharply divided between those who have given preference to the proclamation of the gospel, and those who very much emphasized the need for humanitarian assistance as a Christian priority. Pitted against each other were evangelization versus diaconical service. Some people frown upon what they consider a gross neglect of the gospel message, when Christian organizations are involved in the business of reaching out to the poor. Others, fearing the attachment of spiritual strings to our material assistance, prefer to be altogether silent on the Christian gospel when offering assistance, and eye with suspicion those who appear to misuse physical help as a means to their evangelistic end.

However, there must not be a dichotomy between Faith and Works, Word and Deed. For a Christian, the two can and must be joined together, although they need not always be equally be propagated. The two do not constitute a dichotomy, but a duality. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News of the New Testament, comes to us not only as words of comfort and salvation, but also as actions of compassion and assistance. Our faith finds its expression both in the verbal testimony and in the

¹⁹The German language aptly differentiates between *Heil* (salvation) and *Heilung* (healing).

witness of loving deeds. One without the other is either hypocrisy or mere activism. Comforting words alone, without the accompanying deeds of love, will echo aimlessly past ears and minds; while charitable deeds, although they often speak for themselves, may need to be interpreted to be fully understood. Word and Deed should come together. They are two sides of the same coin, two signs of God's care and compassion. God is encountered through the preaching of the gospel and through the caring acts of love. Only through word *and* deed do we get a glimpse of God's divine presence, His eternal power, His kingship and reign. God's love, as any love, is revealed through loving words and loving deeds. If one is lacking, love is subject to question or absent altogether.

Not only do word and deed, faith and works go together, but they may be said to have, at least in principle, the same priority. We cannot claim that one is more important than the other. However, the first may be more appropriate on one occasion, while the second could be more suitable at other moments. It may also be that, for certain organizations or particular people, there is a difference in mandate and purpose, which would cause them to give preference to one over the other. Churches, for instance, have different mandates than hospitals. A Christian pastor may devote the major portion of his time to the word, while a Christian doctor or rehabilitationist will spend most of his time acting out his or her healing profession. Given our different backgrounds, professions and callings, we need not be everything to all people at the same time.

The miracles of Jesus, i.e. the physical healings of sick and disabled people, are obviously the visible side of an invisible power. One could also say that they were the visible *signs* of an unseen spirituality. As miracles, therefore, they must not be over-estimated because the deeper spirituality of the heart is considered more important than the outward and often superficial appearance. On the other hand, as the only visible tokens of God's divine power, these healings tend to have an important *significance* within society, even if they are not mystified by their inexplicability.

The Gospels speak of signs in more than one way. The miracles are generally referred to as signs (John 4:48; 6:30). In response to requests for signs (i.e. miracles), Jesus refused to work any miracles but said that the "sign of Jonas" would be the only sign to be given to his listeners (Mark 8,12). In Jesus mind, the "sign of Jonas" was nothing else but the preacher himself: "For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation (Luk. 11:30. 32)²⁰ This is corroborated by another reference where Jesus himself is explicitly called a sign (Luk. 2:34).

However, we can also conclude that the preaching itself is the sign. Explaining the meaning of Jona's sign, Jesus said of the Ninivites that "they *repented at the preaching of Jonas*, and behold, a greater than Jonas is here." The spoken word ought to be sufficient in itself. It is a sign worth believing in and repenting for. That is why we must speak of both word-signs and deed-signs. Both have their proper place and their particular *significance*. Word and deed are the two instruments by which God's

²⁰The interpretation, according to which the *sign of Jonas* was his 3-day stay in the whale's belly as an anticipation of Jesus being buried in the grave for three days, is to be considered a post-Eastern explication that found its way into the Gospel of Matthew even though it has little to do with Jesus' own original intent.

reality shines into our own. In the life of Jesus, both signs were present. And in the Christian church too, both must be there!

The spiritual healing as well as the physical healing both have a Now aspect and a Not Yet dimension. In one way they can be present now and yet remain elusive until a future that believers hope for:

The spiritual healing, i.e. the salvation or redemption, comes to us now through words of comfort, in form of an assurance about the forgiveness of sins and the removal of guilt from the conscience, in form of the healing of the mind and the soul, and through the living promise of ultimate salvation. Redemption is first promised us through the preaching of the word, and faith is our response by which we stake a claim for our future salvation. Hence, while redemption has an end-time quality, it also influences our spiritual well-being right here and now. Redemption must therefore not be relegated to a distant past, but may be understood as a present reality, experienced by faith. But while experienced by faith *now*, it continues to elude us until the promise is fulfilled *then*.

The ultimate salvation, therefore, remains subject of our hope and anticipation. No matter how comforting religion and spirituality may be, how reassuring forgiveness of sins may be to our troubled minds, there remains within every man a yearning and longing for ultimate righteousness, the vindication of the good and the rectification of injustice. Whatever healing we might experience here and now, it is but an anticipatory token of a greater and more comprehensive salvation.

Physical healing may come to us now, as in the case of the paralytic. In fact, we desire nothing more than physical health, absence from bodily pain and suffering. We want physical regeneration immediately, and are not satisfied with a mere promise. When pain and suffering befall us, we long for deliverance as soon as possible. But all too often, the restoration of health is not granted to us. Reality proves that our physical healing may be long in waiting. So physical regeneration, even if partially experienced now, remains the subject of our faith and hope for God's future.

Physical healing is one part of the whole salvific process. Even on this side of eternity, a sound body is hardly possible without a sound mind.²¹ And when it comes to ultimate salvation and redemption, no matter how these may be interpreted and understood, they cannot be thought of without physical wholeness or the absence of sickness and suffering.

Conversely, spiritual healing can also be understood to be an integral part of physical regeneration. In the story of the paralytic, the physical healing would have been incomplete without the healing of the mind and of the soul. Many today, organically well, are not physically fit because their souls and minds are troubled. Their physical healing cannot be divorced from spiritual well-being. Even when thinking of the ultimate redemption, this is often understood as the transformation (transfiguration?) of man's physical existence, including, however, his mind, soul, and spirit.

²¹"Sound mind" is here alluding to 2 Tim. 1:7 and is therefore not referring to man's intellect but to man's psychology and spirituality.

The story of the paralytic also entails a claim about the messianic authority of Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees questioned the right of Jesus to forgive sins as well as the *efficacy* of his forgiveness; for according to them, only God Himself could grant the forgiveness of sins. The story implies that Jesus, contrary to the opinion of his critics, has the divinely ordained right to bestow forgiveness of sins, because it is implicit that he is the anointed king (=the messiah=the Christ) of the *kingdom of God* which is an important Biblical concept that warrants a discussion in connection with disabled people. It will give us a better understanding of spiritual redemption and physical regeneration, but also of individual salvation and societal transformation.

7. The Kingdom of God: Salvation of the Individual and of Society

“If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God [refers to the healing of a multiply-disabled person], *then the kingdom of God is come unto you.*” (Mt. 12:28)

The *kingdom of God* (or the *kingdom of heaven*) is one of the grand motifs of the New Testament. Below, I wish to explore its meaning and its relevance for people with disabilities.

The Jews expected the establishment of God’s kingdom. They longed for it and believed it to be near. Many even hoped that it would be a political power that would stand up against the Roman Empire. John the Baptist thought it was imminent, and Jesus, too, also preached about its early advent. “The kingdom of God is at hand,” was the message preached in Galilee. (Mk. 1:15; see also Mt. 4:17; Luk. 21:31; where it is the message of Jesus; Mt. 10:7 where it is to be the proclamation of his disciples; and Mt. 3:2 where it is preached by John the Baptist.) In what is known as the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to pray: “Thy kingdom come.” (Mt. 6:10)

To the Jewish contemporaries of Christ’s day, the kingdom was expected to bring the freedom from the bondage of sin as well as the freedom from worldly suppression. It was to be the answer to man’s personal needs as well as to the privation of the nation as a whole. It was thought to be the salvation for individual and society. It was to bring to each and everyone both spiritual redemption and physical restoration. It was to be the full manifestation and materialization of God’s power on earth.

However, the kingdom of God did not come as expected. Thoroughly aborted were the hopes of the Jews. Instead of a powerful Jewish kingdom that would oust the Romans from the Holy Land, Jerusalem and the Jewish land were destroyed a few years later²² and the Jews became scattered in a Diaspora throughout the world for two millennia. The *basileia tou theou*²³ remained elusive until an indefinite time.

²²In 70 A.D., when Roman armies sacked Jerusalem.

²³Greek for *Kingdom of God*.

The early Christian church, seeing that the Jewish state had been obliterated, came to believe in the *spiritual* nature (and the *individualized* significance) of God's kingdom - at least until such time when it would be fully and visibly established.

The church's belief in the spiritual nature of the kingdom is best reflected in what Jesus himself has claimed: "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there! for behold, the kingdom of God *is within you.*"²⁴ (Luke 17:21) Then there is the statement which the Gospel writer John lets Jesus say to Pontius Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence." (John 18:36)

This verse is in contrast, if not in contradiction, to the less popular, but highly significant text of Mt. 12:28 quoted at the beginning of this chapter, in which Jesus asserts that "if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, *then the kingdom of God is come unto you.*" We should not be troubled by the phrase "cast out devils" for the text clearly refers to the healing of a multiply-disabled person, blind and without speech (see verse 22). Hence, to Jesus *the cure of disabled people is proof of the kingdom of God having come into this world.* This joining of *healing* and the *kingdom* is also apparent in another text where Jesus commissions his disciples "to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick" (Luk 9:2). According to Jesus, the healing of sick or disabled people was the best indicator that God's power was at work.

From the foregoing texts we can indeed conclude that, according to Jesus, the kingdom of God is decidedly different from this world and stands in opposition to this world. But we would misunderstand Jesus if we were to reduce his message of the kingdom of God to a mere *spiritual* phenomenon. While he may not have understood it as a political force, he nevertheless considered it a powerful reality which, if received by faith, would reach into this world, could manifest itself all around us and may exist "within" us. It was a force which could change people. It showed itself not merely in the suave words of a persuasive preacher but in the effective transformation of minds, bodies, and human lives! As Paul later asserted: "The kingdom of God is not in word, but in power." (1 Cor. 4:20) The word here is *dynamis*: To Jesus and Paul alike, the kingdom was dynamite!

From the point of view of the Church, Jesus' healings of sick and disabled people could be interpreted as efficacious *symbols* and effective *signs* of the coming kingdom of God which was yet to be established. They documented that the kingdom of God had become manifest in Jesus Christ, although it may not have been fully erected yet. They were the anticipation and visible forebodings of the future kingdom which radiates into this world. They were also evidence of the messiahship of Christ, in whom the kingdom of God is not only promised but already apparent.

From today's point of view, I would say that the kingdom of God is the New Testament language for the *realization of the reality of God* in this world. Or, to use non-theological language: It is the manifestation of the good and virtuous on earth, both in individuals and in society. It is liberty, peace, justice, and health. Although spiritual, it is also tangible, real, effective, transformative, and powerful. Divine reality, if it has any meaning, must penetrate into our own reality. God can become

²⁴The text can also be translated: "The kingdom of God *is among* you."

real to us, if we open ourselves up to allow goodness, justice and compassion to flourish. Wherever healing takes place and human suffering is alleviated, God's power is evidenced. Wherever justice prevails and true love has its way, God becomes a reality. Whenever a person with a disability is physically or spiritually healed, divinity has touched humanity. That, in fact, is the message of the kingdom of God.

