



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for

Disability

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us explore our calling to walk beside one another in friendship and learn from one another's disabilities. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- Zacchaeus: Short and Un-Seen** 2
Societal fears of disability warp how we read the Bible. But the Zacchaeus story challenges the normative assumption that disability is a problem to be fixed or eliminated. All human beings can be accepted as children of Abraham regardless of their physical characteristics or capabilities.
- Many Bodies, Many Worlds** 4
Disability is a mode of human experience that challenges our norms and reshapes our most basic understanding of reality as we encounter the rich diversity of what it means to be a human being in God's image.
- Disability and the Cult of Normalcy** 6
Against the cult of normalcy, disability foregrounds vulnerability as a fundamental condition of sharing life together. It reminds us that wholeness is not self-sufficiency, but is the genuine communion that results from sharing our vulnerable humanity with one another in light of God's grace.
- The Lure of Eugenics** 8
In contemporary society "prenatal care" and "prenatal screening" are taken to be synonyms, but they become antonyms in practice when the refusal to test the fetus is portrayed as unnecessarily risky and aborting a disabled child is portrayed as a relief.
- Jars of Clay** 10
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- Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability** 12
Is there room in the baptismal waters and at the Lord's Supper table for persons with profound intellectual disability? For Christians who practice believers' baptism, the question goes to the heart of what it means to be the Church and to welcome the giftedness of each person in our midst.



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Zacchaeus: Short and Un-Seen
(*Disability*, pp. 11-17)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Desperate
(*Disability*, pp. 54-55)
- 📖 Lasting Wounds
(*Disability*, pp. 56-57)
- 📖 Unexpected Healing
(*Disability*, pp. 58-59)

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Zacchaeus: Short and Un-Seen

Societal fears of disability warp how we read the Bible. But the Zacchaeus story challenges the normate assumption that disability is a problem to be fixed or eliminated. All human beings can be accepted as children of Abraham regardless of their physical characteristics or capabilities.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 19:1-10

Meditation†

Slowly, however, there has been the gradual realization that people with disabilities, even those with intellectual disabilities, should not just be the objects of Christian ministry. Rather, the church needs to begin discerning where, when, and how people with disabilities can be engaged in the doing of Christian ministry.

Amos Yong

Reflection

It is difficult to see “the Bible really is good news for all people, including those with disabilities and those who are temporarily able-bodied,” Amos Yong notes, when we read it through the lens of “normate and ableist assumptions, experiences, and perspectives of non-disabled people.” We may think “disabilities are ordained by God for God’s purposes,” “people with disabilities are or ought to be pitiable and charitable objects of the care of others,” and “[disability] is a sign of divine punishment for sin, or of the presence and activity of an evil spirit.” Such a misreading, he warns, may “lead people with disabilities to internalize the normate view and thereby wonder what is wrong with them that prevents their reception of God’s healing power.”

The history of interpreting the story of Zacchaeus shows an ableist bias. Many interpreters ignore his littleness, or spiritualize it as an emblem of humility. For them, nothing depends on his shortness! Yet this hides an important part of the story and Luke’s overall message. Did Zacchaeus suffer from pathological dwarfism? In any case, the people would have taken his shortness to be a sign of character flaws like small-mindedness and greed. Luke is subverting these ancient physiognomic beliefs.

To bring out this feature of the Zacchaeus story, Yong invites us to re-approach the narrative from a *littlist* or *shortist* perspective. A littlist reader might notice:

- ▶ *Zacchaeus is an agent, not a passive recipient of pity.* He is a role model of what little people can do. Unfortunately, no matter how physically capable little people are, many stereotype them “as bitter, disagreeable, and vengeful, and...rarely portray them ‘as thinking, feeling individuals who were at the center of their own lives, but rather... as adjuncts to the lives of others,’” Yong notes. Zacchaeus is not only fully employed (albeit in a role that is despised in the community), but also he can and does seek out Jesus within the crowd, and welcomes the chance to host the Son of Man in his home.
- ▶ *God welcomes and values Zacchaeus.* Dwarfism (like lameness, mutilation, blindness, and skin disease) was a “blemish” that kept a person



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from God's altar (Leviticus 21:16-24). "With Jesus' pronouncement, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham' (Luke 19:9), the (Levitical) prohibition against dwarfs from full participation in the liturgical cult of ancient Israel was lifted," Yong observes.

- ▶ *Zacchaeus and the people are saved or healed in ironic ways.* "Normate assumptions would have expected Jesus to heal the sick, impaired, and disabled. Jesus does no such thing in this case, although he definitively acknowledges the presence of full health in the sense of salvation for Zacchaeus. On the other hand, the prejudices of the people are confronted, and Jesus' acceptance of Zacchaeus just as he is undermines their expectations that those who are impaired and disabled need to be 'fixed' or cured in order to participate fully in the renewal and restoration of Israel," Yong writes. For little people today who fear they must undergo various surgical procedures touted to help them fit in with the aesthetic sensibilities of normate culture, this is good news.

"The ableist bias is insensitive to the world of disability and their normative assumption is that the world as it ought to be will not feature any signs or marks of impairment, even those related to littleness.... The result is not only an overlooking of important features of a text expressive of the salvific message of the gospel, but the perpetuation of an oppressive social imagination that has negative repercussions for people with disabilities," Yong concludes. "Perhaps what the Zacchaeus story teaches us is that human beings are equals both in their sinfulness and need for repentance, and in their being accepted as children of Abraham regardless of their physical characteristics or capabilities."

Study Questions

1. What does Amos Yong mean by a "normate" or "ableist" perspective on Scripture? How can it distort the interpretation of biblical stories?
2. Visualize Zacchaeus as a dwarf (a person under 4'10" tall). What new meaning does this add to the story?
3. Recall the problem Yong raises in the meditation. How does the story of Zacchaeus guide your thinking on that point?
4. Select one of the pieces of Christian art that Heidi Hornik discusses — Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, Nicholas Poussin's *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man*, or the Byzantine mosaic of the woman suffering from a hemorrhage who steals a healing from Jesus. Does that artistic depiction seem to reflect or to undermine an ableist bias on the interpretation of the particular biblical story?

Departing Hymn: "The Twisted Form upon the Tree"

† Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Baylor University Press, 2007), 189.



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Focus Article:

📖 Many Bodies, Many Worlds
(*Disability*, pp. 18-24)

Suggested Article:

📖 Affirming God in the Midst of Disability
(*Disability*, pp. 79-82)

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Many Bodies, Many Worlds

Disability is a mode of human experience that challenges our norms and reshapes our most basic understanding of reality as we encounter the rich diversity of what it means to be a human being in God's image.

Prayer

Almighty and Everlasting God,
who has created each of us in your image
and through the crucified and resurrected body
of a beloved Son made of us one body:
give us hearts and minds, we pray,
to know the wisdom of human vulnerability;
to see the beauty in bodies differently-abled;
to dismantle barriers erected by attitudes and architecture;
and to trust the Spirit's power to make us friends,
make us whole, make us one.
In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

Reflection

Asking "How can we richly include people with disabilities in the life of the congregation?" is an important question to ask, but not the right place to start. The key question, John Swinton suggests, is "What does it mean to be human?" because thinking about the latter question throws important light on the first one.

