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MAKING PROVIDENCE CHURCH IN DULUTH, GEORGIA,
A MORE WELCOMING PLACE TO PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES

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John Tyre Blackburn, Jr.

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MAKING PROVIDENCE CHURCH IN DULUTH, GEORGIA,
A MORE WELCOMING PLACE TO PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES

John Tyre Blackburn, Jr.

Read and Approved by:

Faculty Supervisor: Jeremy P. Pierre

Second Reader: Curtis Solomon

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For the glory of God

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PREFACE

The burden of my heart concerning persons with disabilities goes back to the moment my wife, Patti, and I realized that our son, Jonathan, might have a developmental disability. He was only two years old when we first became aware of what would later be unofficially diagnosed as Asperger syndrome. For Jon this has meant that relationships are difficult for him; he struggles in social contexts to connect with others. Though he has been blessed to be a part of a warm and loving congregation at Providence, a church I have pastored for nearly three decades, he is still sometimes disconnected and disengaged from relationships in the body. Even though many have tried to reach out to him by greeting him warmly, his difficulty with relationships has made real connections rare. His struggles are not unique, and so beg the question: How can we do a better job of incorporating persons with disabilities into the full, redemptive body life of the church?

In December 2017, I had the opportunity to attend the Biblical Counseling Coalition Meeting in Rome, Georgia. The theme of that year's conference was *Including Persons with Disabilities in the Life of the Church*. Joni Eareckson Tada was the keynote-speaker and her messages pierced my heart. Now I saw not only how much persons with disabilities need the church, but also how much the church needs them! We simply must address this urgent need.

I am indebted to the faculty and staff of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for the profound impact that they have had on my life and ministry since I enrolled in 2018. My faculty advisor, Dr. Jeremy Pierre, has been extremely helpful in encouraging and guiding me through the process. The congregation at Providence has offered continual support and enthusiastic participation. They are an amazing body of

believers. My family have been patient and helpful through the process—my son, Jonathan, my daughter, Maggie, and most of all my wife, Patti—I love you all dearly.

Finally, I am grateful to God for His infinite wisdom in giving to His church the gift of mental and physical disabilities so that we might have a clear testimony to our own need of grace by showing us how deficient we are in our ability to love and serve others, and by reminding us that we are all spiritually “disabled” and in need of God’s redeeming grace.

Ty Blackburn

Duluth, Georgia

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities are underrepresented in the church today. Though they make up a significant portion of the population in America (12.7 percent),¹ it is widely acknowledged that they are not proportionally present in the American church. This sad reality is one that crosses all theological and ecclesiastical divides. Evangelical and mainline congregations are failing to incorporate persons with disabilities into their fellowships.² Pastor, and disability advocate, Michael Beates writes, “people with disabilities are almost universally absent from the congregation of most American churches.”³ Apparently a high view of Scripture and a commitment to sound doctrine do not make a church immune to this modern malady. To make matters worse, even when they attend our churches, persons with disabilities are almost always under-involved.⁴ That is, they are not sufficiently connected to the body life of the congregation. They are most often not involved in small groups, one-on-one discipleship or other close personal relationships. Persons with disabilities who are actively involved in the healthy body life of the church are very rare.

¹ W. Erickson, C. Lee, and S. von Schrader, “2019 Disability Status Report: United States,” Cornell University Disability Statistics, 2019, www.disabilitystatistics.org.

² Joni Eareckson Tada, unpublished presentation notes, Biblical Counseling Coalition, December 2017.

³ Michael S. Beates, *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2012), 17.

⁴ Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations* (Baltimore: Brookes, 2007), 8.

Context

The Reformed Southern Baptist congregation I pastor in the greater Atlanta area has also struggled to provide the kind of welcoming environment that would enable persons with disabilities to fully integrate into the life of our church. Though we have been greatly blessed by the Lord to have a number of persons with disabilities in our congregation,⁵ we have struggled to incorporate them fully into the life of the congregation. At Providence, persons with disabilities are not under-represented but they are under-involved. We are extremely grateful that, given our local demographics,⁶ we presently have about the same percentage of persons with disabilities as are present in our surrounding community (9.4 percent in our area, 13.0 percent nationally),⁷ we have failed to engage those believers with disabilities in a meaningful way into redemptive relationships such as Bible studies, small groups, and one-to-one discipleship. This failure has left people who greatly need support and encouragement marginalized in our church.

Providence Church is relatively healthy with many strengths. The people have a high view of God and want to glorify Him in their lives. Additionally, the church has a high view of Scripture. This God-centered perspective has led the people to exhibit humility and a teachable spirit. The people are eager and attentive listeners to the preaching and teaching of the Word and want to obey God's commands. The congregation has responded enthusiastically in recent years to biblical counseling training. The members have received the instruction eagerly, and seen its value, first, for

⁵ The survey utilized in this project showed that approximately 10 percent of respondents identified themselves as persons with disabilities.

⁶ Providence is located in northeast Atlanta in Gwinnett County.

⁷ University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability, "Annual Report on People with Disabilities in America: 2023," Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, 2023, https://disabilitycompendium.org/sites/default/files/user-uploads/v1-Accessible_2023_Annual_Disability_Statistics_Compendium_ALL_Final.pdf

their own sanctification, and second, for equipping themselves to help others. The congregation has also demonstrated extraordinary willingness and skill to care for one another, especially hospital visitation, preparing meals, and serving one another in times of need. The members are also eager to welcome new people to our services. Guests are regularly engaged in warm conversations when they come to our services. In addition, Providence is blessed to have a solid leadership team, having five elders and nine deacons who exemplify the character qualities set forth in 1 Timothy 3 (see also Acts 6; Titus 1; 1 Pet 5). Their record of faithfulness has earned the trust of the congregation. In addition, this body exhibits strong and loving male leadership in the home. The church's commitment to the glory of God and the Word of God, as well as its trust in its leadership, has led to a true oneness of mind and unity of purpose.

Although Providence is a relatively strong church, it manifests a number of weaknesses. First, we have struggled with organization and administration, especially as we have grown over the last several years. At present the most obvious weakness hindering the spiritual growth and ministry effectiveness is found in the area of relationships. Though, as mentioned above, our church is consistently described as warm and friendly, we sometimes struggle to get newcomers connected into the body life of the church. Sadly, people sometimes attend Providence for six months or more and then leave. When interviewed about their departure, they have said, "We just couldn't get connected." This occurrence has become more common as we have grown in number over the last several years. One way we have sought to address this problem recently is by starting Home Groups. These are small groups organized geographically to help members and attendees to get connected in relationships. Presently, we have six groups meeting every other week in members' homes. Though this has made a difference in our efforts to assimilate newcomers into the body life of the congregation, we still struggle in this important area.

Another manifestation of our relational weakness is seen in the way we have failed to draw in a number of church members and regular attendees who have more obvious disabilities. Of particular concern are three of our young men who have been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. Asperger's is an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that though it is characterized by "strong language skills and intellectual ability," nearly always leads to great difficulty with social interactions. Persons with ASD tend to be socially awkward, struggling with the "give and take of conversation . . . and with difficulty interpreting nonverbal communication."⁸ One of these young men with Asperger's is my son, Jonathan. He and the other young men with Asperger's have tended to be left out, along with a number of others who are shy or who are "loners." It was clearly not intentional, but it has been a problem. This ongoing failure is an echo of two failures in the past where we were unable to integrate families into the regular body life of the church that had children with profound disabilities. These families attended the church for some time but never really connected and subsequently left.

Rationale

Even though our congregation is committed to the Scripture and to the glory of God and also has demonstrated an exceptional willingness to care for and serve one another, we find that persons with disabilities are under-involved in the body life of our church. Despite every good intention of our members, the pastors, elders, and deacons, we find that our desires have not resulted in making us as welcoming to persons with disabilities as we would like. Beyond this, we believe that the church ought to be the one place where persons with disabilities feel most welcome. Given our Lord's heart of compassion, and the beauty of the gospel message, shouldn't we have more persons with disabilities at Providence than are present in our community? When they do come,

⁸ Autism Speaks, "What Is Asperger Syndrome?," accessed April 26, 2023, <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-asperger-syndrome>.

shouldn't those who attend Providence find real connection to the body life of the church? How is it that we are struggling to create a community that is truly and thoroughly welcoming to persons with disabilities?

The answer to this question becomes clear when we remember the teaching of Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."⁹ It is instructive that the tenses of both verbs in the passage are Greek present tense with an emphasis on the on-going nature of the action of the verbs. It could be translated, "Do not continue being conformed to this world, but start being transformed by the renewing of your mind." We see, then, that this passage instructs us that the world is continually exerting a shaping and conforming pressure upon Christians, which acts on us as long as we live in the world. It never stops. The urgency of Paul's message is to tell us that the only way to resist the relentless conforming pressure of the world is by actively seeking the transforming power of God's Word. The Word alone stops the relentless conforming force of the world system. It does so through the dynamic power of Scripture applied with specificity to our lives. This passage then makes clear that, if a believer is not being "transformed," continually applying Scripture to every area of life, he is being "conformed." This verse also explains that the present problem of evangelical churches failing to be welcoming places to disabled persons is a evidence of our failure to teach what the Scriptures say about disabilities and persons with disabilities. As a result, even sound churches are failing in this area. We simply have not been taught. We haven't come to see how Scripture speaks to this particular area of life.

How can we make progress in this area? By addressing the need of our non-disabled persons to grow in practical knowledge about disabilities. If we can develop a more biblical theology of disability, cultivate the grace of genuine sympathy toward the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, and develop skills in relating well to our

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

disabled brothers and sisters, we can make our church a place to which persons with disabilities can come and connect.

Furthermore, we must evaluate our progress in this area for four reasons: first, Scripture makes clear that every Christian person needs sound relationships to help him or her grow; second, every believer needs the spiritual protection that comes from being connected to the flock; third, persons with disabilities and their families often have even more acute needs for support and encouragement than do ordinary believers; and fourth, when we fail to connect to persons with disabilities in dynamic relationships, the church misses an opportunity to show the glory of Christ in an especially profound way.

We understand that the problem of underrepresentation and under involvement of persons with disabilities is complex. There are numerous factors that make it difficult for persons with disabilities to be fully integrated into the life of the church. However, we believe that we can make significant progress toward making Providence a more welcoming place for persons with disabilities by teaching and applying God’s Word to this perplexing problem.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to make Providence Church, Duluth, Georgia, a more welcoming place for persons with disabilities. We will do this by reshaping the underlying culture of the church as it relates to disabilities. Because culture is made up of “shared beliefs, accepted values, common practices, and prevailing goals,”¹⁰ we will need to applying specific, relevant passages of Scripture to change our underlying beliefs and values about disabilities so that they conform with Scripture.

¹⁰ T. Dale Johnson Jr., *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 141.

Goals

The following three goals are intended to facilitate the success of this project:

1. The first goal is to lead the members of Providence Church to examine and refine their beliefs about disabilities and persons with disabilities. This goal will be measured by a pre-survey and post-survey of the members of the congregation who participate in all parts of the intervention and will be considered successfully met if the mean of the post-survey questions measuring beliefs reflects a positive change that is statistically significant.
2. The second goal is to help the members of Providence Church to cultivate godly attitudes toward persons with disabilities. This goal will be measured by a pre-survey and post-survey of the members of the congregation who participate in all parts of the intervention and will be considered successfully met when the mean of the post-survey questions measuring attitudes reflects a positive change that is statistically significant.
3. The third goal is to develop essential skills for relating well with persons with disabilities. This goal will be measured by the performance of participants in role plays aimed at practicing relational skills. Members will be evaluated by their peers and the goal will be successful when eight out of ten participants score 48 out of 60 on peer evaluation forms.

Research Methodology

Prior to any instruction about disabilities and persons with disabilities, a Beliefs and Attitudes Assessment (BAA)¹¹ will be administered to the entire congregation. This pre-intervention assessment will gauge members' initial beliefs about, and attitudes toward, persons with disabilities. It will assess the degree that their beliefs and attitudes reflect the thoughts and values of God as He relates to persons with disabilities. Each respondent's survey will be tracked in such a way that pre-survey and post-survey data can be compared according to each respective participant.

The second step will be to preach a two-week sermon series aimed at helping members to think about, and to place value on, persons with disabilities precisely the way that God does. An additional purpose of the sermon series is to recruit motivated church members to participate in the daylong training curriculum.

¹¹ I have personally developed the Beliefs and Attitudes Assessment for this particular intervention. I have incorporated a few questions from other instruments as noted in appendix 3.

The third step will be to provide a one-day, six-session curriculum to equip participants for effective ministry to persons with disabilities by increasing knowledge, cultivating empathy, and developing relational skills in a biblical framework. This curriculum will seek to apply principles of biblical counseling and discipleship in such a way as to relate to everyday relationships with persons with disabilities. It will also include instruction on the challenges of disabilities with a particular emphasis on cultivating empathy on the part of the participants. Empathy will be cultivated by utilizing Joni and Friends' "Disability Awareness Training Stations."¹² The trainees will be taught relational skills with the aim of having them become more comfortable relating to persons with disabilities. These one-anothering skills will be practiced in one of the sessions through role plays in the context of four person groups.

The BAA will be re-administered after the completion of the sermon series and the one-day seminar. Pre-survey and post-survey scores of those who hear the sermons and take part in the one-day seminar will be compared, and the intervention will be judged to be successful when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrates a positive, statistically significant difference in the pre and post-survey scores measuring beliefs and values, respectively.

People-First Language, Definitions, and Limitations/Delimitations

People-first language. An important practice that we adopted in this project was to use "people-first" language. People-first language helps us to remember to "put the emphasis on the person and not the disability."¹³ We refer to "persons with

¹² In these stations, participants will experience what it is like to have vision impairment, hearing impairment, autism spectrum disorder, impaired manual dexterity. Joni and Friends, "Disability Awareness Training Stations," accessed April 26, 2023, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/disability-awareness-training-stations.pdf>.

¹³ Joni and Friends, "Disability Etiquette," accessed April 26, 2023, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/disability-etiquette.pdf>.

disabilities” rather than to “disabled persons.” This may cause sentences to be wordy, but the benefit outweighs the cost. Therefore, we have made a concerted effort to use people-first language throughout this project.

The following definitions of key terms will be used in the ministry project:

Disability. The United States government regards a person as having a disability when he/she “(1) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more ‘major life activities,’ (2) has a record of such an impairment, or (3) is regarded as having such an impairment.”¹⁴

Autism spectrum disorder. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is “a developmental disorder related to autism and characterized by awkwardness in social interaction, pedantry in speech, and preoccupation with very narrow interests.”¹⁵

There will be three delimitations placed on the project:

Duration. This project will be limited to two weeks, which will include pre-assessment of the congregation at large, sermon preparation and delivery, curriculum instruction, and post-assessment of the congregation who were also class participants.

Participants. A second delimitation concerns the ages of participants. Only those over eighteen years of age will be surveyed and evaluated by their peers.

Scope. The third delimitation is the scope of disabilities covered in the training curriculum. The curriculum will provide instruction on the following: three types of physical impairment (vision; hearing; and manual dexterity) as well as one type of mental impairment (ASD).

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, “Frequently Asked Questions - General,” accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/publications/faqs/general#3>.

¹⁵ Matthew Loscialo, “Asperger’s and Autism: What’s the Difference?,” Asperger Friends, May 21, 2022, <https://www.aspergerfriends.org/difference-of-aspergers-and-autism/>.

Conclusion

Providence Church is a congregation with great strengths and with significant weaknesses. A significant weakness, which we hope to address in this project, is in the area of relationships, particularly in ministering to persons with disabilities. We hope to change the attitudes of church members by preaching a series of messages on the subject and by recruiting and training church members to confidently and skillfully minister to disabled persons who very often have great difficulty engaging in edifying relationships. As persons with disabilities find our congregation to be more welcoming, we hope to see them thrive and the body of Christ at Providence mightily advance in actively engaging in one-anothering relationships to the end that we will all “grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (Eph 4:15).

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR MAKING PROVIDENCE CHURCH A MORE WELCOMING PLACE TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Scripture commands and enables us to become welcoming to persons with disabilities. The Bible does this by changing how we see (1) the person with a disability; (2) the disability itself; (3) the spiritual needs of a person with a disability; and (4) his place in the church.

How We See the Person with a Disability

Introduction

For us to be truly welcoming to persons with disabilities, we need to see them rightly; we need to see them biblically.

Genesis 1:27

One of the most amazing yet neglected truths is that every human being is made in the image of God. As we read in Genesis 1:27, “And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created Him; male and female He created them.” The word “image” translates the Hebrew *tselem*, which means “a representation, a likeness,”¹ and so God created humans to be a representation of Himself in the world. Every person is essentially a reflection of God’s infinite glory!

This truth means when we see another person the first thing, we should see is glory, the glory of God reflected in this particular human being. In every encounter, the

¹ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 767.

person in front of us is a person of great dignity and value because he bears the image of the Most High God. The basic response of our hearts in every meeting ought to be honor, value, and respect. If we are truly thinking biblically, this will be our first thought when we meet a person with a disability. Wow! Here is another image-bearer reflecting the glory of our great God. As we learn to let this fundamental truth permeate our hearts, we will most certainly respond differently to persons with disabilities.

How We See Disabilities

Introduction

Disabilities give clear testimony to the fallenness of man. As we have seen, every human is created in God's image and is worthy of honor, but it is also true that every person is fallen and sinful and in need of the saving grace of Christ. When sin entered the world so did death and decay and brokenness. One of the reasons that God allowed the physical world to be radically damaged by sin was so that it would give continual testimony to our need of God's saving grace. In Romans 8:20 we read that "the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope." This verse teaches that God determined that creation itself must bear the scars of sin "in hope" that this would lead fallen men to "groan" and "eagerly wait" for the "redemption" of their bodies. The very real suffering that accompanies disabilities is a part of God's redemptive design. As we suffer, we recognize with unmistakable clarity that something is fundamentally wrong with this world; something is fundamentally wrong with us. As we see our disabled brothers and sisters suffer, we are reminded of the universal need of redemptive grace.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Second Corinthians 12 offers insight into how the need of God's grace is made clear in our weakness. To see this, we need to understand the broader context in which we find Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. The apostle's second letter to the

Corinthians was written to protect that church from the dangerous influence of false teachers who had gained a significant following in Corinth. One of the most damaging tactics employed by those false teachers was their slanderous accusations against Paul: that he was not a true apostle and, therefore, that the Corinthians should not listen to his teaching. They based their claims against his apostleship on a number of observations they made about Paul and his ministry. First, they said that he was not a very good speaker—certainly not as good a speaker as a writer (2 Cor 10:1, 10; 11:6); second, they pointed to the lack of appropriate dignity in his “tent-making” enterprise as evidence that he was not an apostle; and third, the Corinthian heretics said his suffering had been too extensive for him to be a true apostle.

This last claim, though not directly stated, is behind Paul’s repeated emphasis that his extensive suffering is what qualifies him to be mightily used of God as an apostle (2:14-17; 4:7-16; 11:16-33; 12:1-10). Chapter 12 flows directly out of his bold claims in 11:16-33 to that effect. There he claims that he is more qualified to be an apostle than his opponents precisely because of the greatness of his suffering. This argument culminates in his stunning statement, “If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness” (11:30). Moving into the 2 Corinthians 12 Paul is seeking to explain and illustrate how “weakness” is the only right cause for boasting, because weakness leads to the power of Christ.