One thing is certain, however: According to the New Testament, the kingdom of God is characterized by a *Now* and a *Not Yet*. While the Bible offered the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of salvation, it does not promise an immediate physical healing of our ailments or an imminent transformation of our society. The miracles of Jesus were only few in numbers, and in some places he was unable to perform any healings. Much suffering continued to exist. Jesus himself was crucified. Many of his disciples suffered. Many of the early Christians were persecuted, tortured and killed, but their hope for the kingdom's establishment remained firmly entrenched in their minds.

Even today, our faith does not necessarily improve our health or heal our sick world. That remains left for a future still in God's hands. Injustice, sickness, and poverty continue to persist. There continues to be a future aspect of the kingdom which still awaits fulfillment. The kingdom of God stays shy of its full realization. Even for the Christian believer today, many unfulfilled hopes still remain. Sin and suffering, injury and injustice linger on in this world until God's kingdom would be erected on the last day. Whoever is not healed, is comforted by the hope that one day God would establish His kingdom, in fullness and glory, and with majestic power. Then, and then only, would He abolish all suffering, sinfulness, and unrighteousness.

From the New Testament point of view, the future establishment of the kingdom is closely linked with the return of Christ: He who was believed to have ascended to heaven, was also believed to return in glory to set up his dominion. The hope for his *Second Coming* lingered on. The expectation of his final *advent* and his last appearance instilled Christians of all generations with faithful anticipation. All those who suffered, vested their hope in Christ's future kingdom that he was to set up.

Yet even the early Christians were already troubled by the fact that their Master did not come back as early as they had expected. Such *delay* of the kingdom has constituted a problem for the church since the beginning, but it is equally true that many believers continued to cling to their hope despite the long wait. Today, after two thousand years, the kingdom still remains elusive. Christ, the king, has still not returned in glory. The legitimate question therefore is: When will the kingdom come? Or: Will it ever come? The question also is: What implications does the long delay have for salvation and healing, for redemption and regeneration, for our hope and expectation?

Would it not seem that, in light of the long retardation of the kingdom, the alleviation of physical suffering should not be left for an ethereal future hope? Would it not make sense that, given the elusiveness of the kingdom, we should busy ourselves with making our world better? Should we not, instead of staking all our hopes into the full manifestation of a delayed future kingdom, do our very best to allow the powers of that kingdom manifest themselves in ourselves, our

surroundings, our society, our world? Should we not help the kingdom to penetrate our world and to become more and more visible even now?

There has been a controversy among Christians regarding the establishment of the kingdom. Conservative Christians have argued that while it may be possible for the kingdom to manifest itself in individuals, it is impossible for man himself to change the nature of human society or to erect the kingdom on earth, ere God chooses his own good time to establish it. Christians of a more liberal outlook have argued that it would be wrong to just sit there waiting for an intangible and indefinite hope, twiddling one's fingers as it were, without actually working for the transformation of human society or, as they say, for the setting up of the kingdom.

The controversy has had implications for the kind of work Christians have tasked themselves to undertake. The more conservative group has often concentrated its efforts on influencing and changing the lives of individuals, emphasizing their personal salvation and their characters transformation; while the latter group has frequently aimed at changing societies and unjust political or economical structures, alleviating the causes of poverty, oppression, and military conflict; in doing so, they have occasionally assisted various liberation movements in countries where liberty was suppressed and the poor were being exploited.

The controversy, no doubt, has its roots in theological differences which we need not go into here. But it seems to me that, regardless of the long delay of God's ultimate kingdom and the consequences we may draw from it for our expectation, we as Christians ought to work for both: the transformation of individuals (thereby exercising *mercy*) as well as the betterment of unjust societies (thereby effecting *justice*). I believe that both can be justified on the basis of the New Testament record. Whatever we believe about the If, When, and How of a future kingdom, the Christian faith gives us ample reasons to work for the healing of the individual and the healing of society. The longer the delay of the "soon-coming" kingdom, the more urgent the transformation of society and of mankind as a whole!

If the reader can agree with the notion that Christians ought to work for the healing of individuals as well as for the rectification of society's wrongs and inequities, then the question arises: Where do we begin? Whom precisely do we help? What must be our primary focus? Who our first target? What exactly do we seek to change? Should we attempt to change the wealthy and the mighty? The oppressors and exploiters? Or should we not rather aim at the poor, the indigent, the disadvantaged, yes: the disabled? In assisting such people, we could help them as individuals and also strengthen them as a group so that they will be better equipped to fend off exploitation, suppression, injustice, prejudice, ignorance, and indifference. As long as these persist, we cannot claim to have done our Christian duty.

Excursion: Will The Disabled Be In The Kingdom Of Heaven?

What is called the *kingdom of God* in most books of the New Testament, is referred to as the *kingdom of heaven* in the Gospel according to Matthew. That expression conjures up a different association. It reminds us that for many Christian believers

heaven is something to be gained, while hell is to be shunned. The word *heaven* seems to imply that the kingdom may not be an earthly establishment. And no doubt: while the Jewish beliefs of salvation focused on an *earthly* kingdom, Christian believers have often vested their hopes in an *heavenly* kingdom. Matthew, with his choice of language, may be symptomatic for this shift in emphasis, or should I say, in geography.

Many of Jesus' contemporaries were troubled by the question of who would go to heaven, or who would inherit the kingdom. Jesus himself was asked questions about it. Even today, many people wonder: Is there an after-life? Is there a place called heaven? If so, how do we get there? Or: who are the privileged ones who make it to heaven, while others, less fortunate, must be accommodated in a less blissful locality? Who comes first? Who last? Or, assuming there is no place called heaven, how do we imagine life after death? Or do we abandon the idea of eternal bliss altogether? In conjunction with our topic of disabilities, we could also ask the question: Will people with disabilities be in the kingdom of heaven?

This cannot be the place for us to go into a long discussion on after-life or on the possibility or impossibility of heaven. The answers one would give to the above questions would largely be influenced by one's theological presuppositions or one's religious affiliation. What we can do here is to briefly explore what the New Testament, or Jesus in particular, has to say about it. I say *briefly* because a more thorough investigation would require a study of all the sermons of Christ and all the many New Testament references to the kingdom. I limit myself, for the moment, to a few crucial texts which explicitly speak about who is eligible to enter the kingdom:

In his secret conversation with Nicodemus, which John describes in detail as though he had listened in on it, Jesus asserts that only those who have been *born again*, will enter the kingdom:

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5)

Being born again, was something Nicodemus did not readily understand. In another passage, Jesus admonishes us to become like children. I presume he meant the honesty, simplicity, unpretentiousness, and trust exhibited by small children:

"Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 18:3)

In another text Jesus asserts that only those who *do* God's will, are eligible for the kingdom, and not just the pious who merely pretend:

"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." (Mt. 7:21)

There are several texts which suggest that the poor are especially privileged when they come to the gates of the kingdom:

"Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God." (Luk. 6:20)

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 5:3)

“How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10: 24)

The first of the beatitudes (blessings pronounced by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount) is quoted here twice: once according to the lesser known version of Luke 6 and then according to the more popular version of Matthew 5. It is generally accepted that the Lukian version, according to which the poor are entitled to the kingdom, is older and more authentic, as it is also shorter, than the Matthew reading. Luke also fits well with other passages, such as the one in Mark 10:24, which speak of the difficulties of the rich to enter into the kingdom.

The beatitudes according to Matthew are more spiritualized. The “poor” become “the poor in spirit” and those “that hunger” (Luk. 6:21) become “they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Mt. 5:6). There has been somewhat of a mystery about what is meant by the mysterious expression “the poor in spirit.” I have heard numerous expositions of this passage but the easiest explanation seems to me that Matthew (or the tradition which handed down his version of the beatitudes) probably found it offensive to accede to the poor special prerogatives for the entrance into the kingdom. There must have been, within the early church, some believers who were not poor but well to do and who would have taken exception to the notion that the poor were privileged simply because they were poor. Instead, one probably argued that whoever was contrite in heart and accepted salvation by humble faith, would be eligible for the kingdom, regardless of his or her poverty or prosperity.

Without a doubt: there are no easy answers to the question of *who* will enter the kingdom of heaven and *what* exactly the kingdom constitutes for a believer. To attempt even a cursory answer would require much more space and would likely not satisfy many readers because of their own backgrounds, understandings and beliefs. It seems obvious, however, that it is much easier for wealthy and healthy people to forego the notion of heaven and after-life than for those who struggle a whole lifetime with poverty and sickness.

Another thing is quite clear: Jesus, in his speeches and in his actions, very much favoured the poor, those who hungered and thirsted, those who were deprived and dejected. He himself was poor. And to him, children and poor people were the first to enter the kingdom! And the admonition to his listeners and followers was that they too should treat the poor fairly and even favourably.

The idea behind putting the poor first in the kingdom seems to stem from the hope that at the end of the day, or rather: at the day of the end, there will be a just and fair recompense for this life’s trials and tribulations: whoever is disfavoured in this life, will be favoured in the life thereafter; and whoever has exploited the poor and accumulated wealth at the expense of others, has already received his reward and may not expect another (see Mt. 6:2, 16:27).

The reader might ask: What has this discussion about the poor to do with the disabled? People with disabilities are often among the poorest of the poor. They are doubly handicapped: by their physical or mental impairment as well as by the disregard and dereliction of their society which more often than not leaves them stooped in poverty. Whatever can be said about the poor, can be said with twice the force and justification about people with disabilities.

If heaven is the place where those disfavoured here will receive appropriate rewards to recompense them for this life's disadvantages, then many people with disabilities ought to be greatly rewarded. If the future kingdom constitutes a compensation for suffering, then many handicapped people will have a claim to it: less for their physical handicap as for what they suffer in terms of being derided and dejected.

Some non-disabled people might think that I am exaggerating; that disabled people are not derided and dejected, ridiculed or scorned at. Openly, maybe not. But there is often a subtle indifference, a deceptive aloofness, and a suggestive insensitiveness which may hurt more than open ridicule. With unguarded derision you know who the enemy is; but subtle indifference or pretentious sympathy may be less unequivocal but more painful. People with disabilities yearn for equal treatment and equal opportunities! It is of course better to accord them equal treatment here than to comfort them with the elusive rewards of kingdom come.

I would like to once more come back Matthew's version of the first beatitude in which Jesus claims: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Some interpreters of this mystic text have been quick to point out that "the poor in spirit" did not refer to the "mentally retarded." I would respond, why not? If "poor in spirit" means contriteness of heart, humility and unpretentiousness, then from all I know about intellectually impaired people, they must definitely be included here. And if children are said to be the greatest in the kingdom of God, then would we not need to also place the mentally retarded children, most of whom are not only void of mischief but also sincere and lavish in their affection, at the forefront? Disabled children generally, and mentally retarded children in particular, certainly have many deficiencies and needs. They are rated among the poorest of the poor, although they may have understood the richness of love. It is not inappropriate to consider them among the greatest in God's kingdom.

Another question we could ask is this: Will the disabled, if in heaven, be there with or without their disabilities?

