A New Call For Reformation In The American Church

Theology, Suffering And Disability In Context

By, Neal Martin

Presented To

The Faculty of Evangelical Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Religion

June 9, 2020
# Table of Contents

I. Introduction ........................................................................................................Pg 2  
II. Review of Literature..........................................................................................Pg 7  
III. Theology in Context: American Culture.......................................................Pg 10  
IV. The First Response: A Nuanced View of Suffering........................................Pg 14  
V. The Different Facets of Suffering.................................................................Pg 15  
   A. The Fallen State of the World.................................................................Pg 16  
   B. Human Freedom and Moral Agency.....................................................Pg 21  
   C. The Cosmic Conflict: Satan and The Demonic Presence.......................Pg 27  
   D. Suffering as Refining Fire....................................................................Pg 32  
   E. Suffering as Correction........................................................................Pg 36  
   F. Persecution as Witness.........................................................................Pg 38  
   G. God Suffers With Us............................................................................Pg 43  
   H. Embracing God’s Grand Narrative: Providence, Mystery & Hope..........Pg 46  
VI. The Second Response: Groaning and Lament: The Need For Community...Pg 53  
VII. The Third Response: The Reformation of Disability & The Church.........Pg 57  
    A. Imago Dei: Disability and the Image of God.......................................Pg 60  
    B. Equipping the Many Parts of the Church Body....................................Pg 65  
    C. The Great Commission: Disability & Discipleship............................Pg 69  
VIII. Concluding Remarks..................................................................................Pg 73  
Bibliography ....................................................................................................Pg 76
I. Introduction

Albert Herzog posits that “people with disabilities have been, and still are, located at the margins of congregational life.”\(^1\) But how does one address this ongoing reality? Is it through the building of ramps, elevators and automatic doors, or is it through political action and calls for social change? Many disability scholars, theologians and writers have called for such solutions. However in facing the reality of the marginalization of persons with disabilities from congregational life we must not only look at “physical access to buildings” or “political and social calls for change”, but rather we must examine the interconnectedness of theology, suffering, disability and culture to properly understand this marginalization. Only then can we posit a new way forward.

Within this paper we offer a nuanced and contextual approach in forming a theology of suffering and disability, along with three “responses” of action. In this we call for a “spirit of reformation” to take place. Noted church historian Justo Gonzalez reminds us that a part of what sparked Martin Luther to first pen what would later become the famous “95 theses” was Luther’s rejection of the “traditional values and practices which contradicted the clear sense of scripture”.\(^2\)

In seeing the clear contradictions and abuses of power that had become normative within church culture, Luther hoped to “reform” such practices within the church. Of course he could never have imagined the outcome, nor is his work alone the “sole catalyst” of what would later become the Protestant Reformation. That being said, we, like Luther, call for a “spirit of


reformation” by rejecting the church theologies and practices in America that both contradict scripture and continue to marginalize persons with disabilities.

Unlike many works that have been written on disability or theologies of suffering, this research reflects on the unique cultural landscape of American Christianity and scriptures “counter-cultural reply” in conjunction with the voices of disability theologians. The American Church’s treatment of the subjects of suffering and disability are broad and range from philosophical treatises on the problem of evil, to areas of lament and prayer, alongside “name it and claim it” theologies, healing rituals and prosperity gospels.

By reflecting seriously on the theological and cultural landscape of American Christianity and by listening to scripture’s “countercultural reply” as well as the experience of persons with disabilities within the church community, we can deepen our understanding of suffering and disability while avoiding reductionist tendencies by many American church leaders to give “easy explanations” that only further trivialize and misunderstands the suffering of people.

Disability theology, although relatively new compared to theologies of suffering, has seen a surge of scholarship in recent years. Scholars such as Larry Waters and Roy Zuck have compiled volumes that span the areas of disability ministry, biblical theologies of suffering and pastoral counseling. Disability scholar Marva Dawn has also written on the subject of suffering from a disabled perspective. Many other disability scholars have written on inclusion, access and awareness to the minority voices of the disabled community.

---

One might ask “why do research on suffering or disability when there have been scores of books written on the subject?” From self-help guides to trauma recovery, and liberation theology, the themes of suffering and disability abound within literature. However, a gap exists in disability research that focuses on specific contextual theologies of disability and especially “counter-cultural” models as opposed to the historic “medical models” or the newer “social models” of disability theology. That is not to say the “counter-cultural” model has never been used. Michael Beates and his work *Disability and the Gospel* as well as Amos Yong’s *The Bible, Disability, and The Church* both have taken such an approach, but more work needs to be done in this field. This research is another voice that fills that gap and develops this model further for disability studies. We also call for more discourse within this model for disability theology. Indeed we have only begun to scratch the surface of what contextual models of disability and suffering look like for the church today and how they posit a challenge to move forward towards more holistic congregations.

What is formed then is a new “contextual theology of suffering and disability”. This theological model is based on scripture and challenges the American church to evaluate their own theological presuppositions while listening to the needs and concerns of persons with disabilities. Finally this contextual theology of suffering and disability will posit a new way for the American Church to become a faith community in which persons with disabilities not only take part in, but flourish.

This new “contextual theology of suffering and disability” found within this research will be framed through Stephen Bevan’s “countercultural model” of contextual theology. This is also

---

called the “contrast” model or “prophetic” model. In this paper we will use the term “prophetic” to acknowledge that this contextual model of suffering and disability specifically challenges the theological landscape of the American Church, as opposed to other models that focus primarily on cultural or political ideologies. That being said, we will examine parts of American culture and its various responses to suffering and disability that have been assimilated (at least in part) into the theology of American Christianity.

Furthermore this “prophetic model” puts the voice of God (through the scriptures) as the “speaking center”. This is a contrast to the vast majority of historic theologies of suffering and disability which centered on alleviating suffering and “fixing disability” through the medical model. This is also a contrast to many current models of disability theology which sprang out of the disability rights movement (such as Eisland’s liberation theology) that use an anthropological model which puts the “testimony of persons with disabilities” as the speaking center.

Disability theology can be a reforming voice within the boundaries of historical orthodoxy. While some shape disability theology in clearly political or liberatory ways, others have sought to reform the ongoing theological discourse within the Christian tradition and add to its richness a voice that has been previously unheard or deeply misunderstood. In this we find as other scholars have, that, “disability theology begins with the recognition that people with

---

7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
disabilities have been at best a minority voice in the development of Christian theology and practice and at worst have been completely silenced within the conversation”.

Before going further we must state that the term “disability” within this research is defined broadly as “an individual with a disability is a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities,” While we posit this broad definition of disability to include physical, intellectual and multi-disabilities, it must also be noted that people with disabilities are individuals with distinctive theologies, perspectives and worldviews. As such, “it is important that we remember there is no one perspective that can be called the disabled person's perspective”.

Throughout this research we will examine various “foundational truths” about suffering and disability as seen through the scriptures such as the “fallen state of the world” or the “imago dei”. This places scripture at the “speaking center” of the discussion. It is only after these foundations have been laid that we can then formulate a contextual theology that specifically addresses theological concerns such as “reductionism” or “prosperity gospels” that have been imported into the theological ethos of the American Church. This is witnessed by various disability theologians and scholars and it is through these voices we see the stark critique of how these theological problems have alienated and ostrichsized many people with disabilities from the life of the church. Finally this research will posit three “responses” for the American church.

