

PART 1  
UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

CHAPTER 1  
A VIOLATED POTENTIAL

**Introduction**  
**One Little Girl**

Elizabeth stood silently by her mother in the foyer. With blond curls and a print dress, she was a darling four-year-old. But something was different. Her eyes protruded, even bulged, excruciatingly from her small skull. That is what most people would notice. They would never know of the countless surgeries she had endured since infancy. They would not know the name of the condition that had caused her to need them. They would not realize that she could not hear their voices when they spoke to her, for she was deaf as well. They would never grasp what goes on in her little heart, or in her family's heart. Perhaps, at best, they might see a girl to pity.

Sitting in the crowd that Sunday, I pondered the struggle of that petite girl and the mother who loved her so tenderly. Suddenly an image came to mind. Christ was present at church that day. Though thousands attended the worship service, many with fine attire, appealing faces, impressive lives, I saw Jesus at the back, with Elizabeth. There, he kneeled before her. The smile on his face and the glimmer in his eyes captivated her. They spoke silently together, signing with their hands. Out of all the thousands present that day, Jesus was with Elizabeth.

Objectively, however, what kind of future does Elizabeth have? The answer to that question depends on a number of things that are the subject of this paper, but if

Elizabeth is coming from the average home, the spiritually unempowered home, her future looks categorically grim.

### **The Challenge of Special Needs Family Systems**

Children with disability have a rough road to travel. They must battle not only the immense physical and emotional struggles that go along with their particular disability, but numerous other challenges as well. Many studies indicate that Elizabeth faces a greater potential for family turmoil, for parents divorcing, for domestic abuse, and for numerous socio-economic problems.

The implications of disability for each child, however, are by no means certain. Some researchers debate the meaning of data comparing the special needs family to the general population. Milton Seligman addresses this issue:

Based on our present state of knowledge, it is unrealistic to draw firm conclusions about the problems and stresses experienced by families of children with disabilities. It is also difficult to ascertain whether these families are better or worse off than are comparable families without special needs children.<sup>1</sup>

One study by Jutta Joesch and Ken Smith, based on the data from over 7,000 children,<sup>2</sup> is inconclusive about chances of divorce in special needs families. It clearly states that “current knowledge about the relationship between children’s health status and their parents’ risk of divorce is limited,”<sup>3</sup> even though studies in the seventies indicated high divorce rates among parents of chronically ill children. Joesch and Smith’s data does indicate that, in the limited assortment of disabilities they studied, those “marriages with children who have congenital heart disease, cerebral palsy, or who are blind have divorce

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<sup>1</sup> Milton Seligman, “Childhood Disability and the Family,” in *Handbook of Psychosocial Characteristics of Exceptional Children*, ed. Vicki L. Schwean and Donald H. Saklofske (New York: Plenum, 1999), 116.

<sup>2</sup> These children were identified in the 1988 Child Health Supplement to the National Health Interview Survey. The survey traces the effects of 15 childhood health conditions.

<sup>3</sup> Jutta M. Joesch and Ken R. Smith, “Children’s Health and Their Mothers’ Risk of Divorce or Separation,” *Social Biology* 44, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1997): 159.

rates that are 2 to 3 times higher than those with healthy children.”<sup>4</sup> However, research findings that forecast the likelihood of divorce in such circumstances are few in number.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the difficulty in determining the functionality and health of special needs families as opposed to others relates to the complexity of the situation. Although a great number of families divorce when put under intense stress, other families get stronger. The situation has the potential to amplify the best, and the worst, in a family. Each family has the potential to learn, adjust, and transform, as well as to avoid, clash, and regress, and may experience a mixture in varying degrees of each of these. Thus, in a sense, it may not be appropriate to compare special needs and average families. As John Rolland states:

The resilience needed by a family dealing with a slowly progressing but fatal illness such as cystic fibrosis cannot be compared with that necessitated by the demands of ordinary life. Clinicians need to be careful not to append the label ‘pathological’ to families beset by serious illness since standards of normality and dysfunction appropriate to other situations do not apply to them.<sup>6</sup>

Seligman gives further insight into the reasons that comparison is inappropriate:

Families with a chronically ill child confront challenges and bear burdens unknown to other families. The shock of the initial diagnosis and the urgent and compelling need for knowledge; the exhausting nature of constant care unpredictably punctuated by crisis; the many and persistent financial concerns; the continued witnessing of a child’s pain; tensions with one’s spouse that can be aggravated by the fatiguing chronicity of care; the worries about the well-being of other children; and the multitude of questions involving the fair distribution within the family of time, money, and concern—these are challenges that parents of chronically ill children must face.<sup>7</sup>

Common sense seems to indicate that the strain for special needs families can easily exhaust their resources—material resources, physical resources, and emotional resources.