Paul demonstrates that weakness is a worthy reason for boasting by recounting an astonishing vision given to “a man” he knows. He then briefly recounts the content of the vision, yet he goes to great pains to avoid boasting in the vision itself. The glory of the vision is such that it is certain that his opponents would surely have boasted in the vision had they had this *αποκαλυψις* themselves. This vision from the “third heaven” involved hearing things which were so splendid that man is not permitted by God to share them. What is most striking is that Paul chooses not to ascribe this vision to himself, when in fact, it becomes clear as the text unfolds that he himself is the man who had the

vision.² Murray Harris points out how this becomes explicit in a number of ways especially in the sudden change of personal pronouns. In verses five and six, we see the first person pronoun, “me” (εμε, με, εμου, μοι), replaces the third person demonstrative pronoun used earlier, “such a one” (τοιουτου).³ Surprisingly, the apostle does not boast in the vision or its glorious revelation. He is unwilling to speak in the first person because he is determined to make a powerful point—the vision which he had is not a legitimate cause of boasting. Rather, the proper ground of boasting is weakness.

In verse seven the fact that it was Paul’s vision becomes increasingly clear with Paul’s statement, “There was given me (μοι) a thorn in the flesh” in response to the “surpassing greatness of the revelations” I had received. He also shares God’s purpose in giving him this “thorn”; it was given so that Paul would not exalt himself—literally, “in order that I should not be exceedingly uplifted” (ινα μη υπεραιωμαι).⁴ God’s gracious purpose for Paul was to keep him useful by keeping him cognizant of his own weakness. The “thorn” did just that. Commentators have speculated widely on the precise identification of Paul’s thorn. Harris points out that though “the proposed identifications . . . are legion in number . . . ; they may be classified under three main headings: 1) spiritual/psychological anxiety; 2) opposition to Paul; or 3) a physical malady.”⁵ The precise identification of the thorn is not critical; if it had been, the Lord would surely have been more specific. Though I personally agree with Harris that it was likely a physical malady, more importantly, God used some kind of ongoing suffering to bring the apostle to his knees. The eighth verse recounts Paul’s efforts to have the thorn removed. George H. Guthrie notes that the verb, παρακαλεω, though often translated

² Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 443.

³ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 846.

⁴ Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 443-45.

⁵ Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 858.

“encouraged,” “here carries a different force, that of . . . urgently imploring someone for something” and that the fact that he prayed “three times” adds even greater “urgency to Paul’s request.”⁶ At this point, Paul has not yet come to understand God’s gracious purpose for the thorn, therefore he is determined to have it removed.

In verse nine we begin to see the beauty of God’s gracious gift to the apostle and to glimpse our Lord’s glorious wisdom in dealing with His servants. Here, in response to Paul’s urgent prayer for relief, the Lord answers his request by saying, no—though not in so many words. In fact, the Lord’s answer to Paul’s specific petition (to remove the thorn) is to assure the apostle of the sufficiency of His provision for him. In this response Jesus promises two things: first, Jesus promised that His grace would always be there for Paul; and second, He assured Paul that being in possession of His grace meant having supernatural power to endure. “My grace is sufficient for you”—that is, I will give you all you need in the midst of this painful and difficult circumstance, but I will not change your circumstance; in so doing, you will be reminded of your complete dependence upon Me, you will see your “weakness,” and as you depend completely upon Me, you will experience My power and grace. Here we see that weakness is not a disqualifier in the body of Christ; rather, it is a prerequisite for experiencing the sufficiency of the grace of Christ. This episode beautifully illustrates what is one of the main themes of 2 Corinthians: Paul’s extensive suffering qualified him to be used mightily of God. Far from being an indication of divine disfavor, as his opponents claimed, Paul’s tribulations established Him as divinely blessed and, in turn, truly authenticated his apostleship.

This passage has tremendous implications for our ministry to disabled believers. Disabled Christians often see their disability in the same way that Paul saw his

⁶ George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 591.

thorn. It is painful, and they long to be free of the “torment.” But very often, it is the purpose of our Lord to use these “thorns” in precisely the same way that He used Paul’s—to show the sufficiency of His grace and power in the lives of those whose suffering makes them “weak.” Weakness becomes the platform for, or better, the backdrop against which God perfects His grace. Commenting on this passage in his book *When Disability Hits Home: How God Magnifies His Grace in Our Weakness*, pastor Paul Tautges writes, “The contrast of our weakness with God’s power brings God the glory He deserves.”⁷ Because we learn from the Lord’s encouragement to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 that His “power is perfected in weakness,” we can be confident that those with disabilities have extraordinary potential to manifest the sufficiency of the grace of Christ in a way that many otherwise non-disabled believers do not.

The unique experiences of grace available to disabled believers is beautifully illustrated in the life of Joni Eareckson Tada. As a young Christian woman, she had a tragic diving accident that left her a quadriplegic. Dealing with the trauma of complete immobility and looking ahead to a life of profound physical disabilities, Joni earnestly and repeatedly pleaded with the Lord to heal her. After a few years of asking God to remove this suffering, she came to understand that God had a purpose in allowing her to be “weak.” His purpose was the same for her as for Paul: to show the sufficiency of His grace and power in her abject weakness. Anyone who has heard her share her testimony cannot help but see the glorious power of Christ in her life. I last heard her speak at the Biblical Counseling Coalition meeting in December 2017. After hearing her testimony, a man within her organization made this comment to me: “Imagine what the evangelical church of our day would have lost if Joni Eareckson Tada had not gone through her incredible trials. Now ask yourself, ‘what are our local churches missing because we are

⁷ Paul Tautges, *When Disability Hits Home: How God Magnifies His Grace in Our Weakness and Suffering* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2020), 77.

not reaching and ministering well to persons with disabilities?’ ‘What insights into the sufficiency of His grace are being lost to us?’”

How We See the Spiritual Needs of a Person with a Disability

Introduction

Persons with disabilities have fundamentally the same spiritual needs as other non-disabled believers. Yet with the current state of affairs in the church, persons with disabilities are finding it extremely difficult to connect to the body life of congregation. This issue is leaving them in a state of acute spiritual vulnerability. The New Testament makes clear that every individual believer has deep spiritual needs that can only be met through active participation in the fellowship of the local church. Therefore, church leaders must see that all members become engaged in life-on-life ministry—that is, in “one-anothering” relationships. Fifty-eight times in the New Testament we find commands or exhortations with the direct object “one another.”⁸ We see that one-anothering relationships are the place where believers “encourage one another and build up one another” (1 Thess 5:11) as well as “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (10:24). Sadly, for our church and many others, disabled persons tend to fall outside this essential locus of New Testament ministry. Disabled believers find it difficult to connect with non-disabled believers and vice-versa. Yet through the local church they can (1) experience healthy growth and (2) be protected from potential apostasy.

Colossians 3:16

An important emphasis of Scripture is that all Christians need to be involved in healthy relationships with other Christians. To grow spiritually we need, as Paul David

⁸ Wayne A. Mack, *To Be or Not to Be a Church Member? That Is the Question* (Fort Worth, TX: Calvary, 2004), 26.

Tripp has said, “the daily ministry of fellow believers.”⁹ In Colossians 3 we find two “one-anothering” exhortations that are essential for the spiritual health of Christians with disabilities.

Colossians 3:16 must be understood in the larger context of 3:1-17 and in light of the purpose of the epistle itself. Paul writes this epistle to protect the spiritual health of the church in Colossae from the danger of false teaching. They were apparently being confronted with teaching that combined elements of both legalism and mysticism. In 2:18 the apostle warns them against “delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels.” These doctrinal errors were causing the believers to turn from a truly Christ-centered life. Paul is concerned that the Colossians come to see that Christ is, and must be, everything in their lives. It is Christ who has created all things, has reconciled them to God, in whom are “hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”; in Him that “all the fullness of deity dwells”; and in whom they have been raised up and are now able to walk in purity (Col 1:16, 22; 2:3, 9; 3:1). Therefore, the Christian life is, at its essence, a continual looking to, and trusting in, Christ. Therefore, the doctrine of Christ is essential for healthy spiritual growth and for practical Christian living. It was precisely for this reason that the Colossian heresy was so potentially deadly—it led believers away from the preeminence of Christ, from the simplicity of “knowing Christ personally and intimately, theologically and practically.”¹⁰

Against this larger backdrop of Paul’s purpose in writing the letter, we are now able to see that the focus of 3:1-17 is to encourage the believers to keep their minds “on the things above” because in Christ, “they have died” and their lives “are hid with Christ in God.” This living connection, with the finished work of Christ, is to be the wellspring

⁹ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R), 53.

¹⁰ Richard R. Melick Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, New American Commentary, vol. 32 (Nashville: B&H, 1991), 183.

from which their godly behavior is to flow. As they trust in Christ, they will be enabled to “put aside” ungodly attitudes and behavior (3:5-9) and to “put on” Christ-like attitudes and conduct (3:10-15). Each Christian must continually stay focused on and be connected to Christ. This close union helps us see the great importance of the instruction in verse 16—we must “let the word of Christ richly dwell within us.”

The corporate nature of the instructions in this verse and the surrounding context are noteworthy. The main verb in verse 16, ενοικετω, is a third person *plural* imperative. Indeed, all the instructions in the surrounding passage are aimed at the church corporately; the verbs and the pronouns are all plural. Therefore, to actualize these instructions in our lives individually will require our working with others corporately.

Returning to the main command in verse 16, “let the word of Christ dwell richly within you,” we need to consider how the genitive, του χριστου, is to be understood. Is this genitive subjective, where Christ is speaking as His word is ministered; or objective, where this means the word about Christ? Though we cannot be dogmatic, an objective understanding best fits the context of Colossians. Paul’s overriding concern is to help the believers in Colossae to keep their eyes on Christ and His finished work rather than to be taken captive by the legalistic and mystical teachings that were being espoused there. To keep them Christ-centered, Paul is “urging the community as a whole to put the message about Christ at the center of its corporate experience.”¹¹

Next, it is necessary to return to the verb ενοικετω itself. What does it mean to “let the word of Christ dwell” within you? Murray Harris points out that the immediate context leads one to see that “the concept is dynamic, not static”—where the word about Christ is “not merely to be present as a resident but is to be operative as a powerful

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 286.

force.”¹² The impact of the Word’s dwelling within us is to be experienced through the three present tense participles which follow. The Word actively dwells within us through our “teaching,” our “admonishing,” and our “singing.” The first two participles are of particular interest to us in that they have as a direct object the pronoun, *ἑαυτοῦς*. Normally, this word is translated “yourselves,” but here the translators rightly see that the use is “reciprocal,”¹³ and thus they translate it “one another.” These two participles are to be taken together as is also seen in the way the phrase “with all wisdom” is used in the sentence. It comes just before the first two participles and belongs with them—we teach and admonish “with all wisdom.”¹⁴ The sense of the command is that as we teach one another and as we admonish one another with the word about Christ, doing so with wisdom, we are actively unleashing the attracting power of Christ to anchor our souls to Him. This is an essential fundamental part of a healthy Christian life.

Therefore, we conclude that the apostle Paul makes clear in Colossians 3:16 that one-anothering relationships are essential for every believer to grow in godly character, love, peace, and thankfulness. Why? Because one-anothering relationships are the place where the word about Christ is ministered through mutual teaching, admonishment, and encouragement. This means that disabled believers must be involved in dynamic one-anothering relationships if they are to be healthy, growing Christians.

Hebrews 3:12-13

Hebrews 3:12-13 is one of the clearest New Testament passages warning professing believers of the danger of apostasy. This warning comes in the context of the

¹² Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 144.

¹³ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 208.

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 158.

great burden of the author of Hebrews to call the Jewish believers to whom he writes to endure persecution because of the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is superior to the angels, to Moses and his covenant, to Aaron and his priesthood, and to the tabernacle, they must hold on to Him against all opposition. This larger message provides the context for Hebrews 3:7-4:13, where the negative example of Israel's failure to enter Canaan (3:7-19) serves as a warning to believing Jews in the first century—do not fail to enter God's rest (4:13) by falling away from Christ as did they.

The author begins this warning in Hebrews 3:7-11 with an extensive Old Testament quotation from Psalm 95:7-11 where the psalmist recalls the failure of the people of Israel to believe God and enter the Promised Land by faith (Num 13-14). The argument is that if the people in Moses's day, who had seen so many signs and wonders attesting to God's glory and might, could fail to enter the Promised Land, then the Hebrew Christians ought to beware of the same fate. This initial Old Testament quotation is followed by direct warnings to the audience whom the author has in view (vv. 12-14). Then after this warning he returns to the example of Israel's unbelief, seeking to strongly emphasize it with a series of rhetorical questions. The movement back and forth from ancient Israel's unbelief to the potential present peril of the Hebrew Christians makes this passage sobering and powerful. As Peter O'Brien says, "The threat to the congregation is real . . . and by juxtaposing this description" of Israel's failure "with the listeners' present situation" the author makes the danger plain.¹⁵

That the danger of these professing believers falling away is real is seen first in the urgency of the command, "take care" (βλεπετε). It is a present tense imperative calling for continual watchfulness. What are we to watch out for? We are to look for the presence of "an evil, unbelieving heart" that "falls away" from God. This was precisely

¹⁵ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 145.

the problem of the people of Israel in the psalm—they had evil, unbelieving hearts and that led them to fall away from God. The author “sees the possibility of the same condition in his readers.”¹⁶ The peril of “falling away” follows “unbelief.” As William L. Lane points out, the author makes a play on words, *απιστιας εν αποστηναι*, which serves to show that “falling away and unbelief reflect the same disposition.”¹⁷ Even more alarming is that this danger of unbelief leading to apostasy could spring up anywhere in our midst. The instruction is addressed to all of us; the imperative *βλεπετε* is plural in number. We are all corporately called to watch out for each other, because the author is teaching us that “in isolation from fellow-believers each individual is more liable to succumb to the subtle temptations” of unbelief.¹⁸

After issuing a strong, direct warning in verse 12, the author encourages his readers to do precisely the same thing for one another—they are to warn one another repeatedly and continually against the peril of unbelief. Paul Ellingworth points out that verse 13 makes clear that the exhortation in verse 12 (“take care . . . lest there be in you an evil, unbelieving heart”) was not “to individual, self-examination” but to mutual responsibility.¹⁹ This idea is seen more clearly when we notice that the command to “encourage” one another is also in the present tense, emphasizing continuous, ongoing action. The continual nature of the exhortation is further emphasized by the prepositional phrase “day after day” (*καθ’ εκαστην ημεραν*). The author continues to emphasize the urgency of the matter by going on to add the clause, “as long as it is called ‘Today’”; in a sense, he makes this warning triply urgent. We see that we are commanded to give

¹⁶ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews: From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 105.

¹⁷ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47A, (Dallas: Word, 1991), 86.

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 100.

¹⁹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 220, 221.

ourselves to continually watch out for one another, seemingly without rest, seeking to protect every other believer from the clear and present danger of spiritual apostasy.

Next, the writer of Hebrews gives another insight into the insidious nature of apostasy. Apostasy grows in the soil of hearts “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” The verb “hardened” (σκληρυνθη) is in the passive voice indicating that “sin is conceived as an agent that deceives and leads an individual to an irretrievably hopeless position.”²⁰ Thus sin itself poses such a great threat to the spiritual safety of professing believers that we are urged to deal with it quickly and decisively in the lives of our brothers and sisters. The urgency that Scripture places on our mutual responsibility to watch out for one another and to confront one another is very far removed from how modern evangelical Christians see our relationships to other believers. For a church to be healthy, for Christians to be protected from spiritual danger, we need to radically overhaul how we see the normal Christian life. God intends that His people be connected to one another in living, vital relationships that allow us to recognize the warning signs of sin and apostasy before it is too late. Thus, we see that one-anothering relationships are of critical importance to the spiritual well-being of every Christian, as these are a primary means by which the believer is protected from the hardening effect of the deceitfulness of sin, which has the power to effect apostasy. Believers with disabilities need the spiritual protection that comes through one-anothering relationships just as much as believers without disabilities. Therefore, it is urgent that we learn how to incorporate Christians with disabilities into the body life of the church.

²⁰ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 87.

How We See Their Place in the Church

Introduction

This passage shows that every single church member's active participation is necessary for a congregation to be healthy and effective. This involvement is a matter of great importance for ministering to persons with disabilities. Clearly, the church needs to learn how to accommodate persons with disabilities by making provision for them to be able to worship with the body and also attend Bible studies. We might see these opportunities as our only need to minister well to believers with disabilities, but we should let the Scriptures inform our mindset.

1 Corinthians 12:14-26

First Corinthians 12 has more to say about the church's need to have believers with disabilities involved in active ministry. This passage shows us that the church itself has need of something the person with disabilities can give—his spiritual giftedness and his Spirit-empowered ministry.

To see how this passage speaks to this issue, we must see these verses in light of not only Paul's teaching in chapter 12 but also of his overall message in this letter. Paul writes 1 Corinthians to address distressing reports he had received about the church at Corinth and the struggles they were experiencing. He was also writing in reply to a letter he had received directly from the Corinthian church which had posed a series of questions they asked him to answer. In many ways this is one of Paul's more diverse letters in that it covers a variety of topics, from divisions among the people to meat offered to idols, to spiritual gifts, etc. Yet interestingly, the one theme that comes up again and again is pride resulting in the Corinthian Christians' arrogant disregard for one another. The church was afflicted with a host of problems because they had a deeper problem with pride.

Chapter 12 marks a transition to a new subject about which the Corinthians themselves had inquired—spiritual gifts. What becomes evident in chapters 12-14 is that

spiritual gifts were not fulfilling the divine plan in Corinth. God had given gifts to believers so that there might “be no division in the body, but that the members might have the same care for one another” (12:25), but gifts were having the opposite effect in Corinth—they were dividing the church. Believers with outwardly impressive gifts were taking great pride in them while, at the same time, looking down on those with gifts that were less outwardly noteworthy. When addressing this problem, Paul brings several different biblical teachings to smash the divisions and to promote unity. First, he provides clear instruction on the subject of spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14; and in between, Paul sandwiches the love chapter. First Corinthians 13 provides a powerful rebuke to the Corinthians pride and self-exaltation. Here he elucidates that “the more excellent way” is the way of love. In other words, God has given to each believer in the body the spiritual gifts He willed so that each person might use his gift(s) to serve other believers in love.

An important foundational truth shared by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:18 is that God alone determines our spiritual gift(s) and our placement in the body: “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.” Because God Himself has “placed” (εθετο, 2nd Aorist of τιθημι) each person, we should trust His “wisdom and sovereignty.”²¹ Honoring God’s wise placement of persons with disabilities in our congregation means that we must be willing to do the hard work of incorporating them and their gifts into the body life of the church.

In these two verses the apostle sets forth the reality that every Christian in the church “needs” every other Christian. To make this point, he personifies the members of our physical bodies,²² suggesting that the “eye” might be tempted to say to the “hand,” “I have no need of you.” In the same way, the “head” might feel the same way about the

²¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 266.

²² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 612.

“foot,” but Paul does not allow them to utter these foolish sentiments. He says, “the eye *cannot* say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’”; or “the head *cannot* say to the foot, ‘I have no need of you.’” The idea that one believer does not need another is nonsensical and thus not to be uttered. In other words, that an all-wise God, would sovereignly “place” a member in the body of Christ in such a way that it was extraneous and unneeded is completely ridiculous. The fact is, as Paul makes clear in verse 22, “the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary” (αναγκαια). Gordon Fee defines this Greek word as “indispensable” and speaks of “weaker” members as Paul’s way to describe “the internal organs, which are full of ‘weakness,’ but are indispensable to there being any bodily functioning at all.”²³ Every person in the church is gifted by God and placed precisely where He wants him in order to make an indispensable contribution to the function of the body. If this is true of all believers, then it is true of disabled believers as well.

The apostle is not content with merely showing how we ought to *view* the members of the body which are “weaker”; he shows how we ought to *treat* them, by way of a stunning and insightful analogy. Paul speaks of members “which we deem less honorable” as in reality being highly honored or valued by us in our own lives regarding our own bodies. Thomas Schreiner states that in speaking of “less honorable” members the apostle is speaking euphemistically of the sexual organs and how people show greater honor to them by being careful to cover them.²⁴ Though we value them, we are also careful to hide them. In fact, our potential embarrassment through exposure leads us to give great care to “cover or even adorn them.”²⁵ Yet it is the sexual organs, male and female, that are absolutely essential to reproduction and the growth of our families. The

²³ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 613.

²⁴ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 267.

²⁵ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1009.

point is clear—some of the things which are hidden, and thus seem less important, are in reality the most necessary. If we understand this individually with our own physical bodies, how much more is this true in the body of Christ. Those members whose value seems to be hidden are those that God has made the most necessary. If God sees them as the most necessary, then we must grant them great honor as well.

Our calling to grant greater honor to those who seem to have, at first glance, the least value offers a unique opportunity to differentiate the church from society. As David Garland writes, “It is . . . countercultural to bestow the greatest honor on those who seem to be negligible.”²⁶ Beyond that, if we believe God’s Word, then we must believe that we *need* the contribution of disabled persons in our churches. From the verses we have considered, we conclude that the failure of a church to assimilate persons with disabilities into its ministry means that that church body is attempting to function without “indispensable” body parts. Ironically, a church like this is, as it were, functioning with its own disabilities. The church itself is missing an internal organ, a lung or a kidney, and will continue to do so until it is able to incorporate the person with disabilities gifts and ministry into the life of the body.

Conclusion

The Bible calls every church to be a welcoming place for persons with disabilities. To achieve this calling, we must let all of Scripture speak to how we see disabled persons, disabilities themselves, the spiritual needs of persons with disabilities, and their place in the church. As we learn to see all of God’s people as image-bearers, we come to place appropriate honor and value on persons with disabilities. When we learn to see disabilities as both reminders of our fallenness and as invitations to look for grace, we understand that disabilities are gifts to the church. Second Corinthians 12 shows us that

²⁶ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 596.

one of the things the church is missing by not incorporating disabled persons into the body life of the church is the unique experiences of the all-sufficient grace of Christ which is seen in all its glorious power in circumstances of great human weakness. The New Testament makes clear the profound spiritual needs of every Christian: every person desperately needs the local church. Moreover, we have seen that Colossians 3:16 shows us that every believer needs “one-anothering” relationships to grow in grace, and that Hebrews 3:12-13 provided a sobering warning to believers who are disconnected from these relationships. To be disconnected is to be in danger. Therefore, for any believer to be isolated from the church is to be unhealthy and endangered. Clearly, believers with disabilities also desperately need to be connected to the church in living, organic relationships. The New Testament also shows that the church needs every believer. First Corinthians 12 makes it clear that those members who, at first glance, appear to be weaker are actually indispensable. The church desperately needs what they can give. So we see that as the church is instructed from Scripture about the true nature of disabilities, it becomes a place that will warmly and gratefully receive those who are afflicted.

CHAPTER 3
OVERCOMING THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
INFLUENCES UPON THE CHURCH

To make Providence Church a more welcoming place for persons with disabilities, we must overcome the shaping power of social and cultural influences upon the church. To accomplish this goal, we need to carefully consider how the surrounding culture has influenced us so that we can then apply the Scripture with specificity to our lives in a way that will effect lasting change.

**Understanding the Social and Cultural
Influences upon the Church**

If we are to overcome the powerful influences of society and culture, we must first learn to see how our world is affecting us. Only as we begin to recognize the errors in our thinking can we reject them and replace them with biblical truth, or as Romans 12:2 says, “be transformed by the renewing of our minds.” To renew the mind, we must have two goals—one negative and one positive. Negatively, we must consciously reject our old worldly ways of thinking; and positively, we must adopt new biblical thought patterns. In essence we are called to replace wrong ways of thinking with right ways of thinking. Then as we meditate on the truth it reorients our attitudes, and finally paves the way for new habits of acting and relating.

It is our contention that the reason the modern evangelical church is unwelcoming to persons with disabilities is that the church has been “conformed to the world.” We have adopted the world’s thoughts and beliefs about persons with disabilities, and this has led us to embrace the values of the world as it relates to disabilities, and finally, these beliefs and values have shaped our behavior toward persons who are

disabled. This conforming process was as inevitable as it was unintentional. Our failure to seek transformation through specific biblical truths applied to the issues surrounding disabilities has ensured that we would be conformed to the spirit of the age. Often, Christians find it hard to believe that they have accepted the lies of the surrounding culture because they know that they have not intended to do so. In truth, the church has always struggled with this issue. A few decades ago, noted Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer lamented, “Christian thinking today is still ignorant of its own infiltration by the present prevalent surrounding thought-forms.”¹ We have slowly, imperceptibly adopted unbiblical ways of thinking, feeling, and acting toward persons with disabilities. Contrary to our good intentions, this is the reality. Someone has said, “facts are stubborn things,” and the facts are clear. Surveys of persons with disabilities consistently show that they see the church as an unwelcoming place.² Add to this what Erik Carter calls the “participation gap”—that is, that we have a disproportionately low number of persons with disabilities in our churches, and these facts confirm that we not manifesting the welcoming love of Christ toward persons with disabilities.

We must begin by considering the specific lies that dominate our present world and how it thinks about disabilities and persons with disabilities. Careful and thoughtful introspection can uncover unbiblical ideas and beliefs that have corrupted our thinking about disabilities and persons with disabilities. As we explore our ideas on this topic, we must pose some important questions. What lies have we adopted? How have these errors molded our beliefs about persons with disabilities? As we are able to identify these unbiblical ideas, we can then begin to renew our minds with biblical truth that will reshape our attitudes and actions toward persons who are disabled.

¹ Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 1, *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), xx.

² Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations* (Baltimore: Brookes, 2007), 6.

In her book *Same Lake, Different Boat*, Stephanie Hubach points to two large philosophical currents that have shaped our cultural and social environment: modernism and postmodernism. She draws on Francis Schaeffer’s work to make the case that these worldviews have each profoundly impacted the way we see disabilities. The modern enlightenment worldview described by Hubach sees disabilities as “an abnormal part of life in a normal world.”³ The postmodern worldview sees disabilities as “a normal part of life in a normal world.”⁴ Each of these views is deeply flawed and lead to serious, damaging errors. Both views distort the way society sees disabilities and persons with disabilities, and both have, in turn, shaped the way the church sees these things as well.

The Modernist Worldview

The modernist worldview which dominated western culture from the mid-nineteenth century until the late twentieth⁵ has tended to have a largely optimistic view of the world, in general, and mankind, in particular. The modern worldview sees nothing intrinsically wrong with the world, and it sees nothing intrinsically wrong with man. In fact, the modern worldview, buoyed by advances in science and technology, espouses that people can make the world whatever they want it to be. This optimistic modern worldview came to full expression in the Secular Humanism of the early twentieth century. Christian philosopher David A. Noebel describes the secular humanist’s view of man and society saying, “one of secular humanism’s central tenets is man’s inherent goodness or perfectibility Man is a being with unlimited promise . . . who possesses

³ Stephanie O. Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched with Disability* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 26.

⁴ Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat*, 28.

⁵ Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone), 22.

the power or potentiality of solving all of his problems.”⁶ This worldview, incorporates Darwinian evolutionary theory into its optimistic view of mankind and sees both man and society as “perfectible.”⁷ Modern man dreamt of the day when all of our challenges—even death—will be conquered by our advances in science. This view of the world sees the world as basically good, or “normal.” It follows then the modernistic mind sees disabilities as an “abnormal” part of life in a “normal” world.

Given the philosophical commitments of modernity, we can see why disabilities are seen as an unwelcome intrusion, an “abnormal” blot on an otherwise “normal” world. Within this worldview disabilities reflect missteps in the upward march of mankind. If we believe man is evolving toward perfection, it is not surprising that something as ugly as eugenics was embraced by millions in the early decades of the twentieth century. Eugenics, meaning literally “good birth,” was the “movement devoted to improving the human species through the control of hereditary factors in mating.”⁸ Proponents of eugenics called for the sterilization of persons with disabilities so that the human race could continue its evolutionary march toward perfection. More extreme eugenicists advocated euthanizing those with severe disabilities. The horrors of the holocaust are a lasting monument to the end of this line of thought. Though extreme forms of eugenics have been rejected in our society, nevertheless, the philosophical thought forms continued to exert their influence. One way we see this is in the “quality of life” mindset. Worldly minded people ask, “What kind of life can a person with severe mental disabilities have?” They measure the “quality of life” a disabled individual can have over against the standard of normalcy; because they cannot live a “normal” life,

⁶ David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times: The Religious Worldviews of Our Day and the Search for Truth* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1991), 428.

⁷ Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1976), 121.

⁸ Victoria Neufeldt and David B. Guralnik, eds., “Eugenics,” in *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 468.

they question if their life is even worth living? They consider that it would be better for them and their family—as well as society—to be saved from the high costs of living with this severe disability? A most telling statistic relating to how modern man sees the disabled is the rising abortion rate of unborn babies diagnosed with birth defects.⁹

Even when modern-minded people reject the more extreme implications of the modern worldview, these underlying thought patterns still radically color the way they see persons with disabilities. Disability advocate Julie Smart describes the “perceived defining nature of the disability” in the way the non-disabled relate to persons with disabilities. She says, “others assume that the disability is the central identity and self-definition of the person with the disability.”¹⁰ They see not the person but the disability. Though biblical Christians are immune to the more extreme manifestations of this mindset, the underlying thought-forms are subtly seductive. The danger lies in the way these ideas appeal to an untrained mind. If we do not have a robust biblical worldview of disabilities, we are easily ensnared by the enticement of human reason. We see the person with severe disabilities much as the modernist does; having imbibed the beliefs and values of modern culture, we tend to see the person with disabilities as “abnormal,” different, and deficient. Pastor Lamar Hardwick laments how the church has been “shaped” by the modern mindset. He writes about this modernist worldview of disability using another common label, the “medical model of disability.” Hardwick writes that the “medical model” has impacted the church and leads parishioners to view persons who are disabled by “focusing on the disability or impairment” in such a way that they fail to relate to the person.¹¹ The dominant tendency in the church is for the non-disabled to

⁹ Mary O’Callaghan, “Prenatal Diagnosis and Disability Selective Abortion,” University of Notre Dame, McGrath Institute for Church Life, 2019, https://mcgrath.nd.edu/assets/345188/expert_guide_by_mary_o_callaghan.pdf.

¹⁰ Julie Smart, *Disability, Society, and the Individual*, 3rd ed. (Austin, TX: Pro-Ed, 2016), 100.

¹¹ Lamar Hardwick, *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 88.

fixate on the “medical” (physical) need of the person with a disability, and thus to neglect his real spiritual needs. When this mindset permeates a church, it leaves the person with a disability isolated from real relationships and from true Christian communion in the body of Christ.

If we are not consciously rejecting these modern ideas and replacing them with Scriptural truth, we are being “conformed” by them. To see how true this predicament is, consider these questions. How often do we expect every child to be born healthy and without disabilities? When we do hear of a child born with disabilities, do we respond as biblically informed Christians should? Are we rightly saddened by the reminder of the brokenness of our fallen world and the real suffering that will come, but hopeful and confident in God’s perfect will and the sufficiency of His grace? Or do we respond as the world does?

The Postmodern Worldview

The postmodern worldview has come to the forefront much more recently, beginning in the early part of the twentieth century and continuing to grow in its influence in the first two decades of the twenty-first. Postmodernism is a pessimistic worldview characterized by disillusionment and a loss of confidence in the progress of man. It “is ultimately a form of cynicism.”¹² The former optimism of modernity has been replaced by the extreme skepticism of postmodernity. For postmodernism the march of mankind is no longer seen as an upward procession toward perfection; now history is seen as an ongoing cycle of tyranny. At its core is a rejection of objective truth. Postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty states, “Truth is made, not found.”¹³ Truth is “made” by those in power to oppress and subdue others. If we truly believe that there is

¹² Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 22.

¹³ Albert Mohler, “Postmodernism and Society” (message delivered at the 2007 Ligonier National Conference Contending for the Truth), Ligonier Ministries, May 29, 2015, YouTube video, 52:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3r9L8IPCY_M&ab_channel=LigonierMinistries.

no such thing as truth, just a social construct used to oppress and subjugate others, then freedom comes by rejecting and deconstructing all truth claims. Human advancement and liberation require a rejection of all truth claims.¹⁴ Further postmodernism necessitates the repudiation of all standards and norms. After all, who is to say what is *normal*? What does *normal* even mean in the postmodern world? This idea has tremendous implications for how postmodernists view disabilities. Disabilities are no longer aberrations from the standard or departures from the norm, since to the postmodernist, there are no valid standards or norms. Disabilities are reduced to differences. For the postmodernist, it is evil to think that anyone is more “able” than anyone else, or less “able” than anyone else. Any attempt to call someone “disabled” presumes to define some standard of normal abilities. The result of this line of thinking is that the concept of disability loses all meaning. Therefore, Hubach states that for a postmodern worldview, disabilities are “a normal part of life in a normal world.” She quotes disability advocate, Carol Tashdie as saying, “Having a disability is a difference like any other human characteristic. It is not a deficiency. It is by no means a tragedy and does not deserve pity or benevolence or charity. Now is the time to recognize and celebrate disability rather than ignore, devalue or use it as a justification for lower expectations.”¹⁵

This view has an important kernel of truth in recognizing the equal value and dignity of all people, no matter our differences. Postmodernism sees persons with disabilities as complete equals and so it moves away from the essential ugliness of modernity and its low view of persons with disabilities. At first glance it appears that the advent of postmodernism has ushered in a new era of blessing for persons with disabilities. Postmodernists see every individual, even those formerly labeled “disabled,” as “normal” in their own respective ways. However, the pendulum has swung too far.

¹⁴ Ben Shapiro, *The Authoritarian Moment: How the Left Weaponized America's Institutions against Dissent* (New York: Broadside Books, 2021), 88.

¹⁵ Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat*, 28.

The initial euphoria experienced by persons with disabilities in the warmth and affirmation of postmodern-minded people toward persons with disabilities soon evaporates. This is because postmodernism fails to acknowledge the very real suffering that persons with disabilities truly experience. If we are all normal, then none of us needs any special treatment, not even a person with profound disabilities. People with this mindset are hindered from extending care and help because postmodernism has no philosophical basis for compassion. That is because for the consistent postmodern, “disabilities” don’t exist. Therefore, even when people are severely disabled, they do not often receive appropriate compassion, understanding and support.

The reality faced by persons with disabilities exposes the folly of the postmodern position. Disabilities have been defined as a “physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities.”¹⁶ Every impairment represents a significant departure from normal human function, and every departure from the norm entails some measure of added difficulty and suffering. Sufferers need compassion, understanding and support. This can only come from someone who truly acknowledges their suffering. Postmodern-minded friends offer affirmation and acceptance; what is needed is compassion and help. The needs are real and ongoing. Despite the initial appeal of the postmodern view of disabilities, with its affirmation of the “sameness” and equality, it undercuts true compassion and support. The end result of the postmodernist’s view of disabilities is the same as modernist’s—the response to people with disabilities is woefully deficient.

Bible-believing Christians are again, for the most part, immune to the most extreme forms of the postmodern errors; yet, these subtle lies still exert a shaping and molding force upon our thoughts and attitudes. The Christian understands from Scripture

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, “Guide to Disability Rights Laws: Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA),” last modified February 28, 2020, <https://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm>.

that love and compassion are defining marks of faithful believers and that we are called to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2; see also John 13:34-35). Yet the postmodern idea that we are all the same has the inevitable effect of dulling and downgrading our sympathy for the suffering of persons with disabilities. Postmodernism’s obsession with avoiding any concept of normalcy encourages us to believe that disabilities are merely differences to be embraced and celebrated. This means my friend with a disability needs from me acceptance, not compassion; she needs honor, not help. This mindset makes us numb and insensitive to the suffering of persons with disabilities, and the profound challenges they face will almost always inhibit their active involvement in the body life of the congregation.

Contemporary Views of Personhood and Identity

Another way that the conforming power of our world has affected the way we see persons with disabilities is by changing how we define what it is to be human. This has happened as ideas from modernism and postmodernism have converged with other current thought forms to confuse and distort the way we see the self. What is a person? What makes us authentically human? How are we to understand our identity? What are our obligations to ourselves and to others? The way our contemporaries answer those questions is radically different today, and this has had a massive impact on how disabilities are viewed in our culture.

In his book *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*, Carl Trueman states that “expressive individualism is the normative way of thinking about self and its place in the world.”¹⁷ He explains that, according to expressive individualism, to be “authentically human” in

¹⁷ Carl Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 23.

today's world means "to act outwardly in accordance with one's inward feelings."¹⁸ This elevates of our inner desires in such a way that self-expression and personal fulfillment become paramount. As the self becomes the focal point, true community is undermined. "People thus encounter one another as collaborating or contending wills, pursuing their own individual goals."¹⁹ This means that other people in our lives are either means to an end of our pursuit of self-fulfillment, or they are obstacles to be overcome or avoided in that pursuit. With this understanding of the self, there is little room for the personal sacrifice necessary to care for others who are in need, and whom we view to have little to offer us in return. This mindset, as it shapes the thinking of believers turns, us from the biblical emphasis on loving and serving others and toward an unhealthy concern about our own personal fulfillment. Both in subtle and not so subtle ways this kind of thinking leads believers away from loving sacrifice by causing us to think entirely too much about our own comfort and happiness.

Another way that expressive individualism undermines Christian community is in its enshrinement of self-determinism. Here persons are truly authentic when they "define for themselves what gives them their identity, their purpose in life, and their sense of meaning."²⁰ This has become so entrenched in contemporary culture that it is expected that you not only tolerate others who make lifestyle choices which violate the clear teaching of Scripture, but you must actively affirm them. As Trueman writes, "to tolerate somebody is, by definition, to disapprove of them, albeit in a rather passive way. But it is also not to recognize them . . . ; it is not to affirm their identities as they wish to be affirmed."²¹ This thought form has come to be so dominant in the culture that genuine

¹⁸ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 23.