---


that is guided by scripture’s prophetic voice and can lead to new ways of listening to the testimonies of persons with disabilities and in turn, become communities in which they can flourish.

II. Review of Literature

The field of Disability Theology is still a fledgling enterprise. As you will see below, scholars and advocates come from a variety of backgrounds and fields. Scholarship ranges from special education to psychology, health-care, anthropology to practical theology and pastoral practitioners. Each of these contribute and advocate for the disabled community within their respective fields.

A challenge of the ongoing “disability theology” discourse is the multidisciplinary approaches to disability itself. Disability has been positioned in various theological enterprises and models. Liberation theologies of disability and social models speak from an activist/disability rights center. Others such as renowned speaker Joni Erakson Tada put the “Gospel Message” and evangelism as the speaking center.

Disability itself is complex, Waldschmidt posits “Academia itself often chooses to apply somewhat undifferentiated approaches to this phenomenon. When it comes to disability, rehabilitation sciences, medicine, psychology, education, and social policy research dominate the field.”¹⁴

---

Scholars and historians note that many “liberation theologies” have developed within the 1970’s.\textsuperscript{15} Two of the unifying themes have been both the call for social change and the interpretation of history through the marginalized.\textsuperscript{16} Phillip Berryman also notes “liberation theology is also one manifestation of a worldwide movement for human emancipation”.\textsuperscript{17} One major work which distinctly shaped modern disability theology that borrowed heavily from the liberation theologies of the 1970’s was Nancy Eiesland’s \textit{The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability and Marginality}.\textsuperscript{18} Eiesland’s book particularly addressed disability in new ways that challenged the ideas of churches regarding disability in purely “modernist” medical or educational terms and posited a postmodern critique on the church’s response to the disabled.

Scholars have also noted, “Since its introduction in the late 1970s, the social model of disability has changed international disability discourses. This model, as academics and activists with a disability studies background well know, emphasizes that disability is a social construction”.\textsuperscript{19} This had led to other minority theories to align further with disability studies such as feminist disability and ethics.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Ibid1} Ibid. p 6-7.
\bibitem{Ibid2} Ibid. p.6.
\end{thebibliography}
Looking specifically at Disability and church inclusion, some early disability advocates such as Charles Palmer, working within special education wrote a book entitled *The Church and the Exceptional Person* in 1961. In this very practical work, Palmer argued for a change within churches to include what he terms “exceptional” people. He states “every exceptional person has encountered rejection, mockery, and pseudo pity.” Palmer’s goal was to help the reader first understand persons with “exceptional problems” and to then to “extend your church’s ministry to include each of God’s children, whatever his abilities or limitations.”

Psychology and special education practitioners such as Erik Carter have also become advocates for the disabled and church inclusion. In Carter’s work *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities* Carter calls for full participation, inclusive religious education and hospitality. Written in 2007, his work is broad and scope and includes a range of “barriers” and a host of “initiatives” which could lead to better inclusion and welcoming within faith communities. Carter argues that although religious communities have historically provided care and services to people with disabilities, they nonetheless struggle to welcome these same people into their congregational life.

John Swinton alongside Jean Vanier, two prominent voices of Disability Theology, penned a short “resource book” entitled *Mental Health: The Inclusive Church Resource*. Other Disability Scholars have come forward such as Amos Young, Hans Reiders, Debbie Creamer,

---

22 Idid. p.17.
24 Ibid. p.16.
Shane Clifton and Benjamin T. Connor who are some of the most prominent disability theologians advancing the conversation of not just inclusion, but who challenge the very perception of disability, God and the world around us.

As stated previously, scholars such as Larry Waters and Roy Zuck have compiled a volume that spans the areas of disability ministry, biblical theologies of suffering and pastoral counseling. Disability scholar Marva Dawn has also written on the subject of suffering from a disabled perspective.

Stephanie Hubach and her work *Same Lake Different Boat* and Michael Beate’s *Disability and the Gospel* as well as Amos Yong’s *The Bible, Disability, and The Church* have all moved the conversation forward on disability and church inclusion and have advanced the disability theology discourse.

**III. Theology in Context: American Culture**

Many disability theologians have called for social change or have advocated for accessible church buildings, but what they have failed to realize in the need for a contextual theology of disability and suffering. Through this we see the interconnectedness of American culture’s view of suffering and how this in turn reflects on how the church responds to persons with disabilities. While it is certainly good to have physical access to the church it is also just as imperative that persons with disabilities have theological access. As we shall see, American culture has crept into the theology of the church, this in turn has led to the mistreatment of many persons who experience various forms of suffering, of which disabilities are certainly a part.

Another reason for a contextual theology of suffering and disability is that different cultures view suffering and even disability with their own motifs. In fact what one culture calls
“disability” may not even be viewed as such by others. As Kudlick states, research suggests “that not all cultures have seen the same impairments as disabling”.26 This is not to say that suffering or disability is merely a social construct as some have claimed, but rather that we need to look at suffering and disability in context. This helps us address the cultural and theological foundations of people’s behavior towards suffering and disability and without this understanding other efforts to make the church accessible to all will only be frustrated.

Timothy Keller in his own treatment of the American view of suffering states, “Sociologists and anthropologists have analyzed and compared the various ways that cultures train its members for grief, pain, and loss. And when this comparison is done, it is often noted that our own contemporary secular, Western culture is one of the weakest and worst in history at doing so”.27 To put it simply, Americans have a problem with suffering.

Wilkens and Sanford suggest that “the most powerful influences come from worldviews that emerge from culture”.28 Furthermore, they posit that, “these lived worldviews are popular philosophies of life that are few intellectual proponents but vast numbers of practitioners”.29 Within western society, and America in particular we find very few answers to the problem of suffering. Instead the larger trend in American has been to avoid suffering altogether.

Paul Brand, a medical doctor who worked with leprosy patients in India recounts his initial experience within American culture. He writes, “in the United States, a nation whose war

for independence was fought in part to guarantee the right to the pursuit of happiness, I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated, but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it.\footnote{Philip Yancey and Paul W. Brand, The Gift of Pain: Why We Hurt & What We Can Do About It (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1997), p.12.} Other scholars have also noted that Americans tend to disbelieve suffering compared to the global south and countries in which suffering is “close to the surface” or unavoidable.\footnote{Douglas John Hall, God and Human Suffering: an Exercise in the Theology of the Cross (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1986), p.25.} Indeed compared to other countries we appear far “weaker” in our handling of suffering.\footnote{Timothy Keller, Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, p.16.} Brand also asserted that, “It is the philosophers, theologians and the writers of the affluent West, not the third world, who worry obsessively about the problem of pain and point an accusing finger at God”.\footnote{Philip Yancey and Paul W. Brand, The Gift of Pain, p.187.}

Keller even argues that within medieval Europe (where approximately one of every five infants died before age one) historical documents reveal that people took hardship and grief in far better stride than we do, the end result being that today we are far more likely to be caught off-guard and much less able to cope with suffering then our ancestors.\footnote{Timothy Keller, Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, p.15.}

But how did we get here? And why do so many Americans avoid pain at all costs? Some have argued that this avoidance has its roots in the “American Dream” itself. Keller argues that, “if the meaning of life is individual freedom and happiness, then suffering is of no possible use. In this world view, the only thing to do with suffering is to avoid it at all costs, or, if it is unavoidable, manage and minimize the emotions of pain and discomfort as much as possible.”\footnote{Ibid, p.23.}
This is perhaps the greatest weakness within American culture in dealing with the subject of suffering, namely that it has “no meaning”. When left with such a worldview Americans try to alleviate suffering by all forms of escapism, which can very quickly lead to suicide. However when we run, avoid or try to “shut out” the suffering among us, we inevitably find it a bigger mountain to face when it comes again.

