

## **Implications of Self-Worth through Human Vocation for Persons with Disabilities<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

There are many aspects of God's call on individuals in the Holy Scriptures. First, when meeting the Eternal God through an encounter with Jesus, an individual is called to believe in Christ and follow him. People are called to participate in God's redemptive work through belonging to the family of God, the Church, and through joining the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. The Father is already at work in the world sustaining and wooing humankind, while the Spirit moves creatively. Although believers are universally called to work according to their abilities and station, sometimes, albeit rarely, they are called to a very specific type of work. Finally, through the course of their lives, followers of God are called to more than one type of work; whatever form their work may take in any given season, they are called to a life of service to God in Christ.<sup>2</sup> How one works—honestly and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is dedicated to my maternal uncle, Julian Brantson Mitten, who entered his eternal rest on November 23, 2022. Uncle Julian was a shining light to many of what God can do through a person with a disability. About Julian B. Mitten, from his obituary: “[Julian] attended local schools and participated in the 1977 graduation ceremonies at Bradley-Bourbonnais Community High School. As an adult, Julian lived in Latham, Watseka, Libertyville, and Bradley, Illinois. He attended College Church of the Nazarene University Avenue in Bourbonnais where he excelled at greeting and hugging. He loved to travel and had flown to Ontario, CA, Atlanta, GA, Kansas City, MO, and Orlando, FL. He enjoyed vacations with his dear friends, the Remole family, in Missouri and Georgia every summer for over 40 years.” Before retirement, Julian worked at the Kankakee County Training Center and enjoyed participating in the Everyone Cares Camp on the Chicago Central District for many years of his life. His example was an inspiration for ministry to people with disabilities in North and South Korea and Beijing, China.

<sup>2</sup> William Messenger, “Calling in the Theology of Work,” *Journal of Markets &*

excellently—and the attitude in which one works are much more important than the specific type of work one is engaged in.

From a theological standpoint, human vocation is connected to the idea of divine calling and purpose; God has created each of us to do meaningful and important works in this divine drama we find ourselves in. All persons were created to make a significant contribution—particularly by virtue of being in relationship with God and through specific “doings,” which, aided by Christ, bring fulfillment to the larger story of God’s redemption of humankind. Thus, vocation is the doctrine that God is at work in the world through individuals who, in cooperation with his Spirit in them, allow God “to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose”<sup>3</sup> for the sake of God’s creative, sustaining, and redemptive works on earth. When identified and accepted, individual vocations take on a clarified focus, such that individuals live out a specific calling and engage in a specific area of passionate interest, regardless of the occupations or job responsibilities he or she holds.

Furthermore, God, who said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over . . . all the creatures that move along the ground,”<sup>4</sup> did not leave any person outside of his loving care and intention. Seeing that every individual is made in the image of God, then it follows that those who exhibit some form of disability were made to reflect God for his glory. Our discussion of vocation/calling and work for persons with disabilities will include its significance for persons with mental, physical, and developmental disabilities, with the goal of uncovering the role that work plays in contributing to a sense of self-worth in the individual.

Through exploring the *Imago Dei* in persons with disability, this researcher will uncover aspects of the divine purpose in individuals with disabilities in our churches and society and highlight the larger, meaningful

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*Morality* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 171–87.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:13, 14, all Scriptural citations are from the NIV.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:26.

contributions they were designed to make when given the right opportunities. Because persons with disabilities exist in every society, it is our assumption that answering these questions from a biblical perspective will have implications for the meaning of life for people of all cultures. Answers to these questions will lead us to a theology of work for persons with disabilities, with a particular emphasis on those with intellectual disabilities.

### **The Value of Persons Living with Disability**

This author agrees with R. Paul Stevens, who asserted that “God is providentially involved in our lives, so we are not a collection of accidents.”<sup>5</sup> Along with the psalmist, we declare that no one is a random collection of accidental firings of DNA, neurons, muscles, or organs. Every person is uniquely and beautifully created for a wonderful, awe-inspiring purpose that God determined, including his or her personality, strengths, and weaknesses.<sup>6</sup> Augustine affirmed this when he wrote, “There is no life which is not of God, for God is supreme life and the fount of life.”<sup>7</sup>

However, for many Christians, the presence of a disability in the life of a loved one evokes questions about the wisdom and goodness of God. Parents, especially, have questioned whether their child’s disability was the result of a past sin or a means for God to teach him or her a lesson. Persons wrestling with the seeming cruelty of raising a child with a disability and the individuals themselves will naturally bring to light questions of God’s Sovereignty, benevolence, and permissive will.

In truth, we are all vulnerable and dependent creatures. The line between ability and disability is often fuzzy and imprecise; it is social convention that determines what is normative. “Non-disabled and disabled persons are caught up in networks of dependencies, relationships without

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<sup>5</sup> R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Vancouver, B.C: W.B. Eerdmans ; Regent College Pub, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> See Psalm 139:14-16.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2008).

which participation in life activities considered normal would be impossible.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, we can confidently say that no one is perfectly equipped in all areas of life, whether physical or intellectual, and all of us have deficiencies in specific areas.