For many people, who believe in heaven, it is very obvious that there will be no sickness, no poverty, no injustice, no disabilities. The kingdom as the place of purity and perfection, as it were! Impairment transformed into impeccability, disabilities into ever-expanding abilities and aptitudes!!

But perhaps the kingdom of heaven is not so much a place where we have overcome all our limitations and disabilities, where we are endowed with all sorts of magic capacities and fantastic capabilities, where people are judged by their perfection and beauty -- but where humans are recognized and appreciated for their inherent goodness, the beauties of their characters, and where people are judged and loved not because of their riches and abilities but because of their mere existence and their very being.

And if heaven were imagined not so much as a perfect environment with perfect shapes and bodies, but rather as a state of unpolluted minds and upright characters, then - so we could further conclude - there is no reason why we could not start building heaven right here and now. If treated fairly, honestly, and respectfully here and now, disabled people would not need to comfort themselves by dreaming and

yearning for heaven's perfect bliss. They could and should even now enjoy being alive, being appreciated and being loved.

8. Matthew 11:2-6: The Essence of Christianity

To me, the key passage in the Bible relative to disabilities is the well-known text of Matthew 11:2-6 which reads as follows:

“Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.”²⁵

This text is not only a key passage on disabilities, it is one of the most important passages of the whole New Testament because it deals with the crucial and central issue of the messiahship of Jesus. The main contention point or stumbling block between Jews and Christians in the First Century, and even now at the end of the Twentieth Century, has been the messiahship of Jesus, which the Jews strongly deny and the Christians emphatically affirm. Is Jesus the Christ (i.e. the Messiah) or is he not? This passage in Matthew 11 has to do with the essential question - and nature - of the messiahship of the man from Nazareth.

Implied in that question is the even larger issue of the nature of God who is believed to have revealed Himself in and through the Messiah Jesus. And by virtue of that issue, we are also dealing here with the essential nature and truth of our own Christianity and Christian mission. For true Christian faith must be based upon the correct understanding of God as revealed in the mission and messiahship of Christ.

Although I am no foe of modern theology and Biblical criticism, I do think that the passage in Mt 11 has the clear ring of authenticity. It reports about an indirect encounter of two leading Jewish charismatics of the first century. While the true relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth remains subject to much speculation, we need not doubt the report that John was jailed and inquired about the intentions of his fellow preacher Jesus. Whatever John stood for and whatever objectives he was aiming at, he may well have come to count on Jesus to continue what he himself had begun, especially when it became clear that he remained languishing in his prison cell, while Jesus enjoyed great popularity.

The text says that John heard the “works of Christ” and sent his own disciples to question Jesus on his calling. We can speculate whether these “works of Christ” prompted John to see in Jesus a messianic messenger or, conversely, caused him to doubt the messianic nature of the young Nazarene.

²⁵All Bible texts, unless stated otherwise, are taken from the King James Version.

That John entertained those doubts at all, must have had its origin in the fact that Jesus apparently did not (or not yet) perform the decisive and final work which John might have expected or hoped of Jesus and which would have dispelled all his doubts about the messianic nature of the one who came to be known as the Christ. We know that many contemporary Jews expected the Messiah to enter the scene during their lifetime and to establish the long-hoped for kingdom of God which would replace the Roman Empire. We also know that many of Jesus' disciples - except for the most inner circle - later became very disillusioned about Jesus, because he would not be persuaded to deliver the Jews from the Roman yoke; instead, he talked about the "kingdom of God" as being within ourselves.

Whatever John's expectation of Jesus and whatever his interpretation of messiahship, the question with which John, through his two disciples, approached Jesus, was a most crucial one. John wanted to know nothing less than whether or not Jesus was the One everybody hoped for, whether Jesus considered himself to be the Messiah, and whether he would soon establish the Jewish Kingdom of God.

We know that Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah. Such a claim would surely have been recorded in the New Testament. We also know for certain that he did not allow his followers, some of whom hoped and believed him to be the Messiah, to publicize their expectation or conviction. In fact, he commanded them to be silent on this. Why, we don't know. Perhaps he had his own doubts. Maybe he feared negative repercussions if it were published. It could also be that Jesus believed in a quite different messiahship altogether, in which case his claim to be the Messiah would have been completely misunderstood. I would like to believe the last version.

Be that as it may, we can deduce from the text in Matthew 11 that Jesus allowed the two disciples of John to join him and to observe him for a while, before sending them back with these words: "Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see."

To John's question, Are you the Messiah or not? Jesus responded to by referring to his actions: Look at my deeds and you will know whether I am the Messiah. Or more succinctly: Observe in what way God works through me, and you will know what sort of messiahship I represent. Or, to formulate it rather radically: Behold the results of my mission, and you will learn what kind of God I proclaim.

The passage we have before us, has to do with true messiahship, but more. At issue is the very nature and character of God. The messiahship of Jesus has revealed to us a new kind of God. Or, to be more correct theologically: the Messiah Jesus (=Jesus Christ) has unveiled to us the true nature of God. That is the essence of this passage, that is the quintessential conclusion of the New Testament. That is the sum and substance of the Christian faith.

Having said all that, we come to the final conclusion of Mt. 11: The passage is also clear about what God's divine nature entails and how the messiahship is defined: "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them." The messiahship of Jesus is largely determined and defined by the positive change wrought in the lives of the disabled and dejected. We can also say that, through Jesus who is believed to be the Christ, the character of God is interpreted as the one who

gives particular attention to the handicapped and indigent, transforming their lives and setting them free. The Good News of the New Testament is that the disabled are no longer lingering as outcasts on the periphery of society but are the special focus of God's compassion and care. The conclusion of Jesus' messiahship is this: that God allows himself to be defined by the blind, the deaf, the lame, the lepers, the poor. We approach God through those among us who are in greatest need. Serving the disadvantaged is the best and truest worship. Hence, we may say that the truth of our Christianity is evidenced, or denied, by our actions relative to the disabled and most deprived members of our community. The real test of our faith is seen in what we are doing to the blind, deaf, and disabled. That is the essential quality of the *euanggelion*, the gospel. That is the quintessential purpose and meaning of the Christian mission.

PART THREE: DEALING WITH DISABLED PEOPLE

9. Rehabilitation

The process by which disabled persons are being brought (back) into playing a functional role within their society, we call *rehabilitation*. The word *rehabilitation* goes back to Latin *habilitare* which denotes “to make fit” and is the precursor of the word “to enable.” The prefix “re”, then, implies a restoration of the original abilities.

In the United Nation’s “World Programme of Action,” rehabilitation is defined as

“a goal-oriented and time-limited process aimed at enabling an impaired person to reach an optimum mental, physical and/or social functional level, thus providing her or him with the tools to change her or his own life. It can involve measures intended to compensate for a loss of function or a functional limitation (for example by technical aids) and other measures intended to facilitate social adjustment or readjustment.”²⁶

The usage of the word *rehabilitation* by rehabilitationists is so common that to them the word may primarily evoke the association of disabilities. However, we must recognize that the term has a more general meaning that is worth noting.

In general usage, to *rehabilitate* somebody means to bring him or her back into good standing. A person may have been discredited through allegations or dishonored through acts of either his own or somebody else’s, and the act of reinstating that person into a state of respect and dignity is called *rehabilitation*. An acquittal in court by which a defendant is declared “not guilty” is such an act of rehabilitation: It is a vindication of his innocence, integrity, and dignity. When the jury gave its verdict for O.J. Simpson, he was instantaneously rehabilitated (although some people continued to entertain doubts about his innocence).

The word *rehabilitation* is not found in the Bible, at least not in the King James Version. But the concept of rehabilitation is certainly documented in the holy book. One well-known example is the rehabilitation of Cain who slew his brother Abel. Although God was angry at Cain for the murder he had committed out of envy and jealousy, it was God Himself who also provided Cain with the protection that allowed him to once again be a respected member of human society. “And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” (Gen. 4:15) The Bible then continues to report that Cain took a wife and built a city which he named after his firstborn son. A city in the Old Testament is a significant sign of human relationships. It is within the city that human society unfolds and flourishes. Marrying, having children and building a city meant that

²⁶“World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons,” adopted by the UN General Assembly at its 37th regular session on 3 December 1982, by its resolution 37/52: see under C. Definitions.

Cain was a full-fledged member of his society, that his guilt had been wiped out, and that he had been fully rehabilitated despite his murder.²⁷

Another good example of such rehabilitation is Job, as recorded in the book of the same name. He had committed no offense or crime, but his human dignity had been badly shaken when fate took away his wealth, his family, and finally his health. His misfortune was severely aggravated by the way society was looking at Job. Throughout the larger portion of this poetic book, even Job's best friends sought to convince him of his guilt. They could not sever his suffering from his culpability. But in the end, Job is vindicated. His righteousness and dignity is upheld. He is brought back into the bastion of human society. He is rehabilitated. Before God and man. Hence, rehabilitation is not just geared to the respective person, but includes the society in which that person functions. It is a rehabilitation for the individual and the people.

It is no surprise that in the old times, and often still today, disability has been associated with guilt, and the alleged guilt has often served as a convenient justification to ostracize the person concerned. Rehabilitation has to do with the annulment of guilt, with the restoration of dignity, and with the integration and inclusion into human society.

We said that the term *rehabilitation* is not found in the Bible. What we do find quite frequently, though, are the words *redemption* and *salvation*. Here is not the place to delve into the deeper meaning of these terms but the mere mention of them here may hint at the fact that there is an even wider and deeper application of rehabilitation: The dignity and integrity of all of us is at stake, and we must all be rehabilitated. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God: being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:23) No matter how endowed we may be with genetic fortune and with the blessings of a good upbringing (nature and nurture), all of us, disabled or not, encounter failures, make small and big mistakes, succumb to temptations, fall short of our own aspirations. We are in need of rehabilitation and redemption, salvation and sanctification.

This general meaning notwithstanding, rehabilitation is also a term specifically applicable to persons with disabilities. To expound fully on this special meaning, is of course not within the scope of these theological considerations, and the topic is amply discussed at many rehabilitation conferences and seminars as well as specialized publications and books. By learning how to rehabilitate disabled persons, we are, in fact, participating in the redemptory process of humanity as a whole. The rehabilitation of a person with a disability is interwoven with the redemption and salvation of society as a whole. Salvation is not just an ephemeral, transcendent or eschatological quality, but a process that is to begin here and now; and with every disabled person who is successfully rehabilitated, the non-disabled community is gradually rehabilitated and redeemed from its guilt of neglect and deprecation.

We shall now attempt to find out what, in more concrete terms, the Old Testament says about how the non-disabled society should treat disabled people.

²⁷The Bible reader should not be troubled by the problem of where that society or Cain's wife may have come from, unless he insists on a strict historical interpretation of the story.

10. Old Testament Evidence

The Old Testament makes a number of references about how to deal with disabled persons or, to be more accurate, how not to deal with them.

Lev 19:14-15 reads as follows:

“Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the Lord. Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.”

In Deut 27:18 we find a similar statement:

“Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way. And all the people shall say, Amen.”

We can judge such injunctions as good common sense and the baseline of ethical conduct pertaining to the handicapped. The idea here seems to be: Don't make life more difficult for the disabled than it already is! Don't take advantage of their disadvantage! It would be asking too much, if we expected here any guidelines for rehabilitation. If the Bible had revealed all the truth there was to discover, we would not be in need of any further thinking or reasoning.