This in turn has led the American church’s response to suffering, a response which often further alienates those with disabilities and in doing so becomes an “active participant” in their suffering instead offering a welcoming community. Disability scholars have noted, “clearly a monumental gap exists between the local churches and the disabled population. All too often individuals and families go through the most difficult trials and circumstances of their lives in isolation from the Christian community”.

Many reductionist theologies have been posited by church leaders in response to suffering. As disability scholar Michael Beates states, “just as culture works hard to bury the reality of our sin and mortality, so too often does the church.” Unfortunately while American’s seek to avoid pain, so too does the church. Beates further states, “physical brokenness reminds us we are finite, that the world is not as it should be”. One example of this is the reductionist theology is that all children’s suffering (and especially inherited genetic disability) is somehow related to the sin of the parents. Such views do not take seriously the complexities of suffering

---

36 Ibid, pg 23.
39 Ibid, p.81.
and in the quest to provide “easy explanations” for the suffering we encounter in the world, these views only further alienate the disabled community.

IV. The First Response: A Nuanced View of Suffering

When faced with suffering many people exclaim “how can this be?” As previously stated, American culture seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Since this is one of the dominant ideas within our culture, it is no wonder that people are often left disillusioned as to how suffering has come into their world. Others conceive of a universe that is ruled by some kind of moral geometry. In this view we only need to “do the right things” to avoid the afflictions that befall so many others. In each of these viewpoints we are met with a misunderstanding of suffering. By putting forth reductionist theories or inadequate explanations to the reality of the world many Christians within America are frequently caught off guard despite the prevalence of suffering around them. In short, many have adopted similar attitudes based on the culture in which they live.

Therefore, the first “response” in addressing this reality is to form a contextual theology of suffering and disability. One that discards reductionist theologies and in its place forms a “nuanced view of suffering and disability”. Put simply, the first response in any change must start from a change in thinking and perspective.

It is imperative that we first understand the depth and complexity of suffering and resist one-dimensional and shallow explanations. We begin with broadening our theology of suffering in noting that if the American church does not first discard reductionist theologies of suffering, it will only continue to misunderstand and marginalize people with disabilities. Therefore The first

---

step in correcting the church’s deep misunderstanding of those who suffer with physical or intellectual disabilities is to form a “nuanced view” of suffering itself.

It is also worth noting that not all questions on suffering have clear answers. Many church leaders and pastors can fall into the trap of “needing to give an answer” to suffering, however scripture asserts that there are mysteries and “secret things” of God which are unknown to us (Duet 29:29, Job 11:7, Rom 11:33). Indeed one of the elements or of a nuanced theology of suffering is mystery itself, along with others such as providence. That being said, we do have many scriptural “foundations” which we can examine in forming a nuanced view of suffering.

As we explore the different foundational truths on the topic of suffering we will discover a richer theology of suffering; one that gives some explanation as to why suffering occurs and also how we can respond to suffering in our lives. In this we discover not only “origins” such as “The Fall” but also meaning and purpose in “being forged in the fire”. Throughout this exploration we also wish to correct reductionist theology and challenge church practices that are detrimental to those who are suffering, especially those with disabilities. In this disability theology becomes a prophetic voice that points us back to scriptural foundations.

V. The Different Facets of Suffering

Robert Palmer and Heather Palmer Welesko put forth the theory of suffering based on the “diamond model”.\textsuperscript{42} One which includes nine specific domains of suffering. This model which they dubbed “the diamond of adversity” explores suffering from a complex viewpoint. Indeed they state, “by viewing suffering in this dimensional and multi-faceted way, we are better able to cast a wide and broad net, honoring not only the complexity of our own humanity but also the

manifest depth of human adversity. The diamond model refuses to fall prey to one-dimensional, flat-footed theories and explanations.\textsuperscript{43}

Therefore taking the diamond model as a metaphorical framework we will look at the many “facets” of suffering. Just like a diamond we will discover that each facet is not only essential in a robust theology of suffering, but that each informs the other and gives us a larger picture of the complexities of suffering. However if we reduce our theology (as many church leaders have) into one facet, while ignoring the others, we are quickly led into naive and damaging theology. Therefore it is essential that we take care to see each facet of suffering as part of the whole. In this way disability theology offers a nuanced view of suffering by critiquing reductionist theologies and pointing us back to scriptural foundations. As previously stated, the “prophetic model” of this contextual theology puts the voice of God (through the scriptures) as the “speaking center”. By critiquing church practices that fall woefully short of the biblical view of suffering, disability theology points the church back to scripture to correct its view of why suffering occurs and how we should respond.

Now we turn to the “facets” of suffering. Each of these facets point us to the various ways we encounter suffering in the world. Taken as a whole they offer us a nuanced view of suffering. While this list of “facets” is not exhaustive, it does begin to point us towards the multi-faceted complexity of suffering. In doing so we see scripture’s counter-cultural reply to the American church and it’s reductionist theologies.

\textbf{A. The Fallen State of the World}

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, p.24.
As we look at the first facet of the diamond model we arrive at the subject of the fallen world. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed treatise of the subject of “The Fall” it is nonetheless helpful to briefly sketch what we mean by the fallen state of the world as outlined in the scriptures. This is the first “foundational truth” that we must build our contextual theology on.

To put it concisely, the fallen state of this world, as outlined in the Genesis narrative (Gen 3:1-24), is the account by which sin irrevocably changed the state of humanity and creation. What God had made “good” and “very good” in the beginning of the creation account is now “cursed”. The paradise of Eden is lost by the willful actions of Adam in succumbing to the “serpents” temptation to disobey God's moral law. With this “fall” came the bondage of all creation.44

Scripture asserts that sin came through one man (Romans 5:12) and subsequently affects the very nature of humanity even from infancy (Ephesians 2:3, Psalms 51:5). Many also refer to this as “original sin” and through this first sin comes the reality of pain and suffering under the curse. Grudem uses the term “inherited corruption” to explain our inherited sinful nature after the fall.45 Thus not only does all of creation “groan” (Romans 8:22) but humanity is also changed from a state of innocence to a state of depravity.

In putting forth a theology of suffering we must insist that the “state of cosmic reality” is one in which humanity finds itself separated from God, living on a cursed ground and

surrounded by the spiritual forces of satan which seek to further alienate us from the goodness of God. In short, we are in desperate need of a savior, and until we can appreciate this state of affairs we will deeply misunderstand God and the origins of suffering.