In comparison to a perfect, awesome God, all persons have some form of relative disability. For example, my friend with mild cerebral palsy was bullied as a child due to his slurred speech and unsteady gait. In my childhood, I was bullied for wearing thick glasses and having a constant stuffy nose due to allergies. As an adult, my friend with cerebral palsy is a whiz at computer software, whereas I struggle to make technology work for me. My late uncle with Down’s syndrome certainly had less anxiety in social situations than I do, and he could recite the birthdays, death dates, and wedding anniversaries of dozens, even hundreds, of people he considered his friends. In contrast, whether through preoccupation or poor memory, when I walk into a room of my own home to retrieve a particular item, I often forget why I’m there. As we age, our bodies and minds wear out, even if our spirit soars. None of us perfectly displays the complete image of God, either cognitively or physically. From a biblical view, we are all broken individuals affected by sin and its effects, and we are all in need of healing and restoration.

This is not to minimize or deny the struggle of those individuals who bear more apparent “disabilities,” defined by the inability to function physically, mentally, and/or intellectually at normative levels. Recent social movements admirably emphasize the unique abilities, as opposed to disabilities, of those with medically diagnosable disabilities. This emphasis, however, need not abandon the very real struggle of the individuals themselves to belong, thrive, and make meaning of their lives within the context of a society biased toward normative functioning. Exploration of vocation and work as a means to improving self-efficacy and a sense of self-worth may help clarify the purpose for which individuals with disabilities were put on earth.

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<sup>8</sup> Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 47.

### Human Vocation for Divine Purposes

God's design for individuals and cultures has always been for flourishing. The Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah 61 clearly declared the future Kingdom message of healing for the brokenhearted and freedom for the captives.<sup>9</sup> As individuals created in the image of God, God declared humans to be his masterpiece, "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."<sup>10</sup> The primary means by which God performs those good works is through an individual's vocation.

However, human philosophies and systems can diminish the beauty of divine calling and reduce humans to cogs in a machine for the benefit of society. Strict conformity to social norms regarding individual capabilities breeds a self-contempt for the diverse design of the human condition. To be sure, the worth of the individual cannot be derived using a utilitarian, communist lens of his or her purpose on earth. If human mechanisms for productivity or reciprocity in relationships are used as a gauge for human worth, an infinite number of reasons to be disappointed in others arise. Thomas E. Reynolds suggested "legal forms of insuring fairness can neutralize the unique worth of persons, reducing all to exchange equivalency."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, when the intrinsic precious value of the individual is assumed, love is a possibility in every relationship, no matter how marred or imperfect the relationship began.<sup>12</sup> From a divine perspective, love ceases to be love when defined through a transactional view.

To view persons with disabilities as "less than" or sub-human may be normative according to an earthly (fallen) mindset. Western worldviews that hold up autonomy as the model of healthy functioning, in particular, overlook the reality that each of us is dependent on one another for multiple aspects of human flourishing. Reynolds called this assumption the "cult of normalcy." He asserted that "communities . . . are led to project the fear of

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<sup>9</sup> See Isaiah 61:1, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 2:10.

<sup>11</sup> Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 137.

disorder and worthlessness onto others who exhibit bodily qualities that are different and unfamiliar.”<sup>13</sup> Our perceptions of human worth and potential have been skewed by widely held conceptions of ability and wholeness versus disability and brokenness. Reynolds continued, “The ‘problem’ is not the person with the disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person.”<sup>14</sup> However, when viewed through the lens of Scripture, we come to understand that people with disabilities carry no special category, either negative or positive, for belonging to the people of God or for accomplishing good works; they have also been included in the call to divine relationship and vocation extended to every person created by God.

A scriptural view of work does not measure its outcome by its complexity or simplicity. We do not evaluate a vessel based on what we want it to do; it must be evaluated according to the purpose the Divine Artist created it for. Timothy Keller has reminded us, “The gospel frees us from the relentless pressure of having to prove ourselves and secure our identity through work, for we are already proven and secure. It also frees us from a condescending attitude toward less sophisticated labor and from envy over more exalted work. All work now becomes a way to love the God who saved us freely; and by extension, a way to love our neighbor.”<sup>15</sup> The Potter molds the clay; it is not for us to direct the purpose others were created for, but rather to seek the Creator’s highest purpose for them.

Next, we turn to the Scriptures themselves to discover God’s purpose for individuals with disabilities and to deal with the potentially problematic interpretations of ceremonial laws when read from a normative worldview.