¹⁹ O. Carter Snead, *What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 6.

²⁰ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 156

²¹ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 156.

tolerance has become intolerable. Though we as biblical Christians may resist the prevailing pressure to affirm the worst expressions of expressive individualism, we will find it harder to recognize the gentler impact of these ideas and values on the way we relate to others in the body of Christ. As we are inundated with the message that we must continually affirm the sinful choices and self-expressions of others, we will find it more and more difficult to give and receive correction to our brothers and sisters in Christ. In this way, expressive individualism strikes at the life blood of relationships in the body of Christ. Christians grow in the Christian life by “speaking the truth in love” to one another. We are to “teach” and “admonish” one another because we all desperately need relationships where truth is spoken and sin is confronted. When we fail to relate to others in this way, we rob them of an essential blessing in their lives—loving correction. Without the give and take of loving correction in our relationships, we simply cannot thrive spiritually. This means that as the church becomes infected by the contemporary confusion about what it means to be human, we will not be able to experience healthy growth in holiness because we will be depriving one another of an essential means to this kind of growth.

To make matters worse, contemporary beliefs about identity and oppression create divisions in the body of Christ that make loving correction increasingly difficult. Douglas R. Groothuis explains how “identity politics” fosters these divisions; “‘Identity politics’ . . . instead of deeming individuals as ‘created equal’ before God and the law . . . understands individuals to be members of a group who must be treated accordingly.”²² Because contemporary society encourages individuals to see themselves as parts of distinct groups based on categories of social oppression, this makes believers without disabilities to be even more reticent to offer words of correction to believers with

²² Douglas R. Groothuis, *Fire in the Streets: How You Can Confidently Respond to Incendiary Cultural Topics* (Washington, DC: Salem Books, 2022) xxiii.

disabilities. In current thought, to be “abled” is to be a part of the “privileged” group, and thus to be “privileged” is to be completely unable to understand the situation of those in the other group, those without privilege (persons with disabilities). Therefore, the privileged has no voice—no right to speak any word of correction to the unprivileged. Instead, the privileged believer must only listen to the voice of the unprivileged. He has no place to speak critically. While Scripture certainly affirms that love requires that we listen carefully to others so that we might understand their struggles and their needs, it also tells us that we are to speak words of correction to those we love. It is quite instructive that the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” is immediately preceded by a verse which says, “you shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor” (Lev 19:17). Loving one another requires both that we listen and understand one another as well as that we “reprove” one another. But unless we are actively being transformed by the power of Scripture, we will often succumb to the temptation of withholding correction in our relationships with brothers and sisters with disabilities.

Because we are not actively rejecting the lies of the culture and then replacing those lies with the corresponding biblical truth, we are more like the world than we realize. We vacillate between being awkward and uncomfortable in the presence of persons with disabilities (result of modernism); to being indifferent to their needs (result of postmodernism); to being unwilling to confront sin (result of expressive individualism and identity politics). Though we believe in the value and dignity of all human beings and the needs of all people for vital connection to the body of Christ, we often fail to engage persons with disabilities in the church and in our lives.

The Biblical Worldview

The biblical worldview sees disabilities as “a normal part of life in an abnormal world.”²³ Where the modernist view is optimistic about man and the world, and the postmodern view pessimistic, the biblical view is realistic. It sees the world as it truly is, it embraces the intrinsic goodness of God’s creation and of man as His image, and it also accepts the profound effects of sin. This fallen world is now completely and fundamentally “abnormal.” Nothing is as God created it to be. This departure from its original design (i.e., its normal state) has touched every part of creation and every facet of man. Man is now radically different than God made him to be. Sin has distorted everything so thoroughly and completely that when we encounter abnormality, it is precisely what we should expect. Truly the abnormal is now normal.

Therefore, we should not be surprised when we encounter persons with physical and/or mental disabilities. Instead, these disabilities are exactly what we expect to encounter in an “abnormal” world. In fact, since everything is now truly abnormal, physical and mental disabilities serve as gentle reminders that we ourselves are not what we were made to be. This is especially true of us spiritually—every human being is spiritually disabled. Paul Tautges writes, “Every human being’s greatest need, whether ‘abled’ or ‘disabled’ is for the grace of God to overcome our spiritual disabilities. This is why Jesus came to earth.”²⁴

Our spiritual disabilities and true spiritual condition were on display in the earthly ministry of our Lord. Jesus demonstrated His messiahship in the way He reversed the effects of the fall. Jesus’s answer to the question brought by the disciples of John the Baptist is instructive. Relaying John’s question, they asked, “‘Are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?’ Jesus said, ‘Go and report to John what you hear and

²³ Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat*, 29.

²⁴ Paul Tautges, *When Disability Hits Home: How God Magnifies His Grace in Our Weakness and Suffering* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2020), 51.

see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt 11:2-3). Here Jesus quotes from Isaiah 35 and 61 to establish beyond any doubt His Messiahship. He is doing what only the Messiah could do—reverse the effects of sin and the fall. In the gospel of John, the evangelist highlights to the reader how physical disabilities are outward signs of our being spiritually disabled. In John 9 Jesus heals “the man born blind.” His blindness from birth is expressly linked to the spiritual blindness of all people apart from Christ. We are all spiritually blind and need Jesus, “the Light of the world” to open our eyes. This example demonstrates one of the great blessings that comes to the local church when God gives it members with disabilities. These physical and mental impairments are visible reminders to us that we are all fallen and in need of grace. Scripture teaches that sin brought decay, deformity, and ultimately death into the world. The world is broken and so are we; all of us. Sin has affected every part of man; he is totally depraved. This means that all of our faculties are tainted by sin. Physically, mentally, emotionally, volitionally, and spiritually we are broken and in need of grace. Our brothers and sisters who are disabled are visible reminders of our brokenness and help us all to long for heaven when He shall make all things new.

The biblical worldview alone provides a context for seeing disabilities and persons with disabilities as God sees them. It honors and values persons with disabilities while still acknowledging the unique reality of their suffering. The Scriptures will guide the Christian to a balanced and biblical mindset toward persons with disabilities. He can mourn with his brother over the challenges and difficulties that his disability brings, and at the same time honor and value him, remembering that every human life is glorious and reflects the glory of Almighty God. He understands that persons with disabilities need support and encouragement to cope with their suffering.

Finally, the biblical worldview understands that to be truly human is to live not according to your inner desires but according to the will of God. We don’t determine our

identity or our purpose, God does, and we are called to help our brothers and sisters to live for His will and for His glory. This means the believer can encourage his brother with disabilities to rejoice in the wise purposes and Providence of God while leaning on His all-sufficient grace. Persons with disabilities, like all of us, need to be surrounded by believers who are being transformed by the living Word.

Overcoming These Influences through Whole-Person Change

If we are to make Providence Church a more welcoming place for persons with disabilities, we will need to apply God’s Word to our lives specifically and comprehensively. We will need to strive for whole-person change. Whole-person change is change that affects every part of our hearts and lives. Because God desires obedience from the heart, we must intentionally seek transformation in each of the three areas of the human heart: the mind, the emotions, and the will. If we want to truly change, we must seek change from the heart, because lasting change always comes from the heart.

To seek heart change we need to understand the heart the way Scripture does. The Bible describes the heart as the control center of our lives. Proverbs 4:23 explains, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” The heart is “the inner person . . . ; it is the essential core of who you are . . . , encompassing all other terms and functions used to describe the inner person (spirit, soul, mind, emotions, will, etc.).”²⁵ The heart is seen in Scripture as the source of human behavior. It encompasses our responses to the world around us and to the things that happen to us. These responses according to Jeremy Pierre are “three-dimensional. The human heart responds cognitively, through rational processes based on knowledge and beliefs. It also responds affectively, through a framework of desires and emotions. It also responds

²⁵ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 59.

volitionally, through a series of choices reflecting the willful commitments of the heart.”²⁶

The lies from the world that have taken us captive have in some way captivated each part of our hearts. Embracing unbiblical ideas about disabilities has led to unbiblical beliefs about persons with disabilities. Then these unbiblical beliefs have shaped our affections and emotions, resulting in worldly attitudes. Finally, these worldly attitudes have resulted in ungodly patterns of action and relating to persons with disabilities.

We must reverse this process. We must seek to renew our minds by intentionally rejecting cultural thought-forms and replacing them with biblical truths. Changing our hearts continues in the affections as we meditate upon Scripture and pray for God’s love to fill us, cultivating new desires and attitudes. Whole-person change then extends to transforming our wills, as we develop new habits of response and relationship toward persons with disabilities, leading to a change in the fundamental commitments of our hearts. To achieve this objective, believers must be trained in a way that addresses all of the barriers in our hearts. This project will seek to address three formidable obstacles in the heart—one cognitive, one affective, and one volitional. The three obstacles are (1) the failure to recognize the infiltration of worldly thought-forms about disabilities; (2) the inability to respond with appropriate emotions to the challenges faced by persons with disabilities; and (3) the absence of practical skills in relating well to persons with disabilities.

Renewing Our Beliefs about Disabilities

The first obstacle to our church becoming a more welcoming place for persons with disabilities is in the minds and the thought lives of our church members. As we have

²⁶ Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 12.

seen, the world has shaped our thinking, resulting in the adoption of beliefs about disabilities that are unbiblical. To combat this problem, we must seek to recognize and replace each specific worldly belief about disabilities. Addressing specific lies, by rejecting them and replacing them with biblical truth. Then we will need to extend those truths into every area of our hearts and lives.

We have seen how both the modern mindset and the postmodern wrongly view disabilities. Modernism—though it does acknowledge the real suffering of persons with disabilities—focuses almost exclusively on the negative aspects of disability while postmodernism fails to acknowledge the suffering that comes with disability. From the modernist perspective, the disability itself becomes the focus instead of the value of the person, while the postmodern perspective affirms his uniqueness, celebrates his authenticity, but completely ignores his suffering. The modernist response to disabilities is hopelessness and unhealthy pity contrasted to the postmodernist reaction of insensitivity to true needs and an unwillingness to help. In both cases, the person living with a disability is not served well.

The answer is the transforming power of the Word of God. The Scriptures present a comprehensive theology of disabilities. The church needs to be taught the doctrine of man in a way that highlights the intrinsic value of every human being as an “image bearer,” reflecting the glory of God. Believers need to be reminded of the sovereignty of God in all things, including the purposeful creation of every person with disabilities. This fundamental truth anchors our hope. In Psalm 139, David expresses joyful confidence in God’s intentional and purposeful formation of his own body in “his mother’s womb.” From this we must conclude that we are all “fearfully and wonderfully made,” even those with disabilities (Ps 139:13-16). God’s sovereign creation of persons with disabilities is stated by the Lord Himself in response to Moses’s objection to being called to go to Egypt to speak to Pharaoh. “Then Moses said to the LORD, ‘Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken

to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.’ The LORD said to him, ‘Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes *him* mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?’” (Exod 4:10-11).

God’s personal and purposeful involvement in the creation of every human being is a foundational pillar to a sound view of disabilities. We also need to understand the doctrine of sin and the fall and God’s gracious determination to subject the world to futility in hope (Rom 8:20). Disabilities are one way we vividly see the present state of our fallen world. Next, we must understand the way God has composed the church to be interdependent and mutually responsible for one another. Finally, we need a robust theology of grace, recognizing how God’s glorious strength is made known in our weakness.

To see these truths transform the church into a truly welcoming place for persons with disabilities requires more than merely teaching these doctrines. Believers must commit to meditate regularly upon these truths. They must repent of how they have allowed the world to shape their core beliefs about disabilities and persons with disabilities, and they must cry out to God in prayer for the Holy Spirit’s work in their hearts. They must exercise their faith, that God and His Word are mighty enough to accomplish “the destruction of fortresses . . . , destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor 10:4-5).

Cultivating Godly Attitudes toward Persons with Disabilities

The second obstacle to be overcome is the unwelcoming attitudes and emotions with which we respond to persons with disabilities. These unbiblical emotional responses create attitudinal walls of separation that keep persons with disabilities at a distance.²⁷ These entrenched feelings have developed over time and in many cases have

²⁷ Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, 10.

hardened us and numbed us emotionally. Changing feelings and attitudes is hard work and happens as we seek God's grace to change our desires and values.

The shaping influence of the world has caused us to adopt values that are inconsistent with Scripture, and which exert a controlling influence on our desires, emotions and attitudes. These ungodly values need to be exposed, rejected, and replaced. As we turn from ungodly values toward valuing the things that God values, we will see our affections and feelings transformed. We will need God's grace and power unleashed in our lives through His holy Word.

The beliefs fostered by modernism lead to the formation of values and desires that conflict with God's will and Word. These values shape the hearts of believers in profound ways. Worldly, modernistic Christians will tend to place great value on normalcy and perfection. This viewpoint can lead to an inordinate level of grief over disabilities and an unhealthy level of pity toward persons with disabilities. Seen from the world's viewpoint, severe disabilities are frighteningly tragic. Viewed against a value system that sees only this life, disabilities are indeed devastating. But when the Christian looks at disabilities against the backdrop of eternity and the promises of God, a soul-anchoring perspective strengthens the heart. This message is what the non-disabled believer must share with his brother with disabilities.

Postmodernistic thinking influences Christians to see disabilities in a way that minimizes the need of persons with disabilities. This tendency, along with the common sinful desire for comfort and ease, can lead Christians to ignore the suffering of their brothers and sisters and to feel little or no conviction about it. Scripture calls us to cultivate the love that has been "poured out within our hearts" (Rom 5:5) and to express it in acts of compassion and service. Persons who live with disabilities live with suffering. They need more than affirmation and acceptance; they need real practical help in the context of a loving relationship in the body of Christ. This is what God calls us to, and

what He will equip us for—or as Joni Eareckson Tada says, “God never intended for us to suffer alone.”²⁸

Changing values, desires and emotions requires more than simply recognizing the sinfulness of our hearts. When we seek intentional heart change, we must not content ourselves with merely knowing the truth in our minds; we need to fundamentally change our affections. This is accomplished in a variety of ways.

First, upon recognizing sinful values and desires the believer must take them to God in honest confession. Honesty with God is essential. We are not to refine them before we pray; we take the “raw, unprocessed, unedited truth about . . . what I am experiencing, what I am wanting,”²⁹ directly to God. In this way, we face our need of God’s grace in Christ. He must change us from the inside out by giving us new desires and attitudes. We confess our sin and ask for God’s help to turn away from loving the things the world loves. Repentance is a grace that we need to practice daily if we are to see new desires spring from our hearts.

A second essential step is meditation upon God’s Word. As the believer meditates upon the truths of God’s Word, the Lord reshapes the desires of his heart to conform to God’s desires. He begins to value what God values and to want what God wants. Meditation upon Scripture changes the heart by recognizing and emphasizing the emotive elements of the passage. That is, Scripture often directly addresses the heart by its use of word pictures and vivid imagery. In this way God cultivates new affections by calling us to not only understand a passage but to feel the force of the text. This kind of whole-person meditation is essential in the pursuit of lasting change. But it is important to remember that for God’s Word to transform us we must respond to the Word with

²⁸ Joni Eareckson Tada, “Pursuing Joy in Christ with Disabilities,” January 8, 2018, in *Truth in Love*, episode 136, produced by Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, podcast, MP3 audio, 26:26, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/til-136-pursuing-joy-in-christ-with-disabilities-feat-joni-eareckson-tada>.

²⁹ Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 116.

faith. Faith is a “continual process of submission,”³⁰ where we actively believe what God says in His Word about what we should feel. We accept God’s values and actively reject our unbiblical ones.

A third fundamental need in changing the desires of the heart is prayer. We must call upon the Lord asking for His grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to infuse new, godly desires and values into our souls.

As we daily deepen our repentance, meditate upon the Word and seek God in prayer, we will begin to see the Lord reshape our desires. As God works by His Spirit and through His Word, we can see our hearts changed so that we truly feel what God feels toward persons with disabilities.

Developing Skills for Relating to Persons with Disabilities

The third obstacle to welcoming persons with disabilities is our lack of relational, interpersonal skills. The world’s conforming pressure shapes not only our beliefs and attitudes; it also shapes our behavior. Ungodly desires lead to ungodly actions, and ungodly actions lead to ungodly habits. Ungodly habits in this area are entrenched ways of responding and relating to persons with disabilities. Many Christians are surprised that they have developed entrenched habits when they know that they have not spent that much time around persons with disabilities. Inability to maintain good eye contact, speak directly and confidently to the person with disabilities, or the desire to exit the encounter are common habits of non-disabled persons. This is because the inevitable result of bad beliefs and bad values is bad habits.

The modernist mindset sees disabilities as an ultimate tragedy with no basis for hope and redemption. As this way of thinking infects the believer it results in the desire to avoid the ugly realities surrounding disabilities. This thought process, in turn, leads to

³⁰ Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 119.

habits of avoidance, like quickly averting the eyes when we encounter persons with disabilities, or an unwillingness to move beyond shallow, surface conversation when talking with a person with disabilities or a family member of a person with disabilities. Most often, an overly negative mindset about disabilities leads to extreme discomfort and awkwardness in the presence of the disabled. These emotions then lead to an array of off-putting actions which are unwelcoming to persons with disabilities.

The postmodern mindset also creates problems for us believers when we adopt this ungodly way of seeing disabilities. These thought-forms tend to make it hard for us see the person with disabilities as an individual with unique circumstances and unique needs. The contemporary way of viewing people with disabilities is to lose sight of individual by seeing their identity in terms of the larger group—the disabled. This results in a lack of awareness of the person in front of us. We fail to see their profound needs and we fail to minister to them. Unawareness quickly develops into habituated disinterest. Bad relational habits are not easily overcome. Greg Gifford defines habits as “regular, frequent practices that seem almost second nature.”³¹ When something seems second nature, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the difficulty of changing. Entrenched patterns of response to persons with disabilities are stubborn things. Habituation is difficult to reverse. Thankfully, in Christ we have access to the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him at God’s His right hand in the heavenly places (Eph 1:20). The power of God is more than sufficient to transform not only our thinking and affections, but also our relational habits.

To see lasting change in the area of relational responses to persons with disabilities we need to take deliberate steps to develop new habits. First, there needs to be thoughtful introspection and self-examination. How do I respond to persons with

³¹ Greg E. Gifford, *Heart and Habits: How We Change for Good* (Wheaton, IL: Kress Biblical Resources, 2021), 19.

disabilities? Am I awkward and uncomfortable around the disabled? Do I avoid eye contact? Am I motivated by the desire to get away from the conversation as quickly as possible?

After we acknowledge our unwelcoming relational habits, we can begin to practice new ones. Here is where we bring the entire whole-person model of change to bear on the issue. Because we are now operating with new beliefs about persons with disabilities, and because we are actively cultivating new affections toward persons with disabilities, we now can strive to take actions consistent with these new beliefs and affections. For instance, in meeting a person with profound intellectual disabilities, the right-thinking Christian remembers that this person is a reflection of the glory of God and is worthy of my honor, respect and time. Now that I am turning from my worldly desires for comfort and ease and seeking to desire what God desires, I can move toward this person with genuine affection, wanting him to know how much I value him. This outlook then sets the stage for my intentional efforts to make and maintain eye contact, my careful focus on speaking directly to the person with severe disabilities, my patience in awaiting a possible response, and my overall comfort and ease knowing that I am called by God to this moment and this ministry.