We begin with this account of “The Fall” because it is one of the most foundational aspects to understanding the origins of suffering. When we encounter global suffering, disease, illness, disability, natural disasters and finally death itself (the ultimate consequence of sin) we see the effects of living within a fallen world. Others have dubbed this “natural evil”. Gerald Peterman and Andrews Schmutzer posit “there is no domain of life that is not marred by the effect of human sin and rebellion. Sin has ecological and cosmic effects - from Creator to creature, the entire relational ecosystem now suffers”.

However many find this state of affairs troubling. The question is often asked. “If God is omnibenevolent (all good and loving) and omnipotent (all powerful) then why is there so much suffering in the world? However theologian Douglas Hall answers this objection by challenging the question itself. He states “when infinite power is posited as the primary and characteristic attribute of deity, then no one can be satisfied with an answer that is less than the abolition of suffering as such”. The question itself is reductionistic by placing “power” or “goodness” as the primary attributes of God. Furthermore this question is namely “assigning blame” a root cause for suffering. In the face of global suffering many unfortunately take the view of finding a “cosmic God” to blame or end up denying his existence altogether.

46 Larry J. Waters and Roy B. Zuck, *Why, O God?: Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p.245-256.
Feinberg also challenges such a notion of such thinking. He writes, “we may think of sin as trivial, but it isn't. We may also think that the punishment of disease, trouble, and death far outweighs the crime of a little sin. That only underscores how far we are from God's perspective on these things. In light of our relative comfort with sin, a little sin doesn't seem so bad”.\(^{50}\) By recognizing that it was Adam's sin, not God, that ushered in the fall, we correctly see the cosmic state of affairs.

At this juncture many people are tempted to say “well that's life, you just have to live with it” in regards to suffering in light of a fallen world. However Gerald Peterman and Andrew Schmutzer and in their work between Pain and Grace reject the above statement. While it may describe “the plight of humanity” they posit that, “as an attitude in life, such comments repair nothing. Instead, they stifle empathy towards others, shun meaningful reflection, and promote cynicism within oneself.”\(^{51}\) As already mentioned, such reductionist comments cheapen our understanding of suffering and ignore the complexities therein.

Others try to ignore the reality of a fallen world by insulating themselves through comforts, escapism or disengaging from the wider culture.\(^{52}\) As stated previously, within the American context people seek to avoid pain and suffering at all costs. So then just as they seek to avoid it within their personal lives, they also avoid persons with disabilities in their church communities. Many have also embraced healing theologies that depict a “lack of faith” when suffering of any sort does occur. Thereby placing the origin of suffering on a spiritual deficiency of the sufferer themself!

\(^{50}\) John S. Feinberg, *When There Are No Easy Answers: Thinking Differently about God, Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids MI: Kregel Pubns, 2016), p.76.

\(^{51}\) Gerald W. Peterman and Andrew J. Schmutzer, *Between Pain & Grace*, p.22.

\(^{52}\) Larry J. Waters and Roy B. Zuck, *Why, O God*, p.246.
All of these practices are particularly harmful to persons with disabilities. Sadly many Christians and church leaders continue insulating themselves from the reality of a broken world by placing persons with disabilities in designated parts of the church building (away from the general group) or very frequently exclude these persons from “public roles” such as singing in the choir or worship team.⁵³

When persons with disabilities are placed “out of sight” from the congregation we do great harm in denying the universality and global impact of suffering from living in a fallen world. Eisland, in her notable work *The Disabled God*, states; “in American society, the temptation to hide our difficulties from others is endemic...Ignoring disability means ignoring life; it is the precursor to isolation and powerlessness”.⁵⁴

Some disability scholars and theologians have advocated that the church view disabilities in light of the fall. It is this prophetic voice that points us back to the foundational truths outlined in scripture. As Beates states; “With the fall came not only a rupture in our relationship and dwelling with God, but our bodies and all creation fell as well”.⁵⁵ Carson also places the origins of suffering in similar fashion. He states that “if instead we see suffering as, in the first place, the effect of the Fall or the result of a fallen world, the consequence of evil that is really evil and in which we ourselves all too frequently indulge, then however much we may grieve when we suffer we will not be taken by surprise”.⁵⁶

---

So rather than being “taken by surprise” by suffering and disability or further isolating persons with disabilities within our church communities, may we see correctly the origins of suffering upon creation. This “fallen state” in which we live is the first facet in the diamond model of suffering. One that has been stated clearly in scripture and yet one in which large parts of our culture and church communities have ignored.

Before we move on it is important to note that this is merely one facet. In this we are looking at origins. That is not to say that all suffering is due to “the fall”. Such reductionist thinking is to be avoided. As we shall see, some suffering is indeed a part of living in a fallen world. At other times though it may be because of our own actions, the actions of others, spiritual attacks, or a consequence of societal or national actions such as war. As previously stated, it would be a grave mistake to reduce suffering down to a singular causality. Thus it is through this nuanced view that we see the complexity of suffering.

B. Human Freedom and Moral Agency

The second facet of suffering looks toward another aspect of causality, namely, human freedom. In the Noahic account we find that “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). Throughout the scriptures we read of accounts such as this detailing the moral agency of humanity. In doing so we clearly see this second facet of suffering. Thus this is the second “foundational truth” that we must build our contextual theology on.

There is a popular notion within the western world and especially in America that “all people are basically good”. When encountering suffering persons are quick to decry their

---

“innocence” and look for someone to blame, especially God. Such a view is unfortunately present at times even within the Christian community. However the Christian tradition has maintained a firm resistance to such a worldview. Richard Rice notes “God is responsible for the possibility of evil, but not for the actuality of evil”. In other words we have been created with the freedom to act as moral agents of good or evil, albeit from a fallen state.

Theologians throughout the centuries have argued on the definition of freedom, especially in conjunction with God's sovereignty and providence. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed argument on each of these interconnected theologies, scores of books throughout the ages have been written on the topic. However, a few key points must be made to define what “human freedom” means in conjunction with moral agency.

To begin we must state that the human freedom of which we are talking about is inconsistent with the notion of “absolute omnicausal determination”, which asserts a constant determination of all things by God and nothing else. Neither are we suggesting that human freedom is without any grounding whatsoever in the sovereignty of God. Rather, as theologian Thomas Oden stated, we find that “God freely chooses to order life in such a way that human freedom may be a companion to God's freedom without denying God's almighty power or goodness.”

60 Ibid, p.150
In saying this, we must not make the mistake of some theologians who have historically denied the effects of original sin upon humanity's freedom.\textsuperscript{61} As stated previously, within the Western world the popular notion is that “all people are basically good”.\textsuperscript{62} Such a view is unfortunately present at times even within the Christian community. However Christian orthodoxy and tradition has maintained a firm resistance to such a worldview.