### **Worth of the individual in the Old Testament**

There are few mentions of disability in the Torah, and the passages that do

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<sup>13</sup> Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

mention it could be categorized as naming only visually identifiable [physical] disabilities.<sup>16</sup> A Jewish reading of the Torah would conclude that disability could quite possibly be the result of individual disobedience to the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. While this represents an incomplete reading of the Old Testament's view of disability, such a view could potentially be ascertained from passages in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

The only mention of disabled persons in Leviticus is in chapter 21:17-23, where priests with disfigurements were prohibited from entering the Holy Place because Yahweh's holiness required service from persons who were whole and undefiled. The disfigurements mentioned in this passage named blindness, lameness, mutilations of the face or limb, a broken foot or hand, hunchback or dwarfism, a blemish of the eyes, an itching disease, scabs or crushed testicles. These were all referred to as "blemishes," symbolizing ritualistic impurity, not moral impurity. Thus, for the purpose of keeping the Levitical Holiness Code for priests to minister before the altar of God, it was necessary to exclude those with such disabilities from service in the Holy Place. It should be noted, however, that priests with disfigurements were allowed to minister everywhere else in the Tabernacle, just not in the holy sanctum. They were also included in partaking of the sacrificial meals offered.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to Leviticus 21, Deuteronomy 23:1 prohibited anyone with crushed or mutilated testicles from entering "the assembly of the LORD." Scholars have pointed to this as a ceremonial law that referenced Yahweh's disgust for the pagan practice of emasculating males to serve as eunuchs in his sanctuary. However, Isaiah 56:3-5 assured us that those who had been emasculated and were determined to be obedient to Yahweh did, in fact, belong to his people.

Deuteronomy 28:21-68 listed the curses the LORD would bring upon Israel if they did not obey him in times of prosperity. While the majority of

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<sup>16</sup> Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 19.

the curses named diseases that would befall Israel when the people disobeyed, verse 61, read from an ableist perspective, could give way to the belief that disabilities were included in the curse for disobedience. However, the vague language naming “every kind of sickness and disaster not recorded in this Book of the Law” has clearly not provided sufficient evidence upon which to formulate a theology of disability as being synonymous with divine curses.

From a strictly Old Testament perspective and what Amos Yong designated a “normate” Christological view,<sup>18</sup> believers could be led to conclude that there was truly something “defiled” or sinful about persons manifesting a disability.<sup>19</sup> This would, of course, be in direct contrast to the teaching in Job that a blameless person can become the victim of horrific suffering. However, in the majority world, it is not uncommon for people—including Christians—to hold the view that impairments or disfigurements are direct consequences of the sins of predecessors. For people of these cultures, a person’s disability is frequently a matter of profound shame for his or her family and for society in general. This hindrance to flourishing has highlighted the need for a theology of redemption for disabilities.

In answer to the shame-filled experience for those living with disability, Jeremy Schipper related the Suffering Servant’s affliction in Isaiah 53 with the social experience of one with a physical disability or disease.<sup>20</sup> Traditionally, the passage has been applied to the scorn and punishment Christ endured on the cross as he took on the sin and afflictions of the human race. However, this author believes that the experience of having been “despised and rejected by mankind,” of having been held in low esteem by others, is biblical evidence that Jesus was indeed familiar with the social experience of a person with a disability. Furthermore, this passage promised

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<sup>18</sup> The “normate” view of Scripture, also termed an “ableist” view, refers to reading Scripture from the lens of able-bodied persons who (unintentionally) apply its meaning to discriminate against persons with disabilities.

<sup>19</sup> Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant*. Biblical Refigurations (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).



redemption for the pain and suffering endured by those with a disability, as it was written, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering . . . the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”<sup>21</sup> Not only did Christ endure what those experiencing social rejection have endured, but he has also redeemed the experience of disability by healing the wounds received when a person with a disability is considered by others as stricken by God. God has not abandoned those with disabilities. On the contrary, He has redeemed the disability and will use it for His glory!

### **Teaching on Care for the Disadvantaged in Deuteronomy**

Israel was herself a premature nation of slaves while in Egypt. Oppressed by a nation stronger than herself, she was helpless to overcome her circumstances on her own. She needed rescue and deliverance from hands that controlled her. Following her rescue from slavery, Yahweh desired that Israel continue to live in dependency upon him. Deuteronomy 7:8 describes that because Yahweh loved Israel and had redeemed them from a life of enslavement to the Egyptians, they were to provide the same care for the vulnerable among them. The fatherless, widow, and long-term foreigner residing by choice among Israel were dependent upon Israel’s people for sustenance.

While there are no explicit commands in Deuteronomy regarding care for the disabled, there are plenty of references about caring for the disadvantaged. Those included providing refuge for those who committed manslaughter, prohibition of impartial judgment of civic cases, and commands to show hospitality and to provide generously for the poor. In Deuteronomy 4:41-43, God commanded the Israelites to designate specific cities of refuge for those who innocently caused the accidental death of another. Through providing asylum, God protected the lives of those on whom others would seek revenge.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19 declares that God would show no partiality or accept any bribes; he would treat fairly anyone who would come to him.