For most Christians the bad habits have become so well established that lasting change will require practice. Role play can be used to great effect here. Though many Christians balk at the idea of role play, it is an extremely effective way to grow in the development of skills. Whereas our thoughts and attitudes can be worked on in the context of individual Bible study, personal meditation and prayer, relational skills need to be practiced with other people. An excellent way to prepare for interactions with persons with disabilities is to practice the desired behaviors with other non-disabled believers. We can work in a simulated encounter with a person with disabilities to practice eye contact while maintaining a natural tone of voice and looking at and speaking directly to the person with disabilities. We can develop the skill of patiently waiting for the response of

the person with disabilities and we can practice how we move forward in the face of their inability to respond directly to us. Many other essential skills can also be attempted in exercises like this.

As we work at cultivating new habits, we will find that we become more and more skilled, and that there is an amazing synergistic benefit of working on these skills. Practicing relational skills will affect the other dimensions of our heart. We will grow in our affection for persons with disabilities, and we will reinforce our biblical beliefs about them so that we become more eager and willing to invest in the lives of those who live with disabilities. This is the nature of the heart. The volitional part of the heart doesn't just flow from the intellectual and affective parts, but there is a back and forth dynamic between each of the three dimensions of the heart. As Jeremy Pierre writes, "These three functions are necessarily interrelated. Thoughts can lead to feelings that can lead to choices; choices can also lead to thoughts that can lead to feelings; just as feelings can lead to choices that can lead to new thoughts."³² This interdependence should motivate us in all of our efforts to produce change, because each change we seek, whether intellectual, affective, or volitional, will have a ripple effect on the other dimensions of our heart and will make a lasting difference in the way we live.

Conclusion

When we fully understand the difficulty, we face in making the church a more welcoming place for persons with disabilities, we are humbled before the work before us. Cultural and social influences have cut deep ruts in our hearts that must be overcome. Unbiblical thought-forms have hardened into unbiblical beliefs; sinful desires have formed into selfish, sinful values and attitudes; worldly patterns of action have molded rigid relational habits. All these things together have been raised up into spiritual

³² Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 16.

“strongholds” that control our thoughts, emotions, and actions around persons with disabilities. But as we come to understand the lies that have infiltrated our hearts and begin to replace these lies with the “living and active” Word of God, as we cultivate new affections through repentance, meditation and prayer, and as we develop distinctively Christian relational skills, we will certainly come to see that “the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses . . . , enabling us to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:4-5). As we make progress in this important area of ministry we will demonstrate the extraordinary beauty of the body of Christ. As Dale Johnson writes,

We are the body of Christ because we are a redeemed people. We have been reconciled to God, and we are one in Christ. As a body we are members of one another, called to care for each other. As the body of Christ we comfort, serve, bear burdens, exhort, forgive, sing, show hospitality, rejoice, admonish, pray, teach, commit, encourage, help, and speak the truth in love. We do all of this in ways that are beautiful, difficult, sacrificial, and countercultural.³³

The church is beautiful precisely because of the difficulties we embrace, the sacrifices we make, and the enculturating influences we resist. Disabilities provide a wonderful opportunity for the church to shine.

³³ T. Dale Johnson Jr., *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 141.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to make Providence Church, Duluth, Georgia, a more welcoming place for persons with disabilities. We attempted to do this by making some foundational, structural changes to our underlying church culture. Since culture consists of shared beliefs, accepted values, common practices, and prevailing goals,¹ we need to work to change each of these components of our existing culture. Scripture teaches us that beliefs, values, common practices, and goals are things which flow from our hearts. This means that our project was aimed at changing the hearts of our people to make us more welcoming and accommodating to persons with disabilities. We hoped to achieve this through accomplishing three main goals: (1) to help our members examine and refine their beliefs about disabilities and persons with disabilities; (2) to cultivate godly attitudes in the members of Providence Church toward persons with disabilities; and (3) to develop essential skills for relating well with persons with disabilities. We sought to accomplish these three goals through a two-part sermon series and a six-hour seminar held on the Saturday between the two sermons. We then tracked the effectiveness of the project by attempting to measure the change we saw in the areas mentioned above. The first two goals were measured by a survey of the people of the church, before and after they received training related to disabilities. The third goal was measured by the performance of participants in role plays aimed at practicing relational

¹ T. Dale Johnson Jr., *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 19.

skills. Members were evaluated by their peers and scored on an evaluation card. The duration of this project was nine days.

Administering the Pre-Survey

The project was launched on Friday evening, August 19, 2022, with the sending out of the Pre-Survey accompanied by a brief video. In the video I laid out the purpose and timeline of the project with particular emphasis on the urgency of timely responses. I explained that the survey sought to measure our understanding, beliefs and attitudes about disabilities and would only require seven to ten minutes of their time. I made clear that to participate in the study itself, each adult must complete the pre-survey before the Sunday morning service. Further I explained that the survey was anonymous but that, in order to facilitate our research, we were asking each respondent to include the last four digits of their cellphone number. We received 103 completed pre-surveys before the sermon on Sunday morning. The survey itself (see appendix) was administered through Jotform and the results of the pre-survey were imported to Excel to facilitate analysis and evaluation.

To properly score the survey results, we reversed the score of the questions which were constructed to seek a “Strongly Disagree” answer. Nine questions were best answered with Strongly Disagree—2, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, and 19. For these questions we entered a 6 in place of a 1; a 5 in place of a 2; a 4 in place of a 3; a 3 in place of a 4; a 2 in place of a 5; and a 1 in place of a 6. This ensured that higher survey results reflected the desired movement we hoped to see in the beliefs and attitudes of church members.

Preaching the First Sermon

The first sermon was preached on Sunday morning, August 21. The title of the message was “Making Providence More Welcoming to Persons with Disabilities—Part One.”

Introduction

At the outset I sought to present to the church the nature of our problem—that despite our good intentions, we are, in many ways, unwelcoming to persons with disabilities. I made the case by showing that what is true of the larger church in America is also true of us—that apparently persons with disabilities believe our church to be an unwelcoming place because of their under-representation in our congregation. Surveys show that approximately 13 percent of the population of the United States are afflicted with a major disability.² I asked, “Ought not the church of Jesus Christ be the most welcoming place to persons with disabilities?” As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:26-27, “For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong.” This passage teaches that God’s criteria for choosing His people leads Him to compose His church in such a way that it will have a greater percentage of persons who are “weak,” than we might otherwise expect. Should then, this not lead us to expect that our church ought to have a higher percentage of persons with disabilities than we find in the wider population? When we face this question honestly, remembering how attractive Jesus was to persons with disabilities during His earthly ministry, we should be grieved that they are under-represented in our church.

Though this is surely unintentional, it was also inevitable. Why? Wherever we are not actively and intentionally seeking to “be transformed by the renewing of our minds,” we will inevitably be “conformed to this world.” We have become like the world because have not sought to apply the Scriptures thoughtfully to the area of disabilities. The adoption of worldly beliefs, attitudes and actions has made us unwelcoming to persons with disabilities.

² W. Erickson, C. Lee, and S. von Schrader, “2019 Disability Status Report: United States,” Cornell University Disability Statistics, 2019, www.disabilitystatistics.org.

Scripture Reading

I read Romans 12:2, Colossians 2:8, and 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. These passages speak directly to what has happened in the evangelical church in America, and at Providence. We have adopted worldly thought-forms about disabilities and persons with disabilities.

The First Point: The Conforming Power of the World

Our beliefs about disabilities, as well as our attitudes and relational habits toward persons with disabilities have been shaped by the world in such a profound way that we are not as welcoming to them as we ought to be. The apostle Paul tells us that this will be the case because of the continuous conforming pressure the world exerts on us. I then included in my sermon an explanation of Romans 12:2.³ This continual conforming pressure has resulted in our having adopted unbiblical worldviews. Next, I proceeded to explain the contribution that Stephanie Hubach had made in her helpful book *Same Lake, Different Boat*, where she shows how modernism and postmodernism have each deeply affected our thinking about disabilities.⁴ I showed how our thinking has been corrupted by both the modern and postmodern worldviews. Modernism sees disabilities “as an abnormal part of life in a normal world.”⁵ While postmodernism sees them as “a normal part of life in a normal world.”⁶ Both of these worldviews have negatively affected the way we see and relate to persons with disabilities.

³ For further discussion of this passage, please see chap. 1, p. 5.

⁴ For a fuller discussion of this, see chap. 3, pp. 31-37.

⁵ Stephanie O. Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched with Disability* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 26.

⁶ Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat*, 27.

The Second Point: The Transforming Power of the Word

Scripture provides a realistic view of man and the world. It enables us to see things as they truly are. Our world is fallen; mankind is fallen. We are not what God originally created man to be. The biblical worldview frames our view of disabilities and persons with disabilities in such a way as to provide perspective and hope. Here are five things Scripture gives us to shape the way we see persons with disabilities.

First, every person is of immeasurable value because they are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:26-27 makes this point with great emphasis.

Second, every person is the sovereign and individual creation of God. This is made clear in Psalm 139:13-15. Further, God takes full responsibility for creating persons with disabilities (Exod 4:11). This helps us to see God has a clear and definite purpose in the disability.

Third, every person is a depraved sinner and in profound need of God's redemptive grace in Christ. Here I expounded on Hubach's position that Scripture shows that "disabilities are a normal part of life in an abnormal world."⁷

Fourth, every person's physical and/or intellectual disabilities are in part intended by God as a window into the spiritual disabilities in every heart. This is made clear in the New Testament (Mark 2:5-11; John 8:12; 9:1-41; Rom 8:18-21).

Fifth, every person who believes is now far from what he shall be in glory (Rom 8:28-30; Phil 3:20-21; 1 John 3:1-2). Persons with disabilities are gentle reminders to all of us that we are not yet what we will be!

I concluded by asking the congregation to pray for God's Word to transform us all and invited them to participate in the seminar.

⁷ Hubach, *Same Lake, Different Boat*, 29. For fuller discussion, see chap. 3, pp. 41-43.

Preparing for the Seminar

The most impactful part of the project was the seminar that was held on the Saturday between the two sermons in the series. This six-hour, six-session seminar was intended to offer additional in-depth teaching about disabilities and the church, as well as to provide practical and experiential training aimed at addressing the attitudes and behaviors of participants. Of particular significance was the seminar session where participants experienced simulated disabilities. We downloaded detailed instructions for these simulations from the Joni and Friends website (see below). These instructions contained a thorough shopping list for materials needed for simulations. We ordered these several weeks prior to the seminar. After receiving those materials and delivering the first sermon, the focus turned to making all the necessary preparations for Saturday.

Monday: RSVP Request

We sent out an RSVP request for those who planned to attend the seminar on Saturday. This was necessary to plan for food, materials, and for the number of disability simulation stations necessary to accommodate seminar attendees.

Tuesday/Wednesday: Disability Simulation Stations Preparation

We planned to divide the seminar participants into coed groups of four for the purpose of the disability simulations. We set up four disability simulation stations in four rooms in our Education Building. We chose to simulate four types of impairment: (1) manual dexterity impairment; (2) sensory processing impairment; (3) vision impairment; and (4) hearing impairment. According to the instructions we received from the Joni and Friends' website, we simulated manual dexterity impairment by asking participants to wear gloves and have their fingers and thumb taped together in a way that made easy movement impossible. Then each person was asked to: (1) use a plastic knife to put peanut butter on a saltine cracker; (2) tie a shoe; and (3) string beads. The sensory

processing impairment station simulated what persons on the autism spectrum experience as they try to carry on normal activities amid a world in which they have great difficulty filtering stimuli. Participants were asked to read a short article while the other group members sought to distract them by tickling them with a feather, squirting them with a water gun, blowing a whistle, or holding an open can of cat food close to their faces. The third station simulated blindness by having participants wear dark sunglasses that had been covered over with Vaseline. The “blind” person was then asked to use a cane to walk across the room avoiding unknown obstacles placed in the room by other participants. Next, they were led by another back across the room. Finally, each person tried to pour water from a pitcher into a glass. The fourth simulation was hearing impairment. To simulate this we used two different rooms. In the first room, participants placed earplugs in their ears and tried to discern what another participant was saying from across the room as he read from cards which contained words and sentences specifically formulated to make the task difficult. Participants then switched roles with the other participant now trying to read the lips of his partner reading from different word and sentence list. The second part of the hearing impairment simulation took place in another room where participants watched a video that was created to simulate hearing through a hearing aid.

Based on the RSVPs received we determined that we would need only three substations in each of the four simulation rooms. Then on Wednesday evening after church we met with seven volunteers who had agreed to facilitate the disability simulations during the seminar. We were able to talk through and walk through each simulation. This was invaluable as we were able to anticipate some potential problems and modify our plan accordingly. We used two volunteers in the sensory processing impairment simulation, the vision impairment simulation, and the hearing impairment simulation. Only one volunteer was necessary for the manual dexterity simulation station.

Thursday: Role Play Preparation

On Thursday we were able to fully plan and practice our greeting role play. We planned to divide the group by sex and into groups of four. We made cards with instructions for each of four roles to be played in each role play (see below). One person played the role of a person with intellectual disabilities, another played the role of a family member, the third played the role of a greeter meeting these two persons in the church foyer on their first Sunday at Providence. The fourth person was an observer, charged with carefully observing the relational skills of the greeter. Did he/she use appropriate speech, demonstrate appropriate warmth, eye contact, etc.? After each role play, the participants changed roles so that they all got to play all four roles. Then after completing all four roles they were asked to score each of the other three members of their group. We had developed score cards (see below) to be used by all participants in grading how each greeter did. We were careful to label each person in the group by letters A, B, C, D, rather than by their names to ensure anonymity in the interpretation of role play results. Participants then were asked to place their completed score cards in a basket so that we would be able to analyze the results.

Conducting the Seminar

We opened the building before 8 a.m. on Saturday morning and had donuts and coffee available as participants arrived. Each person was asked to sign in. We asked them to wear a name tag and gave them a copy of the seminar schedule and notes (see below). The Seminar was entitled “Cultivating a Church Culture That Welcomes and Embraces Persons with Disabilities.”

Session One: Recognizing the Problem (8:35 a.m.-9:25 a.m.)

After welcoming the participants, we opened the seminar by reading Colossians 3:12-17. This passage presents the beauty of life in the body of Christ. What a glorious picture of the church and the great blessings that are ours in connection with our

brothers and sisters, yet unfortunately, persons with disabilities are missing out on this glorious community life! They are under-represented in the body of Christ, and even when they are present in the church, they tend to be under-involved. The purpose of my project is not primarily to see Providence start a ministry to persons with disabilities—though I earnestly hope this is a byproduct of it. It is to aim deeper at the underlying culture of our church. The goal is to fundamentally change our culture. That is, to change our shared beliefs, values and customs about disabilities and the way we view persons with disabilities. We have a blind spot. We don't intend to be unwelcoming individually or corporately, but we are. How did this happen? First, we need to understand the heart. The heart is God's favorite word to describe the inner man. It is the control center of life. In Scripture the heart is where we think, feel, and choose. Proverbs 23:7 says, "as a man thinks in his heart so is he." The heart is where we think. The Bible often speaks of the desires of the heart (Deut 14:26; Ps 37:4). The heart is where we desire. Desires are closely linked to affections and emotions. But the heart is also where we choose. In Hebrews 4:12, we read that the Word is "sharper than any two-edged sword . . . and is able to judge the thoughts and *intentions* of the heart" (emphasis added). The heart not only thinks, but it also "intends" or purposes. The heart does all three things—it thinks, it wants, and it chooses. Further, the heart is "dynamic," meaning that there is a continual interplay of these three components back and forth upon one another.⁸ There tends to be a basic progression in the way change happens. Most often, change begins in the mind, which leads to change in the emotions, which leads to change in the will. Though this is the normal progression, the heart is "dynamic" in that there is a reciprocal kind of impact. The movement is not only one directional as the will can also impact the mind and the affections, and the affections can impact the mind and the will. Nevertheless, the basic

⁸ Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 17, 18.

pattern holds—change in thinking generally leads to changes in affections, which in turn, leads to changes in the will.

Therefore, when we read in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 that strongholds are formed in our minds when we allow our thinking to be controlled by the world, we can trace our present problems back to failing “to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” Because we don’t fight to make our thoughts conform to God’s Word, we slowly become more and more like the world in what we believe and what we value. These strongholds serve to obscure how we see life. We need the corrective vision that God’s Word brings us. When we fight to bring every thought captive over and over, slowly we begin to be transformed in our thinking and our attitudes and our actions. A wonderful example is Joni Eareckson Tada. We watched a video Joni released on July 30, 2022, the fifty-fifth anniversary of the diving accident that left her a quadriplegic. We showed the 57-second video and then asked, “How do we explain how a woman could celebrate such a tragic event as the diving accident which left her paralyzed? How could she exude such joy and gratitude to God?” The answer: she has brought every thought captive; she has cultivated godly attitudes resulting in a changed life.

Session Two: Understanding Our Calling (9:35 a.m.-10:25 a.m.)

We began session two by reading Ephesians 4:11-16 and noting that God intends that we all grow by “speaking the truth in love” to one another. We all urgently need this. Persons with disabilities also need this kind of organic connection to the body. Again, many are cut off from this blessing. But when they do come to church and we have the opportunity to speak the truth they so desperately need, they are often hindered from hearing us. Why? We have to work on that phrase “in love.” We are to speak the truth in the context of a relationship of love. What does this look like?

To answer this question, let’s consider Jesus’s words in John 13:34-35 where we are called to “love one another as” He has loved us. An amazing component of

Christ’s love for us is seen in John 1:14 in His incarnation. Jesus came to where we are; He entered into our world, and He entered into our suffering. Hebrews 4:15 says that we “do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize” with us. The double negative makes this emphatic—we absolutely do have a High Priest who can sympathize with us. Hebrews 2:14-18 and 2:10 emphasize this point even more.

As we consider our calling to love persons with disabilities as Christ has loved us, we see that we need to be willing to enter their world and seek to understand them and the challenges they face as well as the suffering they experience. To do this, we need to be there, to be with them, to spend time listening and asking questions.

Another way we can develop some sympathy is by trying to imagine what it must be like to be in their place. What would we be feeling were we in their place? How would we want to be treated? To help us begin to imagine these things that are far removed from us, we decided to use disability simulation stations. After our break, we moved through four simulated disabilities: impaired manual dexterity, impaired sensory processing; impaired vision, and impaired hearing.

Session Three: Deepening Our Sympathy—Disability Simulations (10:35 a.m.-11:35 a.m.)