Swinton finds these crucial clues to our shared humanity in Scripture and the human experience of disability:

- ▶ *All bodies are holy and worthy of love*, for they are earth animated by God's *nephesh* (breath, or spirit) (Genesis 2:7). "Each person, each body is a place where God's *nephesh* continues to sustain life," Swinton writes. "Each body is holy" – not in the sense that it is perfect, or beyond sin, but "there is something of the divine within each person, and it is that which is holy and it is that which makes our encounters with one another holy. As we recognize the presence of God's *nephesh* in one another, we begin to realize that attending to God's creatures is a mode of attending to God." We begin to understand what it means truly to be with people who have disabilities. Their bodies, like all bodies, are holy places."
- ▶ *God uses disabled bodies to carry out key tasks of the coming kingdom*. In what Karl Barth called "the strange new world within the Bible" that is continually reshaping our thinking and feeling as disciples, human disabilities take on rich and varied meaning. For instance, God chooses Moses, a person with a profound speech impediment, to speak to Pharaoh (Exodus 4:10-12). The Apostle Paul – perhaps suffering from depression, epilepsy, or scoliosis – finds God's strength through his disabling condition (2 Corinthians 12:7b-10). In the disabled body of Christ on the Cross we encounter our redemption. Swinton summarizes, "In the strange new world within the Bible, human bodies and human disability have meanings that stretch beyond our simplistic biomedical assumptions that we need to fix what is broken and normalise what we consider to be abnormal. Disabled human bodies can carry powerful messages of redemption just as they are."



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- *The multiple worlds we live in help us understand what it means to be human and to live humanly.* Swinton describes how theologian John Hull's world changed as he went blind late in life: "His hands, which were previously used to *do* things, now became vital sensory organs that informed him of the way the world is. Sounds became primary informants, but he discovered that listening without seeing was quite different than listening with sight.... Hull became acutely aware that...our bodies construct and live in phenomenal worlds which may be quite different from one another, but which nonetheless reveal some of the richness and diversity of human experience." This leads Swinton to ask questions like "What might it mean to take seriously the world of a person with a severe intellectual disability – someone without words or 'normal' cognitive capabilities?" and "What could the experience of people whose wheelchairs have become extensions of their bodies tell us about reality?"
- "As we gaze upon our different bodies, rather than assuming that there is a need for healing and change, either now or in the future, we can recognize each one is a site of holiness and a place of meeting," Swinton concludes. As we begin to see one another as sustained by God's *nephesh*, called (even through disabling conditions) to serve God's kingdom, and knowing the world in rich and diverse ways, we will turn from merely *including* people with disabilities in our communities to longing for their presence in our life together. Then we will truly *belong* to one another within the body of Christ.

Study Questions

1. According to John Swinton, what is the difference between *including* people in a community and their *belonging* to it? Consider why it is so much easier to include people with disabilities in a community than it is for them to belong to it.
2. In what specific ways did John Hull's world change as he became blind late in life? Consider how this supports Swinton's idea that "There is no single phenomenal world somehow 'out there' awaiting discovery. All of us via our bodies construct and live in phenomenal worlds which may be quite different from one another, but which nonetheless reveal some of the richness and diversity of human experience."
3. Swinton describes the Bible as "the doorway into a strange new world." What does this suggest about the role Scripture plays in our discipleship?
4. Through the images in Terry York's hymn "The Twisted Form upon the Tree," consider the ways that God expresses love for us through Christ's disability.
5. What did Tom Graves discover when, from the perspective of his disabling condition of multiple sclerosis, he reconsidered God's power, creation, and purposes for humankind?

Departing Hymn: "The Twisted Form upon the Tree"



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Focus Articles:

📖 The Cult of Normalcy
(*Disability*, pp. 25-33)

Suggested Article:

📖 Travelling in the Ark
(*Disability*, pp. 83-88)

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Disability and the Cult of Normalcy

Against the cult of normalcy, disability foregrounds vulnerability as a fundamental condition of sharing life together. It reminds us that wholeness is not self-sufficiency, but is the genuine communion that results from sharing our vulnerable humanity with one another in light of God's grace.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 45:9-12

Reflection

Disability is, in part, a social construction; it is not something we find in the world, but a way we happen to label and sort things. "Disability, of course, usually involves a bodily impairment—an inability to perform some task or activity considered necessary within a social environment. However, not all impairments are disabilities," Tom Reynolds notes. For example, much visual impairment is not labeled a disabling condition when we can "correct" it with glasses, while mobility impairment that requires crutches or a wheelchair is considered a disability. "Society disables people by representing impairment as a flaw or deficit, by constructing what is 'normal' and thereby creating the difference between bodies that are 'able' and those that are 'disabled.'"

The social construction of disability is just the flip side of what Reynolds calls "the cult of normalcy." Understanding how this works and resisting its sway are essential to our "sharing the radically inclusive love of God without representing some people as 'abled' and others as 'disabled.'" Reynolds identifies these elements in the rise of the cult of normalcy.

- ▶ *Certain kinds of bodily appearance and function that are valuable in particular situations of exchange are held up as standards for all people's bodies.* It starts innocently enough: we would like our interactions with people to be predictable. So, if ways of persons' looking or acting prove useful in certain exchanges, we "inscribe these standards across daily life—through media, education, economics, moral codes, etc.... We are habituated into mechanisms of normalcy." Once we have formed these expectations of one another, notes Reynolds, "disability appears as a disruption, a disorienting surprise that throws into crisis what has been taken for granted."
- ▶ *To maintain a group identity, certain kinds of bodies are privileged and others are considered deviant.* This "ableism" manufactures an "us" by diminishing a "them." It stigmatizes some folks "as abnormal and in need of care through curative practices, normalizing management, or exclusion." A normal-abnormal binary may infect our good intentions: "Even language of 'caring for the needy' can still function as a way of maintaining a regulative 'us' (giving from an abundance) over against 'them' (receiving from scarcity)," Reynolds warns. "Often church communities participate in the cult of normalcy inadvertently...[when] a paternalistic and unilateral mode of giving emerges that 'does for' others as if they are helpless subjects with nothing to offer."
- ▶ *Human vulnerability is misunderstood as a flaw in human nature when we only value "what counts for 'ability'—for example, the capacity*



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to think rationally, act autonomously, and look slim, healthy, and agelessly beautiful." Disability can open our eyes to great truths that the cult of normalcy is hiding: "All human beings share a capacity for giving and receiving, which is grounded in their vulnerability.... We do not just need others in order to survive as helpless infants, but also to flourish as people who can love and be loved by others, and eventually die in their care."

"Full humanity is neither diminished by disability nor confirmed by ability. Instead, it is based on the interdependent relationships we share with one another as creatures loved into being by God and in the image of God," Reynolds concludes. "The *appearance of disability*, manifest variously through different bodies, calls us prophetically into acknowledging our common human vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and this opens us more radically to God's grace."