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<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 53:4-5.

“He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.”<sup>22</sup> Reflecting God’s care for the destitute, Israel was commanded to provide hospitality and care for the fatherless, the widow, and the foreigner residing among them. This passage even goes to the extreme of commanding Israel to *love* (*ahav*) the stranger/foreigner because they themselves had been foreigners in Egypt and knew what it was like to be oppressed and displaced. Furthermore, multiple references in Deuteronomy 1-11 and 27-34 provide kinship for the foreigner who was “within your gates.”<sup>23</sup> As an act of remembrance and thanksgiving for the LORD’s deliverance out of bondage, the righteous path of obedient Israel was to provide and care for those less fortunate than them.

Interestingly, there has been no explicit mention of intellectual or developmental disability in the Old or New Testaments. On the contrary, an alternative (disability) reading of the Old Testament could determine that infirmities not explicitly condemned or linked to generational sin were covered under the sacrificial system, not because sin was implicated, but because basic provision was made for the fallen, broken state of humans in general. From this perspective, God already made perfect provision for the flourishing of the person with developmental or intellectual disabilities.

Due to the societal disadvantages imposed upon the disabled, God’s people who accommodate, include, and even honor those with disabilities among us are akin to King David’s bringing the lame Mephibosheth to the royal table and providing for his lifelong needs (a narrative example of God’s grace extended to a person with a disability). Such attitudes and behaviors are consistent with the nature of a holy God who shows covenantal *hesed* love to His people and is an accurate Kingdom orientation toward persons viewed by society as the “least of these.”

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<sup>22</sup> Deuteronomy 10:18.

<sup>23</sup> Mark R. Glanville, Luke Glanville, and Matthew Soerens, *Refuge Reimagined: Biblical Kinship in Global Politics* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021), 41.

### ***Redemption of Disabilities in the New Testament***

Luke's account recalls when, at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus was called to read from the scroll of Isaiah a prophecy about his purpose as Messiah. On that day, Christ announced that the Sovereign Lord had anointed him to preach good news to the poor, release for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and *to set the oppressed free*. Thus, Jesus went about Judea, Galilee, and the Decapolis healing every disease and sickness and exorcising demons from the afflicted. There were multiple accounts of Christ's healing people with physical maladies: the lame, those with skin diseases, the blind, the deaf and mute, and even raising young men and women from the dead. At the time of their healing, Christ restored the ostracized to their community; he commanded healed lepers to show themselves to the priest and to offer the required sacrifices. For the woman with the issue of blood, he publicly declared her healed. The delivered demoniac was commanded to return to his hometown and to tell his friends and family what the Lord had done for him. Interestingly, there were no accounts of anyone being healed of an intellectual disability by Jesus.

John 9 tells of the encounter in which Jesus healed a blind man whose impairment was, according to Jesus, due to no one's sin, not his own or his parents' sin, but so that the works of God might be displayed in his life.<sup>24</sup> His subsequent healing gave Jesus an opportunity to condemn the refusal of the religious leaders to admit their own spiritual blindness and condemn the injustice of accusing persons with disabilities of sinfulness "at birth." Once the healed man was expelled from the synagogue, Jesus found him and challenged the man to believe in him, the "Son of Man," a title Jesus used to refer to Daniel's prophecy but also to identify himself with the human condition. Jesus frequently lifted up those bowed low under the weight of human oppression and physical maladies. He must not have considered those with intellectual disabilities in need of healing because, if he had, there would surely be accounts of such encounters.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul wrote of what the Corinthians had once been at the time of hearing the message about Christ:

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<sup>24</sup> See John 9:3.

“Not many of you were wise by this world’s standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth . . . But God chose the foolish things of this world, and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”<sup>25</sup> Amos Yong makes a case for understanding “the things that are not” as a typology applicable to those with intellectual disabilities.<sup>26</sup> Wrongly viewed as pathetic by the majority population and frequently regarded as more pitiful than those with physical impairments, persons with intellectual disabilities have been stripped of all status in societies that esteem autonomy and self-determination. In collective societies that derive honor from conformity and intellectual achievement, the status-lessness of the intellectually disabled is even more pronounced. God’s design for the Church was that no one should be able to boast of what he or she had or had not received: neither status nor physical strength, social connections, nor human accomplishments.

According to the Apostle Paul, Christ’s death on the cross revealed the foolishness of the human powers that seek to determine who should be regarded as admirable or desirable. In contrast, God chose the ones the world considered foolish to manifest his great grace and beautiful handiwork. Paul’s gospel declared that we are all equal partakers of God’s grace to us in Christ Jesus.