A higher ethical standard than in Leviticus is presented to us in a much later book. In Job 29:15-16 the man of suffering is quoted as saying:

“I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame. I was a father to the poor.”

This seems to be a recipe for selfless ethical conduct. There is no reason for boasting, if one doesn't do harm to the blind. But if one goes out of one's way to compensate for their disadvantages - that's worth noting. Being eyes to the blind, ears to the deaf, mouth to the dumb, feet to the lame - that is high moral ground.

The story of Helen Keller, the American woman who was both blind and deaf, but learned enough to get a PhD and become a world-renowned author and public speaker, is remarkable enough. But her story is also the story of Anne Sullivan, the untiring and self-effacing teacher without whose dedication and commitment we would not know of Helen Keller today. Helen's achievement is also Anne's triumph. And while we rejoice with every disabled person who achieves a high degree of independence and self-sufficiency, we must pay homage and respect to the many indefatigable rehabilitationists who tirelessly persevere, despite slow progress, until the often modest goals are attained.

We must also mention here Leviticus 24:19-20 which is a well-known judicial code of punishment:

“And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbour: as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; breach²⁸ for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again.”

²⁸Breach = fracture

This ruling obviously provides for appropriate punishment commensurate with the felony committed. The punishment should not be more, and it should not be less, than the severity of the crime. The justice meted out here makes sense. It may be short of the radical commandment of Christ who tells us to offer the other cheek if slapped on the first one, and it may not be appropriate for the legal systems of Western democracies at the end of the Twentieth Century. But the ruling "breach for breach, eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" once was a helpful guideline to regulate crime and punishment in cases where physical disabilities were involved.

Our coverage of Old Testament texts relative to the treatment of disabled persons would not be complete if we did not also mention Leviticus 21:16-23 which, at least on first sight, sounds very discriminatory:²⁹

"And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying Speak unto Aaron, saying Whosoever he be of thy seed in their generations that hath any *blemish*,³⁰ let him not approach to offer the bread of his God. For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or anything superfluous or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded, or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken; No man that hath a blemish of the seed of Aaron the priest shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the Lord made by fire: he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God. He shall eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy, and of the holy. Only he shall not go in unto the vail, nor come nigh unto the altar, because he hath a blemish; that he profane not my sanctuaries: for I the Lord do sanctify them."³¹

The disabled are told here: Stay away from the sanctuary! If you have a handicap, you can't minister in the church! A whole professional caste seems to have been closed for the handicapped. That's a pretty tough prohibition, especially when God Himself is the author. If a lawgiver gave out such an instruction today, he would certainly be met with an uproar of public indignation and be accused of discrimination. In what way, one would be asking, can a disabled person profane the sanctuary?

The only comforting explanations for these discriminatory ordainments I have to offer, are the following: Firstly, there was a theological lesson in this injunction. God is perfect, and whatever is offered to him must be perfect and without blemish. The only appropriate response to a just and holy God is the perfection of the one who dares to approach Him. Secondly, we must recognize that what seems like a discriminatory ruling was limited to certain activities of the priest caste in Israel society and that it did not bar disabled persons from doing any other sacred activity.

Thirdly, one ought to be aware that these legal ordainments are part of the religious rites of a very early Jewish period and that any judgment on that period from a Twentieth Century vantage point may be unfair and presumptuous. However,

²⁹See the previous discussion on this passage on page 8f.

³⁰Blemish = physical defect

³¹Another example of such discrimination can be gathered from the temple document found among the Dead Sea Scrolls in Qumran, according to which no blind people were to enter into the Holy City all the days of their lives, in order not to desecrate the city.

religious conservatism tends to change over time because people go through a learning process and truth acquisition, which may make it unavoidable to transform religious ideologies, practices and rites. Revelation is a process, truth is rarely absolute, and today's morality may be tomorrow's vice.

11. New Testament Evidence

If our goal is to learn from the New Testament as to how we should deal with disabilities, then the answer is very clear: Cure is better than rehabilitation. The New Testament records a number of curative miracles, and one might conclude from these reports that the cure of a disabled person is indeed the ultimate miracle! What would have been the appeal of the preacher from Nazareth, had it not been for the many reports about disabled people being cured by his healing hand?

One practical conclusion we ought to draw from this is that there should be no rehabilitation program for the disabled without a preventive and curative component. From experience we know, for instance, that in many schools for the blind there are often students who could be cured or whose vision could at least be improved to useful function by eye-medical intervention. Many are forced to learn Braille when an operation could improve their vision at least to the extent that they could visit a normal school, using low-vision devices. The rehabilitation of many a disabled person would have been unnecessary, had we more vigorously carried on preventive and curative programs.

Inherent in the New Testament emphasis on curative measures is a dangerous fallacy, however: the notion that cure is the only true and effective rehabilitation. Nothing could be further from the truth. We should not assume that when Jesus did not perform a healing miracle, he was, on account of such absence, unsuccessful; or that his salvific power did not influence or give healing to a person. True rehabilitation, i.e. the restoration of human dignity and the full re-integration into human society, is not just the privilege of those cured. It is the privilege and imperative also of the incurable. The integration of somebody cured is cheap. The integration of the incurably disabled is what true rehabilitation is all about. That is why the New Testament's priority on cure must not veil the need for properly dealing with the incurable.

The healing of a disabled person is no doubt a miracle - regardless of whether or not we can explain the cure. A cure which can be scientifically explicated is no less a wonder than a mysterious healing process for which we fail to find an explanation. I tend to marvel more about the miracles of medical science than about those of faith healers. We may marvel and wonder and rejoice over every blind person who is cured, over each polio victim who starts to walk, and over all those deaf people who learn how to communicate.

There were times and places when Jesus was unable to do miracles. And there are times and places nowadays where the power of healing fails; where we are left with the arduous task of rehabilitating those who remain incurable. I wonder which constitutes the greater miracle: when a person is cured and his health is fully restored

- or when a person remains incurably impaired but overcomes pain, suffering, self-doubt, isolation and eventually masters a large potential of his latent abilities.

In the New Testament, faith is recognized as a most important ingredient to miracle cures. Our knowledge today about psychosomatic and somapsychic interdependence gives ample support to the healing power of faith. But nowhere is that power more vital, even indispensable than in the process of rehabilitation. Coping with an impairment is so much easier for someone who firmly believes in the improvement of his condition than for one whose self-doubt and tentativeness constitute the main obstacles to his rehabilitation.

Apart from the priority which the New Testament generally places upon curative medicine, there are few, if any, instructions in the Gospels or the Epistles about how to deal with disabled persons. However, there are a few general principles from which we can deduce relevant lessons.

Romans 3:22 speaks about the righteousness of God provided by faith "unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference." God is the ultimate equalizer before whom all men and women are alike, no matter how different they may be one from another.

"Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free [we could add: disabled or non-disabled]: but Christ is all, and in all." (Col. 3:11)

A similar thought is expressed in First Corinthians where the community of believers is likened to the different members of the human body.

"Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences . . . , but the same Lord. And there are diversities . . . , but it is the same God which worketh all in all . . . For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body . . . For the body is not one member, but many . . . And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked [comeliness]: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another." (1 Cor. 12:4-25)

Here is Saint Paul's blueprint for the integration of the handicapped; for giving priority, preference, and privilege to people with disabilities within our communities. Not only ought they to be members of equal standing, but they are to be specially honored, because according to Paul God honors the feeble and weak more than the strong.

The most powerful New Testament evidence of the priority which is to be given to persons with disabilities is, of course, Matthew 11:2-6 (which already was discussed

above) where Jesus links his own messiahship with the fate of the disabled and disadvantaged community. Their healing is the touchstone of his call and messiahship and of our own calling and mission.

12. John 9

In John 9 we find the famous story of Jesus healing a man blind from birth. The story seems to have been eloquently and elaborately narrated, much more than similar pericopes in the other Gospels. But John 9 also conveys a deeper theological meaning which I cannot exhaust here for lack of space. I shall limit myself to only one issue:

When asking their Master: "Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" the disciples were inquiring into the causality of his blindness. They were looking back.

In responding to the question of his followers, Jesus left the question of causality unanswered and responded with a statement about the purpose of the disability: "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him." Jesus was looking ahead.

Our immediate interpretation of this may be that the works of God became manifest in him through the healing of his blindness. And sure enough, whenever a blind person is made to see again, the works of God are manifest. God's works are visible wherever a cataract patient is successfully operated upon, wherever a glaucoma patient's eyesight is saved, and wherever a child's vision is preserved through the timely administration of Vitamin-A tablets.

However, the story of John 9 is not just a narrative about a medical miracle. It is an account about a man who became one of the great New Testament witnesses of divine power and a staunch disciple of Christ.

"Then again called they the man that was blind, and said unto him, Give God the praise: we know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner. He answered and said, Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see. Then said they to him again, What did he to thee? how opened he thine eyes? He answered them, I have told you already, and ye did not hear: wherefore would ye hear it again? will ye also be his disciples? Then they reviled him, and said, Thou art his disciple; but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spake to Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is. The man answered and said unto them, Why herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes. Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth . . . And they cast him out."

The man became an outcast not while he was blind, but only when he had become a witness to the power of God. He suffered for Christ's sake. The works of God were made manifest in him not just because he was physically healed but because he was

made whole spiritually. That is no less a miracle than when medicine performs its healing wonders.

There is a danger of misjudging the miracle stories of the Bible. Divine reality must not necessarily be absent when eyesight cannot be restored or when other miracles do not occur as desired. On the contrary, God's works may also be manifest in an incurable blind who is being rehabilitated. God's works may also show themselves in non-disabled people who do good works and say good words. God is with the disabled as much as with the able-bodied. And His mysterious workings concern spiritual healing and restoration at least as much as physical health and well-being.

13. Lessons From The Master

“When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee.” (Luk. 14:12-14)

A Christian theology of disability must needs focus on the person and actions of Jesus who is called the Christ. What can we learn from Jesus' dealings with disabled persons? In going through some of the healing narratives, I shall highlight a few key words which will guide us through several principles:³²

The Word: The centurion from Capernaum said to Jesus: “Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.” (Mt. 8:8) Most often, Jesus spoke directly to the person in need. “Ephpheta” (Aramaic for “be opened”) was one of the words he used in order to perform his healing acts (Mk 7:34). Jesus spoke, and people felt the restorative power flow through their bodies. “He cast out the spirits *with his word*, and healed all that were sick.” (Mt. 8:16) Healing is by the word. We must not underestimate the potential healing power of our words. Words can have a soothing effect, if emanating from an empathetic and caring mind. Rehabilitationists, special educators, and community-based rehabilitation workers are no magicians performing miraculous feats but are special friends of disabled people, making extensive use of words to comfort and encourage and to instill hope and healing.

The Touch: Very often, Jesus is said to have touched the sick or disabled person. In responding to the leper's quest to have Jesus cleanse him from the skin disease, “Jesus put forth his hand, and *touched* him, saying, I will; be thou clean.” (Mt 8:3) Healing comes by the touch. “So Jesus had compassion on them, and *touched* their eyes.” (Mt. 20:34; see also Mk. 1:41) The woman who had an issue of blood, instinctively knew the importance of the touch: “For she said within herself, If I may but *touch* his garment, I shall be whole. (Mt. 9:21) But most often it was Jesus himself who extended the healing touch: “He laid his hands on every one of them, and healed them.” (Luk. 4:40) Words may be indispensable, but so is the touch of our

³²I owe some of the following ideas to my former colleague P. G. Michael

hand. Those involved in the rehabilitation of people with disabilities know the merit of frequently touching disabled children and also adults. A hug, an embrace, the holding of a hand can mean so much. There can be no true healing, no true integration, no true rehabilitation without our touch. The touch epitomizes proximity, closeness, familiarity, acceptance. Many a disabled person would experience a wonderful and miraculous mental and psychological healing, if we easily and comfortably embraced him or her and offered the touch of our acceptance.