This in turn seems likely to undermine the family relationally and spiritually. All too

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>5</sup> Danielle Devine and Rex Forehand, “Cascading Toward Divorce,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 64, no.2 (April 1996): 426.

<sup>6</sup> John S. Rolland, *Families, Illness, and Disability* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 63.

<sup>7</sup> Seligman, “Childhood Disability and the Family,” 116.

often, this occurs without the family's awareness of the potential digression and pain they might face.

### **Terminology**

Terminology is a challenging, if not tricky, issue. In some ways it seems there is no perfect description that is free from offending people's feelings or convictions. One is continually in the process of wondering, "What word do I use?" hoping that the choice will not close hearts and jeopardize dialogue. Lynda Katsuno, herself in a wheelchair, states the issue well with, "labels are for jars, not for people."<sup>8</sup> In selecting terminology it seems prudent to avoid labeling the people, and instead, to specify conditions. Some of the following words are commonly heard and sometimes opposed:

Disability  
Impediment  
Handicap  
Impairment  
Exceptionality  
Differently-abled  
Physically/Mentally Challenged  
Special Needs

In the discussion of disability there are those who make statements like, "We are all disabled." The noble intention of this statement is to eliminate barriers and create a sense that we are all basically people with the same makeup. On one level, there is validity in the claim that all people are disabled, particularly if we view our present condition in comparison to what we might look like in pre-fall Eden. In the words of Brett Webb-Mitchell, "Because of our human arrogance in questioning God's commands, we live a limited, disabled, handicapped life as creatures of earthly dust."<sup>9</sup> However, on

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<sup>8</sup> Lynda Katsuno in "Going Beyond the Limits of Disability to Do and Become One World," *Miriam Reidy, WCC* 101 (December 1984): 20.

<sup>9</sup> Brett Webb-Mitchell, "The Spiritual Abuse of People with Disabilities," *Journal of Religion in Disability and Rehabilitation* 2, no.1 (1995): 59.

another level, this designation that all people are disabled is ridiculously simplistic as it glosses over the hard details for people living with profound disability, and the discrimination and difficulty that other people cannot fathom. Many will someday understand disability, on some level as almost all of humankind will eventually arrive there via accident or the process of aging. However, even these disabilities in later life cannot be compared to the child who is born never seeing or hearing or running. Those spending most of their lives able-bodied will never know the turmoil and havoc of growing up with a disability.

Although the word “disability” refers to limitation due to some impairment, there are some who disagree with the term and refute the assumption that they lack anything. Many in the deaf community take a special pride in their deaf identity, viewing themselves as a unique culture with a unique language. This very issue is the root cause of the deaf not qualifying for the federal tax considerations that the blind receive. The deaf prefer to see their inability to hear as having opened up a new world with special dimensions. They might abhor the designation of deafness as a disability, for they see themselves having special abilities that the hearing world lacks. They are thus not “disabled,” but “enabled” or “super-abled.”

The use of the term “special needs” in this paper is not meant to single people out for a negative reason. Some disdain being categorized as different. They prefer to consider themselves as just like everyone else, possessing the same needs as everyone else. Albeit everyone is special needs in some regard, and at the same time everyone has the same basic needs, so here it may be advantageous to see things as the deaf community does – with a “dignified difference.”

Difference can be an item that contributes to a positive and unique identity. Bodily or mental difference is linked to the unique identity, capability, and spirituality of a person. This is reinforced by the term “exceptional”; however, “special needs” is used here to denote that the family with a child possessing a disability has specific needs that are generally neglected to its own detriment.

For the purposes of this study the following terminology will be utilized: I will designate the child as, “child with disability,” not “disabled child.” First, children are children, the fact that some happen to be people living with disability is of secondary importance. Outside their disabilities, these children may be very able, even super-abled, thus I will avoid the term “disabled.”