### **Illustrations of Vocation for the Disabled**

What contribution do disabled persons have to make to the overall good of society? Before we embark on a discussion of vocation for the disabled, we must recognize that it will look different depending on the gifts and capacities of every individual. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the importance of vocation for fulfilling an individual’s purpose in God’s mysterious plan. Thus, a balanced perspective of human flourishing for persons of diverse abilities must consistently take into account dual aspects of being and doings. Furthermore, our treatment of the subject of vocation and work for disabled persons must begin with loving individuals unconditionally

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<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

<sup>26</sup> Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, 99.

apart from any expectations for his or her doings and how those doings benefit us. Reynolds reminds us:

Love is life-giving generosity, a compassionate regard that draws near and attends to the beloved . . . with his or her good in mind. Such generous concern requires that we adjust or even give up our hold on reality as we see it and open ourselves to the unfamiliar, the strange, perhaps threatening presence of another without imposing conditions that restrict or exclude their own capacities and ways of being.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to this, research has shown that work placements matching an individual's capabilities have undeniably contributed to a sense of self-worth for those with disabilities. Rosalie Torres Stone and colleagues noted that "studies on U.S. adults with significant disabilities have shown that work enhanced self-esteem and feelings of belongingness."<sup>28</sup> While Torres Stone studied individuals with psychiatric disabilities (mental illnesses that impeded normal functioning in daily life), her observations hold implications for persons with physical and developmental disabilities.

Torres Stone and her colleagues' study of young adults aged 16 to 30 years old measured the extent to which work impacted their participants' sense of self-worth. The outcome was noticeable: "For adults with psychiatric disabilities in the U.S., Norway, and Sweden, work offered a sense of identity, a boost in self-esteem or self-worth, and structure to their daily lives."<sup>29</sup> The participants' age group was a developmentally "distinctive" time for establishing a foundation for long-term career trajectories, and positive work experiences of the participants helped them to discern their own in-

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<sup>27</sup> Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 116.

<sup>28</sup> R.L. Freedman and S.L. Fesko, "The Meaning of Work in the Lives of People with Significant Disabilities: Consumer And Family Perspectives," *Journal of Rehabilitation* 62 (1996): 49–55. Cited in Rosalie A. Torres Stone et al., "The Meaning of Work for Young Adults Diagnosed with Serious Mental Health Conditions," *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* 41, no. 4 (December 2018): 290–98, <https://doi.org/10.1037/prj0000195>.

<sup>29</sup> Torres Stone, "The Meaning of Work," 291.

terests and talents. Financial reward and independence were other important aspects of work for these young people.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond a sense of self-worth and financial independence, work provided community for the individuals. “Adults diagnosed with psychiatric disabilities reported that employment provided social contact, a sense of belonging and promoted friendships, and connection with others and society, even in cases where individuals felt isolated and unhappy at work.”<sup>31</sup> Work provided social engagement, as opportunities for socializing were fewer after high school, and participants felt isolated without the natural environment and structure of school.<sup>32</sup> At a time when young people were establishing new social networks, the workplace became a place for mutual camaraderie.

Torres Stone’s study reported that having a job was linked to a higher degree of functioning. For Hispanic individuals diagnosed with mental illness, work assignments even became a step to recovery as they provided a channel for coping with their disability, and the social networks it created helped to improve their symptoms.<sup>33</sup> Work also provided participants with the ability to shift from recipient of help to “helper” identity, which promoted recovery and provided a sense of normal integration into society. Conversely, not having a job was linked to poorer mental health and lower subjective physical health. Additionally, work meant financial independence from family support, and a steady income provided a sense of stability and predictability.<sup>34</sup>

Holding a job helped participants gain a sense of importance and purpose beyond oneself. In fact, participants seemed to want to prove those wrong who held prejudice against those with mental disabilities. It gave participants an area to be productive and kept them active and engaged,

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<sup>30</sup> Torres Stone, “The Meaning of Work,” 291.

<sup>31</sup> Torres Stone, “The Meaning of Work,” 291.

<sup>32</sup> Torres Stone, “The Meaning of Work,” 294.

<sup>33</sup> Torres Stone, “The Meaning of Work,” 294.

<sup>34</sup> Torres Stone, “The Meaning of Work,” 293.

which was seen as the better alternative to staying at home, passing their time in idle pursuits. Work gave structure to their day and prevented boredom. It meant being part of a greater society and giving back to others. It even provided an opportunity to help those with lesser abilities than themselves. Getting along with co-workers gave a sense of enjoyment and happiness.

Holding a job helped those with psychological disabilities gain social identity by proving to others that they were productive members of society. Torres Stone and colleagues reported, “. . . many young adults cited the important opportunity that work provided them to show others that they were capable of acquiring and keeping a job despite having a mental illness. For some young adults, having a job specifically enhanced their self-esteem and self-confidence.”<sup>35</sup> For mature adults, the additional piece of holding an identified occupational position (for example, head of purchasing, elected union representative, or assistant director) was the main source of their acquired positive self-image rather than just having a job.