Study Questions

1. What is the "cult of normalcy," according to Tom Reynolds? How is its sway over us similar to a cult?
2. Why does the cult of normalcy usually lead to ableism – the discriminatory attitudes and practices imposed, sometimes unconsciously, by non-disabled people, structures, and policies, on those with disabilities?
3. Discuss Frances Young's observation that disability is "a kind of judgment" on society, for it "shows up people and their relationships and their values for what they are."
4. According to Heiki Peckruhn, what can we learn from L'Arche, the international network of residential communities where people with developmental disabilities (core members) and caregiver assistants live together?

Departing Hymn: "When Hands Reach Out" (verses 1, 2, 4, and 5)

When hands reach out and fingers trace
the beauty of a loved one's face,
we thank you, God, that love relies
on gifts of grace not seen with eyes.

When fingers spell and signs express
our prayer and praise and thankfulness,
we thank you, God, that hands can sing;
you bless the silent songs we bring.

And when the ways we learn and grow
are not the ways that others know,
We thank you, God, that we have learned
your love's a gift, and never earned.

Your Spirit gives us differing ways
to serve you well and offer praise.
When all are joined as one, we'll be
your able, strong community.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2001)[†]

Suggested Tunes: O WALY WALY or TALLIS' CANON

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Focus Article:

📖 The Lure of Eugenics
(*Disability*, pp. 68-78)

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The Lure of Eugenics

In contemporary society “prenatal care” and “prenatal screening” are taken to be synonyms, but they become antonyms in practice when the refusal to test a fetus is portrayed as unnecessarily risky and aborting a disabled child is portrayed as a relief.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 139:13-18

Meditation¹

Scientists should find the gene that makes people pick on those who are different. Then our lives would be better.

A person with a learning disability

Reflection

As the science of prenatal testing develops, Brian Brock says, “it will soon seem nonsensical not to check if our nascent children have genetic defects. It will be hard for modern states that face mounting healthcare costs not to strongly encourage this routine fetal testing regime, and it will be difficult for parents to resist using it. Who, after all, would willingly choose the hardship, financial challenges, and social stigma associated with raising a disabled child? With the advent of painless genetic testing which ‘just happens’ to young parents as a matter of routine, every new parent will begin life with their children having had to make a choice about whether to continue or abort each pregnancy.”

Prenatal testing often is used to screen for selective abortion, a practice that “destroys human community at its foundations by setting up a criterion against which every human life must justify itself before being granted the right to enter human society.” A related problem is the message that this practice sends to people with disabilities: if their condition is now reason enough to abort a fetus, then what value do they have as existing persons?

To help us understand the moral quandaries of prenatal screening, Brock draws an analogy with the famous Berlin Wall: more than a concrete barrier dividing the great city, it required a vast network of people just ‘doing their daily jobs’ — “soldiers, police (secret and explicit), and a judicial and legislative system as represented by immigration officers...that penetrated every nook and cranny of the society that it regulated.” Likewise, prenatal screening for abortion is about more than new technologies; it is about a “wall in the mind” dividing “them” from “us” that *precedes* and *sustains* how we are using the techniques. That wall, too, requires a network of actors to maintain it.

- ▶ *Geneticists and laboratory technicians must find a clear boundary.*

Prenatal diagnosis has grey areas and judgment calls, Brock notes: “Amniotic fluid must be extracted, cells cultured from it, chromosomes separated, and then a judgment made about the health (or otherwise) of the fetus’s genes.” In testing labs where geneticists (usually male) oversee the work of less educated technicians (typically female), they know the process involves fallible craftwork, but rarely “admit the interpretive nature of their work.” Furthermore, since science has “very incomplete knowledge of how any given genetic anomaly will be expressed as a child matures,” autopsies are routinely performed on aborted fetuses to confirm the diagnoses.



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- ▶ *Genetic counselors (rather than geneticists) lead pregnant women to this boundary and explain what it means. "Counseling sessions...have four main goals: establish the primacy of scientific discourse, establish the authority of this discourse, communicate risk, and construct a family history narrated in medicalized terms." While counselors see their work as value neutral, they are gatekeepers for a value-laden health establishment that expects "some conceptions are expendable."*
- ▶ *Parents must decide whether to end a pregnancy.* Brock highlights the social pressures on the "informed decision" required of parents. Learning the scientific terminology is daunting for many. Since amniocentesis yields a diagnosis late in pregnancy (though new techniques are changing this), a mother may have to painfully separate herself from the one in her womb whom she wanted. Parents face disapproval if they fail to test, or refuse to abort an abnormal fetus. Those who bear live disabled children may face anger or disappointment from medical staff, and feel pressure to institutionalize their children. Sexual politics between a mother and father may complicate the decision. In our culture, mothers often must make reproductive choices as private individuals. Others have supporting roles: researchers advance testing techniques, medical personnel perform abortions, and legislators frame laws on abortion, prenatal testing, and support for parents with a disabled child. "Christians should welcome the fact that technologies developed to aid screening can now be used in the service of care," Brock concludes. "The essential ethical insight to grasp, however, is that there is a vast difference between using those technologies to care for children in the joyous receipt of a divine gift, and deploying them as an expression of the ideologies of control, management, expertise, and risk avoidance."

Study Questions

1. How does prenatal screening for selective abortion impact people with disabilities?
2. Consider how prenatal screening is distorted by what Tom Reynolds (in the previous study) calls "the cult of normalcy."
3. How can your congregation best engage with Christian love each of the primary actors in prenatal screening for selective abortion?

Departing Hymn: 'O Lord, Life is Sacred' (verses 1 and 2)

O Lord, life is sacred, a gift from above;
each person is worthy of honor and love.
your works are so marvelous, we're wonderfully made;
we each bear your image, conception to grave.

Your hands shaped and formed us before we took breath;
You knit us together and clothed us with flesh.
You give us our life and ordain all our days;
Your works, Lord, are wonderful; we lift our hearts in praise.

Susan H. Peterson (1998)
Tune: GORDON

† Quoted in John Swinton and Brian Brock, eds., *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics: Why Science Needs the Church* (2007), 1.



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Focus Article:

📖 Jars of Clay: Disability in Intentional Christian Community
(*Disability*, pp. 34-42)

Suggested Article:

📖 Lowering Barriers for People with Disabilities
(*Disability*, pp. 89-93)

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Jars of Clay

Living in an intentional Christian community offers a nurturing context to fully embrace the vulnerability that accompanies disability, to concretely enact our Christian beliefs with respect to the intrinsic worth of all human beings, and to affirm the value of all members of the community.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Meditation 1

Of course, the brokenness and limitations of people with disabilities...is too evident to be overlooked. Much less clear, however, is that, in looking at them in this way, we may fail to see our own brokenness and limitations. To look at other people's brokenness and limitations without seeing our own is a gesture of power; to acknowledge our own brokenness and limitations in the face of theirs is a gesture of community.

Hans S. Reinders

Reflection

"As a person who has lived with incurable neurological disease (multiple sclerosis) for more than half my life, and with permanent disability for many years, I have been very aware of the many ways in which contemporary cultural values with respect to such things as independence, productivity, physical fitness, health, youth, beauty, and so forth, inevitably deepen the sense of vulnerability that accompanies debilitating illness and disability," Kay Toombs writes. "We live in a world that places inordinate value on autonomy and that soundly repudiates any signs of weakness and vulnerability. Thus the sick, aging, and those with disabilities find themselves isolated and marginalized, uncertain of their personal and social worth."