Having determined that we had forty persons (not including simulation station volunteers), we numbered off to make four groups of four. Here we allowed men and women to be in the same groups. Groups 1, 2 and 3 began in the Manual Dexterity Impairment Station which we designated as Station A. Groups 4, 5 and 6 began in the Sensory Processing Impairment Simulation Station, designated Station B. Groups 7 and 8 began in the Vision Impairment Simulation Station, designated Station C. Groups 9 and 10 began in the Hearing Impairment Station, designated stations D1 and D2. Group 9 began in D1, the substation where participants tried to read lips, while group 10 began in D2 where participants watched the video simulating hearing with a hearing aid. Each

simulation station volunteer tried to send the groups to the next station after they completed the simulation (about twelve to thirteen minutes at each station, though D1 and D2 were about six minutes each). The groups went from station A to B; B to C; C to D; and D to A. The entire process, four stations at twelve minutes each, together with time moving between stations took just under one hour.

Lunch (11:40 a.m.-12:20 p.m.)

During lunch participants were asked to reflect on the disability simulations by talking about their experiences. Each table had sheets of paper with questions that were intended to facilitate discussion (see below).

Session Four: Minding Our Manners (12:25 p.m.-12:50 p.m.)

We began session four by reading Titus 2:11-3:2. We focused on our call to be “gentle, showing every consideration for all men.” The words “gentle” and “showing every consideration” (also translated “showing meekness”) work together to show that Christians are meek, not easily offended, and “gentle,” not giving offense. One of the ways we need to seek to do this with persons with disabilities is by learning “disability etiquette.”⁹

Disability etiquette can be summed up by seeking to relate to persons with disabilities in a way that demonstrates that we see them first as people. This awareness can be demonstrated in the way we speak about them and to them. We should use “people-first language.” As the online resource “Disability Etiquette” says, we should

put the emphasis on the individual, not on the disability. It’s a subtle distinction but it speaks volumes! For example, say “the woman who is blind,” rather than “the blind woman.” We should begin by directly addressing the person with disabilities, speaking to her, not about her. We should not act on our own hastily formed expectations about persons with disabilities; rather, we should address them with

⁹ Joni and Friends, “Disability Etiquette,” accessed April 26, 2023, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/disability-etiquette.pdf>.

gentleness and hopefulness, allowing them to have the opportunity to respond directly to us.¹⁰

If after patiently waiting for a response, none is forthcoming, we can then look to the person(s) accompanying them for any necessary information. Disability expert Jeff McNair points out that persons with disabilities often rise to the level of our expectations.¹¹

Not only are our words important, but we should demonstrate people-first attitudes. When we meet persons with disabilities, we should work to be genuinely excited to meet another image-bearer and exude warmth and joy in our interactions with them. Finally, we need to exhibit people-first relational skills, by maintaining good eye contact, respecting their personal space and using appropriate body language.

Because this is so important, we are going to role play welcoming a person with disabilities to church. After the break we will begin this important activity.

Session Five: Disability Etiquette—Role Play (12:50 p.m.-1:30 p.m.)

Given that we had forty-seven persons who were to be involved in role play and we believed participants would be more comfortable if we separated men and women, we ended up with six men's groups of four and four women's groups of four. The groups were encouraged to go find a place where they could hear one another and make the role play more realistic. After the groups completed four role plays, they were asked to score one another on how they did using appropriate language, eye contact, etc. (see below). They then turned in those sheets to enable us to evaluate the effectiveness of the role play.

¹⁰ Joni and Friends, "Disability Etiquette."

¹¹ Jeff McNair, *The Church and Disability: The Weblog Disabled Christianity* (n.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2009), 217.

**Session Six: Part of the Family
(1:30 p.m.-2:15 p.m.)**

We began the last session by reading 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. This passage showed us among other things that the church desperately needs every member to contribute to the healthy function of the body, including persons with disabilities. At this point, we opened-up the session for questions, comments, and discussion.

Preaching the Last Sermon

I began the last sermon with an explanation of the timeline of the project and an encouragement for all in attendance to fill out the online post-survey as soon as possible on Sunday after the service. We included an insert in the bulletin which contained a barcode that took them immediately to the post-survey.

Scripture Reading

The Scripture reading was 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. A key concept in the passage which would be a fundamental theme of the message is the word “need.”

**The First Point: Persons with
Disabilities Need the Church**

When we step back and look at the big picture of this metaphor, we see that there is one body consisting of many members, a key metaphor for the church in the New Testament. Another key passage which unpacks this metaphor is Ephesians 4:11-16, where we see the organic unity of the body. The church is likened to a living organism. The New Testament authors found it inconceivable for a Christian to live his/her life separate from the church. For a believer to be separated from the church is as unthinkable as a person’s hand or foot living separate from his/her own body. Separation of an appendage from the physical body leads to a certain and inevitable outcome—decay and death. There is no alternative. How urgent is it that we see this as it relates to believers with disabilities! We must remove all barriers that are hindering the full participation of persons with disabilities in the body life of the congregation.

The urgency of this need is also seen in another important metaphor for the church—the flock of God. Individual believers are likened to sheep, individual members of one flock (Matt 18:12-14). So separation from the flock is also a matter of life and death. In these ways Scripture underscores the great need of individual believers for the church. Another passage that calls us to take this need seriously is Hebrews 3:12-13. There the author of Hebrews warns professing believers of the imminent danger of falling away and being “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” The only remedy is to “encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called today.” The implication is clear, only active participation in one-anothering relationships can safeguard our hearts as we seek to live for Christ in this dark world. Persons with disabilities need the church.

The Second Point: The Church Needs Persons with Disabilities

However, the main point of the passage in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 is how much the church needs each individual member. For the body to operate at optimal health it needs the contribution of each member. The necessity of every single member is powerfully brought out by a series of three striking statements in verses 22 and 23. First, we read that those members which “seem” to be “weaker” are in fact “necessary”; second, those that seem to be “less honorable” are those to whom we must “bestow abundant honor”; and third, the ones which seem “less presentable” are in reality those that become even “more abundantly presentable.” The word *perissos* is used three times in the passage to emphasize how the honor and presentation of those we think are less is, in reality, “exceeding, abundantly, superabundantly” more.

How can this be? The answer to that question is found in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. There we find that the apostle Paul has a “thorn in the flesh” which he earnestly desires that God will remove from him. After praying three times for relief, the Lord appeared to him and said, “My grace is sufficient for you for My power is made perfect in weakness.” Here we see the principle that more need means more grace. More

suffering means more grace. Persons with disabilities can experience grace in ways that persons without disabilities cannot, simply because they have greater need of grace. For the church, then, that has more persons with disabilities there will be even more opportunities to see God's amazing grace.

We can see how this works by considering how persons with disabilities can through God's common grace, impact even unbelievers in significant positive ways. An example of this is former Atlanta Brave, Joc Pederson. From all appearances he is an ungodly man, but he has clearly developed some extraordinary sensitivity to others because of his growing up with a brother with Down syndrome. Joc's brother Champ is clearly very important to him, and he is unashamed in his love for his brother. We can see how the presence of a loved one with disabilities shaped this man's life in a positive way. If this is true for unbelievers, how much more is it true for believers. Imagine what God can do in the body of Christ when He places believers with disabilities in our midst, and we actively seek His grace. As we learn to minister to them, depending on God's grace, we find that we are the ones being changed! They spur us on to greater growth, greater sensitivity, greater love. The result is that a person with severe intellectual disabilities can make an untold impact on his local church.

In 2017 I had the opportunity of being a guest at the Biblical Counseling Coalition Summit in Rome, Georgia. Joni Eareckson Tada shared her testimony and called on those in biblical counseling to do more work to apply the Scriptures to the issues surrounding disabilities and persons with disabilities. After her powerful testimony, I was able to talk for a few minutes with one of her associates from Joni and Friends. I will never forget what this gentleman said. He asked me, "Imagine what the Evangelical church in America would have missed over the last fifty years if we did not have Joni Eareckson Tads. Now ask yourself, 'what is your local church missing because you don't have persons with disabilities fully involved in the body life of the congregation?'"

Administering the Post-Survey

Immediately after the service ended, we opened-up access to the post-survey. To facilitate a timely response, we posted signs on all the exits and at various places on the church campus. Each sign had a bar code that could be used to access the survey. With the encouragement we gave the congregation and the ease of the process, we received one hundred completed post-surveys before midnight Sunday evening.

Conclusion

We were able to execute the format and schedule of the project as we hoped. In fact, the compressed nature of the timeline appears to have helped us to create momentum among the people. Though it takes time to change a culture, we have taken a good first step.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

To assess the effectiveness of this project we will need to consider the project's purpose, its goals, and its strengths and weaknesses. Beyond the questions of how this project has impacted our church, we ought to consider how it has impacted my ministry. How has this project stretched me theologically? How has this work affected my understanding of myself and my ministry? Finally, how has the project affected the church in ways that we cannot measure through the research instruments? Only when we have considered each of these questions will we be able to make a full and accurate appraisal of the value of the work.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was “to make Providence Church a more welcoming place to persons with disabilities.” To accomplish this objective we concentrated our efforts into a relatively compact schedule so that the entire project was completed in ten days. The pre-survey was administered on Friday evening, August 19, 2022, and was kept open until the following Sunday morning, August 21; the first sermon was delivered that Sunday morning; the six-hour seminar was held the following Saturday, August 27; the second sermon delivered on the next Sunday morning, August 28; the post-survey was administered immediately following the service and closed by midnight, August 29. The compressed timeline allowed us to stress the importance of timely responses to the survey and seems to have created more interest and enthusiasm than we would have seen if we had a longer response time.

The project appears at this point to have been extremely successful. This success is evident in both the level of participation in the components of the project and in the overall response to the content of the project. First, participation exceeded my expectations at every point. I had hoped to receive 80 pre- and post-surveys and we received 103 and 99, respectively. I had hoped to have 40 adults attend the Saturday seminar, and we had 43 persons present. This response is even more encouraging considering the time constraints of the project. Although the congregation did not receive notice of the exact schedule until the week before the project began, they responded with warmth and enthusiasm. Second, the material presented in the sermons and in the seminar was very well received. The reactions of the congregation have been uniformly positive. For these reasons, the project appears to have been a great blessing to the church.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

A more objective way to measure the success of the project is to consider the goals of the project against the objective criteria used to measure those goals. The three goals of the project were to help members of Providence (1) to examine and refine their beliefs about disabilities and persons with disabilities, (2) to cultivate godly attitudes toward persons with disabilities, and (3) to develop essential skills for relating well with persons with disabilities. The project sought to meet these goals by providing instruction about disabilities through a two-part sermon series and a one-day training seminar. We had 43 persons that heard both sermons and took part in the training seminar. The first two goals were evaluated by using a Beliefs and Attitudes Assessment, a twenty-question survey using a Likert Scale, with twelve questions measuring beliefs and eight questions measuring attitudes. The third goal was examined by using peer evaluation forms to score the relational skills of participants in a role play of interaction with a person with disabilities.

Changing Beliefs

We determined that the first goal would be considered successfully met when the mean of the post-survey questions measuring beliefs reflected a positive change from the pre-survey mean and that change was shown to be statistically significant. The mean for the twelve questions measuring beliefs for the 41 persons who took part in all parts of the project increased from 62.68 in the pre-survey to 66.39 in the post-survey (see table 1 in appendix 1)¹. This change of 3.71 points reflected an increase of 5.92 percent. A paired *t* test was calculated to compare the respective means. The analysis produced a significant *t* value ($t = 4.29, p < .05$) demonstrating that this change was statistically significant (see table 2 in appendix 1). Therefore, the first goal of the project has been successfully met.

Looking Closer at the Impact upon Beliefs

In order to maximize what we could learn about the project's impact, we asked our survey respondents in Part 1 of the survey to tell us if they had been personally touched by disabilities. We did this by asking two questions: (1) Are you yourself disabled? and (2) Do you have a family member who is disabled? If they answered "yes" to either of these two questions, we considered those respondents to be persons who have been "personally affected by disability." For the purpose of analysis those who answered "yes" to being affected by disability, we included in the YES group. Those who responded "no" to both questions we considered to be persons who had "not been personally affected by disability and we placed their responses in the NO group. After making this distinction it became apparent that the impact of the training was much more dramatic upon the NO subgroup than upon the YES subgroup. For the 21 persons who reported that they did not have a disability and did not have a family member with a disability, the means of the pre and post-survey questions related to beliefs jumped from

¹ Statistical research assistance provided by Scott Moodie, Plover, Wisconsin.

61.71 to 67.33, an increase of 9.11 percent (see table 5 in appendix 1). The paired *t* test showed again that this was a statistically significant increase ($t = 4.61, p < .05$; see table 6 in appendix 1), while the change for those who had been touched by disability was only from 63.70 to 65.40, a statistically insignificant increase of 2.67 percent (see tables 3 and 4 in appendix 1).

The data from the survey questions about beliefs provides clear evidence that the project was successful in helping church members to examine and refine their views about disabilities and persons with disabilities. However, the greatest impact was upon those who had not been touched personally by disability. For those persons this training made a profound difference and provided a helpful start in changing the culture of our church.

Changing Attitudes

The second goal of the project—cultivating godly attitudes, was measured by a pre-survey and post-survey of the congregation and was to be considered successfully met when the means of the survey questions measuring attitudes reflected a positive change that was statistically significant. The respective survey means of the eight questions measuring attitudes was 36.22 for the pre-survey and 39.68 for the post-survey (see table 1 in appendix 1). This reflected an increase of 3.46 points and 9.56 percent. A paired *t* test was calculated to compare the respective means, producing a significant *t* value ($t = 4.68, p < .05$). This means that participants' attitudes improved in a degree that was statistically significant (see table 2 in appendix 1). This goal has been successfully met.

Looking Closer at the Impact upon Attitudes

Once again it is instructive to compare the data for those who had been personally affected by disabilities and those who had not. When we examine the change

in attitudes for the 21 participants who had not been previously touched by disabilities (the NO group) we once again see that the training had a markedly greater impact on this subgroup. The NO group mean increased from 35.29 to 39.57, a net increase of 4.28 points and 12.13 percent (see table 5 in appendix 1). This change was statistically significant ($t = 4.121, p < .05$; see table 6 in appendix 1). The YES group mean increased a smaller amount, from 37.20 to 39.80 and 6.99 percent (see table 3 in appendix 1). Though smaller, this change in the YES group was still a statistically significant increase ($t = 2.489, p < .05$; see table 4 in appendix 1).

The data from the surveys provides strong evidence that the project was successful in helping church members to begin to cultivate godly attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Although we saw the greatest impact was on those who had not been personally touched by disabilities, it is especially gratifying to see that the attitudes and values of those who had personal experience with disabilities were positively affected by the training in a way that was statistically significant. The way we at Providence see disabilities and the value we place on persons with disabilities has been positively affected by this intervention.

Developing Skills

The third goal of the project—to help members develop better relational skills—was considered successful when 8 out of 10 participants in the role plays scored 48 or better on peer evaluation forms. This third goal was limited to those persons who attended the Saturday seminar where the role plays were conducted. Each person was scored by the other three participants in his or her group; these three scores were averaged to give a total score for each person. Based on the research criteria this goal was successful: 36 out of 41 role play participants (87.8 percent) scored an average score of 48 or better out of a possible 60. The median for all scores was 53.33 and the mean was 52.45. The role plays were even more effective than I had hoped. The seminar

participants enthusiastically engaged one another in the role plays. There were four different roles in the role play, so each group did the role play four times. The repetition, along with the opportunity to play each respective role, reinforced the importance of relational skills and resulted in an enthusiastic response to the role play by nearly all seminar attendees.

Because the three goals were met, the project was a success. We were able to make a significant impact on the 41 persons who took part in all parts of the intervention. They were encouraged to examine and refine their beliefs, attitudes and relational habits toward persons with disabilities. Based on the results, this project has made a strong impact on the culture of our church.

Strengths of the Project

The project appears to have had a significant impact on the life of our church. The effectiveness of the project has become especially clear when we note three particular strengths: (1) the practical nature of the instruction; (2) the emotive and experiential impact of the disability simulations; and (3) the application of the Scriptures to these issues.

The first strength of the project was the pragmatic nature of the instruction. We took great care to make the project as practical as possible, both in the sermons with a greater emphasis on application, and in the teaching content of the seminar. Each session had a practical aim even when theological content was central. The goal of the seminar was to impact beliefs, attitudes and relational habits. The use of discussion questions helped participants to think about how to apply the concepts they were learning. Finally, the role play gave an opportunity to put the things we had talked about into practice. Several people commented on the benefit of doing this exercise.

The second strength was the emotive and experiential impact of the disability simulations. The simulations, adopted from the Joni and Friends website, were extremely

effective in giving our seminar attendees an opportunity to experience what persons with various disabilities go through. This seemed to be the highlight of the seminar. Many shared how impactful it was to put themselves for a few minutes in the place of a person with a disability. The goal was to help us cultivate a greater ability to imagine what our brothers and sisters with disabilities are going through. However, we concluded that the best way to connect to their experiences is to learn to ask good questions and to work hard at listening to them.

The third strength was the biblical and theological content of the sermons and the workshop sessions. The Word of God alone can change the heart. Because we want change from the heart, it was essential that we ground all practical instruction and application in the Scriptures. By God's grace we were able to apply the Scriptures to the issues surrounding disabilities, making a difference in the life of our church. Particularly impactful was the application of 1 Corinthians 12 to validate the place of persons with disabilities in the church. This passage emphasizes both how much persons with disabilities need the church and how much the church needs persons with disabilities. The second part of that argument seemed to come through with great force to our congregation.

Weaknesses of the Project

There were two main weaknesses of this project. First, the timespan of the project was too compressed. Originally, we considered carrying out the project over a eight week span, however, upon considering that everyone in the target group needed to participate in all facets of the project, we elected for a shorter duration. Enacting this project over two weeks did enable us to have a significant number of people who took part in all components. However, though I believe it was better to focus the material into a fairly narrow time window, it would have been even more effective if it had been expanded by one or two more weeks. Instead of a two-sermon series as we did, three or

four would have been ideal. The seminar should still have been scheduled near the end of the sermon series so that interest could grow through the first two or three sermons.

A second weakness was that we could have provided more direction for immediate practical application. We should have asked and answered the questions, “What can you do? How can you become involved now?” A very helpful suggestion that one young man made after the seminar was that we might ask our people to volunteer to help at the next Special Olympics event in our area. This participation could provide an excellent way to apply what was learned and also to serve as an effective outreach to the community.

What I Would Do Differently

The first thing that I would do differently relates to the schedule. I would allow more time on the front end of the project to publicize the event schedule. This time would enable better planning, greater involvement, and more focused prayer. I would increase the scope of the project to a four-week sermon series, scheduling the seminar on the Saturday before either the third or fourth Sunday.

The second thing I would do differently is revise the surveys. I would consider changing the questions which measure the belief clusters so that they were more accurate and effective. Then I would change the question on the post-survey which asked, “Did you hear both sermons and attend the seminar?” It would be better to replace this single question with a series of questions, “Did you hear the sermon on (date)? Did you hear the sermon on (date)? Did you attend the Saturday seminar?” By separating the questions into distinct parts, the data would be much more precise.

Related to practical application, I would schedule the seminar with a view toward encouraging involvement in ministry to persons with disabilities immediately following the intervention. For example, it would be wise to schedule the training to end a month or two before the Special Olympics so that the congregation could have an

opportunity to immediately commit to take part in a hands-on ministry opportunity. An alternative might be to talk with local hospitals or ministries for other ways to serve.