Lifting up: In connection with the healing of Peter's feverish mother, it is said of Jesus that "he came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up." (Mk. 1:31) Of an epileptic boy, it is also said that "Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose." (Mk. 9:27; compare also Acts 3:7 and 9:41) Our words are important, and our affectionate touch may have a soothing effect; but there is no substitute for our action through which handicapped people are raised from their downtrodden state. The disabled person wishes to be lifted up, to be put on his feet, to be raised up to new heights. There should be no empathy without action, and no compassion without commitment! Words and touch without commitment and appropriate deeds is the hypocrisy of pity. Conversely, action without real empathy may reveal itself as fruitless activism or cold, impersonal professionalism. True compassion and empathy may call for action at the right time and place, or for non-action at another time, depending on the situation.

I shall never forget my participation at a conference on disabilities in China's capital Beijing in November of 1990. Many physically disabled participants were there some of whom also participated in a sightseeing tour to the famous Ming tombs and to the Great Chinese Wall. With my memory of the Tiananman square incident of June 1989 still fresh, I did not relish to see the band of Chinese soldiers who had been ordered to accompany us in order to assist the disabled conference members on this trip. But my feelings changed dramatically, when the Chinese soldiers started to help those with impairments down the stairs to the tomb. I still recall one slim Chinese member of the Red Army who lifted up a husky Australian paraplegic, whom I had otherwise seen only in his wheelchair, and carried him on his back all the way down the more than 60 steps to the bottom of the vault! I later noticed the same soldier again exerting his full strength in bringing the big Australian up the stairs to the top of the Chinese Wall. Nice words and a mere touch or pat on the back would not have gotten the paraplegic from down under to the depth of the tomb or to the top of the wall: It was the unceremonious action and exerted effort of the Chinese soldier which was called for and duly delivered.

The Commission: After the healing - or sometimes as part of the healing process - Jesus commissioned many of those whom he healed to perform certain duties. One was told to wash himself in the pool of Siloam. Others were told to show themselves to the priest and offer sacrifices (Mk 1:44; Luk 5:14). Healing requires the individual's own participation. Not only through faith, but by a person's own action and commitment. We are to help them so that they can help themselves. We may go with them the second mile, but starting with the third, they must be on their own. We are not to perpetuate dependence. We may help up to the point of our own superfluity. We must release them into their own responsibility.

Food and Fellowship: After the healing of a 12-year old girl which appeared to be dead, Jesus told the parents and bystanders “to give her something to eat.” (Mark 5:43) We also know that Jesus and his disciples fed the throngs who came from far away to hear him. Sitting down to have a meal with someone is commonly regarded as a sign of intimate association and fellowship. Once, Jesus invited himself to the house of a man of very short physique. The man, detested by many in his town, was absolutely delighted. But the most telling testimony in this context is found in Luke 14:12-14 where Jesus gives the following instructions:

“When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. *But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind:* And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee.”

Sitting down to eat and have fellowship with those disabled is the test of our sincerity in treating them as our equals, our friends, our own. Giving preference at our table to those whom society tends to overlook is the touchstone of our genuineness in accepting disabled people as coequal.

We could inquire, as this juncture, into our motivation for assisting, and associating with, the disabled. Are we doing it for our living? Or for some other recompense, or reward? Or are we befriending them for their own sake?

There are surely many reasons why rehabilitationists have committed themselves to work for and with disabled people. Some have chosen a profession which by its very nature requires, or allows them, to work with handicapped people. There are many salaried persons involved but also numerous volunteers. Few, if any, are involved in this business to become rich. If that was their objective, they would surely have chosen something more lucrative. Many have become involved because they themselves may suffer from an impairment or have a special child. It has made them sensitive to the needs of others. I also know those who have seen a dire need and decided that if they did not help, nobody would.

These are all good, legitimate, and noble reasons to be involved in rehabilitation. In fact, there is *every* good reason to do so. However, the discussions so far have also added a Christian, Biblical, theological -- or simply humanitarian -- rationale. Helping disabled people to be fully integrated into society, to be mainstreamed into the human community, to be independent, self-confident and successful, is a veritable Christian responsibility because it not only allows them to unfold their full humanity but it also makes non-disabled people more humane and more human.

14. Is The Image Of God Impaired?

People with disabilities are human beings, like the rest of us. But in many societies, they are often treated with a lower esteem than other humans. They lack not just the ability to exercise certain bodily functions or, in the case of intellectually-impaired

people, certain mental capacities; what they often lack is the human dignity of ordinary men and women. Dignity is the human worth either inherent in a person or conferred upon that person by society. People with disabilities often lack both, because these two are interrelated. Rehabilitation, then, is a process by which human dignity is restored to people with disabilities.

The Biblical understanding of human dignity is based upon the notion that man was created in the image of God. That is one of the axiomatic tenets of the Bible.

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” (Gen 1:26-27)

Being said to have been created in the image of God, puts every man and every woman on a high pedestal and bestows upon all of us a divinely-sanctioned dignity that should apply to all humans equally.³³

The fact that many disabled people are often not esteemed to have the same dignity as non-disabled people - and that they have a low self-esteem themselves - leads us to the crucial question of whether or not the image of God is indeed impaired, when it comes to people with disabilities, or whether the divine image, although fully applicable even to handicapped humans, is simply not recognized or taken seriously.

The notion that the image of God may be impaired is not so far-fetched an idea at all, if we understand the image as a reference to God's perfection. In a disabled person, either physically or mentally impaired, that perfection is certainly in question. To arrive at a valid answer, we must dwell for a moment on the general meaning of the image of God.

What everybody seems to agree upon, when it comes to a discussion on the meaning of the image of God, is that it does not mean that man is equal to God or that he is just like God. On the contrary, God can only be thought of as infinitely greater and other than man. There is an abysmal gap between man and his Creator.

Hence, if there is any useful meaning in asserting man as having been created in the image of God, then this can only be understood in terms of certain lofty qualities which man possesses in distinction to animals and which should be observable in order for man to live up to that *imago dei*. Such qualities can be identified as upright stature, linguistic ability, reasoning power, and moral responsibility. These not only distinguish us from the animal world, but they also place us in a special relationship with the divine Creator before whom we must exercise these abilities prudently and wisely.

But having identified such qualities, through which man may - or may not - live up to God's image, we recognize that a physically disabled person may still fit the image, even though he or she may suffer from one or the other bodily imperfection. However, the conclusion seems unavoidable that a severely mentally-disabled person apparently does not, because he or she lacks the gift of speech, the thinking mind, and consequently sufficient moral responsibility. We could conclude,

³³The idea for this chapter was lifted from two articles: Walter Neidhart, *Geistigbehinderte als Anfrage an die theologische Anthropologie*, in: *Theologia Practica* 15 (1980), S. 303; and: Heinrich Ott, *Menschsein und Menschenwürde des geistig Behinderten*, in: *Theologia Practica* 15 (1980), S.307.

therefore, that such a severely disabled person is (a) either not a human being at all or (b) not created in the image of God.

Martin Luther in his days had no qualms to dispute the humanity of a mentally disabled and deformed child.³⁴ However, our common understanding tells us that even an intellectually-impaired person is a human being. In fact, few of us would question this today, for two reasons: First, there is a definite genetic relationship between a retarded child and other people. And then, he or she was conceived by a human father and born from a human mother, and is human by virtue of that birth.

But what about being created in the image of God? Do we have to revise our understanding of it? Is the image tarnished, impaired, distorted? Or are intellectually disabled people exempted from the lofty predicate of the *Imago Dei*? Or is God's image perhaps only a general and idealistic predicate which, while applying theoretically to all human beings, in reality and practice falls short of the ideal in concrete cases?

The answer I wish to give³⁵ is based upon the assumption that the image of God, after which man was created, is basically and primarily of relational qualification. Being made in the likeness of God is not so much characterized by an attribute or quality residing within man, as it constitutes an interaction between God and man. In other words: It is not so much man's physique, brain, speech, or responsibility which qualify him to receive the divine stamp of *imago dei*, but - according to the Biblical context - it was God's one-sided *a priori* decree through which he chose to enter into a relationship with man; a relationship to which man can only respond by willingly opening himself or herself up in order to be a recipient of God's blessings.³⁶

Applied to people with severe intellectual impairments, this means that they, like all of us, are said to be created in the image of God, not because of their inherent qualities, but simply because God has already entered into an intimate relationship with them, a relationship through which He can communicate with them and understand their inner feelings and longings, even though they themselves may have limited abilities of communication and understanding.

We can even say that the fundamental relational character of the *Imago Dei* is more accentuated in mentally disabled people, as any inherent qualities they may or may not have, do not get in the way of the immediate relationship. From our experience of working with mentally retarded individuals, we know that they frequently exhibit a pronounced ability to respond to feelings of love, attention, warmth and empathy. Their capacity to reciprocate acceptance and love, be it God's or ours, is unquestioned. We could also say that the image of God, if interpreted not so much in terms of any inherent qualities but upon an *a priori* acceptance, would find a most apt expression if non-disabled people granted to mentally-impaired kinsmen a biased, preconceived, and prejudiced -- love.

Man is created in the image of God. As it is God Himself who made man according to His own image, we must conclude that every man and every woman has an

³⁴Neidhart cites an example from Luther's writings in which he labeled such a child as *massa carnis sine anima* (a mass of flesh without soul), p. 304.

³⁵My argument is essentially based upon Ott's article.

³⁶After He had created man and woman in his own image, "God blessed them" (Gen 1:28).

inherent divine dignity which commits every one of us to treat all humans, disabled or not, with the same highest degree of divine dignity and respect.

PART FOUR: ONE'S OWN DISABILITY

15. Adapting To One's Own Disability

This topic is one that should best be presented by somebody who is disabled himself and can speak of his or her own experience of becoming disabled and coping with disability. It is one of the contradictions of the rehabilitative profession that expertise is often with the non-disabled, rather than with the disabled people themselves, where it should be concentrated. One of our indispensable tasks is to allow the disabled to develop that competency so that they can combine expertise with their own experience.

A good number of instructional books have been written designed to help cope with disabilities. Good books and helpful publications. They may be useful for people who must contend with a newly acquired disability and attempt to adjust to it. Rehabilitationists certainly can be of help in this process. But they do not spare the disabled the hard mental and emotional exertion of wrestling, and living, with the disability.

Basically, there are two extremes in coping with one's own disability.

On the one hand, we know of congenitally disabled children who at first are totally oblivious to their disability. Only gradually do they become conscious of the fact that there is something unusual or abnormal about them and that their degree of dependency is not found in the majority of other children. One African blind boy told me how initially he considered his blindness to be perfectly normal. Only when playing with sighted peers one day did he figure out that there was something different between him and the other youngsters. It was only then that his mother explained to him what blindness was and what the other boys were able to perceive visually. Of course, this kind of unobtrusive and gradual awakening does not preclude a disabled person's need to wrestle with his newly-recognized impairment, to learn to live with that handicap, and to face up to the fact that his condition is exceptional.