In an intentional Christian community where she has lived since 1998, Toombs experiences an "alternative culture with a radically different value system,...a nurturing context in which it is possible to fully embrace the vulnerability that accompanies disability." She highlights three elements of the community members' countercultural perspective on disability.

- ▶ *They affirm "INTERdependence and celebrate the unique place that each member of the Christian community occupies in the living organism that is the body of Christ."* This contrasts to the inordinate value our culture places on independence, which can poison relationships — making those with disabilities reluctant to admit vulnerabilities (they don't want to be a "burden" on others) and causing their caregivers to resent the loss of freedom they think is necessary for self-fulfillment.
- ▶ *They emphasize BEING OVER DOING.* "In our society a person's worth is judged according to the capacity to produce (to be useful) or the ability to achieve a certain professional status," which leaves those who are unable "to do" feeling as though they have no value, Toombs notes. The Christian community recognizes "that the assessment of personal worth has as much to do with 'being' (or character) as it does with 'doing' is a vital step in maintaining personal integrity and countering negative attitudes with respect to disability."



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► *They realize health includes vulnerability.* On society's view of health as "complete absence of disease and freedom from *any* physical or mental limitation" and achieving ideals of "beauty, physique, physical strength, fitness, and vigor," vulnerability is only weakness. But Christians embrace a paradigm of health grounded in covenantal relationship with God and one another. Toombs writes, by "setting aside selfish ambition, envy, and worldly success in favor of love, humility, and service to others, our lives in community are built upon a basis of trust that enables us to share our vulnerabilities and needs without fear of condemnation from others. As a result, the vulnerability that accompanies the reductions of illness and disability is less a negative life circumstance than it is an opportunity to share in the miracle of relationship."

Study Questions

1. How do the cultural ideals that Kay Toombs identifies – self-determination, doing over being, and health as the absence of disease – combine to devalue people with disabilities?
2. Consider how Paul's teaching on the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) stands opposed to those cultural ideals.
3. Explore how life together in your congregation exemplifies the body of Christ in opposition to those cultural ideals?
4. How does Carolyn Winfrey Gillette's hymn "When Hands Reach Out" depict the body of Christ flourishing through the sharing of human vulnerabilities?

Departing Hymn: "When Hands Reach Out" (verses 1, 2, 4, and 5)²

When hands reach out and fingers trace
the beauty of a loved one's face,
we thank you, God, that love relies
on gifts of grace not seen with eyes.

When fingers spell and signs express
our prayer and praise and thankfulness,
we thank you, God, that hands can sing;
you bless the silent songs we bring.

And when the ways we learn and grow
are not the ways that others know,
We thank you, God, that we have learned
your love's a gift, and never earned.

Your Spirit gives us differing ways
to serve you well and offer praise.
When all are joined as one, we'll be
your able, strong community.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2001)

Suggested Tunes: O WALY WALY or TALLIS' CANON

¹ Hans S. Reinders, ed., *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 6.

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Focus Article:

📖 Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability
(*Disability*, pp. 60-67)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability

Is there room in the baptismal waters and at the Lord's Supper table for persons with profound intellectual disability? For Christians who practice believers' baptism, the question goes to the heart of what it means to be the Church and to welcome the giftedness of each person in our midst.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:17-22

Meditation†

Over the years I have worked with many people whose life experience includes profound cognitive disability. I am always struck by the overwhelming sense that despite the apparent inability of some people to understand and respond in the ways that are expected by the majority, there is much more to their lives than can be seen through eyes which register only pathology and suffering. Even those with the most profound forms of disability are able to worship.

John Swinton

Reflection

"Baptism is supposed to follow faith as a person's conscious and voluntary act of obedience to Christ's command" according to Baptists and others who practice believer's baptism. "This act of obedience serves as the initiatory rite into the Church," Jason Whitt observes, and "the Lord's Supper is reserved for baptized believers – those persons who by baptism have become members of the Church." So, he wonders, if those with profound intellectual disabilities cannot "consciously and freely turn to Christ and follow him in baptism, must they remain outside of the Church and not share the table with those who are followers of Christ?"

There is no question that God's saving grace extends to the profoundly disabled: "these children and adults are held firmly within God's love," Whitt explains. Yet while they are welcomed by their church families, they remain "in a child-like position in the Church... [and] never fully belong to the community of believers." Fearing that this will "betray the gospel that demands a place for the 'least of these' because Christ has broken down the barriers that separate us – including the one between able-bodied and disabled," Whitt explores how we might "remain true to Baptist convictions on believer's baptism and sharing of the table while making room for those who can never act on their own volition or understanding to confess faith in Christ."

- ▶ *Baptism is more than a symbol.* Since the ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are reserved for only those who believe, they are more than symbols, they are *acts of belonging*. "Something takes place: a person is brought into the community of the Church and a new identity as one baptized begins to be formed. Likewise, [in] taking the meal... a shared identity is forged among those around the table." Whitt says. Ordinances "are acts of threefold agency: God, the Church, and the candidate. Because they are given by



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A Series in Faith and Ethics

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Christ to the Church, there must be a body of believers gathered together who can offer them. When people turn to Christ in faith and become new creations, it is the Church that forms them into the new identity discovered in the gospel narrative.”

- ▶ *The Church is more than a voluntary association*, because it is this sort of identity-forming community. “Believers learn what it means to be disciples as they are formed within the community that lives the gospel story.” Early Baptists thought the Church was ‘voluntary’ in another sense: “each believer finds faith apart from coercion from earthly powers.”
- ▶ *Baptizing the intellectually disabled is not like infant baptism*. Admittedly, they cannot comprehend the “belongingness” of the ordinances, but can their “response to the gospel” be expressed in other ways? As Michael Taylor reminds us, “It is true that we look for a response to the gospel in those who come to join the Church, but we are made members of Christ far more by what is given than is expected.”

These reflections lead Whitt to suggest “those in the tradition of believer’s baptism should baptize persons with profound intellectual disabilities – not all such persons indiscriminately, but those children and adults who are already present in our congregations, the sons and daughters of faithful parents who have included them in the life of the Church.” He says “believer’s baptism remains the norm for most. The intention is not to turn from this conviction, but rather to recognize that there are cases where baptizing one who cannot confess faith is a proper affirmation of that person’s place in the body of Christ.”

Study Questions

1. Why do Christians who practice believer’s baptism emphasize the symbolic function of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper? How, according to Jason Whitt, does their practice indicate these are more than symbolic?
2. Compare and contrast infant baptism with Whitt’s proposal for baptizing those with profound intellectual disabilities.
3. Why, according to Whitt, is it important to move toward a practice of baptizing those in the Church with profound intellectual disabilities? Do you agree?

Departing Hymn: “Jesus, Our Lord and King” (verses 1 and 4)

Jesus, our Lord and King,
to you our praises rise;
to you our bodies we present,
a living sacrifice.

Baptized into your death,
with you again we rise,
to newness of a life of faith,
to new and endless joys.