So then, what is advanced in this nuanced view is an understanding of human freedom within the context of prevenient grace. This view thoroughly emphasizes humanity as fallen creatures. Therefore we “cannot, unaided by prevenient grace, exercise our capacity of free will in choosing righteousness”.\textsuperscript{63} Indeed we live in this fallen state with the full effects of original sin upon us. There has been and continues to be, much debate about free-will and predestination. However even those who hold to a more dogmatic view of predestination agree that God has ordered humanity in such a way that we are morally responsible and accountable for our actions.\textsuperscript{64} This in no way denies providence, but rather places human freedom within God’s plan for creation.\textsuperscript{65}

Wesley wrote “Indeed, if man were not free, he could not be accountable either for his thoughts, words, or actions. If he were not free, he would not be capable either of reward or punishment; he would be incapable of either virtue or vice, of being morally good or bad”.\textsuperscript{66} So while God may “guide us” within or actions, He does not interfere with the human freedom he

\textsuperscript{62} Harry Lee Poe, \textit{See No Evil}, p.35.
\textsuperscript{65} Thomas C. Oden, \textit{Classic Christianity}, p.150.
\textsuperscript{66} J. Kenneth Grider, \textit{A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology}, p.244.
has bestowed upon us”. While human freedom and God’s overarching plans for the cosmos present us with a paradox, we must insist that God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are beyond our comprehension, but not contradictory.” In short, God has provided humanity with the ability to act in one way or another.

This freedom to act as “moral agents” has unfortunately led to many abuses of freedom and unspeakable evils throughout the world. Many have raised objections to a God who would create a world in which totalitarian regimes, wars and the holocaust could exist. Against the backdrop of such global suffering a common objection is usually stated in terms such as; “Couldn't God have created a world in which people could only choose to do what is good?

Douglas Hall answers this objection, he writes, “If suffering is inextricably bound up with human freedom then through power God could only eliminate suffering by eliminating freedom. But if freedom is the very essence of the human creature, as the tradition as generally maintained and as we also insisted earlier, then the elimination of freedom would imply the virtual elimination of humanity.” Philosopher Alvin Plantinga also answers this common objection in his treatment of the Free-Will Defense. He writes;

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly

69 Thomas C. Oden, Classic Christianity, p.59.
70 Douglas John Hall, God and Human Suffering, p.97-98.
enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil.\textsuperscript{71}

Thus we come to the second facet of suffering. Namely, that sometimes suffering is because of our own freedom to act as agents of moral evil. As Oden states “Freedom could have no meaning if it did not risk going astray. To posit a freedom that cannot possibly fail is to run away from the human freedom God gives. God graciously allows human freedom the room both to stand and to fall”.\textsuperscript{72} Human freedom “gone astray” has led to much suffering. Both as the result of our own actions and also by the actions of others.

Philip Yancey in his book \textit{Where is God when it hurts} puts it this way, “A free man may pick up a chunk of wood and take advantage of its firmness by bashing the head of another man. God could, I suppose, reach down each time and transform the properties of wood into those of a sponge, so that the club would bounce off lightly. But that is not what he is about in the world. He has set into motion fixed laws that can be perverted to evil by our misguided freedom.”\textsuperscript{73} So then we must take seriously the consequences of our actions.

But not only our actions. At times we find that another aspect of suffering comes from the broader decisions of society. As Robert Palmer notes, many children suffer due to larger family and societal systems, he writes, “When those systems behave foolishly or negligently, tolerating abuse or violence, it is only a matter of time before harm befalls the child and therein is the reason for his or her suffering, he/she becoming the recipient of systematic folly”.\textsuperscript{74} Therefore we must not forget that each one of us lives within “systems” of family, friends, faith

----

\textsuperscript{72} Thomas C. Oden, \textit{Classic Christianity}, p.158.
\textsuperscript{73} Philip Yancey, \textit{Where Is God When It Hurts?} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p.65.
\textsuperscript{74} Robert C Palmer and Heather Palmer Welesko, \textit{The Diamond of Adversity}, p.73.
communities and society at large. This reality demands that each one of us gives high regard as to how we manage our freedom to act as moral agents, especially in light of the far reaching impact of those around us.\(^{75}\)

Before we turn to the third facet of suffering, we must recognize that human freedom is not always the cause of suffering. Like all reductionist theologies, we do great harm by reducing the complexity of suffering to a singular point. Unfortunately this second facet of suffering has undoubtedly been one of the most abused by the church in misunderstanding disability.

If we think of suffering only in terms of “choice” then many are led to believe that suffering is a product of the sufferers own making. And as we have stated above, while this may be the case in some instances, in others it is not. Unfortunately by reducing suffering to our own abuse of freedom, many persons with disabilities have been isolated by the church.

Indeed as Keller writes, many people “stay away because like job's friends, you need to believe that the afflicted person somehow brought this on or wasn't wise enough to avoid it. That way we can assure ourselves that it could never happen to us. The afflicted person challenges us to admit what we would rather deny - that such severe difficulty can come upon anyone, anytime”.\(^{76}\)

Having a theology of suffering that reduces all forms of outward adversity to personal sinful actions is inconsistent with biblical teaching. Indeed as Fienberg notes “the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16) is a vivid reminder that outward appearances aren’t a good basis for judging spirituality”.\(^{77}\) Yet in spite of passages such as these people with disabilities are still

\(^{75}\) Ibid, p.134.
frequently subjected to exclusion or forced to endure “healing practices” that will free them from their personal sin and bring them back to “normality”. The “sin and disability conflation” is unfortunately an ongoing practice within the church.

One such story written by Michael Justice displays the harmful effects of having such a reductionist view of theology that conflates all disability with personal sin. He writes,

Dennis lived with the scourge of multiple sclerosis for over twenty-eight years. As a 1975 ThM graduate of Dallas Seminary, he was once invited to preach at a local church. When he arrived, he was met with resistance over the fact that the pastor felt that the stage was “sanctified” along with the furniture on it. The pastor told Dennis that if he was to preach while sitting in a wheelchair, he would defile the stage and the sanctified furniture.

As we look at the second facet of suffering, we must note that while some suffering is of our own making, or the product of the actions of others, at other times suffering is not of our choice at all. Therefore disability theology calls the church back to scriptural foundations of human freedom and moral agency, but also posits that this facet must be seen in light of the broader picture of suffering that scriptures give us. Reductionist theologies that place the origins of suffering and disabilities on personal sins alone must be abandoned. In its place a nuanced and multi-faceted view must be upheld, one based on scripture’s foundational truths. As we turn to the next facet of suffering, we learn that sometimes other cosmic forces are involved in suffering as well.

C. The Cosmic Conflict: Satan and The Demonic Presence

---

The third facet of suffering is the cosmic conflict: Satan and the demonic presence. C.S. Lewis wisely wrote, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”

It is ironic that in America we see a fascination in the paranormal and yet at the same time American’s are very likely to dismiss ideas about spiritual forces at work in the world. But just as secular society avoids the idea of “the devil” many Christians have historically placed an overemphasis on his powers, erring to the other extreme of Lewis’ warning.

The danger in either approach is readily apparent within the scriptures. We are told in 1 Peter “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”

Simply ignoring the fact that we have a spiritual adversary is to welcome untold suffering and temptation into our lives. However the scriptures also make it clear that the forces of Satan will be overthrown (Rev 20:10) and that Christ is the fulfillment of the garden prophecy (Gen 3:15). Also throughout Jesus ministry we note that a part of his work was the casting out of demons (Matt 4:24, 8:16, 10:8, Mark 1:34, 7:29, Luke 4:33, 8:2, 13:32).