I will also avoid the term “handicap” or “handicapped,” which refers to the days when those with disabilities had little choice of employment. The predominant job options available were as street vendors, selling pencils, or worse as beggars, holding out a “handy cap” for a donation. “Handicap” will, however, be used in the sense of a “handicapping society, ” “handicapping home, ” and “handicapping church”—those places that discriminately limit people with disability.

### Demographics

Louis Harris and Associates of New York did the first sourcing on disability information in the United States. The landmark study was conducted in 1986 and was commissioned by the U.S. National Council on Disability and the International Center on Disability. The information gained was the basis for Congress crafting the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. The first draft specified who would be classified as possessing disability by the federal government. At the time, the number was determined

to be 43 million people. Now there is general agreement that the number is 49 million people. Of this number, 21% possessed their disability before the age of 19. The study also showed that unemployment among those with disability was around 66%. Attitudes toward those with disability is also worth noting. Respondents who believed people with disability face some discrimination amounted to 59%, and 19% thought there was “a great deal” of discrimination. People who believed those with disability “have untapped potential to contribute” amounted to 78%, and 92% had admiration for those with disability. On a less positive side, 74% expressed pity, 58% had feelings of awkwardness, 47% of fear, and 16% of anger for what they perceived as inconvenience caused by the handicapped.<sup>10</sup>

Though the United Nations began to respond to the disability issue earlier than most countries, many policy-makers and governments have lagged behind in acknowledging the voice of people with disability. The UN designated 1981 the “International Year of Disabled Persons,” stressing the right to equal opportunity and participation. All recent world summits have also recognized people with disability as among those whose rights are being seriously violated. Despite the UN’s bringing the issue to the table, the fine words still lack the follow-up power on disability issues. An estimated 12% of the world’s population has disability; that amounts to 500 million people. Of those, 60% reside in developing countries where severe abuses are common.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> ICD (1986) NOD (1991) NOD/Harris (1995) surveys in National Catholic Office for Personal Disability sourced at <http://www.ncpd.org/demora.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Rachel Hurst, “The International Politics of Disability,” *Transformation* 15, no.4 (October-December 1998): 19.

## Conditions

### Basic Rights

Not only is discrimination against those with disability prevalent, but certain fundamental rights are also commonly denied. In developed countries, most abortion laws condone aborting fetuses on the grounds of disability weeks after it is illegal for other abortions. In the United Kingdom, a pregnancy involving an unborn child with disability can be terminated right up to full term.<sup>12</sup> The following disturbing poem captures this atrocity:

“The Ones That Are Thrown Out”  
 One has flippers. This one is like a seal.  
 One has gills. This one is like a fish.  
 One has webbed hands, is like a duck.  
 One has a little tail, is like a pig.  
 One is like a frog  
 with no dome at all above the eyes.

They call them bad babies.  
 They didn't mean to be bad  
 but who does.<sup>13</sup>

Legislation in China demands the sterilization of people with disabling hereditary conditions and also forbids them to marry. In other countries, people with disability are being denied resuscitation and also more expensive treatments, such as transplants.<sup>14</sup>

### Socio-Economic Status

According to the Christian Churches Foundation for the Handicapped, people with disability have the highest rates of unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Miller Williams, *Distractions*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), quoted in *Despite This Flesh*, Vassar Miller (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 61.

<sup>14</sup> Hurst, “Politics of Disability,” 19.

suicide.<sup>15</sup> To be a child with disability in the poor third world is to be the marginalized of the marginalized. In a place where even the able-bodied roam garbage heaps for food or are sold by family members, a child who cannot contribute materially faces a heart-breaking future. A boy with Down's Syndrome in Bangladesh might be used for cruel slave labor, and a deaf girl in Thailand will likely find herself owned by someone in the sex trade. Such children can easily enter the possession of the most abusive people in their society—those shameless enough to take advantage of the most vulnerable.

### Family Stability

In her landmark book, *A Difference in the Family: Life with a Disabled Child*, Helen Featherstone speaks of the slow process that tends to pull a special needs couple apart:

These pressures operate subtly. The distance between parents grows imperceptibly as each battles fear, guilt, anger, or fatigue, as the child's disability colors how each sees the marriage. . . . A child's disability can magnify differences that cut close to the heart.<sup>16</sup>

In the family system, each member has a particular impact upon the others. In the case where one member requires an excess or abundance of attention, there is great potential for stress on all other parts of the system. But research has been limited in this regard:

Most research on divorce and children has examined divorce as the independent variable and child functioning as the outcome variable. However, a recognition of the reciprocal nature of interaction between family members indicates the necessity of examining the extent to which children influence their parents' marriages.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Ministering With the Family Experiencing Disabilities," unpublished curriculum of Christian Church Foundation for the Handicapped. Sourced at <http://www.ccfh.org>.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Featherstone, *A Difference in the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 92.