Anonymous

Suggested Tunes: ST. MICHAEL or ST. THOMAS

† John Swinton, “Introduction: Re-imagining Genetics and Disability,” in John Swinton and Brian Brock, eds., *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics: Why Science Needs the Church* (2007), 13.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Zacchaeus: Short and Un-Seen

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Meditation | Meditation |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how a “normate” or “ableist” perspective can distort our interpretation of the biblical stories that involve disability.
2. To illustrate this distortion with the story of Zacchaeus, and to read the story instead from a “littlist” or “shortist” perspective.
3. To discuss how some works of Christian art which depict biblical stories can either reflect or subvert an ableist interpretation of Scripture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

In an article entitled “‘Who Causes the Blind to See’: Disability and Quality of Religious Life,” the sociologist Avi Rose notes that Jews and Christians tend to see disability in negative terms, in part because of how they read biblical stories that feature disability. They often take a disabling condition to be a sign of God’s punishment or an evil incarnation, as a challenge to divine perfection, or as an indicator of spiritual incompetence and exemption from religious practice. At best, they think it is a reason to pity and show charity to the person with the disability.

Are these attitudes in the biblical stories themselves, or are we reading them into Scripture? Amos Yong explores the extent to which we are at fault for projecting into the biblical narrative our own normate and ableist assumptions about disability.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to open members’ hearts to hear the written Word afresh.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 19:1-10 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

As we begin our reflection on human disability, it would be appropriate to investigate the role of disability in Scripture. However, as Amos Yong warns in this study, our interpretations of the biblical stories are often distorted by the normate or ableist assumptions of our society. To help us escape these biases, he imagines how little people, or people with pathological dwarfism, might interpret the story of Zacchaeus. Not only does this

show us a different side of the Lucan story, it opens our eyes to one of Luke's major themes – namely, that the gospel of Jesus Christ subverts the physiognomic beliefs of ancient (and contemporary) culture.

Study Questions

1. Amos Yong explains these two terms: "'Normate' in the field of disability studies refers to the assumptions about disabilities held by those without disabilities; 'ableism,' parallel to *sexism* or *ageism*, thus represents the discriminatory perspectives and practices imposed, sometimes unconsciously so, by non-disabled people, structures, and policies, on those with disabilities." Because readers with a normate or ableist perspective assume that the biblical message is "obviously meant for normal people (like them)," Yong thinks they tend to overlook the presence of disabilities and their importance in biblical stories. They further assume "the world as it ought to be will not feature any signs or marks of impairment."
2. As you read the story of Zacchaeus once or twice, ask members to close their eyes and visualize him as a dwarf. What do they "see" now in the story? Yong suggests, "The image of Zacchaeus running ahead of the crowd and climbing a sycamore tree (19:4) would have provoked the derision of the crowd...fascinated by the awkward movements of a pathological dwarf with his less symmetrically proportioned body." Do members now notice how assertive Zacchaeus is in meeting Jesus, how surprised and pleased he is to receive Jesus' blessing, or how able he appears in hosting Jesus in his home?

Reflect on the restriction against dwarfs in Leviticus 21:16-24 and the ancient physiognomic belief that dwarfs must be small-minded or greedy. What other negative views of dwarfism do members recall from fairytales and popular culture? Discuss how the Lucan story undermines these negative associations with the disability.

3. Yong distinguishes ministering from being ministered to, being active from just being passive in the Church. He says the story of Zacchaeus "undermines [the people's] expectations that those who are impaired and disabled need to be 'fixed' or cured in order to participate fully in the renewal and restoration of Israel." Ask members to list the disabling physical and intellectual conditions that threaten to reduce some people to passive recipients of ministry in your congregation. How can you discover these people's gifts for ministry and incorporate them more fully into the congregation's ministry?
4. If time permits, divide into three small groups to review the pieces of art. Otherwise, choose one or two pieces of art that members will discuss together as a group.

Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1602-1603), which interprets John 20:24-29, "emphasizes the corporeality of the risen Christ," Heidi Hornik writes. "The painter conveys the sensation of touch as we watch Christ guide the finger of Thomas into the gaping wound." The interpretation subverts the normate perspective that ignores disabilities or assumes that they "will be erased in the end."

Nicholas Poussin's *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man* (1655) interprets the story in Acts 3:1-10. The artist highlights the man's beggarliness, not his lameness; Hornik notes, "He has a malnourished body, but...no deformity or disability is evident in his figure."

The sixth-century Byzantine mosaic from San Apollinare Nuovo depicts the story of the woman suffering from a hemorrhage who steals a healing from Jesus (Mark 5:24b-34; Luke 8:43-48). Due to the mosaic's placement high on the church wall, "the actions had to be clear, the gestures exaggerated, and the number of figures reduced to a minimum." The woman's prostrate figure dominates the image. Does this emphasize her active role in the story, or her passive reception of Jesus' healing?

Departing Hymn

"The Twisted Form upon the Tree" is on pp. 43-45 of *Disability*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Many Bodies, Many Worlds

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To grasp the difference between *including* people in community and their *belonging* to it.
2. To consider how we inhabit different phenomenal worlds through our bodies (with their disabling conditions), and thus how we require one another's perspectives to understand what it means to be human and to live humanly.
3. To understand what it means to inhabit "the strange new world within the Bible."

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"It began innocently enough as I stumbled and tripped while playing tennis.... My concern grew as I noticed a great deal of numbness in my left hand and my feet began to feel as if I were walking through sand," recalls Tom Graves, President Emeritus at Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond, Virginia.

"I was thirty-six years old, at the prime of my life, with a loving wife and two young daughters. A few months earlier I was playing tennis, golf, softball, and jogging. Now I was scared to death, or I should say, I was scared of death. I wondered if I would live long enough to teach my daughters how to ride a bicycle. When the [neurologist] concluded lengthy tests and informed me that I had multiple sclerosis, I remember thanking him, knowing what else he was looking for.

"At that same time, the spring of 1983, I was teaching a course on the problem of evil. Suddenly I was no longer a spectator looking objectively at the many instances of chaos and suffering in human life. Now I found myself to be a very fragile participant in the game of life, wounded and afraid like so many others. One lives and thinks differently when one experiences the harsh limitations of human life.... My illness challenged and changed my thoughts at several points." (*Disability*, 79-80)

Tom Graves discovered he was living in "another world," to use John Swinton's phrase. What would he learn there? How would he communicate it to others? And who would listen?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking members to read the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study John Swinton claims the experience of disabling conditions, both physical and cognitive, can become windows on perceiving the world, our humanity, and how to live well. He finds confirmation for this

idea both in the Bible and the human experience of disabilities. But the narratives of Scripture are normative for him: they provide the “strange new world” that reshapes our ideas about human disability and enables us to welcome and learn from the phenomenal “worlds” of people with disabilities.