Contrary to those who are disabled from birth, there is something traumatic about a person who becomes disabled later in life. Having enjoyed perfect health for many years and then being suddenly confronted with a disabling condition, is certainly a frightful and alarming experience. Often, the reaction is one of shock, consternation and distress. Many become suicidal at first and must grapple with their fate until they manage to accept their disability and learn to make the most of it.

One could categorize the stages of dealing with one's disability as follows:

1. Shock and Consternation
2. Depression and Protest
3. Rehabilitation and Adaptation

4. Normalization and Integration

The development by which disabled people learn to understand their impairment and to adapt to their disability is a process of maturation by which one learns to appreciate the essentials of life. It is also a process of re-arranging one's priorities and preferences. It is very much a spiritual, or for that matter, a theological process. When, years ago, I was confronted with a medical problem which potentially and eventually would have left me disabled, I studied the book of Job in order to glean from it some insights about how to deal with suffering. I am glad to report that I enjoyed healing and recovery, but every one of us would gain much from pondering about one's own actual limitations and potential disabilities, reflecting on affliction, suffering and even death. Such introspection must not wait until fate strikes us or until destiny forces it upon us.

The question about how to cope with one's disabilities is an issue for all of us, handicapped or not. Our whole life is characterized by the constant tension between our abilities and our disabilities. The struggle to overcome disabilities and to develop abilities is the essence of life which begins in weakness and without abilities, and ends on the same note. In between lies the struggle, the learning process, the mastering of skills and proficiencies, the overcoming of obstacles and restrictions, the development of talents and the acquisition of competencies, the compensation of weaknesses and the complementation of deficiencies.

When we are young, we think the world belongs to us. We believe in our abilities and are convinced of our capabilities. We think little of our limitations and unconsciously defy them. As we grow older, we become cognizant of our limits and conscious of our constraints.

The truth is: Most things in life we cannot do. Our inabilities are legion: I cannot fly like a bird, I cannot sing like Pavarotti, I cannot sing, fullstop. I cannot speak Mandarin, Indonesian or Tagalog. I cannot play a single music instrument, neither piano, nor guitar nor a simple flute. I am a terrible Tennis player even though I keep running around the court, often the laughing stock of the whole club. I don't know how to give a massage, I am an awful telephone operator. I also have some character deficiencies I don't want to talk about. Many of us, gifted in so many ways, lack essential and elementary skills: we cannot be patient, cannot be kind, cannot be faithful, cannot believe, or have not even learned how to love.

To have limitations and disabilities is normal. Life and living is about learning. Learning to discover talents, to develop abilities, to perfect skills. Often, one's weaknesses become the key to one's capacities. Much of the time, our abilities develop as compensations for our deficiencies.

As we reflect on these truths, we have reason to become more humble and contrite, less arrogant and conceited. We might come to appreciate each and every ability of ours as a divine gift bestowed upon us free of charge, without our claim or right to it. We might also learn to appreciate the most basic and simple gifts life has to offer: the gift to breathe, to eat, to taste, to smell, to see, to hear, to walk, to talk, to think, to feel, to love, to live. One or the other gift may be absent or impaired, but there are many reasons to live and enjoy life.

Some of us who are non-disabled might conclude that certain people with severe disabilities have few reasons, or even no right, to live. But ask the disabled themselves: They have many motives and incentives to enjoy life. And, hence, they have every right to live. When the Hollywood actor Christopher Reeves (“Batman”) was thrown off his horse, broke his neck and became paralyzed from his neck down as a quadriplegic in 1995, having to be artificially fed, I was impressed to learn how quickly he found a new cause to which he committed himself and which obviously made life worthwhile for him once again, despite his incapacity. After learning of his accident, many of us smart alecks reacted thinking: Oh, he would have been better off dead. But would he say that himself?

Every disabled person must learn, in his own way, to cope with his or her disability. This task cannot be taken away from him or her. Everybody is the master, or victim, of his own fate. All of us are called upon to make the most of what God, life, and fate has in store for us.

The following passages outline various ways of how disabled individuals in the Bible have dealt with their own disabilities. They may serve as examples of how someone confronted with an impairment learns to cope with it.

16. The Bartimaeus Demand

In Mark 10 we learn of the blind Bartimaeus who sat outside the city of Jericho begging. We read that when Jesus approached,

“he began to cry out, and say, Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me... And Jesus answered and said unto him, What wilt thou that I should do unto thee? The blind man said unto him, Lord that I might receive my sight.” (Mk 10:47-51)

According to the New Testament record, Jesus did indeed heal Bartimaeus whose impertinence finally led to his cure. Would that more blind people who now sit idly beside the road cried out for help! One of the greatest problems eye doctors are confronted with is the fact that many blind people do not come forward but remain hidden from them. A blind or disabled person has every right to demand healing if there is only a hint of a chance. And if a cure is not possible, then the disabled person has every right to ask for appropriate assistance which will help him to achieve an equalization of opportunities.

Of Bartimaeus it was said that “many charged him that he should hold his peace”, but he cried for help even louder. So it might be with disabled people who start demanding help from us. We, the “noble” benefactors, consider it a gracious forbearance when we “stoop down” and extend our benevolent assistance, and we would consider it disrespectful of the disabled to *demand* our help; but Bartimaeus teaches us that such demands are not presumptuous but rightful and fair. In helping, we are merely fulfilling our duty and obligation. In reality, the disabled are among the very last who come forward to claim their rights and our respect. When they do,

we should not be shocked but delighted. They have waited all too long already. And we have held them down long enough!

17. The Samson Recovery

Samson was the *bon vivant* and *enfant terrible* among the tribe of Dan. He loved sweet things, lavish parties, and beautiful women. As an Israeli he chose a comely wife from amongst the Palestinians (which the Old Testament calls the Philistines). He was known for his strength, his courage and his ruthlessness; having slaughtered scores of enemies with his own hand. But there came a day when he lost his strength and darkness befell him: The enemies blinded his eyes, threw him into a dungeon, and made him the laughingstock of their parties. There was no cure for his blindness. At that lowest point in life, he “called unto the Lord, and said, o Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me.” (Judges 16:28) He did not ask for his sight to be restored, but for regained strength. And God gave it to him.

Not every blindness is curable. Many disabling conditions are untreatable. Demanding a cure may render the victim irrational and foolish. But asking God for strength is always appropriate. A disability may leave us weak, empty, hopeless and full of despair. But there it must not end. God’s strength is ours for the asking. Ask, and ye shall receive. Have not many of us walked away strengthened from a severely sick or disabled person whose courage, strength and moral power have put us to shame?

God may not heal us, he may not cure our disability, but we may ask for regained strength which He is more willing to give than we are prepared to request. God may not restore to us the lost eyesight or the lost limbs, but He can give us the strength to cope. The Samson Recovery is not a cure but a solution.

The New Testament offers a similar lesson: Paul’s thorn in the flesh.

18. Paul’s Thorn in the Flesh

We do not know if the Apostle Paul had an impairment or not. But he does speak of an infirmity, which he also calls a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7). He does not tell us what it was, and it may perhaps not have been obvious to everybody. The nature of the “thorn” must have been such that it humbled him and prevented him from becoming over-confident and exultant. Perhaps it was a disease which flared up every now and then, troubling his body and mind. We do not know and never will. Writes Paul:

“For this thing, I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:8-9)

This is the paradox of Paul’s thorn in the flesh: God’s power is revealed not in the strong and mighty but in those who are weak and feeble.

“Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.” (Verse 10)

Being disabled is not tantamount to being weak. While some handicaps may entail physical or bodily frailty, there is a strength other than physical which disabled people may lay claim upon: There is the power of the mind and the power of the will, there are the forces of determination and persistence, there is moral strength and spiritual might! There are, not least of all, the powers of faith, hope and love.

Says Paul, “of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities” (Verse 5). What do we glory in? What do we boast about? In what do we take pride? In ourselves, in our fame and riches, in our talents and gifts? Or do we glory in our weaknesses that we overcome, our limitations that we conquer, our propensities that we defeat, our impairments that we triumph over, and our disabilities that we turn into opportunities?

19. The Jesus Absolution

We ordinarily do not think of Jesus as a disabled person. He was not. For all we know, he was a healthy man. But he was also a friend of people with disabilities. A doctor for blind, deaf, lame and leprous people, he must have thought much about the fate of handicapped people and well understood their plight. What an irony that he would suddenly find himself fettered, blindfolded, mocked, and eventually nailed to a cross! Talk about disability! When a strong and healthy young man barely over 30 years of age is treated like that, out go his abilities, his future prospects, his reputation, his strength, his courage, and even his faith! The words, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” bespeak Jesus’ despair, depression, emptiness, and loneliness. It’s no surprise.

But according to the Gospel of Luke, he also said something else: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,” speaking of the soldiers who crucified him, perhaps also of Pontius Pilate who was too weak and selfish to protect this innocent life, and maybe even of the Jewish theologians who were too pious and jealous to face, without revenge, his rebuke and reproach. Jesus forgave them all. The Jesus Absolution. Where did he take the strength to show such generosity and magnanimity? Did they really not know what they were doing? Should they not have known better than to pass judgment so easily and so selfishly? Should they really be forgiven their discrimination, their disabling treatment, their neglect and prejudice?

Jesus answer is: yes, for they know not what they do. Discrimination, bias, prejudice and indifference are the sins of the narrow-minded, not the wide-hearted, of the small brain, not the farsighted and thoughtful. It takes a big heart and a wise mind to show forgiveness where there is bigotry; long-suffering where there is intolerance; and forbearance where there is fanaticism. Much inner strength and inherent power is to be gained from showing that kind of nobility and absolution. Such magnanimous attitude may not buy us the riches and fame of this world, but the inner satisfaction and contentment of a peaceful mind and an upright spirit.

Far be it from me to demand such noblesse from disabled people who have as much a right to be human as everybody else; rather, the Jesus Absolution may be anybody's ideal and model which it is our privilege to emulate and imitate, disabled or not.

20. The Gospel According to the Disabled

What is the gospel,³⁷ the Good News? What constitutes the Christian message, the proclamation of the church, the *kerygma*³⁸ of the New Testament? And what does it mean to people with disabilities?

The gospel has many names: "The gospel of the grace of God," (Acts 20:24) "the gospel of peace," (1 Cor. 10:15) and the gospel of the "power of God unto salvation." (Rom. 10:15³⁹) The gospel is grace, peace, and power, according to these texts.

20.1 *The Gospel Is The Story of Jesus*

This cannot be the place to explore the copious meanings of what the King James Version calls the gospel. However, its basic and most important meaning is described in 1 Cor. 15:1-4 where Paul recalls the essentials of the Christian message:

"I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you . . . how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day."

The gospel is the story about Jesus. The account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is why the books which record that life, are called the "Gospels."

The gospel, if taken as the story of Jesus, includes the sermons and the healing acts of the man from Nazareth. His dealings with the poor and neglected, the disabled and the disadvantaged. It is the narrative of the blind receiving their sight, the deaf hearing, and the lame walking.