Self-efficacy, or the belief that one has the ability to accomplish the goals that have been set before him or her, is particularly enhanced through work. The researchers concluded that “the present study illustrates that work provides intrinsic benefits to young adults that can be translated into increased levels of self-efficacy and motivators to work.”<sup>36</sup> For those already feeling socially marginalized and stigmatized, coming to work provided social support and social activities, which improved both self-esteem and self-efficacy. This, in turn, provided an overall improved sense of psychological well-being.

A bi-vocational pastor in the greater Chicago area shared his reflections on his full-time work with adults with disabilities at Elim Christian Services. At Elim, individuals with disabilities engage in educational services for half-days and in work-related activities for the rest of the day. They also perform monthly service projects in the community. Pastor Ryan wrote:

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<sup>35</sup> Torres Stone, “The Meaning of Work,” 295.

<sup>36</sup> Torres Stone, “The Meaning of Work,” 295.

One of the jobs we have is packing school supplies that get donated and distributed to local schools, providing [the schools] much needed and desired help getting kids what they need. On distribution days, we send 8-10 of our adults from various program areas to assist in actually handing out the supplies to kids. The absolute joy on the faces of our adults as they give out the boxes they personally helped pack is a sight to behold! That particular “work” that they do provides an opportunity for them to be a blessing to someone else, and who doesn’t enjoy being able to be a blessing?

A few weeks after one of our distribution days at a school just down the road from Elim, we had a large fundraising event on our campus. I was at one of the tents when a family with a young girl came by. They mentioned the distribution at their daughter’s school, and I asked her if she liked her box of supplies. She was beaming [sic] and said she was extremely happy. I mentioned that I worked with the people who put together the Hope Packs, and she was beaming [sic] even more. It was a pleasure to pass along her thank you’s a couple of days later to my class. Work made them a part of something bigger than themselves and beyond themselves.<sup>37</sup>

“In a social model of disability, difficulties experienced by individuals with physical disabilities are rooted in social structures rather than physical differences.”<sup>38</sup> According to this perspective, an individual’s sense of self is influenced by positive interactions with others in his or her social environment. Due to a socially constructed sense of self, regardless of a person’s view of self, he or she is likely to need strategies to protect that sense of self

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<sup>37</sup> Email Interview with Rev. Ryan Kuehl, Chicago, IL, December 6, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Beverley J. Antle, “Factors Associated with Self-Worth in Young People with Physical Disabilities,” *Health & Social Work* 29, no. 3 (August 2004): 167–75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hsw/29.3.167>.



from negative images held by the people around them.<sup>39</sup> The above literature suggests that work assignments, regardless of the complexity of tasks, add a sense of accomplishment, and work communities contribute to a sense of purpose for those with limited abilities.

When my uncle with Down's syndrome was able-bodied (before his illness caused physical decline), he delighted in coming home to my grandparents' or parents' home from his usual group setting on weekends or holidays. His first tasks upon arrival were ones he enjoyed: gathering up the trash and sweeping the front porch. Sometimes, you could see him puttering around in the guest bedroom where he stayed, rearranging items there, going through mail and the family calendar in the kitchen, or recycling trash. Although he had his own bedroom at the group home where he lived, there was a sense of ownership when he stayed with family. He was encouraged to stay busy, whether through household tasks or through doing his "homework,"<sup>40</sup> as it gave him a sense of belonging and purpose. He also reveled in the money he was making at his workshop job.<sup>41</sup> As a young teen, he served as guest book supervisor at my parents' wedding, a role that suited his gregarious nature, which he often recalled with pride in the years to follow. Later, he served as guest book supervisor at a friend's wedding since he excelled at meeting and greeting.

There is no limit to the tasks that persons with disabilities can perform when creativity is applied. Appropriately leveled tasks have the potential to bring joy to the individual as well as his or her family. Antle recommended that social workers "develop interventions that build on the natural

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<sup>39</sup> Antle, "Factors Associated with Self-Worth," 173.

<sup>40</sup> Uncle Julian's "homework" was a writing activity with notebook and pen, in which he repetitiously wrote down names and important dates of loved ones. He also filled up calendars in the house with the same. He could remember the important dates of hundreds of friends and family. In this way, he was truly gifted.

<sup>41</sup> Uncle Julian went to the Kankakee County Training Center, where he and his housemates worked on contracted projects, similar to those which Elim Christian Services receives.

strengths of families and their children with physical disabilities.”<sup>42</sup> It is important to “challenge notions of life with a disability as tragic, painful and difficult” and to “help young people with physical disabilities build esteem-enhancing opportunities and broaden their network of support beyond their family.” Work communities broaden the network of support for people!

A career exploration program was implemented with 55 learners with special needs<sup>43</sup> to determine the effect on the individual’s confidence toward moving from high school into a career.<sup>44</sup> Participants chose their desired workplace, performed work duties at the workplace for four days, received feedback from their supervisors, and participated in Occupational Therapy group sessions in which they discussed their apprehensions about work. The therapy sessions also reinforced the work skills they had practiced and effective ways of interacting with people at the worksite.