<sup>17</sup> R. E. Emery, *Marriage, Divorce, and Children's Adjustment* (Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1988), quoted in Devine & Forehand, "Cascading Toward Divorce," 424.

The Christian Church Foundation for the Handicapped has identified other challenges that special needs families face:

- >Siblings of a child with a disability are four times more likely to be “maladjusted” than their peers who have all typical siblings.
- >Nine out of ten women who find out through amniocentesis that their unborn child has Down’s syndrome choose to abort.
- >Four out of five marriages that either produce a child with a disability, or include a spouse or child who becomes disabled through accident or disease, end in divorce.
- >The incidence of abuse in families with a disabled child is twice that of typical families.
- >Children with cognitive impairments are subject to abuse ten times more frequently than typical children.<sup>18</sup>

Domestic violence is an area of huge concern, but particularly among the disabled. Some statistics show 90-95% of women with disability are abused and or raped.<sup>19</sup> It is hard to conceive that those who already have to struggle with basic functioning may also have to face the fears and perhaps lifelong trauma of being abused, as well.

### **Theology of Disability**

#### Discomfort With Difficulty

In the words of Nancy Eiesland, “disability has never been religiously neutral, but shot through with theological significance.”<sup>20</sup> The way disability is perceived and integrated within the church is a direct statement about its condition. Throughout history and in the present, there are many obstacles that those with disability encounter in the church. There are likely two dominant categories of destructive verbal or non-verbal statements that say:

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<sup>18</sup> “Ministering With the Family Experiencing Disabilities,” unpublished curriculum of Christian Church Foundation for the Handicapped. Sourced at <http://www.ccfh.org/>

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Lane, “Victim Theology,” at [www.soeweb.syr.edu/thehp/spirituality.html](http://www.soeweb.syr.edu/thehp/spirituality.html), 1992.

<sup>20</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 69, quoted in Nancy Lane, “Changing Attitudes, Creating Awareness,” at [www.soeweb.syr.edu/thehp/spirituality.html](http://www.soeweb.syr.edu/thehp/spirituality.html), 1992.

First: Something is wrong with you:  
 You are being punished for personal or family sin.  
 You are demon possessed or demonized.  
 You are blemished and should not approach the altar.

Second: Consider your plight a blessing:  
 God is testing you and will reward you.  
 You are being purified. One day you will be a saint.  
 This is your cross—joyfully take it up.  
 Your disability is a blessing in disguise. God must think a lot of you to entrust you with this.  
 God never gives us a burden that we cannot bear.

While many of these statements may be true, they are often said before the speaker has any empathetic idea of what those struggling with disability, either on a personal level or through a family member, experience. Such words only selfishly serve the speaker, and they reverberate with hollowness in the hearer's mind.

Theological answers do not come easily regarding the issue of disability, especially in the case of a newborn child. We are faced with trying to answer the question raised by the first stanza of the following poem:

Disability: A Lament

Creating God:  
 You made the sky,  
 clouds of purest white,  
 with rays of fuchsia and orange and magenta at sunset,  
 and faces dear with the smiles of loved ones.

Today thousands were born without sight;  
 thousands more lost vision because of injury or disease.  
 And it was evening and morning of another day.  
 Did you call this Good?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Helen Betenbaugh and Marjorie Proctor-Smith, "Disabling the Lie: Prayers of Truth and Transformation," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1998), 296.