Theological Reflections

This project provided an extraordinary opportunity to work on the application of theology to life and ministry. It was much more helpful than we anticipated. Three areas of doctrinal reflection that have helped the church are (1) the sovereignty of God as applied to the realm of disabilities, (2) the nature and composition of the church, and (3) the ways of God, how He uses perplexing and difficult issues to grow His people in their understanding of the truth.

The Sovereignty of God

Grappling with the complex questions surrounding disabilities causes us to come to terms with some difficult questions related to the sovereignty of God. Is God actively and personally involved in the creation of each individual born with a birth defect? Scripture says He is (Exod 4:11; Ps 139:13-15). Given that, what is His good purpose in creating these persons with these profound problems? In the same way, is God sovereign over every accident and/or disease that leaves people with severe disabilities? Again, the Bible says He is (Lam 3:37-38). How are we to understand His love in the context of these perplexing problems?

When we let Scripture shape our thinking by helping us reframe and rephrase the questions, we come to see how marvelous and wonderful the doctrine of divine sovereignty truly is. Our God reigns. He is not only sovereign, but He is also completely good, knowing how to give only good gifts to His children. Those things we perceive as curses, such as profound disabilities, are in reality His gracious gifts of love to His people. Though it is good and right to mourn with those who mourn by hurting with persons with disabilities and the families of persons with disabilities, “we do not mourn as those who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13). After we enter into their suffering and

understand their pain, we are called to help them seek out the beauty and glory of divine providence. God's "thoughts are not our thoughts and His "ways are not our ways"; His thoughts and ways are much "higher," much more wonderful (Isa 55:8-9). The stability that comes from the bedrock of this doctrine is such a source of strength and hope for persons with disabilities, their families, and their Christian brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

The Nature of the Church

It has been extremely illuminating to consider the questions, "How do we involve persons with disabilities in the church?" "What is their place and role in the life of the congregation?" Asking these questions forces us to dig into the implications of key passages in the New Testament on the nature and composition of the church. Ephesians 4:1-16 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 present to us the interdependence of the church. Every member of the church needs every other member of the church in the same way that we cannot do without "the proper working of each individual part (Eph 4:16). We need all of the parts of our physical bodies to function at the optimal level physically. In the same way, we need every single member to make its full contribution to the body for the church to be at its optimal level spiritually. We find that in the amazing wisdom of God that "the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor" (1 Cor 12:22-23). This passage tells us that even a believer with profound intellectual disabilities can make a radically productive contribution to the body. His or her main ministry may be trusting God in His providence. He or she may not be able to contribute any spoken encouragement or physical gestures of love and support, but his or her presence can do something to and for the body of Christ that is entirely unique. The presence of this person in our midst can call something out of the rest of us that changes us and glorifies God in such a way that we can come to see them as absolutely

“necessary” to our spiritual well-being. We can come to the place we esteem them with a very great honor because of the actual value they bring to the body of Christ. “How unsearchable are His judgments and how unfathomable are His ways!” (Rom 11:33).

The Ways of God

The third theological reflection flows from the other two. The sovereignty of God and the nature of the church have become so much more beautiful through the diligent study that this project required. These complex questions drove us to the Scriptures in a way that produced great fruit in the life of our church. Here we get another window into the glorious wisdom of God: He has ordained to give the deep blessings of His Word to people who are forced to battle with the confusion and doubt that surround suffering. As the German Reformer Martin Luther maintained, suffering is an essential component of sound biblical interpretation.² To receive, we must first ask, for it to be opened to us, we must first knock, to find, we must first seek (Matt 7:7-8). Nothing makes us seek, knock, or ask like suffering.

Personal Reflections

I am very grateful to the Lord for the way that this doctoral project has been used in my own life and ministry. It has forced me to consider how we have failed in the past to live up to the standard set forth in Scripture concerning persons with disabilities. It has also birthed in my heart a present determination to see our church form a vibrant ministry to persons with disabilities and to families of persons with disabilities. Finally, the project has led to a fundamental shift in how I see my role in ministry at Providence in the future.

² John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 104.

Grief over the Past

The study over the last three years has helped me to see the failures that have been a part of my life and ministry over the twenty-nine years of pastoral ministry at Providence Church. Several times through the years we have had families of persons with disabilities visit our congregation; more often than not, we have failed to welcome them into the body life of our church. I remember with great sadness one family that worshipped with us for a couple of months early in my pastorate. A woman brought her daughter who had a severe mental disability that also limited her mobility. Though I tried to be warm and friendly, I failed to truly connect with them. Needs like this must be handled with intentionality and sensitivity. Though we have a number of persons in our congregation who have various disabilities, we have more often than not failed to fully incorporate them into the one-anothering relationships so essential for spiritual health. Without doubt the greatest pain for me personally concerns my son, Jonathan. Jonathan has Asperger syndrome and struggles to relate well to others. In spite of being the pastor's son, he has lived a life in the margins of the church.

Determination in the Present

The painful realizations from the past have led me to a firm resolution in the present—we must develop a fully functioning ministry for persons with disabilities and their families. Though this was not the specific aim of this project, it is a necessary inference from all that we have studied. We must be more intentional about welcoming persons with disabilities into our congregation. To make this happen we must start and staff a ministry with that aim.

Direction for the Future

Perhaps the most helpful insight that I have gained through this prolonged time of study on this important issue is how I can best use my time in my pastorate. We have received extraordinary blessing from my devoting extensive time and energy to

considering how to apply the Scriptures to the church's understanding of disabilities. We have come to see wonderful things from God's Word, and we can already see how He is moving us in new ways. This realization has caused me to see that my role as senior pastor requires that I devote more time and energy to "big picture" issues like this going forward. To do this effectively, I will have to ask questions like this: "How can our missions ministry be refined and improved by some disciplined study? How can our youth ministry be more biblical? Though my ministry has been devoted to disciplined study when it comes to teaching and preaching, the same is not true of my leadership of the various ministries in the church. I have allowed the tyranny of the urgent combined with poor priorities to crowd out this kind of study. I now see that to be a faithful shepherd requires me to devote regular times of study and reflection to the leadership of all of the church's ministries. From the rich blessings the church has received through my study in the area of disabilities, it is exciting to contemplate the added benefit that will come through this commitment going forward.

Conclusion

This doctoral project has been a great blessing to me and to our church. I personally have been greatly enriched by the rigors of study and the discipline of planning that has been required to complete the work. I have seen the Scriptures open revealing deeper insights into the goodness and glory of God; I have seen how wonderfully sufficient God's Word is to answer the most perplexing questions of life. The church has been blessed by an enlarged understanding of who we are and how we are to function. Most of all though, we have seen the perfection of our God and the supreme excellence of all His ways. He is worthy of all our worship and of our faithful obedience to His command to care for "these brothers of Mine, even the least of them." As we learn to do this for our brothers and sisters with disabilities, we will be expanding our direct personal ministry to our Lord and magnifying the glory of His saving work.

APPENDIX 1

TABLES 1-7

Paired Samples Tests of Full, Yes, and No reductions¹

FULL Set

Table 1

Paired Sample Statistics for Full Set

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	sumBa	62.68	41	5.520	.862
	sumBb	66.39	41	4.790	.748
Pair 2	sumAa	36.22	41	5.047	.788
	sumAb	39.68	41	4.541	.709

Table 2

Paired Samples Test for Full Set

		Paired Differences					1	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	sumBa - sumBb	-3.707	5.533	.864	-5.454	-1.961	-4.290	40	.000
Pair 2	sumAa - sumAb	-3.463	4.739	.740	-4.959	-1.968	-4.680	40	.000

¹ All statistical research assistance here and below provided by Scott Moodie, Plover, Wisconsin.

YES Group

Table 3

Paired Sample Statistics for Yes Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	sumBa	63.70	20	5.676	1.269
	sumBb	65.40	20	5.471	1.223
Pair 2	sumAa	37.20	20	4.641	1.038
	sumAb	39.80	20	4.008	.896

Table 4

Paired Samples Test for Yes Group

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	sumBa - sumBb	-1.700	4.824	1.079	-3.958	.558	-1.576	19	.132
Pair 2	sumAa - sumAb	-2.600	4.672	1.045	-4.787	-.413	-2.489	19	.022

NO Group

Table 5

Paired Sample Statistics for No Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	sumBa	61.71	21	5.321	1.161
	sumBb	67.33	21	3.941	.860
Pair 2	sumAa	35.29	21	5.349	1.167
	sumAb	39.57	21	5.095	1.112

Table 6

Paired Samples Test for No Group

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	sumBa - sumBb	-5.619	5.590	1.220	-8.164	-3.075	-4.606	20	.000
Pair 2	sumAa - sumAb	-4.286	4.766	1.040	-6.455	-2.116	-4.121	20	.001

Table 7

Overview and Reliability of Constructs

Beliefs (12) 1 2 3 5 7 9 11 12 13 16 17 20 Code: sumB

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.705	.724	12

- Strong Internal consistency - good

1. I believe it is unbiblical to teach that if persons with disabilities can grow in faith they will be healed.
2. Believers with disabilities face unique challenges that make it nearly impossible for them to minister effectively to others.
3. Christians without disabilities should be willing to help believers with disabilities spiritually and practically.
5. Persons with disabilities are generally not capable of making a significant contribution to their church community.
7. Christians with disabilities can bless the body of Christ by providing a gentle, visible reminder that this world is broken and we are all broken and in need of God's grace.
9. Persons with disabilities may sometimes need to be challenged to turn from self-pity in order to serve others in the body of Christ.
11. It is God's will for all persons with disabilities to be healed of their disabilities for the glory of God.
12. Christians with disabilities are not able to have as much joy as Christians who are not disabled.
13. A church that has persons with disabilities will have unique opportunities to see the power of Christ at work in ways that other churches will not.
16. God can be more glorified by helping persons with disabilities learn to live for His glory with their disability than by healing them miraculously from their disability.
17. If a church is faithful we should expect, all other things being equal, to have at least as many persons with disabilities in our congregation as the percentage of persons with disabilities in our surrounding area.
20. Believers with disabilities can glorify Christ in a unique way as they have the opportunity to demonstrate that His strength is made perfect in weakness.

Attitudes (8) 4 6 8 10 14 15 18 19 Code: sumA

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.723	.728	8

- Strong Internal consistency - good

4. I feel deep compassion toward persons who are severely disabled
6. When I meet a person with disabilities, I don't believe I am equipped to have a productive conversation, so I don't know what to say.
8. I believe that I am equipped to be a friend to a person with a disability.
10. I tend to talk with people with disabilities in a different tone of voice.
14. When I encounter a person with severe disabilities, I think it best to avoid making eye contact to help them not feel awkward.
15. I become nervous around persons with disabilities.
18. I feel that I am able to sympathize with persons with disabilities and the challenges they face in their lives.
19. Even though Christians with severe disabilities need meaningful relationships with other believers, I am not ready to do the hard work of learning how to have a close relationship with a person with disabilities

APPENDIX 2

ADDITIONAL TABLES

Because we did not include these dimensions in our goals and in our original research plan, we did not include the following data in our discussion of the survey results in chapter 5. But in an effort to dig deeper into the data we were able to collect, we subdivided the questions on beliefs and attitudes in such a way as to focus on more specific effects of the intervention. We subdivided the twelve questions about beliefs into four clusters each exploring a unique dimension of beliefs about disabilities. Likewise, we were able to subdivide the eight questions about attitudes into two clusters which focused attention on two unique dimensions of our attitudes.

This deeper analysis yielded even more information about the impact of the intervention on all the participants considered as a group, but even more on the two subgroups of participants we identified in chapter 5—the YES group, those who are disabled or have family members with disabilities and the NO Group, those who are not disabled and do not have family members with disabilities.

Table 1

Beliefs											Attitudes								
2	5	7	13	3	9	17	12	16	20	1	11	4	8	18	19	6	10	14	15
Role of Disabled Persons				Personal Responsibility			Spiritual Impact of Disability			Faith		Emotional Capacity				Comfort Level			

Table 2A

Beliefs - Role in the Church (4) 2 5 7 13 Code: ROL

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.490	.499	4

- Moderate internal consistency - acceptable

- 2. Believers with disabilities face unique challenges that make it nearly impossible for them to minister effectively to others.
- 5. Persons with disabilities are generally not capable of making a significant a contribution to their church community.
- 7. Christians with disabilities can bless the body of Christ by providing a gentle, visible reminder that this world is broken and we are all broken and in need of God's grace.
- 13. A church that has persons with disabilities will have unique opportunities to see the power of Christ at work in ways that other churches will not.

Table 2B

Beliefs - Personal Responsibility (3) 3 9 17 Code: RES

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.419	.452	3

- Moderate internal consistency - acceptable

- 3. Christians without disabilities should be willing to help believers with disabilities spiritually and practically.
- 9. Persons with disabilities may sometimes need to be challenged to turn from self-pity in order to serve others in the body of Christ.
- 17. If a church is faithful we should expect, all other things being equal, to have at least as many persons with disabilities in our congregation as the percentage of persons with disabilities in our surrounding area.

Table 2C

Beliefs - Spiritual Impact of Disability (3) 12 16 20 Code: SID

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.503	.507	3

- Moderate internal consistency - acceptable

- 12. Christians with disabilities are not able to have as much joy as Christians who are not disabled.
- 16. God can be more glorified by helping persons with disabilities learn to live for His glory with their disability than by healing them miraculously from their disability
- 20. Believers with disabilities can glorify Christ in a unique way as they have the opportunity to demonstrate that His strength is made perfect in weakness.

Table 2D

Beliefs - Faith/Healing (2) 1 11 Code: FAI

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.298	.348	2

- Low internal consistency - indicates a poor grouping. Examine/discuss individually

- 1. I believe it is unbiblical to teach that if persons with disabilities can grow in faith they will be healed. 11. It is God's will for all persons with disabilities to be healed of their disabilities for the glory of God.

Table 2E

Attitudes - Emotional Capacity (4) 4 8 18 19 Code: EMO

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.679	.681	4

- Strong Internal consistency - good

- 4. I feel deep compassion toward persons who are severely disabled
- 8. I believe that I am equipped to be a friend to a person with a disability.
- 18. I feel that I am able to sympathize with persons with disabilities and the challenges they face in their lives.
- 19. Even though Christians with severe disabilities need meaningful relationships with other believers, I am not ready to do the hard work of learning how to have a close relationship with a person with disabilities

Table 2F

Attitudes - Comfort Level (4) 6 10 14 15 Code: COM

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.687	.688	4

- Strong internal consistency - good

- 6. When I meet a person with disabilities, I don't believe I am equipped to have a productive conversation, so I don't know what to say.
- 10. I tend to talk with people with disabilities in a different tone of voice.
- 14. When I encounter a person with severe disabilities, I think it best to avoid making eye contact in order to help them not feel awkward.
- 15. I become nervous around persons with disabilities.

Table 3A - Full Set

Descriptive Statistics									
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
sumBa	41	50	71	62.68	5.520	-.333	.369	-.661	.724
sumBb	41	54	72	66.39	4.790	-.667	.369	-.325	.724
sumAa	41	25	48	36.22	5.047	-.171	.369	-.209	.724
sumAb	41	31	48	39.68	4.541	.141	.369	-.687	.724
ROLa	41	12	24	21.73	2.550	-1.596	.369	3.718	.724
ROLb	41	18	24	22.15	1.905	-.699	.369	-.681	.724
RESa	41	8	18	14.54	2.378	-.880	.369	.430	.724
RESb	41	12	18	15.83	1.935	-.573	.369	-.818	.724
SIDa	41	10	18	16.24	2.083	-1.249	.369	1.138	.724
SIDb	41	12	18	16.93	1.709	-1.777	.369	2.127	.724
FAIa	41	6	12	10.63	1.799	-1.258	.369	.369	.724
FAIb	41	7	12	10.90	1.828	-1.399	.369	.322	.724
EMOa	41	14	24	19.56	2.470	-.145	.369	-.185	.724
EMOb	41	15	24	21.39	2.355	-.773	.369	-.075	.724
COMa	41	10	24	16.66	3.766	.233	.369	-.517	.724
COMb	41	10	24	18.29	3.466	-.134	.369	-.520	.724
Valid N (listwise)	41								

Table 3B

Paired Samples Tests of Full, Yes, and No reductions

Full Set

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Q1a - Q1b	.049	1.999	.312	-.582	.680	.156	40	.877
Pair 2	Q2a - Q2b	-.293	1.309	.204	-.706	.120	-1.432	40	.160
Pair 3	Q3a - Q3b	-.195	1.229	.192	-.583	.193	-1.016	40	.316
Pair 4	Q4a - Q4b	-.415	.921	.144	-.705	-.124	-2.882	40	.006
Pair 5	Q5a - Q5b	-.220	1.151	.180	-.583	.144	-1.221	40	.229
Pair 6	Q6a - Q6b	-.683	1.680	.262	-1.213	-.153	-2.603	40	.013
Pair 7	Q7a - Q7b	-.488	1.098	.172	-.834	-.141	-2.844	40	.007
Pair 8	Q8a - Q8b	-.122	.927	.145	-.415	.171	-.842	40	.405
Pair 9	Q9a - Q9b	-.366	1.019	.159	-.687	-.044	-2.300	40	.027
Pair 10	Q10a - Q10b	-.122	1.520	.237	-.602	.358	-.514	40	.610
Pair 11	Q11a - Q11b	-.317	.722	.113	-.545	-.089	-2.810	40	.008
Pair 12	Q12a - Q12b	-.024	1.458	.228	-.484	.436	-.107	40	.915
Pair 13	Q13a - Q13b	-.463	1.485	.232	-.932	.005	-1.998	40	.053
Pair 14	Q14a - Q14b	-.439	1.324	.207	-.857	-.021	-2.124	40	.040
Pair 15	Q15a - Q15b	-.390	1.481	.231	-.858	.077	-1.687	40	.099
Pair 16	Q16a - Q16b	-.390	1.730	.270	-.936	.156	-1.444	40	.156
Pair 17	Q17a - Q17b	-.732	1.379	.215	-1.167	-.296	-3.398	40	.002
Pair 18	Q18a - Q18b	-.659	1.237	.193	-1.049	-.268	-3.408	40	.002
Pair 19	Q19a - Q19b	-.634	1.220	.190	-1.019	-.249	-3.329	40	.002
Pair 20	Q20a - Q20b	-.268	.593	.093	-.455	-.081	-2.899	40	.006
Pair 21	sumBa - sumBb	-3.707	5.533	.864	-5.454	-1.961	-4.290	40	.000
Pair 22	sumAa - sumAb	-3.463	4.739	.740	-4.959	-1.968	-4.680	40	.000
Pair 23	ROLa - ROlB	-.415	2.966	.463	-1.351	.522	-.895	40	.376
Pair 24	RESa - RESb	-1.293	2.112	.330	-1.959	-.626	-3.918	40	.000
Pair 25	SIDa - SIDb	-.683	2.392	.374	-1.438	.072	-1.828	40	.075
Pair 26	FAIa - FAIb	-.268	2.037	.318	-.911	.375	-.843	40	.404
Pair 27	EMOa - EMOb	-1.829	2.499	.390	-2.618	-1.040	-4.687	40	.000
Pair 28	COMa - COMb	-1.634	4.116	.643	-2.933	-.335	-2.542	40	.015