But while the gospel conveys the narrative of the "Christ event" as it is sometimes called, it very definitely is also meant to have a strong bearing and influence on its

³⁷*Gospel* comes from *Good Spell* and is a translation of the Greek *euangelion* which literally means *good message*.

³⁸*Kerygma* is the *preaching* or *proclamation* of the gospel.

³⁹See also Eph 6:15 and John 16:33.

hearers or receivers: Modern theologians have called it the *existential* or *kerygmatic* nature of the Christian proclamation. This is best expressed in 1 Thess. 1:5:

“For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance . . .”

The gospel elicits not so much an intellectual belief in the historical accuracies of a Biblical narrative as it evokes the faith in, and a commitment to, the spiritual powers which are able to transform human minds, souls, lives, and societies.

What, then, can those listening to the gospel expect to find in it? What are its basic ingredients? What is God’s essential message which has come to us through Jesus Christ?

20.2 *The Gospel Is Life*

I find that the chief interpreter of the gospel is John, the author of the Gospel of John. I dare say that next to the Apostle Paul John has influenced Christian theology more than anybody else.

According to John, Christ says:

“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

John’s references to the word *life* are overabundant. It would be worth looking up all the texts in the Gospel of John containing that crucial word.

“I am the Bread of Life.” (John 6:48) “He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

These are but very few of John’s texts referring to life. *Life* is the key word. *Life* is what the gospel is all about. *Life* is what God wishes us to have in abundance. *Life* is the stuff of which we are made. *Life* is what we live for. Life is more than the promise of salvation. There is life before death.

This applies to everyone of us - disabled or not. We all have a right to life, to life in abundance.

20.3 *The Gospel Is Freedom*

But there is another key word in John:

“The truth shall make you *free*.” (John 8:32)

The gospel makes us free. We have all experienced, in one way or another, the burden of bondage, the millstone of suppression, and the weight of dependencies. But John assures us that the gospel shall make us free. This idea is also reflected by Paul who admonishes the Christians of Galatia:

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” (Gal. 5:1)

And again to those in Rome, he asserts:

“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free...” (Rom. 8:2)

Here we have both words: *life* and *free*. These are two key terms of the gospel. There can be no true life without freedom. Freedom is the essential ingredient in a life of abundance, fulfillment and joy. Freedom is the yearning of every human being. Freedom is the quintessential promise of Christianity.

It may not necessarily be the freedom from all outward fetters and cultural constraints, from family ties and social obligations, from moral restrictions and the respect for truth and the rights of others. Freedom is not to be understood as licentiousness, permissiveness, or irresponsibility.

But the gospel does offer us the freedom from guilt and fear, the freedom of forgiveness and acceptance, of a serene and peaceful mind, of inner strength and divine power, the freedom even from the compulsion.

How does this apply to the people with disabilities? Can they, too, experience life in abundance and true freedom?⁴⁰

20.4 *The Gospel Means A Life Of Freedom For People With Disabilities*

The gospel of the New Testament is first and foremost for the poor and disadvantaged; it is for those in need and for those stooped in darkness, bondage, enslavement and imprisonment - of any kind. Quoting from the book of Isaiah, Jesus read in the synagogue of Nazareth:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed⁴¹ me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.” (Luk. 4:18)

We saw that in Matthew 11 the healing of the handicapped is cited as proof of the messiahship of Jesus. In that passage the preaching of the gospel to the poor seems to have been tagged on as an afterthought or appendix, as it were:

“The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.” (Mt. 11:5)

It would certainly be erroneous to think that the preaching of the gospel to the poor mentioned in this verse is only one of the various activities of Christ. On the contrary: The preaching of the gospel and the healing of the disabled go hand in hand are two different sides of the same coin; in fact the physical healing is part and parcel of the gospel itself. People with disabilities are the most outstanding representatives among the poor. They have been the poorest of the poor, and I dare say that the gospel is *primarily* preached to the disabled and disadvantaged! A life of freedom, therefore, is

⁴⁰I have gleaned some ideas here from an article of my former Tübingen professor Jürgen Moltmann, one of the exponents of liberation theology: “Die Kraft der Seele stärken - Wie die Befreiung behinderter Menschen möglich wird”, in: *Lutherische Monatshefte* (1982), p. 219-221.

⁴¹The *Anointed One* is the *Messiah* or the *Christ*.

also to be claimed by those with handicaps, for there can be no doubt that people with disabilities suffer from stifling constraints from which they need and wish to be liberated. There are three ways in which a disabled person may experience the freedom of the gospel:

First of all, the disability itself is a yoke to bear. Restriction of movement, lack of sense and perception are but some of the consequences of the impairment *per se*.

Freedom can come by learning to better manage the disability: through medical intervention, with assistive devices, by the acquisition of basic skills, and through the whole process we refer to as rehabilitation. This in itself can be quite liberating, as numerous lives will easily document. It is the freedom from the yoke of the impairment.

But then there is also the disabling effect the community has upon the handicapped person. Society often adds insult to injury, disadvantage to disability. Were it not for the handicapping consequences of an indifferent, uninformed and biased public, a disabled person may actually cope quite well with his or her impairment. Freedom can come to the disabled through a more caring and unbiased society which allows them to exercise their rights and to unfold their talents.

Implicit in this transformation of "society" is our own need for liberation: the necessity of us non-disabled people to be freed from egotism, prejudice, and even the *angst* to face the handicapped whose condition make so many of us uncomfortable and uneasy and for whom we readily give donations to pacify our conscience. Even when we truly wish to help them, we often create new dependencies. Real rehabilitation, and true freedom, imply the largest possible degree of independence. We must allow them to become of age, to emancipate themselves, to let them make their own mistakes, to learn from their own experience of freedom. We must be liberated vis a vis the disabled, in order for them to be freed from our own stifling embrace.

Lastly, but not least of all, there is the disabling state of a handicapped person's mind which tells him or her: "I cannot do this," "My efforts are of no avail," "I am not made for this," "I am afraid of failure," "I am unworthy or unable to think great thoughts or do grand things." Connected with this state of mind is also the experience and habit of dependence from which one can extricate oneself only with great difficulty. Consequently, the most liberating effect of the gospel's proposition of freedom must be wrought within the mind and soul of the disabled people themselves. To be truly free, one's mind has to be transformed, fear has to be overcome, dependency must be turned into self-sufficiency.

Handicapped people may take their life into their own hands. They have a right to self-determination. They can and may bear responsibility for their own self. Even intellectually impaired people can exercise that responsibility much more than we non-disabled are often willing to concede to them. Freedom is in essence a liberation of the soul, a condition of the heart, a state of mind, the independence of thoughts, and the bravery of great expectations and aspirations.

For a disabled person to exercise freedom, responsibility and independence, he or she must be endowed with a substantial degree of self-confidence and self-worth. It is here where the gospel may give more than what society, or even the disabled

himself, is prepared to grant: The gospel gives priority to the disabled. So does God. The gospel message is: You are precious in God's sight, unique and of infinite value. You are one of a kind. Your life is worth as much as anybody else's. You must have no fear. You can stand on your own feet, walk your own path, determine your own future! God is at your side. He will empower you, strengthen you, guide you. Men and women may disregard you and forsake you, but you are not alone. You are being loved, because you are worth loving. You may love yourself and be free to love others. You are here to have life, and to have it more abundantly, a life that is full of possibilities. Your life belongs to you. Where there is fear, you may gather courage. Where there are limits, you may reach out for the stars. Where there is weakness, you may grow from strength to strength. God's strength will be your strength. Your weakness will be His power. Your disability will be His opportunity.

CLOSING REMARKS

We have made an attempt to look at the issue of disabilities from a Biblical point of view. We set out to develop the rudiments of a Christian theology based upon the Biblical record. We deliberately ignored the copiousness of Christianity's post-Biblical literature which I presume may also say a thing or two about disabilities. We also left aside any non-Christian sources that could have enlightened us about what other religions say about people with handicapping conditions. Nevertheless, by reflecting on the topic of disabilities in a Christian context, we hoped to add a spiritual dimension to the rehabilitative process.

We pondered upon the meaning of disability, discussing its definition, nature, causes and purpose. We went on to relate disability to the Christian mission and also looked at the Biblical dualism of spiritual and physical healing. The theme of the kingdom of God was considered, not only in terms of the Now and the Not Yet, but also in light of its application to both individual and society. A discussion on Matthew 11 followed where we found that the messiahship of Jesus is closely linked to the service for people who are impaired.

We then proceeded to discuss the term rehabilitation, and looked at what the Bible says on how we should treat people with disabilities. We may have been puzzled by some ancient Old Testament passages but drew some vital lessons about equality and compassion from the New Testament. We also reflected upon the significance of the Image of God as it relates to disabled people, concluding that its deepest meaning lies in God's unreserved acceptance of, and commitment to man, regardless of any qualities a man or a woman may exhibit.

Lastly, we gleaned from some Biblical passages how a person faced with an impairment might cope with it, and then closed with a discussion on the gospel and its meaning for people with disabilities.

There is one important lesson we gathered from the study of the life and teachings of Jesus: that Christians have a special obligation to the disabled who, for the most part then and even now, are relegated to the periphery of society but should be given priority and preference by those who call themselves followers of Christ. The

impairments of handicapped people should not get in the way of their relationship with a society that is proud of its Judaeo-Christian heritage. That relationship should be built upon equality, recognition, and mutual respect.

Neither the impairment itself nor the relationship to society should inhibit the dignity, self-confidence and self-esteem of disabled people. But if the gospel of life and freedom is accepted by people with disabilities, it can, despite a largely uncaring society, instill in them a sense of purpose and determination which defies any limits and barriers they may have, and prompts them to reach out to new heights, new horizons, and new discoveries. An impairment, then, would constitute not so much a disability as an opportunity.

The whole discussion on the Christian perspective of disability serves a fourfold purpose; for it has relevance for our understanding of man, of society, of God, and of our Christian mission. The way we relate to our own disability and to those of others, influences our anthropology, our sociology, our theology, and our missiology.

For a better understanding of the nature of *man* we must take into account our proneness to impairment, our limits and disabilities as well as our capabilities and potentialities. Who are we? Who ought we to be? What makes us human? And what makes us inhuman? How inhuman can we be and still be human? People with disabilities can teach us the vital truth that the greatest threat to our humanity is not a physical or even an intellectual impairment but a shortage of kindness, compassion and love.

Our discussion on disabilities also has a clear bearing on our perception of *society*. What constitutes a society? What is a society meant to be? Can a society, like an individual, fall short of its intended purpose? A handicap, we said, is as much a physical impairment as it is a societal disadvantage. A disability is not only an individual predicament but also a sociological problem. A society which denies equal opportunities to its handicapped members is in itself disabled.

Our reflections on the Christian attitude towards disabilities have also taught us some fundamental truths about the nature of *God*. The question in all religions is: Who is God? How has He revealed Himself? How do we understand God's nature and character? The answer we received from the New Testament is that, according to the Christian understanding, God allowed Himself to be revealed and defined not so much by might and invincibility but by weakness, humility and human disability. The Christian God is the God of mercy and compassion.