Other times the issue is avoided altogether. People find disability or suffering too uncomfortable to face and grapple with. It does not fit their limited views of a benevolent God. William Ranklin's tongue in cheek description plays with this attitude:

One, you must have nothing wrong with you; two, if you do, you must get over it immediately; three, if you can't get over it, pretend you did; four, if you can't even pretend, just don't show up, because it is too painful for the rest of us; and five, if you insist on showing up, you should at least have the decency to be ashamed.<sup>22</sup>

Eiesland observes that our theology is often skewed by a preoccupation with able-bodiedness, "Theological inquiry has frequently instituted able-bodied experience as the theological norm. The theological lenses through which we have traditionally viewed our own and others' bodies distort the physical presence not only of people with disabilities but also of the incarnate God."<sup>23</sup>

People experiencing disability, whether it be personally or through a family member, generally find themselves in a cauldron of hoping for "the cure," being prayed for by people to be cured, and yet not being cured. Others may be frustrated with the preacher who assumes that since those with disability are present in a meeting, they are looking for someone to cure them. Still others spend a lifetime looking for "the cure," and may end up missing life altogether. However, it is crucial to note that there is a difference between being cured and being healed. While "cure" deals with the alleviation of physical suffering, "healing" entails a fuller dimension. Healing may include the body, but more importantly, it refers to an inner completing and spiritual wholeness.

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<sup>22</sup> William Ranklin, *Cracking the Monolith: The Struggle for the Soul of America* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 18, in Betenbaugh and Proctor-Smith, "Disabling the Lie," 282.

<sup>23</sup> Eiesland, "Disabled God," 99.

## Scriptures Relating to Disability

Themes related to disability are common in Scripture. These references often give insight into the issue of wholeness and the level beyond mere physical cure. The following passages are a sample of scriptures often cited with regard to disability.

### **Matthew 11:2-5**

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”<sup>24</sup>

Although the usual focus on this portion is on the identity of Christ being the Messiah, “the one who was to come,” there is interest in the manner of Jesus’ answer to question of his identity. He mentions six different ailments which he had been actively impacting up to this point: blindness, lameness, leprosy, deafness, death, and poverty. However, Christ had also been casting out demons,<sup>25</sup> and he seems purposely to exclude the mention of “exorcism” in the list. Christ appears to be making a special distinction between these ailments and demonization. This may suggest that Christ was putting demonization in a separate category from these physical ailments. This can be taken as evidence that there is not necessarily a connection between disability and demonic activity.

### **John 9:1-3**

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus. “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> New International Version.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 8:16, 28-34.

<sup>26</sup> New International Version.

It is interesting to note that the miracle of healing blindness is unique to Christ. There is no instance of blindness healed in the Old Testament, and none of the disciples healed the blind. However, the issue for this discussion is the meaning of the blindness. This man was blind from birth. To bear such a curse for one's parents' sins seemed overwhelming to the disciples, who inquired about whose sin had caused this disability. But Christ turned the tables by explaining that it happened not because of anyone's sin, but rather for God's work. The disability was not a curse or consequence of evil, but a precursor to the plan of good.

This became the breakthrough realization for one pastor with disability ministering to special needs families in Mexico City, "I was the result of one sovereign, loving and creative act of God. This truth filled my heart and I began to understand that my physical handicap was permitted by God in order to make my life useful for his purposes."<sup>27</sup>

## **2 Corinthians 12:7-9**

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."<sup>28</sup>

The Apostle Paul, a man who healed many people, even raising others from the dead, carried in his flesh an ailment that was not to be cured. Three times he requested that the "thorn" be removed. Some commentators see this as a statement of imploring repeatedly. But God did not take it from him. This issue had the power to torment and humble the apostle. He, who wrote about crushing Satan underfoot, was subject to being

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<sup>27</sup> Raul Armando de la O. Catana, "Christ in me: a Mexican Testimony," *Transformation* 15, no.4 (October-December 1998): 7.

<sup>28</sup> New International Version.

continually taunted in his own flesh by demonic powers. Of course, God had bigger plans for Paul than a physical cure and bodily relief. For Paul realized that the “scene of human weakness is the best possible stage for the display of divine power.”<sup>29</sup>

God’s plan was to have his “grace power,” not his curing power, manifested through this situation. Grace is defined by Spiros Zodhiates as “favor done without expectation of return,” “absolute freeness of the loving-kindness of God... finding its only motive in the bounty and freeheartedness of the Giver.”<sup>30</sup> Paradoxically, this is the grace that Paul was to find amid his suffering.