Indeed one cannot read the book of Job without acknowledging one of the central themes within the narrative is suffering that is bound up with spiritual forces at work, and Satan is the one who directly brings calamity. Likewise Satan is called the great “deceiver”, bringing temptation to humanity. From the fall in the garden until today, Satan and demonic forces have

82 1 Peter 5:8-9, NIV.
been at work in trying to spoil the creation of God. Today we find that demons use “temptations, doubt, guilt, fear, confusion, sickness, envy, pride, slander, or any other means possible to hinder a Christian witness and usefulness.”\(^{83}\) Each of these areas if taken to its end, are responsible for some form of suffering or another. This then, is the third foundational truth that a nuanced view of suffering stands upon.

Palmer and Welesko also link some forms of suffering to spiritual forces. They write, “what we're suggesting is that an answer to the question of adversity emerges when we realize that suffering is sometimes tied to invisible entities gathered around the sufferer.\(^{84}\) In those moments, our suffering becomes part of the answer to cosmic forces, an answer bound up in the suffering itself.\(^{85}\)

In this facet of suffering we must also understand that even in the midst of this cosmic battle, God will not be defeated by the devil. We must put away any notion of dualism if we are to rightly understand what the scriptures are saying. As Palmer notes, “Our suffering becomes ours - and God's - answer to the devil, with suffering providing us our chance to endorse God and silence the accuser in how we bear it”.\(^{86}\)

Not only this, but we must also remember that the work of Christ on the cross is where Satan was decisively defeated. In addition, Christ's victory means that Satan has no rightful authority over us.\(^{87}\) Therefore we must adopt a “right perspective” on the cosmic state of affairs. As we began this section with the wisdom offered by C.S. Lewis, so we must reiterate again that

\(^{83}\) Wayne A. Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, p.176.
\(^{84}\) Robert C Palmer and Heather Palmer Welesko, *The Diamond of Adversity*, p.89.
\(^{85}\) Ibid, p.86.
\(^{86}\) Ibid, p.89.
Satan and other demonic forces are indeed at work in the world today. However, the power of darkness is limited and ultimately has been defeated. So then while we must acknowledge the presence and influence of the demonic, we also should not give it more power than we ought.

The account we receive in Matthew 4:24 however gives us insight into avoiding reductionism. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry the author wrote, “News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.” Notice the categories that are named, of those seeking healing it includes “the demon-possessed”, however it also includes those both suffering illness as well as disability. These categories are in no way a strict medical diagnosis. However it is important to note that “demon possession” is listed as a separate category. Another important fact is that in both the Matthew and Mark gospel narratives the authors differentiate between “expulsions” of demons, and the “healing” of illness, with a few exceptions of general lists of “healing”.

Thus it is important to note that for some maladies the cause was a demonic presence, but for other illnesses there is no demonic activity involved. Throughout the gospel narratives we see a healing of “those oppressed by demons”. In each circumstance we are given an explanation of their unique kind of suffering. However at other times Jesus heals various disabilities such as blindness. Within these accounts not one word is mentioned about demon possession.

---

88 Matthew 4:24, New International Version.
90 Ibid. p.151-152.
91 Ibid. p.151-152.
The reader is left with an obvious truth, sometimes afflictions occur because of the demonic, at other times suffering occurs without the presence of demonic activity whatsoever. Now that we have put forth our third facet of suffering based on scripture’s foundational truths, we must now turn to how this facet is misunderstood. Like the first two facets, we do great harm in being reductionist. As we have stated out in our argument, Satan is indeed at work in the world. However there are a myriad of other reasons why people suffer.

Unfortunately, the church at times has put forth a theology that sees every ailment, illness or disability as a mark of the demonic. This can lead to unsettling or even cruel practices by the church. In particular, many religious communities still see disabilities, and especially intellectual disabilities, such as autism and epilepsy, as spiritual attacks or even possessions by demons.92 A troubling story appeared on international news headlines in 2003 when an eight year old boy with autism was killed during an exorcism at a church in Milwaukee.93 The pastor notably told the local papers that they were praying to God to deliver the boy from “the spirit” that was tormenting him.94

Other such stories have been documented regarding physical disabilities. In his book *Unexpected Guests at God’s Banquet* Brett Webb-Mitchell recounts the story of a man named John who wanted to be part of a small local church. The problem was the pastor of the church thoroughly believed that John’s cerebral palsy was caused directly by the devil himself. The

---

94 Ibid.
pasor insisted that they “exorcise the devil”. In recalling this experience of reductionist theology John describes it as one of “the worst church encounters of his life”.95

Such stories reveal the disturbing outcomes of having such a reductionist theology. And it also highlights the suffering that persons with disabilities encounter within the church. Rather than being a welcoming community that seeks to listen and understand the nuances of suffering and disability, these church leaders (driven by bad theology) become themselves a part of the problem of suffering.

Thus by listening to the testimony of persons with disabilities and their encounters with such theologies, disability theology calls the American church back to the foundational truths of the scriptures outlined above. The American church must condemn such practices and theologies that posit all disabilities as demonic. In its place we advance a nuanced view of suffering.

So then, as we have traced the first three facets of suffering and also studied the reforming voice of disability theology, we begin to see “the true state of cosmic reality” as outlined in scripture. In this we find that some suffering has its origins in natural evil, the fallenness of the world. Other suffering comes from the misguided will of humanity as free moral agents, and still other suffering is bound up in cosmic forces. Now that we have put forth a nuanced framework for the state of cosmic reality we turn briefly to other “facets of suffering”.

D. Suffering as a Refining Fire.

The fourth facet of suffering, “suffering as a refining fire”, is a rich biblical metaphor. In this we view suffering as an opportunity to grow. Within this view, suffering is seen from the

perspective as trials to be faced. We see an account of this metaphor in 1 Peter 1:6-7. In these
verses it is “faith” that is tested. The result of enduring these trials is praise, glory and honor.

Palmer reminds us that “one of the common purposes for suffering isn't to harm or punish
but rather to improve and honor us.” Furthermore Palmer argues that sometimes we suffer
“because we're living very well and God, like a diligent gardener or teacher, coach, or trainer, is
determined to assist us in becoming even better”. In this view the “trials of suffering” make us
more fully ourselves and are not only acceptable, but essential. Bonhoeffer calls suffering “the
badge of true discipleship”. For the disciple of Christ, there is no “effortless, struggle free, and
placid sort of existence”.

Romans 5 is perhaps the most counter-cultural chapter on suffering in that it calls us to
actually “rejoice in suffering”, knowing that through the process suffering produces endurance
and endurance produces character and character produces hope. Keller also notes that there can
be multiple benefits to suffering. It can strengthen relationships, lead to personal development
and growth, create deeper friendships or family ties, and also change our priorities and
philosophies. Indeed “from this perspective, it is not only possible for us to grow through
suffering, but rather suffering becomes absolutely essential to our growth. without it we could
never become everything we are meant to be”.