Two of the participants interviewed evaluated the success of the program after it ended.<sup>45</sup> Even though their typical academic performance was less than average and they both lacked social skills in the school environment, both had performed well at work. The combination of being allowed to choose the workplace they wanted to work in, coupled with the absence of negative expectations from their supervisors and co-workers at the workplace, resulted in a positive experience for both interviewees. Thus, each participant started at their work with a “clean slate” and was able to perform well. The occupational therapist who guided the participants also put few expectations on them that could lead to failure, which helped to bolster the participant’s overall positive experience.

Van Niekerk commented on this low-stakes model: “This program and its success are indicative of the value of a well-chosen activity, pitched at

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<sup>42</sup> Antle, “Factors Associated with Self-Worth,” 173.

<sup>43</sup> Two case studies of individuals in the author’s report presented with ADHD symptomology.

<sup>44</sup> Matty van Niekerk, “A Career Exploration Programme for Learners with Special Educational Needs,” *Work (Reading, Mass.)* 29, no. 1 (2007): 19–24.

<sup>45</sup> Van Niekerk, “A Career Exploration Programme,” 23.

the correct level of functioning as well as unconditional positive regard . . . The outcomes of the program evidently gave the students the benefits of self-determination and internal locus of control and this experience could help them with better career choices.”<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, Pastor Ryan’s experience supervising adults at Elim Christian Services affirmed the value of appropriately chosen activities for contributing to a sense of self-worth and accomplishment for persons with developmental disabilities:

In March of 2020, Elim shut down due to COVID and remained closed until mid-July [2020]. In the gap ... I filled in at one of the larger facilities in need of help, which gave me a glimpse into their home lives and routines....

Their workplace is a place for a larger collection of friendships which expands their world. Coming to Elim provided purpose for their routine and when that was gone it was very difficult for them. When I was there, I was routinely bombarded with questions about other Elim staff and about when we would open back up. They were disconnected from routines and rhythms that provided purpose and brought [a sense of] fulfillment/accomplishment.

While not every adult we work with views coming to Elim as ‘coming to work,’ there are quite a few who do. There are a few who regularly talk about being ready to come to work and being a good worker. They routinely ask when the work projects like Hope Packs or bean packaging will start back up.... They are very proud of what they do and are always ready to share how many bags they filled or boxes they made for the day.<sup>47</sup>

Activities matched appropriately to individuals’ interests and abilities

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<sup>46</sup> Van Niekerk, “A Career Exploration Programme,” 23.

<sup>47</sup> Email Interview with Rev. Ryan Kuehl, 2022.

were essential for improving a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy.

### **Finding Vocation with the Disabled**

For every community that serves the disabled, the creation of strong social relationships and spiritual communion are potentialities. Whether the communities formed are residential or daytime workshops or recreational settings, the intrinsic rewards of working with persons with disabilities are not for the disabled only; there is deep fellowship gained by faith-filled, able-bodied employees who learn with and from the disabled. One model institution that fosters working alongside the disabled is the L'Arche, an international federation of communities for developmentally disabled adults for the purpose of spiritual communion between residents and caregivers.

L'Arche describes itself as a network of communities that are “connected to each other through friendships and the sharing of common values and practices. They are integrated into their neighborhoods and contribute to their surroundings through a multitude of relationships that they foster.”<sup>48</sup> At L'Arche, those with cognitive or developmental anomalies are viewed spiritually as equal partners capable of ministering to those without disabilities.<sup>49</sup> The model allows caregivers to meet the physical needs of the disabled while dwelling with those with disabilities (whom they call “the poor”). It affords an opportunity for the “poor” to meet the spiritual needs of caregivers.

Kevin Reimer, a developmental psychologist, commented on the compassion movement exemplified by the ethos of L'Arche, considering the emotional and physical taxation required of those in the caregiver role: “L'Arche provides an astonishing context for the study of moral action—a movement of compassionate exemplarity in the tradition of Mother Teresa. [Caregivers and residents] participate in an unexpected communion framed

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.larche.org/about-larche/>.

<sup>49</sup> Kevin S Reimer, “Unexpected Communion: Purpose, Vocation, and Developmental Disability,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 65, no. 3 (2013): 199–201.

by the redemptive potential of the cross.”<sup>50</sup> Spiritual service to one another (both caregivers and the disabled) was performed in the course of daily routines, work projects, and leisure activities, as well as regular times of corporate worship. The author commended this model for those drawn to its spiritual model of mutual service in community: “The great secret of L’Arche is readily transferable, even to incipient developmental scientists such as myself.”<sup>51</sup> Similar models of joint work life, service, and worship in residential settings are worth considering for those with severe disabilities and for caregivers who desire its simplicity.