This passage rejects the premise that “all illness is outside the will of God and is to be cured.” It also shows that healing may have nothing to do with faith in some situations. The issue was not faith, but God’s will. Often the unhealed are blamed for lacking faith. They not only suffer from the ailment itself, but are spiritually abused as well. Nancy Lane describes this:

Today, it is often not God’s will which is prayed for but the will of others who decide that healing will mean our disability will disappear. This becomes another form of oppression as it pushes us back into the guilt, shame and fear of stigma. This is death-making to the soul seeking a spiritual life.”<sup>31</sup>

However, we must ask, was there any occurrence where someone came to Jesus for healing who was not healed? If someone comes, it seems to infer that there is a sufficiency of faith already. The question is then divine will. Paul found the all-sufficient grace of God, and learned that when he was weak, he was truly strong.

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<sup>29</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 317.

<sup>30</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), 967.

<sup>31</sup> Lane, “Victim Theology,” 2.

### Philippians 2:5-8

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:  
 who, being in very nature God,  
 did not consider equality with God  
 something to be grasped,  
 but made himself nothing...<sup>32</sup>

The Christ Hymn stands abruptly in the midst of the Bible as unique. In the words of F.B. Meyer, “In the whole range of Scripture this paragraph stands out in almost unapproachable and unexampled majesty.”<sup>33</sup> Peter O’Brien also confirms that there is “no convincing parallel in the whole of Greek literature.”<sup>34</sup> This creates a slight difficulty in arriving at the exact meaning. The word addressing our discussion of disability is that of *kenoo*, meaning empty or void, and translated as “nothing” or “of no reputation.” *Kenoo* is the antithesis of *pleroo*, or fullness. This word appears in Eph 1:23 as “he who *fills* all in all.” So it is amazing to consider that he, who is the fullness of all things, made himself nothing, completely emptying himself.

Though this description contradicts Gerald Hawthorne’s view that the emptying is a mere “poetic, hymnlike way of saying that Christ poured out himself, putting himself totally at the disposal of people,”<sup>35</sup> others have defined it as: “emptied himself of his glory” (Plummer), of his “prerogatives of deity” (Lightfoot), “insignia of majesty”

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<sup>32</sup> New International Version.

<sup>33</sup> F.B. Meyer, *Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1952), 81.

<sup>34</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 217.

<sup>35</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, vol. 43 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 87.

(Lightfoot, Calvin), “attributes of deity: omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence” (Gore, Forsyth, Mackintosh, and Meyer).<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps it is not such inaccurate rendering to say that Christ willingly handicapped himself; he volitionally entered the existence of the disabled. Amanda Shao Tan explains that, “The disability of Christ stems from the wide gap between who he is, what he has, and what he can do, in contrast to, who he became, what he forfeited, and the limitations and confinements to which he subjected himself.”<sup>37</sup> For he who created all manner of fruit and herb hungered. He who created the rivers and vast bodies of water and daily sent the dew thirsted. He who owned the cattle on a thousand hills and more was poverty stricken. He who understood all, and knew the number of hairs on every head, was misunderstood.<sup>38</sup> He who gave humankind ultimate value was devalued, a stone the builders rejected. He who was omnipresent lay constricted in a forlorn manger. He who was omniscient crawled, for he knew not how to walk. He who was omnipotent had hands and feet pinned to a tree that he himself had grown. The vast and ancient one was smooched into time and space. Benevolent Creator abused by malevolent creature. Yes, Jesus wholly understands disability. He himself was disabled to the nth degree. He experienced the ultimate multiple-handicap. Some say this was so He would understand our pain, struggle, and agony. But is it possible that God does not understand anything? Conceivably the disabling of God was not for Christ to “understand” our plight, but rather, to be present to us.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>37</sup> Amanda Shao Tan, “The Disabled Christ,” *Transformation* 15, no.4 (October-December 1998): 8.

<sup>38</sup> John 7:35-36.

## Destiny of Disability

God has given both those with, and those without, disability a dignified role and calling in the eternal scope of things. This plan involves all people reaching beyond their limits and exploring the possibilities of life. Jean Vanier founded the L'Arche Federation, which forms communities for those with disability and those who are downtrodden to help serve people who were “frequently in a state of aggression or depression—with families who did not know how to cope with them.” Vanier deeply believes that those with disability:

Have an important part to play in the development of the world, in helping it to find its equilibrium. They can ensure that development is not just a development of mind and matter, but a development of the total human person, who is certainly intelligence and creativity, activity and productivity, but who is also a heart, capable of love, a seeker of peace, hope, light, and trust, striving to assume the reality of suffering and of death.<sup>39</sup>