---

97 Ibid, p46.
100 Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, p.66.
Finally, suffering can lead us and others, to God. This is certainly what Paul had in mind as he wrote to the church in Corinth by proclaiming. “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong”.\(^{103}\) So then, his fourth facet of suffering is one which calls us to grow, endure, and in the end, become more like Christ. It is a suffering that draws us closer to God and one which becomes a witness of God’s presence in our lives. This is the next foundational truth that a nuanced view of suffering rests upon.

However our American culture does not align with the idea of suffering as a means of growth. One of the tragic elements of American thought is that all suffering is meaningless. As Hubach notes “our competitive culture is uncomfortable with the concept of weakness”.\(^{104}\) But what if suffering is another way to grow in sanctification, to be fully mature, or to be a prophetic voice to our culture? Within the Christian tradition not all suffering is absurd or pointless. In fact, we find the opposite is often true. Keller writes, “Suffering is an important way to grow. People who have not suffered much are often shallow, unacquainted with both their weaknesses and strengths, naive about human nature and life”.\(^{105}\)

Unfortunately, many church congregants regard persons with disabilities as persons to be pitied and avoided. The consequence of such thinking is that many persons with disabilities are not given opportunities to use the gifts that have grown out of their adversity. They become simply the “receivers” of ministry instead of “active participants” within the church community.

\(^{103}\) 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, NIV.
\(^{105}\) Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, p.205.
In contrast to the above views of our American culture, Stephanie Hubach recalls the story of Jon, an adult in her local congregation who was born with spina bifida, she states,

Due to the nature of his condition, Jon uses a wheelchair and requires assistance for many daily living activities. In response to these challenges, Jon has nurtured a positive attitude, a warm sense of humor, a deep faith in Christ, and a notable quality of patience that outshines his able-bodied peers in many ways...For John, physical disability has been a catalyst for tremendous spiritual growth. He has taken something that is a normal part of life in an abnormal world, and redeemed it for God's glory.106

When the church fails to recognize the tremendous personal and spiritual growth that can manifest out of suffering it inevitably limits the participation of its members, including people with disabilities. By relegating the “ministry” to persons who outwardly appear “strong, successful and healthy” the marks of American prosperity, the church undermines its own mission and deeply misunderstands this facet of suffering.

This is not to say that we “wish” suffering to come upon anyone. Neither do we propose to employ the harsh acetic practices of some of the early Christian monastics. We must reject theologies that see Christianity as a practice in working off spiritual debt.107 We must also reject notions that acetic “self afflictions” make us more spiritual before God.108

Due to the reality of the world around us, we must conclude that suffering can happen to anyone, at any time and that no one is immune to suffering. Therefore instead of avoiding suffering we must reframe our own assumptions about it. Keller reframes the question this way, “the same traumatic experience can ruin one person and make another person stronger and even happier. How can we be prepared to handle suffering in such a way that it leads to growth?”109

107 Timothy Keller, Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, p.29.
Along with the above critique, there is also great harm in the reductionism of this facet of suffering. Indeed, by reducing all forms of suffering to “God is testing me” also misunderstands scripture. As Palmer notes, “to reduce all suffering to testing, with God simply throwing us test after test, is sadistic and redundant. When do the tests end and when does God creatively reveal deeper and more varied reasons for human pain?”.\textsuperscript{110}

So then, a nuanced view of suffering includes the “refinement” of ourselves through suffering. However we must also reject reductionism as well as ascetic notions of self harm. Therefore, while we may endure many trials in this lifetime, we should be quick to see the power of God in the midst of our pain. We should not rejoice in the evil itself, but rather where that adversity takes us, namely to the feet of Jesus. In this, disability theology becomes a prophetic voice that points us back to the scriptural foundation of being “refined in the fire”.

E. Suffering as Correction

The fifth facet of suffering, “suffering as correction” is also seen throughout the scriptures. One instance of biblical correction is seen in the life of Jonah. As Keller notes, “God was using adverse circumstances to show him the evil of his own heart”.\textsuperscript{111} The author of Hebrews implores us to “endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?”.\textsuperscript{112} In one of the most well known Psalms written by David (Psalm 23), we find the theme of “correction” with God as the guiding shepherd. This is the next foundational truth that a nuanced view of suffering is built on.

\textsuperscript{110} Robert C Palmer and Heather Palmer Welesko, \textit{The Diamond of Adversity}, p.38.
\textsuperscript{111} Timothy Keller, \textit{Walking with God through Pain and Suffering}, p.207.
\textsuperscript{112} Hebrews 12:7, NIV.
Palmer also agrees that sometimes God uses suffering as a “corrective tool” when we have wandered down the wrong path of life.\textsuperscript{113} However he also notes, “what's important to remember is that even when God corrects, it pains him, and he takes no pleasure in using adversity to change lives”.\textsuperscript{114} So then sometimes suffering comes to us as God’s correction, it is through His guiding hand that we turn from our own sinful actions, attitudes or behaviors.

That being said, we must distinguish between correction and retribution or punishment theologies. Keller notes “God does not exact retribution from a believer, because of Jesus...but God often appoints some aspect of the brokenness of the world to come into our lives and wake us up and turn to him”.\textsuperscript{115} Palmer notes “one of the most common ways people go about explaining their suffering is to default to an angry, punishing God theory, citing a God who stands behind the suffering, having sent it as punishment for some infraction on our part.”\textsuperscript{116}

This facet, suffering as correction, is another frequently mishandled aspect of suffering by American Christians. For when we look at it through the lens of disability we find scores of testimonies pointing to the reductionist thinking that “disability” is punishment, retribution or “correction” for sin. One example is recounted by Marva Dawn, she states, “I was told by one well-meaning student that there must be some unconfessed sin in my life that causes me to be blind in one eye”.\textsuperscript{117} She aptly labels this kind of thinking “retribution” theology as well.\textsuperscript{118}

Not only is this merely “wrong thinking” but it is both absurd and hypocritical as well. If God responded to every act of sin by plaguing the sinner with a disability, quite soon we would

\textsuperscript{113} Robert C Palmer and Heather Palmer Welesko, \textit{The Diamond of Adversity}, p.52.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, p.52.
\textsuperscript{115} Timothy Keller, \textit{Walking with God through Pain and Suffering}, p.208.
\textsuperscript{116} Robert C Palmer and Heather Palmer Welesko, \textit{The Diamond of Adversity}, p.35.
\textsuperscript{117} Marva J. Dawn, \textit{Being Well When Were Ill: Wholeness and Hope in Spite of Infirmity}. p.68.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, p.67-69.
all find ourselves the recipients of such malady! The fact is that all Christians, even the most
devout, live lives that are in need of constant repentance. Thus the absurdity of reducing
disability or “suffering” to retribution alone, becomes all too apparent.

Likewise, so does the hypocrisy of such a theology. For one to say that a person is
disabled or “suffering” by sin alone (thus implying that they remain healthy and able-bodied
because they have not made such an egregious sin) is hypocrisy at its core. Palmer notes, “to
believe, then, God only or always uses suffering as punishment is to deeply misunderstand God,
and to misunderstand adversity as well”. Likewise Carson posits that things such as plagues or
birth defects are not very discriminating. “therefore if we see them only as retaliation or
retribution for specific sins, we should be terribly confused when people who have not indulged
in such sins suffer along with those who have”.