Vocation among the disabled strengthens the social identity of those who engage in it. God created us for relationship and functionality in mutual relationship. The relationship of helper and “helpee,” in which “helpee” is never able to give back, is a dysfunctional view of human nature and of God’s design for work to bring fulfillment and self-worth to humans. Regardless of one’s ability or disability, one-way relationships that foster complete dependency are not God’s way of human flourishing. The supporting member of a helping relationship, including the primary caregiver, must not be the only one helping, lest the caregiver miss out on his or her own flourishing.

While it is certainly true that some humans are more dependent on others, such as infants, the elderly, or those with severe disabilities, there is always a contribution made to the relationship by the more vulnerable member that must be acknowledged and even cultivated.

In the most extreme cases, such as in the situation of caring for a person in a coma, the act of caring for a person who cannot care for him- or herself reminds us that every person is made in the image of the self-giving God and cared for by God Himself, but also by the larger community.

### **Implications for the Church**

Disabled persons are called to relationship with God in the same way that

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<sup>50</sup> Van Niekerk, “A Career Exploration Programme,” 199.

<sup>51</sup> Van Niekerk, “A Career Exploration Programme,” 201.

non-disabled persons are. As God is no respecter of persons, He equips members of the Body of Christ with various giftings. Disabled persons in the Church must be considered equal participants in the life of the community, just as children and the elderly are and as the economically poor and foreigners are. Not only are we to extend welcoming hearts and arms to those affected by disability through Christian hospitality, but we must also seek ways to make church life more accessible to them.

Finally, we must consider how we might best employ the unique giftings of the disabled.

Pastor Ryan at Calvary Nazarene Church in Chicago believes that establishing community with the disabled can add to the richness of the fellowship of believers in churches. He writes:

When it comes to work, especially the work of the church, I think of a potluck where everyone has something to bring to the table. There's something for everyone to do and some way for people to invest themselves in a way that is shared with others and is a blessing. It doesn't take a whole lot to accomplish that. I don't think every church can pull off some sort of special needs ministry, but every church can find creative ways for special needs adults to use their gifts and abilities in ways that bless the life of the church. The need to serve and be a blessing isn't a unique or special need. Lots of people in churches are trying to find where they belong and finding a work that brings out and highlights a person's abilities as a contribution to the greater Body is a huge help.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to valuing the unique contributions of individuals with disabilities, we must recognize the special graces they bring to the fellowship. As leaders, it is easy to lean toward two extremes: either we see the person as incapable of contributing, or we are overly cognizant of how an individual's capabilities might enrich the church. This diminishes the value that a person's presence among us—his or her “being”—affects the whole body.

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<sup>52</sup> Email Interview with Rev. Ryan Kuehl, 2022.

Every person brings a specific gift to the church, and we must be patient to discover it and make space for the opportunity to see him or her use it.

Engaging in relationships with those with disabilities teaches us what it is to be poor in spirit and to hunger and thirst after God's justice. We learn what it is to "change and become like little children" so we, too, may enter the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>53</sup> Jesus promised that if we welcome "one such child" in his name we welcome Christ Jesus himself. This admonition extends to those who have childlike spirits, namely, those with intellectual disabilities.

We have already seen that persons with disabilities are socially isolated and looked down upon by the majority culture. Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church described how we are to show special honor to the parts that lack it.<sup>54</sup> "But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other" (1 Cor. 12:24-25). Thus, thinking of persons with disabilities as the "less honorable" parts of the Body needing special honor is an entirely appropriate theology of disability. However, let us be clear that individuals with disabilities are not less honorable because they have less to contribute; it is because of the reality that they are frequently overlooked, hidden, or regarded as "less than" that qualifies them for greater honor!

### **Conclusion**

We have looked at how God intended humans and cultures from the very beginning for flourishing and for our vocations to be lived out in good works to society as part of that calling. Persons with a disability are no less indicated in the theology of vocation, as they are created in the image of God and thus have been ordained for "good works," which God prepared for them to do. Those good works should not be received on the basis of productivity; rather, the contributions of persons with disabilities must be

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<sup>53</sup> See Matthew 18:3-5.

<sup>54</sup> See 1 Corinthians 12:21-25.

equally viewed through the lens of “beings and doings” and not judged according to their complexity or even popularity.

In reality, the presence of those with disabilities among us, and intellectual disabilities in particular, demonstrates what is most important for salvation: simple faith and repentance. Their presence reminds us that Jesus taught us that we must change and become like little children if we are to enter the Kingdom of heaven.<sup>55</sup> It is the mutual fellowship in Christ that helps us to give and receive divine love and to experience union with the Body through his Spirit.

Accommodating those with disabilities among us, making our church buildings, services, and activities accessible to those with varied abilities models Christlike attitudes and Kingdom community. Even more important than accommodation, however, is the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in our spiritual and social life as believers, considering and treating them as equal partners in the grace of God and equal contributors to the healthy fellowship of the Body.

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<sup>55</sup> See Matthew 18:3.



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