And finally: Based upon these understandings of man, of society, and of God we finally arrive at a specific interpretation of our Christian *mission* the nature of which is not so much governed by a set of beliefs and dogmas to which non-Christians must be converted, as it is determined by a sense of commitment to humanity's depressed, dejected, disadvantaged, and disabled members. Our Christian commission is completed only when there are no more disability plights, when man has found himself, society has come into its own, and God has been fully revealed. Only then shall we be allowed to say: Mission accomplished!

APPENDICES

Appendix One: Fundamental Ethical Propositions

Issues on disabilities carry moral implications. The advances of medical science are not only a blessing but often create ethical dilemmas different from those of old. Genetic diagnosis of potential impairments, for instance, has created such a dilemma in conjunction with the possibility of premature termination of pregnancy. Below, I shall enumerate a number of principle ethical considerations which we may keep in mind as we deal with disabled people and with disabilities.

1. *Being Impaired Is Normal*

People with disabilities, despite their individual needs and differences, must be seen as being within the range of normalcy. It is normal to be different, it is normal to have individual gifts or limits, it is normal to have the disabled in our midst. To disparage what is labeled “abnormal” and to disapprove of what is presumed to be “anomalous” is wrong. Being impaired ought not to be seen as bizarre. Being deviant does not mean being devious. Nobody is entirely normal. Normalcy, if misunderstood as a standard to be attained and to which we must conform, is but a superficial perception and an elusive quality which no person possesses.

2. *Impaired People are an Asset, not a Liability*

Disabled people should be considered an asset of society, rather than a liability, for the very fabric and functionality of society implies its diversity. Society is not an homogenous but an heterogeneous group of people. Not the elimination or exploitation of the feeble and weak by the powerful and strong is called for, but the integration and exchange between them. The disadvantage for the disabled constitutes the opportunity for the non-disabled, inasmuch as the advantage of the non-disabled should constitute the opportunity for the disabled. One *raison d’être* of the disabled and disadvantaged is to elicit, within society, such indispensable characteristics as compassion, empathy, selflessness, humility, tolerance, generosity, and a sense of equal treatment. Therefore, people with disabilities and people without disabilities need each other.

3. *It Is Imperative To Prevent Or Cure Disabilities*

It is legitimate, desirable, and imperative to prevent or cure disabilities wherever possible. Causing unnecessary disabilities or failing to prevent avoidable impairments or to cure treatable disabilities is immoral. Any right of impaired people to exist, to enjoy life, and to have equal opportunities, does not negate the duty to avoid, prevent or cure a disability. Conversely, the need and obligation to prevent or cure impairments as much as possible, does not carry the implication that a child

with an impairment is of less value, that a handicapped person has fewer rights, or that people with disabilities are to be avoided or disparaged in any way. The only exception to the need and right for prevention or cure is when the survival of a person can be secured only by allowing for that person's impairment.

4. *It Is Imperative To Minimize The Disabling Effects Of An Original Impairment*

It is our duty to prevent an anatomic impairment from turning into a severe physical disability or even a social disadvantage. We have an obligation to identify an impairment as early as possible, to extend every possible help to minimize its disabling effects and functional deterioration, and to sensitize communities to avoid the bias and prejudice which disabled people so often encounter. This means that every person with a disability has a right to comprehensive rehabilitation.

5. *Disabled People Have All the Rights Non-Disabled People Have*

A disabled person has every right to life, nourishment, happiness, health, education, occupation, accessibility, sexual activity, and marriage. One could also include here the right to have children, although we can think of legitimate reasons to limit that right when severe handicaps are to be expected. Premarital counseling and adequate contraception may be necessary to avoid risky births. Sterilization may be an option in exceptional cases.

6. *People With Disabilities Are Entitled To Compensatory Support To Live As Normal A Life As Possible*

Disabled people are handicapped in many different ways. Many of these handicaps can be offset or counterbalanced by assistive devices and other measures designed to compensate for their limitations, such as: ramps in public buildings for wheelchair users, teaching Braille to blind people, or providing hearing aids to the hard of hearing. The non-disabled have a moral duty to provide people with disabilities with these devices and special skills in order to allow them a fair chance within a competitive society. It is ethically wrong to withhold such compensatory measures from them.

7. *The Methods Of Prevention, Cure, And Rehabilitation Should Be Accessible, Affordable, and Appropriate Everywhere*

Human rights are, at least in principle, the same the world over. Correspondingly, the rights of people with disabilities should basically be the same, both in developing and in developed countries. The methods of prevention, cure and rehabilitation should be the same in quality and effectiveness everywhere. However, it does not necessarily follow that the methods should be equal everywhere in sophistication and cost. Prevention, cure, and rehabilitation should be accessible for all, but also affordable. And in order to be affordable, it must also be appropriate (meaning: cost-effective technology). Not everything that is scientifically and technically possible,

may be regarded as either affordable or appropriate. A method that may be affordable in one country may not be affordable in another. The limits of the measures to be chosen are not always to be determined by scientific or technological progress but what is of reasonably good quality and effectiveness and what can reasonably be afforded.

8. *It Is Legitimate To Desire Perfectly Healthy Children*

God is a God of perfection, and nature aims at perfection. It is a privilege for human parents to have healthy, non-disabled children, and it is perfectly all right to desire them and to do everything possible to have them. The desire for healthy children does not, however, denigrate the value and the rights of disabled children.

9. *Parents have the right to give birth to a disabled child*

There are some people, even governments, who reason that a pregnancy should be terminated prematurely if it can be established with reasonable certainty that the expected child will be disabled. Parents may come under pressure from relatives or governments to abort such pregnancies, but it should be maintained that disabled embryos or children cannot be labeled undesirable *per se*, because disabled people have always been part of our societies, always will be, and have every right to be. Hence, whenever parents insist on the birth of what they anticipate to be a disabled child, they should have their way.

10. *The Moral Dilemma: Parents have the right to prematurely terminate pregnancies in cases where a severe disablement is to be expected*

There is an obvious moral dilemma involved here: On the one hand, the desire of the parents for a healthy child plus the general obligation to prevent disabilities wherever possible. On the other hand the right of every disabled person to live and to enjoy all the human rights everybody else is supposed to have. No doubt: The medical possibilities of abortion, genetic counseling, and early diagnosis have created this ethical predicament with which parents are increasingly confronted. The decision of the parents will have to take into account not only the degree and likelihood of the newborn's disability, but also the parents' projected emotional stability as well as their potential capability to cope with that child's disability. It must also be said that there is no institution other than the parents themselves to make that difficult ethical choice. Institutions, doctors and counselors may give advice and volunteer information, but the decision is that of the parents alone.

Appendix Two: Biblical Texts About Disabilities

God the Creator of Disabilities?

Ex 4:11 And the Lord said unto him [Moses], Who hath made man's mouth? Or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? (12) Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.

Injunctions About How to Treat the Disabled

Lev 19:14-15 Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the Lord. (15) Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.

Deut 27:18 Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way. And all the people shall say, Amen.

Lev 24:19 And if a man cause a *blemish* in his neighbour: as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; (20) Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again.

Job 29:15 I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame. (16) I was a father to the poor.

Luk 14:13 But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: (14) And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.

Disabled Barred From Sacrificial Service

Lev. 21:16 And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying (17) Speak unto Aaron, saying Whosoever he be of thy seed in their generations that hath any *blemish*, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God. (18) For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or anything superfluous (19) or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded, (20) or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken; (21) No man that hath a blemish of the seed of Aaron the priest shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the Lord made by fire: he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God. (22) He shall eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy, and of the holy. (23) Only he shall not go in unto the vail, nor come nigh unto the altar, because he hath a blemish; that he profane not my sanctuaries: for I the Lord do sanctify them.

Unbelief and Iniquity is Tantamount to Blindness and Deafness (God's People - the Sighted; the Gentiles - the Blind, or Vice Versa?)

- Ps 146:8 The Lord openeth the eyes of the blind: the Lord raiseth them that are bowed down: the Lord loveth the righteous
- Is 29:18 And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness.
- Is 35:5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.
- Is 42:6 I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; (7) To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house... (16) And I will bring the blind by the way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them. (17) They shall be turned back, they shall be greatly ashamed, that trust in graven images, that say to the molten images, Ye are our gods. (18) Hear, ye deaf; and look, ye blind, that ye may see. (19) Who is blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger that I sent? Who is blind as he that is perfect, and blind as the Lord's servant? (20) Seeing many things, but thou observest not; opening the ears, but he heareth not.
- Is 43:8 Bring forth the blind people that have eyes, and the deaf that have ears.
- Is 56:10 His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber
- Is 59:10 We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noonday as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men... (12) For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us...
- Jer 31:8 Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the costs of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither.
- Zeph 1:17 And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord.
- Mt 23:16 Woe unto you, ye blind guides... (17) Ye fools and blind... (23) Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. (24) Ye blind guides...
- Mt 15:14 Let them [i.e. the Pharisees] alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.
- Rom 11:25 Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in.

Rev 3:17 [about the church in Laodicea] Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

Jesus' Messiahship Documented by His Treatment of the Disabled

Mt 11:2 Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, (3) And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? (4) Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: (5) The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. (6) And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

Luk 4:17 And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, (18) The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised... (21) And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.

How to Cope with One's Own Disability

2 Cor 12:9 And he said unto me: My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (10) Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Healing of Visually-impaired Persons

Mt 9:27-31 Healing of two blind men

Mt 20:30-34 Healing of two blind men

Mk 8:22-26 Healing of the blind man at Bethsaida: a cataract operation?

Mk 10:46-52 Healing of blind Bartimaeus in Jericho

John 9 Healing of blind man of whom the disciples asked: "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind" and of whom Jesus answered: "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."

Famous Blind Persons in the Bible

Judg 16:21 Samson: But the Philistines took him,, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house.

Acts 13:11 Saul/Paul: And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand.

Luk 22:63 And the men that held Jesus mocked him, and smote him. (24) And when they had blindfolded him, they struck him on the face, and asked him, saying, Prophecy, who is it that smote thee?

Disabled Persons Said to be Possessed by a Spirit

Math 8:28/Mar 5:5 Psychotics

Math 9:32-33 Speech Impediment

Math 12:22 A deaf-blind

Luk 13:11 A crookbackt woman

MAN'S DISABILITY - GOD'S OPPORTUNITY

Towards A Christian Theology of Disability

Content

INTRODUCTION	Page 1
PART ONE: THE MEANING OF DISABILITY	7
1. The Definition of Disability	7
2. The Nature of Disability	11
3. The Causes of Disabilities	14
4. The Purpose of Disability	19
PART TWO: THE CHRISTIAN MISSION TO THE DISABLED	22
5. Our Mission	22
6. The Paralytic: Spiritual Redemption and Physical Regeneration	24
7. The Kingdom of God: Salvation for Individual and Society	27
8. Matthew 11:2-6: The Essence of Christianity	35
PART THREE: DEALING WITH DISABLED PEOPLE	38
9. Rehabilitation	38
10. Old Testament Evidence	40
11. New Testament Evidence	42
12. John 9	44
PART FOUR: ONE'S OWN DISABILITY	52
13. Adapting to One's Own Disability	52
16. The Bartimaeus Demand	54
17. The Samson Recovery	55
18. Paul's Thorn in the Flesh	56
19. The Jesus Absolution	56
20. The Gospel According to the Disabled	57
CLOSING REMARKS	62
APPENDICES	64
Appendix One: Fundamental Ethical Propositions	64
Appendix Two: Biblical Texts About Disabilities	68