Table 4

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Q1a - Q1b	-.050	2.164	.484	-1.063	.963	-.103	19	.919
Pair 2	Q2a - Q2b	.200	1.196	.268	-.360	.760	.748	19	.464
Pair 3	Q3a - Q3b	-.100	1.334	.298	-.724	.524	-.335	19	.741
Pair 4	Q4a - Q4b	-.150	.587	.131	-.425	.125	-1.143	19	.267
Pair 5	Q5a - Q5b	-.050	1.356	.303	-.685	.585	-.165	19	.871
Pair 6	Q6a - Q6b	-.500	1.504	.336	-1.204	.204	-1.486	19	.154
Pair 7	Q7a - Q7b	-.750	1.446	.323	-1.427	-.073	-2.319	19	.032
Pair 8	Q8a - Q8b	-.350	.933	.209	-.787	.087	-1.677	19	.110
Pair 9	Q9a - Q9b	-.200	1.196	.268	-.760	.360	-.748	19	.464
Pair 10	Q10a - Q10b	-.100	1.744	.390	-.916	.716	-.256	19	.800
Pair 11	Q11a - Q11b	-.400	.821	.184	-.784	-.016	-2.179	19	.042
Pair 12	Q12a - Q12b	.000	1.298	.290	-.607	.607	.000	19	1.000
Pair 13	Q13a - Q13b	-.200	1.473	.329	-.889	.489	-.607	19	.551
Pair 14	Q14a - Q14b	-.350	.875	.196	-.760	.060	-1.789	19	.090
Pair 15	Q15a - Q15b	-.250	1.446	.323	-.927	.427	-.773	19	.449
Pair 16	Q16a - Q16b	.300	1.780	.398	-.533	1.133	.754	19	.460
Pair 17	Q17a - Q17b	-.350	1.348	.302	-.981	.281	-1.161	19	.260
Pair 18	Q18a - Q18b	-.500	1.433	.320	-1.171	.171	-1.561	19	.135
Pair 19	Q19a - Q19b	-.400	1.465	.328	-1.086	.286	-1.221	19	.237
Pair 20	Q20a - Q20b	-.100	.447	.100	-.309	.109	-1.000	19	.330
Pair 21	sumBa - sumBb	-1.700	4.824	1.079	-3.958	.558	-1.576	19	.132
Pair 22	sumAa - sumAb	-2.600	4.672	1.045	-4.787	-.413	-2.489	19	.022
Pair 23	ROLa - ROLb	-.400	3.440	.769	-2.010	1.210	-.520	19	.609
Pair 24	RESa - RESb	-.650	2.159	.483	-1.660	.360	-1.347	19	.194
Pair 25	SIDa - SIDb	.200	2.375	.531	-.912	1.312	.377	19	.711
Pair 26	FAIa - FAIb	-.450	2.164	.484	-1.463	.563	-.930	19	.364
Pair 27	EMOa - EMOb	-1.400	2.088	.467	-2.377	-.423	-2.999	19	.007
Pair 28	COMa - COMb	-1.200	4.034	.902	-3.088	.688	-1.330	19	.199

APPENDIX 3

PRE-SURVEY AND POST-SURVEY

The intervention was preceded by a pre-survey which was administered through an online survey tool.¹ Then immediately following the intervention, the congregation was administered the post-survey, again through the online survey format. Both surveys are included below.

¹ The survey includes two questions adapted from other surveys. Number 5 is adapted from Anthony J. Goreczny et al., "Attitudes toward Individuals with Disabilities: Results of a Recent Survey and Implications of Those Results," *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 32, no. 5 (September-October 2011): 1596-1609. Number 10 is adapted from George Mason University, "Questionnaires on Attitudes and Behaviors toward People with Disabilities," accessed April 26, 2023, <http://mason.gmu.edu/~droyer/WDDCFH/prequestionnaire.htm>.

Disability in the Church Pre-Intervention Survey

by Ty Blackburn

Agreement to Participate: Must be at least 18 years old.

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to measure the beliefs of non-disabled persons about disabilities and their attitudes toward persons with disabilities. This research is being conducted by Ty Blackburn for purposes of project research. In this research, you will be asked to complete the following survey. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time.

Part 1:

Definition of Disability: The U.S. government defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.

A. Given the above definition, are you yourself disabled?*

Yes No

B. Given the above definition, do you have an immediate family member who is disabled?*

Yes No

Part 2:

For each item below, please choose the option which best describes your thoughts. 1=Strongly Disagree. 2=Disagree. 3=Somewhat Disagree. 4=Somewhat Agree. 5=Agree. 6=Strongly Agree

1. I believe it is unbiblical to teach that if persons with disabilities can grow in faith they will be healed.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

2. Believers with disabilities face unique challenges that make it nearly impossible for them to minister effectively to others.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

4. Christians without disabilities should be willing to help believers with disabilities spiritually and practically.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

5. I feel deep compassion toward persons who are severely disabled.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

5. Persons with disabilities are generally not capable of making a significant a contribution to their church community. *

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

6. When I meet a person with disabilities, I don't believe I am equipped to have a productive conversation, so I don't know what to say.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

7. Christians with disabilities can bless the body of Christ by providing a gentle, visible reminder that this world is broken and we are all broken and in need of God's grace.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

8. I believe that I am equipped to be a friend to a person with a disability.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

9. Persons with disabilities may sometimes need to be challenged to turn from self-pity in order to serve others in the body of Christ.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

10. I tend to talk with people with disabilities in a different tone of voice.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

11. It is God's will for all persons with disabilities to be healed of their disabilities for the glory of God.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

12. Christians with disabilities are not able to have as much joy as Christians who are not disabled.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

13. A church that has persons with disabilities will have unique opportunities to see the power of Christ at work in ways that other churches will not.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

14. When I encounter a person with severe disabilities, I think it best to avoid making eye contact in order to help them not feel awkward.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

15. I become nervous around persons with disabilities.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

16. God can be more glorified by helping persons with disabilities learn to live for His glory with their disability than by healing them miraculously from their disability*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

17. If a church is faithful we should expect, all other things being equal, to have at least as many persons with disabilities in our congregation as the percentage of persons with disabilities in our surrounding area.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

18. I feel that I am able to sympathize with persons with disabilities and the challenges they face in their lives.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

19. Even though Christians with severe disabilities need meaningful relationships with other believers, I am not ready to do the hard work of learning how to have a close relationship with a person with disabilities*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

20. Believers with disabilities can glorify Christ in a unique way as they have the opportunity to demonstrate that His strength is made perfect in weakness.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

Identification: For sorting purposes, you will need to input the unique identifier in the field below so that this survey can be linked to your submission for the post-intervention survey, while still remaining anonymous. It is VERY important that you remember this.

Identifying Question: What are the last 4 digits of your cell phone number?* _____

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Disability in the Church Post-Intervention Survey

by Ty Blackburn

Agreement to Participate: Must be at least 18 years old.

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to measure the beliefs of non-disabled persons about disabilities and their attitudes toward persons with disabilities. This research is being conducted by Ty Blackburn for purposes of project research. In this research, you will be asked to complete the following survey. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time.

Have you taken the pre-survey, listened to the sermons from both 8/21 and 8/28, and attended the Saturday seminar (8/27)? *

Yes No

Part 1:

Definition of Disability: The U.S. government defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.

A. Given the above definition, are you yourself disabled?*

Yes No

B. Given the above definition, do you have an immediate family member who is disabled?*

Yes No

Part 2:

For each item below, please choose the option which best describes your thoughts.

1=Strongly Disagree. 2=Disagree. 3=Somewhat Disagree. 4=Somewhat Agree. 5=Agree.

6=Strongly Agree

1. I believe it is unbiblical to teach that if persons with disabilities can grow in faith they will be healed.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

2. Believers with disabilities face unique challenges that make it nearly impossible for them to minister effectively to others.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

3. Christians without disabilities should be willing to help believers with disabilities spiritually and practically.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

4. I feel deep compassion toward persons who are severely disabled.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

5. Persons with disabilities are generally not capable of making a significant contribution to their church community. *

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

6. When I meet a person with disabilities, I don't believe I am equipped to have a productive conversation, so I don't know what to say.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

7. Christians with disabilities can bless the body of Christ by providing a gentle, visible reminder that this world is broken and we are all broken and in need of God's grace.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

8. I believe that I am equipped to be a friend to a person with a disability.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

9. Persons with disabilities may sometimes need to be challenged to turn from self-pity in order to serve others in the body of Christ.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

10. I tend to talk with people with disabilities in a different tone of voice.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

11. It is God's will for all persons with disabilities to be healed of their disabilities for the glory of God.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

12. Christians with disabilities are not able to have as much joy as Christians who are not disabled.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

13. A church that has persons with disabilities will have unique opportunities to see the power of Christ at work in ways that other churches will not.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

14. When I encounter a person with severe disabilities, I think it best to avoid making eye contact in order to help them not feel awkward.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

15. I become nervous around persons with disabilities.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

16. God can be more glorified by helping persons with disabilities learn to live for His glory with their disability than by healing them miraculously from their disability*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

17. If a church is faithful we should expect, all other things being equal, to have at least as many persons with disabilities in our congregation as the percentage of persons with disabilities in our surrounding area.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

18. I feel that I am able to sympathize with persons with disabilities and the challenges they face in their lives.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

19. Even though Christians with severe disabilities need meaningful relationships with other believers, I am not ready to do the hard work of learning how to have a close relationship with a person with disabilities*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

20. Believers with disabilities can glorify Christ in a unique way as they have the opportunity to demonstrate that His strength is made perfect in weakness.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1 is Strongly Disagree, 6 is Strongly Agree

Identification: For sorting purposes, you will need to input the unique identifier in the field below so that this survey can be linked to your submission for the post-intervention survey, while still remaining anonymous. It is VERY important that you remember this.

Identifying Question: What are the last 4 digits of your cell phone number? * _____

Submit

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APPENDIX 4

RESOURCES FOR DISABILITY SIMULATION

The seminar participants found the disability simulations to be a very helpful part of the project. We allowed each person to experience four different disability simulations. The goal was to work toward creating empathy on the part of abled Christians toward those who live with disabilities. The disability simulations were in the following areas: 1) manual dexterity; 2) vision; 3) hearing; and 4) sensory processing. Immediately after the disability simulations, we broke for lunch and asked the seminar participants to discuss a series of questions to help them reflect on the simulations. Instructions for each simulation as well as the discussion questions are included below.

Manual Dexterity:¹

Supplies

- One coach
- Several gloves with fingers taped or glued together
- Saltine crackers
- Plastic knives
- Peanut butter
- Shoes with shoe laces
- Beads and string
- 2 bags with items in them (ex. Pine cone, hair brush, shower sponge, tube of toothpaste, orange, tennis ball)
- Blindfolds

Instructions

People who have had a stroke or who have a spinal cord injury may lose manual dexterity. Individuals with orthopedic impairments may have decreased dexterity and will need to adapt by learning new ways of doing things, sometimes using specialized equipment and tools.

Visual Impairment:²

Supplies

- Two coaches
- Blindfolds
- Sunglasses
- Vaseline

¹ Joni and Friends, “Disability Awareness Training Stations,” accessed April 26, 2023, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/disability-awareness-training-stations.pdf>, 4.

² Joni and Friends, “Disability Awareness Training Stations,” 2.

- Canes (dowel rods can be used, or Society for the Blind/Association for the Blind may donate canes)

Instructions

Have trainees pair up in twos. One trainee should wear the blindfold or sunglasses with Vaseline smeared over the lenses to experience visual impairment or blindness. The other trainee will act as a support and helper to the first. The trainees should reverse roles midway through the time at this station.

Trainees with eyes covered learn:

- How to use a cane to navigate curbs, stairs, etc.
- How to pour water from a pitcher into a cup, feeling when water gets close to top

Trainees without blindfolds or sunglasses learn:

- How to be sighted guides
- Etiquette: announcing yourself by name when entering a room, letting the individuals know when you are leaving the room
- How to correctly guide someone using their elbow
- Stopping at curbs and stairs to alert someone of change
- Talking to the person with visual impairment about stairs and hills, doors, etc.

Hearing Loss: Stations A and B

Station A:³

Supplies

- List of words and sentences for lip reading

Instructions

³ Joni and Friends, "Disability Awareness Training Stations," 8.

Have trainees pair up in twos or small groups. Have them practice lip reading. Only 20% of those who are deaf can lip read proficiently. While sitting across from each other, trainees can practice lip reading using these words and sentences

Lip Reading:

- AY/EE Words - Is it hard to tell the two words are different? Spade/Speed, Stayed/Steed, Shane/Sheen, Bade/Bleed, Tray/Tree, Grain/Green, Braise/Breeze, Same/Seam, Plays/Please, Rail/Real, Fail/Feel, Main/Meal
- PB Words - Can you tell which is P and which is B? Pal, bad, pick, better, part, bake, price, break, pike, bike, plant, ball, pizza, butter, play, balloon, popcorn, basket, puddle, bubble, puppy, baby, please, breeze
- Advanced Sentences:
 - Take the plate to the lady in the green dress.
 - The man tried to catch the fish with an apple.
 - Giraffes can reach leaves high up in the trees because of their height.
 - Kate tried to open the gate but her arm was too short to reach over the top.
 - Jack was the only bachelor at the picnic flying a kite.

Station B: Hearing Aid Simulation⁴

Overstimulation Station:⁵

Supplies

- One or two coaches
- Small speakers to play music
- Feather dusters
- Bandanas

⁴ Vermont Center of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, "Speech through Hearing Aid and FM System: A Simulation," jbombicino, February 22, 2013, YouTube video, 6:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNzxOJKCUug>.

⁵ Joni and Friends, "Disability Awareness Training Stations," 6.

- Scratchy sponges
- Something smelly
- Whistle
- Squirt gun
- Children's books
- Flash lights
- Large dried beans

Instructions

This station is designed to recreate what it may be like for someone who has difficulty filtering out distractions - a common difficulty for those with autism.

Place the large dried beans on three chairs sitting in a row. Have three trainees sit in the chairs, tie the scratchy sponges to the back of their necks using the bandanas and have them read the books out loud. While they read, play music loudly and have the other trainees in the group do everything they can to distract the readers by asking questions loudly and using the supplies listed above.

After a couple of minutes, ask the readers about the books they were reading to see if they were able to retain the information. Rotate readers so that each trainee in the group gets the chance to experience a stimulus overload.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR AFTER DISABILITY SIMULATION

(Used at lunch after the simulations—questions were placed on the tables and participants were asked to discuss them as they ate)

Impaired Manual Dexterity

1. What was the most difficult thing to do?
2. What surprised you?
3. What was the most frustrating?
4. What would be the most challenging thing in your own life without dexterity?

Impaired Sensory Processing

1. Were you able to retain information in the story that you read?
2. Were you able to block out distractions?
3. What was the most difficult distraction?
4. What were you most sensitive to?
5. How would you feel if you were in a classroom that felt like this every day?

Impaired Vision

1. When should you offer help to someone with a visual impairment?
2. What do you think would be the most difficult thing about having a visual impairment?
3. Was it difficult to trust the person guiding you?

Impaired Hearing

1. How did it make you feel when you were doing the hearing impairment simulation?
2. Do you know someone who wears a hearing aid? How did the hearing aid video impact how you see his/her struggle?

APPENDIX 5

RESOURCES FOR ROLE PLAY

To help seminar participants develop better relational skills toward persons with disabilities, we formed groups of four persons each to role play a conversation welcoming a person with disabilities to Providence Church. An important part of the project was to measure relational skills by having peer evaluations of the role plays.. The instructions for the role play and the peer evaluation forms are included below.

ROLE PLAY

(Greeting a Person With Disabilities)

Instructions for PWD

You are to play the role of a person with an intellectual disability

- 1) You are to hold on to the arm of the person playing your family member as you enter the room (church foyer)
- 2) You can choose to either:
 - a. make eye contact with the greeter but do not speak to him/her—simply stare.
 - b. Fail to make eye contact but make some verbal response
 - c. to him/her and what he says
- 3) Allow him to lead you and your family member to a seat.

Instructions for family member of PWD

You are to play the role of a family member of a person with an intellectual disability

- 1) You are to allow your family member with disabilities to hold on to your arm as you enter the room (church foyer)
- 2) Respond to the greeter by introducing yourself and saying, “this is (name)” (of person playing the role of the PWD). Try to remain as quiet as possible while the greeter addresses your family member.

Instructions for Greeter

You are to practice greeting a person with a disability using the concepts we have discussed in the previous session.

- 1) Seek to use *people-first* speech
- 2) Seek to embody *people-first* attitudes
- 3) Seek to use *people-first* actions

Instructions for the Observer:

You do not have an active role this time, so use this opportunity to be especially mindful of closely observing the person whose role it is to greet the PWD.

- 1) Is he using *people-first* speech?
- 2) Is he reflecting *people-first* attitudes?
- 3) Are his actions also honoring the worth of each person with whom he interacts—the PWD and the family member?

ROLE PLAY EVALUATION FORM

(On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being outstanding, rate each of the other three participants in your group in their effectiveness as they played the role of greeter;

NOTE: do not score yourself--you will leave one line blank)

People-first words actions

People-first attitudes

Did the greeter:

Did the greeter demonstrate:

Speak to both parties?

Warmth?

Make effective eye contact and smile?

Patient listening, joyful ease?

Did he use each name appropriately??

Appropriate body language?

Words

Eyes

Names

Warmth

Listening

Body

Pt. A

Pt. B

Pt. C

Pt. D

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ABSTRACT

MAKING PROVIDENCE CHURCH, DULUTH, GEORGIA, A MORE WELCOMING PLACE TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

John Tyre Blackburn, Jr., DEdMin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023
Faculty Supervisor: Jeremy P. Pierre

The aim of this project is to equip church members to be more welcoming to persons with disabilities. Chapter 1 shows how the church has unwittingly become an unwelcoming place to persons with disabilities. Statistics and surveys of persons with disabilities consistently indicate that they see the church as unwelcoming. To change this, we need to examine and refine the way we see disabilities and persons with disabilities. Chapter 2 provides a biblical and theological framework for understanding disabilities. Chapter 3 explores the social and cultural influences that have shaped the church and led it away from a biblical mindset. Chapter 4 outlines the steps we took in the project to move the church toward being a more welcoming place by emphasizing whole-person change, consisting of reforming beliefs, changing values, and developing relational skills as it pertains to persons with disabilities. Finally, chapter 5 assesses the results of the project.

VITA

John Tyre Blackburn, Jr.

EDUCATION

BS, Shorter University, 1986

MDiv, Beeson Divinity School, 1991

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Director of Admissions, Beeson Divinity School, 1991-1993

Adjunct Faculty, Strengthening Ministries Training Institute, Pretoria, South Africa, 2022-

MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Youth Pastor, Providence Church, Duluth, Georgia, 1986-1988

Senior Pastor, Providence Church, Duluth, Georgia, 1993-