Study Questions

1. “To be included, one just needs to be there; to belong, one needs to be missed,” John Swinton writes. “To belong, others need to long for us to be back among them like the father longed for the return of his prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31). To belong, people need to respect our world and take time to seek out its value. To belong, people need to listen to the challenges and questions that our world raises.” For a person to belong to a community, others need to sympathetically inhabit that person’s “world” and value the insight into reality that it embodies. “We are not talking only about things that need to be *done to* a particular group of people or even structural changes that need to be done within our communities,” he continues. “We are talking about developing the types of conversations, understandings, and relationships wherein our world of multiple worlds can be relearned and in so doing the Body of Christ can be re-membered.” With regard to which disabilities in your congregation are these conversations relatively easy? Which regard to which disabilities are they difficult?
2. John Hull noticed a fundamental switch in his relationship to other things: “for sighted people...the world seems to be ‘out there’...[and] is then brought within the boundaries of the world ‘in here’ as they use their eyes.” This mode of experience reinforces their assumptions that the body is “a passive processor of external facts and conditions” and blind people have a deficiency. As Hull lost his sight, “the world moved inward and became the size and shape of his body. Internal feelings and experiences he had never noticed before became primary as his ability to *look* outside began to fade.... Gradually he found himself moving outward, but this time the world ‘out there’ was different. For instance, colors and faces changed their meaning as their ability to inform him of the nature of the world shifted.” It is this shift in perspective, which was more dramatic and crucial than Hull could have expected, that is the basis for Hull and Swinton’s idea that Hull’s “world changed.”
3. This suggests Scripture cannot be reduced to “rules...for good living,” Swinton writes. Rather, “Its stories, images, rituals, and practices invite us to enter this strange new world. As we read the stories of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Paul, we come to recognize that their stories are in fact ours. And as we find our place within these stories, they form a lens through which we re-examine the world we thought we knew, and thus begin to transform our understanding of what we previously assumed to be normal.” Consider how, for Swinton, the stories of Moses, Paul, and Christ suggest *patterns of looking at* (valuing, responding to, feeling with) people with disabilities rather than *moral rules* about how to live.
4. The verses suggest that Christ’s suffering on the cross is “God in pain,” “God in need,” “God confined,” “God alone [abandoned],” and “God with scars,” revealing God’s identification with and empathy for our suffering. The people who can see this most clearly are those who are in pain, in need, confined, alone, and with scars. They are not *projecting* their suffering onto Christ, but recognizing in him a form of their suffering. Swinton’s fine discussion of Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* illustrates this point (*Disability*, 20).
5. “My encounter with personal disability brought me to a refined definition of divine omnipotence...[as] relational love, not manipulative power,” Tom Graves writes. “When viewed from this vantage point we understand the nature of God, the creation of the world, and the purpose of human life in a dramatically different fashion.” Graves concludes that “to allow human freedom, God accepts the agony and consequences of human sin; to provide an arena in which human creativity can be expressed, the natural order remains unfinished; and to provide meaning for human existence, persons are given responsibility to work with God in bringing the created order toward completion.”

Departing Hymn

“The Twisted Form upon the Tree” is on pp. 43-45 of *Disability*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Disability and the Cult of Normalcy

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the rise of the cult of normalcy.
2. To explore why the cult of normalcy veers so quickly into ableism.
3. To consider how disability plays a prophetic role—exposing the social pretensions of the “normal” and allowing us to see our humanity as a vulnerable gift of God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “When Hands Reach Out” locate one of the familiar tunes O WALY WALY or TALLIS’ CANON in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“Across many cultures, disability signifies an unruly body that does not conform to familiar expectations,” Tom Reynolds writes. “It seems to be a body gone wrong and in need of remediation through cure, healing, or rehabilitative adjustment to participate fully in society....

“In my experience as a parent advocating for my son, Chris, these harsh realities are commonplace.... I cannot see his body as ‘wrong’ and ‘lacking,’ as just a thing in need of remedy or cure. Certainly, Chris’s way of being does not conform to social expectations. For example, in a grocery store he is sometimes overwhelmed and overstimulated by the crowds, noises, and tight spaces with shelves stacked high with colorful packages. It becomes clear his reactions are ‘maladjusted’ and disruptive for other shoppers, who pass by shaking their heads and staring disapprovingly at both of us. He ‘should behave’ and ‘contain’ himself, someone once said to me. But I wonder precisely ‘who’ it is that should adjust, behave, and contain themselves. When perceived from a different vantage point (Chris’s), the grocery store is in fact an overwhelming place, bombarding the senses with excess noise and enticements to purchase merchandise, far beyond what is needed. Whose reaction is ‘normal,’ and why?” (*Disability*, 25-26)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for the common human vulnerabilities and weaknesses that can open us more radically to God’s grace.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 45:9-12 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study Tom Reynolds introduces a social model for understanding human disability. He does not see disability as just a medical impairment in functioning of the individual, but as a socially constructed interpretation

of that impairment which effectively excludes the person from participating in common social activities. He helps us see that much of the “problem” of disability is not in individuals, but in societal attitudes (which he calls “the cult of normalcy”) that remain unacknowledged and unexamined. For this reason, disability can play a prophetic role in exposing the social pretensions of the “normal” and revealing to us the nature of our humanity – namely, that the deepest relationships with one another and before God are grounded in our common vulnerability.

Study Questions

1. Tom Reynolds explains, “The cult of normalcy takes the exchange values associated with bodily appearance and function – that is, how useful, productive, or valuable certain bodies are in particular social exchanges – and it routinizes them through systems of power and associated rituals. It takes these socially constructed attributions of value from particular situations and holds them up as standards for all people’s bodies. It makes them seem natural and even ideal. Rituals of socialization inscribe these standards across daily life – through media, education, economics, moral codes, etc. This is why ‘cult’ is a helpful way to understand how normalcy is communicated and internalized by members in a society. We are habituated into mechanisms of normalcy.” Encourage members to select a condition that is considered a disability in relation to another condition thought to be “normal.” How is that idea of “normalcy” reinforced through media, education, economics, and moral codes?
2. “We define ourselves by what we reject,” notes Reynolds; “the things we exclude outline the ‘identity’ by creating an ‘us’ over and against ‘them.’” Once disabilities are socially constructed, they often become the basis for this group-definition. “Language itself becomes a vehicle for this process, inscribing ‘the normal’ into our everyday sense of who we are. For instance, recall how terms like ‘cripple,’ ‘blind,’ and ‘deaf’ are used pejoratively as metaphors of delinquency.” The next step is easy: we develop (sometimes unconsciously) the prejudicial attitudes and systems that exclude or hide the “disabled.”
3. Frances Young does not mean that disability is “some kind of punishment for sin. It is not usually anyone’s fault. But it is a kind of judgment, a *krisis*, because...[s]ociety is judged by the way it treats handicapped people and our society is ambiguous.” Her point, Reynolds suggests, is that “disability prophetically holds up a mirror to each society and to each person, reflecting back values, attitudes, and practices that nurture treatments of disability as a tragic flaw, the product of circumstances and bodies ‘gone wrong.’”
4. Divide into several small groups. Assign to each group or let each one choose a particular disabling condition and discuss our society’s strengths and weaknesses in regard to persons with that condition. What are your congregation’s strengths and weaknesses in regard to that condition? Does the congregation exhibit counter-cultural practices in its regard?
5. Heiki Peckruhn commends the practice in L’Arche of reflecting on the meaning of our humanity “in relationship with those commonly found on the margins of society, who are denied full humanity and opportunity for reflection due to their developmental disabilities.” We will uncover our ableist tendency to “exclude because we are afraid of difference, of being challenged, and of losing what is important to us, including our image of ourselves.” We will also “discover together our unique contributions to our communities.”
6. She notes (with Stanley Hauerwas) that “L’Arche can be a powerful sign to congregations today...because churches too often fall into the temptation of conforming to the speed and placelessness that marks life in the modern age.... L’Arche ‘helps the church find the gospel’ by embodying gentleness, being present for one another, and caring for each other in physical ways through mutual patience, profound interdependence, and honesty.”
7. Finally, she says we will challenge “hypercognition, the attitude pervasive in Western society that privileges cognitive abilities and makes strong connections between intellect and being human. Rather, as Stephen Post argues, humanity is constituted by ‘other-regarding’ love, love that brings to life persons with disabilities and caregivers alike.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Lure of Eugenics