But the church has yet to awaken to this reality. In a church that is not secure and safe enough to deal with the discomforts of disability, a church that is obsessed with the issue of success, something precious will never be known – its own identity and potential. Eiesland boldly explains that, “The church (continues) to squander the considerable theological and practical energies of (people) with disabilities who . . . call the church to repentance and transformation.”<sup>40</sup>

Those with disability have a unique role in the community. Perhaps more than anyone else they possess a capacity to represent Christ’s earthly existence. In a mystical sense they are the epitome of the Christ of Philippians 2. Vinay Samuel gives insight into this special role:

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<sup>39</sup> Jean Vanier, “The Contribution of the Physically and Mentally Handicapped to Development,” in *The Psychological and Social Impact of Disability*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. Robert P. Marinelli and Arthur E. Dell Orto (New York: Springer Publishing, 1991), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Eiesland, “Disabled God,” 75.

There is a sense in which any disabled person is capable of a special understanding of the vicarious aspect of Christ's life. For any disabled person bears a disproportionate share of the effects of the fall, just as Christ did. ...the disabled person in a sense bears this for the whole community: in some mysterious sense the disabled person bears a disproportionate share of the effects of fallenness so that others do not have to. In a way, then, disabled people in their disability give life back.<sup>41</sup>

The divine destiny of those with disability is often not realized unless one takes the time to notice. The disability may not be a loud and forceful sermon, but a still, small voice. Only those who are calmed enough to hear it will encounter the message of God. A mother's simple poem reveals her perception of such a voice:

#### Jacob's Prayer

From Jacob, whose fist will never be raised in anger,  
may I learn a gentle touch.  
From Jacob, whose voice will never form a hateful word,  
may I learn to speak kindly of others.  
From Jacob, whose first smile was a rare and precious gem,  
may I learn to give my smiles freely.  
From Jacob, whose arms struggle to reach and cuddle,  
may I learn to embrace easily and frequently.  
From Jacob, whose eyes strain to see my face,  
may I learn to see the beauty in all of God's creation.  
And may I learn to savor the special love that God has allowed me to  
feel,  
a love held so deep within the heart that I sometimes cry...for Jacob.<sup>42</sup>

The divine design for those with disability may be far greater than the rest of society has imagined. They may be holding the key to much of what is lost in our churches and society. Samuel explains that, "Disabled people are not marginal but central to the wholeness of our community."<sup>43</sup> Perhaps they possess something that the able-

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<sup>41</sup> Vinay Samuel, "God, Humanity, and Disability," *Transformation* 15, no.4 (October-December 1998): 15.

<sup>42</sup> Julie Honeyman, September 1995, for her son, Jacob, quadraspastic dysplasia? CP, hydrocephalus (VP shunt), oral defensiveness, pre-threshold ROP, seizure disorder—one of triplets (identical girls, fraternal boy) born at 27 weeks, at [www.ourkids.org/archives](http://www.ourkids.org/archives).

<sup>43</sup> Samuel, "God, Humanity, and Disability," 17.

bodied forget to see. Their presence can dash a multitude of vanities, melt the most frigid heart, and cause the springs of gratitude to flow in a parched land.

### **A Handicapping Attitude**

People with disability must grow up struggling not only with their bodies, but also with the environment—an environment that may daily tell them they are insignificant. Society still exists for the able-bodied, and perhaps the biggest barriers for those with disability are “oppressive attitudes, inappropriate language, inappropriate expectations, and false stereotypes.”<sup>44</sup> Disability is therefore not primarily a medical issue but an issue of social justice. Rachel Hurst says plainly, “Disability is a rights issue, not an impairment issue.”<sup>45</sup>

But in the divine scheme, although those with disability should play a unique and vital role, they are often prevented or thwarted from fulfilling this destiny. This results in the handicapping of their humanity, and their being treated as if they are less, or even more, than people. Those with disability are often treated with pity, as charity cases—an infringement of their dignity. Or, in other situations, they may be glorified as angelic beings who are worthy of awe, yet not quite human either. Either of these treatments excludes people from full participation and communion in humanity. Such attitudes are the violation of a divine potential.

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<sup>44</sup> Chris Sugden, ed., “Biblical and Theological Reflections on Disability,” *Transformation* 15, no.4 (October-December 1998): 27.

<sup>45</sup> Hurst, “International Politics,” 18.