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the complex network of actors through whom prenatal care is distorted to prenatal screening for selective abortion.
2. To discuss how we can best engage these various actors with Christian love.
3. To consider how prenatal screening for selective abortion impacts the lives of people with disabilities.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn 'O Lord, Life is Sacred' locate the familiar tune GORDON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

'The consequences of advances in genetic knowledge and the huge proliferation of prenatal tests, has not...been therapy, treatment or 'cure' for a fetus detected as having an impairment; the anticipated outcome of a positive prenatal test for impairment remains abortion. Hardly surprising then, that many in the disability community, and their supporters, are deeply concerned that societal acceptance, even welcoming, of increased genetic testing signals powerful messages about disabled people's fundamental right 'to be,'" explains Linda Ward, a professor of disability and social policy at the University of Bristol, UK.

She is concerned that 'The lack of explicit, public acknowledgement that the outcome of increased prenatal screening and testing is an increase in abortion on the grounds of fetal impairment has eased the rapid growth and routinization of prenatal testing, without concurrent public debate on the two issues most centrally involved: abortion and disability.' (Linda Ward, 'Whose Right to Choose? The 'New' Genetics, Prenatal Testing and People with Learning Disabilities,' *Critical Public Health* 12:2, 188)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide you to care for parents who face decisions about prenatal testing and its results.

Responsive Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 139:13-18 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The previous study, "Disability and the Cult of Normalcy," introduced the idea that disability is a social construction: through a process that is largely unacknowledged and unexamined, our society constructs an idea of normalcy and then "disables" persons with certain physical and mental impairments that it considers

“abnormal” by excluding them from common social activities. Tom Reynolds called this process “the cult of normalcy” because we internalize the standards of normalcy constantly and in so many ways. In this study Brian Brock helps us understand how our practice of employing the techniques of prenatal testing to screen out and abort certain individuals is a particularly troublesome example of the cult of normalcy.

Study Questions

1. The increasing use of prenatal testing to screen fetuses for selective abortion signals to people with disabilities—certainly those individuals who have the impairments that are being screened for, but perhaps others as well—that they are a burden on others and that their lives are not as valuable as others. Brian Brock writes, “Some have protested that testing and aborting fetuses with genetic anomalies is not necessarily a judgment about citizens currently living with those conditions. Addressing these objections, Hans Reinders concludes that it is very difficult to separate strong claims about the benefits of screening out the disabled from judgments about the perceived negative impact of the living disabled on society. To ‘test’ implies making ‘selections’ that rest not only on judgments about the health of the human genome, but also on judgments about the quality of life experienced by disabled persons who already exist. Empirical studies confirm that, when faced with a diagnosis of genetic anomaly, virtually every mother or couple draws on anecdotal experiences and accounts of the lives of the disabled and their caregivers in deciding whether or not to abort.”
2. Tom Reynolds writes, “society disables people by representing impairment as a flaw or deficit, by constructing what is ‘normal’ and thereby creating the difference between bodies that are ‘able’ and those that are ‘disabled.’ Medical communities commonly fuel this problem by cultivating curative practices to remedy such flaw or deficiency. Arthur Frank puts it this way: ‘Society prefers medical diagnoses that admit treatment, not social diagnoses that require massive change in the premises of what that social body includes as part of itself.’” Reynolds describes these attitudes about normalcy a “cult” because its promulgation is so pervasive in media, education, moral codes, law, economics, and so on.
3. Consider how these cultural attitudes about normalcy influence the thinking of the various actors that Brock describes. Would they make the same decisions, or make them in the same way, if they had not absorbed these attitudes?
4. Form three study groups to focus on the primary actors that Brock discusses: the geneticists and laboratory technicians, the genetic counselors, and the parents. Consider how your congregation can support, encourage, instruct, and (when appropriate) confront them. (If time permits, you might form groups to focus on the supporting actors Brock mentions: the researchers, the medical personnel who perform abortions, and the legislators.)
5. Brock writes, “Confessing in worship that the sinful man still lives—resisting life with the disabled and pining for an easier life—protects us from undue deference to expert calculators of risk.” How are the actors invited into your congregation’s worship of God? How does your congregation help them envision all of their work and decisions as forming praise (or anti-doxology) of God’s good gifts? How can you be present to support them in making difficult decisions, and in living with the consequences of them?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Jars of Clay

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Meditation | Meditation |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the cultural ideals of self-determination, doing over being, and health as the absence of disease combine to devalue people with disabilities.
2. To consider how an intentional Christian community lives in contrast to those ideals.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "When Hands Reach Out" locate one of the familiar tunes O WALY WALY or TALLIS' CANON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Report

"Rather than viewing ourselves as either dependent or independent, we affirm our *interdependence* and celebrate the unique place that each member of the Christian community occupies in the living organism that is the body of Christ," Kay Toombs reports of the intentional Christian community where she lives. "Those 'with disabilities' are simply absorbed into community life and find a place of participation where their particular gifts are appreciated. ... I simply never think of these individuals as 'disabled.' Rather, I think of them only in terms of the irreplaceable part each plays in the relational context of our community life: the young man, paralyzed after breaking his neck, who has a pivotal role in the young people's outreach ministry in nursing homes; the child with Down's syndrome who joyfully participates in our children's choir; the young woman with a congenital physical anomaly who weaves, spins, and cultivates beautiful flowers using one hand; the extraordinary farmer who works with the horses and who, in other contexts, would likely be discounted as a 'person with an intellectual disability'; and the autistic child who comes to all meetings and gatherings and who is gradually beginning to reach out to others. I also realize that, since becoming a part of this community, I have not thought of *myself* as a person with a disability [of multiple sclerosis]. It is not simply that no one here treats me in that way but also, in sharing my life, all are sensitive to any barriers that prevent my full participation in community activities. As an example, if there is no ramp providing wheelchair access into a person's house, arrangements will always be made for people to meet me there and carry me in and out of the premises."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your congregation to fully embrace the vulnerability that accompanies disability.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In this study we follow Kay Toombs into the intentional Christian community where she lives to discover how and why it responds in a countercultural way to disability and the vulnerability that accompanies it. Drawing upon the Apostle Paul's rich description of the body of Christ, Toombs traces her community's response to "the centrality of covenantal relationship...with God and each other."

Take this opportunity to review how your congregation responds to those with disabilities. In "Lowering Barriers for People with Disabilities" Jackie Mills-Fernald reviews resources that can help congregations learn from the vulnerabilities of persons with disabilities and incorporate their giftedness for ministry.

Study Questions

1. Kay Toombs writes, "There is a strong cultural message that we should be able to look after ourselves, make our own decisions, 'stand on our own two feet.' While personal responsibility is, of course, important, when radical independence is considered to be the ultimate value, dependence on others is negatively perceived as a form of weakness." Furthermore, we measure people's value to society by their work, and this emphasis on *doing* may carry over to how we measure their value to a family and congregation. Finally, the cultural "perception of 'health' and 'brokenness' makes it difficult for people to even see beyond the physical manifestation of disfigurement or disability. In the eyes of the 'able-bodied' there is the clear assumption that disability is incompatible with living a meaningful life." So, collectively these cultural ideals suggest persons with disabilities are weak, lacking in value to others and to society, and unable to find meaning in their lives; and these ideals suggest that their caregivers are burdened and restricted in caring for them.
2. Paul characterizes the members of the body of Christ as neither dependent nor independent, but *interdependent*. The "weaker" (more vulnerable?) are still valuable to the body. Indeed, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26a). All members contribute in some way to the well-function of the body, but we might extend the analogy in a natural way to say their contribution can be in their "being" rather than "doing"; after all, we would not amputate a weakened hand or an asthmatic lung that was "doing" less well, but would care for it. Toombs summarizes, "In this context, rather than being marginalized as they are in the wider culture, those 'with disabilities' are simply absorbed into community life and find a place of participation where their particular gifts are appreciated."
3. Form three small groups to discuss how your congregation is responding to each cultural ideal. How do members support one another emotionally, spiritually, educationally, economically, and in daily activities? How are members valued for "being" (having Christ-like character) and sharing their presence with others, rather than "doing" their roles in the congregation's work? How are persons' vulnerabilities acknowledged and their giftedness (perhaps refined *through* their suffering) shared in the congregation? "These reductions do not diminish one's worth as a human being," Toombs notes. "Indeed,...the most vulnerable among us – the dying – have been an incredible gift to all members of our community. In every case these individuals have pressed forward in faith and demonstrated that, no matter how burdensome the physical circumstances, God's grace is sufficient for every need."
4. The first verses illustrate how Gillette has been blessed by the worship of friends with sight and hearing difficulties. About the fourth verse, she writes, "I am grateful for the ministry of...Jessie Scanlon, a young woman with autism. She was a teenager when we were serving the church she attended with her family. Every Sunday, she and her sister and parents would sit near the front of the sanctuary, on the left hand side. She had her own ministry there. She reminded us that God's 'love is a gift, and never earned.'" Paul's image of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 is interpreted in the final verse.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Meditation | Meditation |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 2 and 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss how Baptists and others who practice believer's baptism obey the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.
2. To consider a proposal for Christians in that tradition to baptize certain youth and adults in the Church who have profound intellectual disabilities.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-14 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Jesus, Our Lord and King" locate one of the familiar tunes ST. MICHAEL or ST. THOMAS in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City there is a beautiful oil painting, *The Adoration of the Christ Child*, attributed to an anonymous fifteenth-century artist in The Netherlands. (See it online at www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110001225.) The composition is quite unusual. We are present with the holy family in the stable, but through a window we can see that it is the very night when the shepherds heard the angels singing. The Christ child is naked in the Manger. With Joseph and Mary, seven angels kneel around the Christ child, while seven cherubs bounce about the ceiling, distracted with joy. Two townspeople peer down at the newborn from the background.

But this is the most unusual feature of the painting: the angel and the townspeople who are nearest to Mary have unmistakable features of Down syndrome and mental retardation. Perhaps it is the first representation of this intellectual disability in art. These two are not singled out in any way; they are simply among the worshippers, human and angelic, of the Christ child.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for family members or friends in your congregation who have profound intellectual disabilities.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 2:17-22 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study explores how the Church is called to practice baptism and the Lord's Supper in relation to those in the Church whose understanding of and response to God's love are shaped by their profound intellectual disabilities. Jason Whitt explains why this is a thorny issue for Baptists and others who practice believer's baptism. However, there is a parallel (and, perhaps, equally difficult) question for Christian traditions that practice infant baptism: How should these churches practice the rite of confirmation (which confers the gift of the Holy Spirit and full church membership) in relation to those with profound intellectual disabilities?

Study Questions

1. The Baptists and other Christians who practice believer's baptism emphasize that through the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper the believer is expressing outwardly a spiritual reality – namely, the believer's salvation through God's grace that has been faithfully welcomed into one's life. Receiving baptism and sharing in the Lord's Supper are the believer's conscious and free acts of obedience that flow from a grace-imbued, faithful life.
2. The practice of the ordinances in this tradition is more complex, Jason Whitt suggests. While they have "great symbolic significance," it is also the case that "God's grace is conveyed through them." In other words, the ordinances involve a three-way agency or communication of the believer, the Church, and God. "To hold an initiation rite reserved for only those who believe suggests that baptism is more than mere symbol. Something takes place: a person is brought into the community of the Church and a new identity as one baptized begins to be formed. Likewise, taking the meal is not only a symbolic reminder of Christ's sacrifice, but in eating and drinking together, a shared identity is forged among those around the table," Whitt writes. He calls the ordinances "acts of belonging" because through these acts the "individual members of the group are formed by the community even as they contribute to the further shaping of the community."
3. Whitt offers "with no small amount of fear and trembling" this proposal for further discussion: that "those in the tradition of believer's baptism should baptize persons with profound intellectual disabilities – not all such persons indiscriminately, but those children and adults who are already present in our congregations, the sons and daughters of faithful parents who have included them in the life of the Church. We offer this baptism into the community with the full conviction that believer's baptism remains the norm for most. The intention is not to turn from this conviction, but rather to recognize that there are cases where baptizing one who cannot confess faith is a proper affirmation of that person's place in the body of Christ." He believes that this practice differs in significant ways from infant baptism. Appoint two small groups to brainstorm the similarities and the differences.
4. An important similarity is that the candidates cannot express to themselves in thoughts or to others in words their response to God's love; this articulation is left to others who love them. Beyond that, the differences are many. The candidates with profound intellectual disabilities will be as old as others who receive believer's baptism; they may express their response to God's love in other behavioral ways; they will be contributing to the congregation's worship and ministry; they may have some (limited) theological understanding of their baptismal experience; they will not mature into the greater and sufficient understanding required for them to make a conscious and free choice to receive baptism; and they were not put forward for baptism because they were born in a particular region, to a particular family, and so on. Do these differences make a difference? Do they suggest the practice would not undermine a commitment to believer's baptism for all other members?
5. Whitt admits that a congregation need not baptize or share the Lord's Supper in order to express love to those with profound intellectual disabilities, or to support the faith of their families or caregivers. He suggests a different sort of reason for the practice he proposes. It expresses "the subversive nature of the Church" wherein "barriers are broken" so that members "discover in the body of Christ that they are dependent upon those they disregarded." Put another way, the practice enables us "to see the profoundly disabled as fellow brothers and sisters, members of God's kingdom, who have been given gifts we need and from whom we might learn."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.