In this disability theology becomes a prophetic voice by pointing us back to the scriptural
foundation of God as the “good shepherd of correction”, rather than a God obsessed with
retribution and divine punishment.

F. Persecution as Witness.

The sixth facet of suffering is a unique type of suffering experienced by Christians. 2
Timothy 3:12 states, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be
persecuted”. Jesus tells us in the beatitudes “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of
righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.

---

121 Matthew 5:10, NIV.
So then to understand the sixth facet of suffering is to acknowledge that some suffering comes to us in the form of persecution. This kind of suffering can take many forms, be it from family, society or culture. Persecution ranges from intolerant attitudes and behaviors, to emotional and physical forms of violence and trauma. The most severe forms of persecution results in the martyrdom of Christians.

While such suffering is traumatic, it is also expected. All Christians should note the words of Jesus in John 15 where he states, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first”.\(^{122}\) He also said, “Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also”.\(^{123}\) To be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, is to take up this facet of suffering. This is the next foundational truth that a nuanced view of suffering is built upon.

Bonhoeffer in his notable work *The Cost of Discipleship* boldly declares, “if we refuse to take up our cross and submit to suffering and rejection at the hands of men, we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have ceased to follow him”.\(^{124}\) However Bonhoeffer asserted that if we as disciples pick up that cross, we become “peacemakers” that are part of Christ’s reconciling work in the world. As such we overcome evil with good and become a witness of peace and forgiveness in a world of war and hate.\(^{125}\)

George Buttrick calls this the “vocation of witness”.\(^{126}\) In this we point to the redemptive pain of Christ and bear witness to the pain, suffering and social concerns of the world.\(^{127}\)

\(^{122}\) John 15:18, NIV.
\(^{123}\) John 15:20a, NIV.
\(^{125}\) Ibid, p.113.
\(^{127}\) Ibid, p.189.
Moreover, this kind of suffering “as a witness” is not just placed on individual disciples but becomes the response of the entire faith community. Buttrick asserts, “until the church knows again this vocation of the pain of public witness it will be bereft of both joy and power”. In this the church’s task becomes a witness to a suffering world.

One of the aspects of persecution is of course that of martyrdom. In this the Christian response is to pursue with our deaths “the fullest realization of God’s reconciling kingdom as the only alternative to our violent world”. And thus become a witness to our own persecutors of God’s grace. In forming a nuanced view of suffering we look to the example of the Amish community’s response to persecution.

We can only begin to comprehend what motivated the tragic school shooting in 2006 at Nickel Mines by Charles Roberts. But one thing has been clear throughout the myriad of investigations and articles that have been published since this tragedy. Namely that this man was “angry with God”. In the wake of the killing of children who belonged to the Amish faith, many have drawn parallels to the Amish communities “response of suffering” that mirrors those found in other stories of Christian martyrs.

Keller notes that the Amish community of Lancaster County, in response to the October 2006 school shooting in which 5 children ages 7 to 13 were killed, faced their suffering much

---

131 Timothy Keller, Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, p.176-177.
like the martyr Stephen did, with a peace that surpassed the nation's understanding.\textsuperscript{132} He also wrote that, “the way they handle their suffering has been a powerful testimony to the truth of their faith and to the grace and glory of their God”.\textsuperscript{133} Most notably they also offered forgiveness to the family of Roberts in the midst of deep suffering and loss. Keller notes this as a form of “self-renunciation” by the Amish community.

However what Keller missed in his assessment was the historical faith of Anabaptism as a “shared history of persecution”. Noted Anabaptist scholar Donald Kraybill traces the forgiveness within the Amish faith to the historical roots of the “many 16th century Anabaptists who forgave their executioners, martyrs whom the Amish claim as physical and spiritual ancestors”.\textsuperscript{134} The Anabaptist tradition places much historical and theological weight on their “shared history of persecution”, most notably found in \textit{The Martyrs Mirror}.\textsuperscript{135} So then, for the Amish community at Nickel Mines their “theology of suffering” was deeply tied to their historical roots and shared history of Anabaptist martyrdom and persecution.

Nevertheless Keller’s assertion of a response of forgiveness, accurately describes the scriptural critique of our culture. He notes that we live in an American society “in which we are taught not self-renunciation but self-assertion - that your freedom, interest, and needs must always come first. A culture promoting self-assertion, however, will usually produce revenge as

\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{132} Ibid, p.176.
\item\textsuperscript{133} Ibid, p.176.
\item\textsuperscript{135} Thieleman J. van Brught and I. Daniel Rupp, \textit{The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs Mirror, of the Defenceless Christians: Who Suffered and Were Put to Death for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, from the Time of Christ until the Year A.D. 1660} (Near Lampeter Square, Lancaster Co., Pa.: David Miller, 1837.)
a response to suffering, while a counterculture like the Amish, promoting self-renunciation, will much more likely produce forgiveness as a response.”

Perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of the American church is its loss of “shared suffering”. The rugged individualism of American culture has led many church communities unable to share in public lament. As the church becomes more individualistic and egocentric those who do suffer become isolated or “silent” sufferers, unable to share their adversity with others.

As we turn to theologies of persecution and disability, we find that some within the Christian tradition have put forth the view that in cases of persecution and martyrdom, persons who died for their faith would retain their scars even in the afterlife. Like the resurrected body of Jesus that retained the marks of his suffering, martyrs would also retain their “marks of suffering” on their glorified bodies. This is one of the only areas of historic theology where disfigured bodies are seen as deserving honor instead of shame. Here bodily suffering takes on an honorable and virtuous motif. To suffer bodily is to have suffered like Christ. Thus where persons have become disabled, paralyzed, blinded or otherwise disfigured because of persecution at the hands of others, is not linked to personal sin or God’s displeasure, but rather this disablement becomes the virtuous actions of a faithful disciple under the cruel hands of persecutors.

---

139 Ibid, p.1010-1011.
140 Ibid, p.1010.
Now of course we must not link every form of suffering to “persecution” where there is no evidence of such. Likewise many disability theologians have noted that we must not reduce all forms of disability or impairment with some notion of “virtuous suffering” and therein romanticize disability as a heroic tale of suffering.\textsuperscript{141} At best such views misunderstand true suffering at the hands of persecutors and at worst belittle and trivialize both the disabled community and the persecuted church. In forming a nuanced view of suffering and disability we find scripture calling us back to the reality of persecution and our response as “witness” instead of retribution to the world.

**G. God Suffers With Us.**

The seventh facet of suffering, “God suffers with us” is a profound response to a suffering world. Scriptures attest that God can be “grieved” at the actions of humanity (Gen 6:6). The Holy Spirit is likewise grieved in Isaiah 63:10. And Jesus is called “the man of sorrows” (Isaiah 53:3). When examining both the historic creeds of the early church, the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, we see a distinct use of the word “suffered” in relation to Jesus. Hall remarks, “whether in full consciousness or not, this was the primitive Christian way of saying that in order fully to identify himself with the human species, it was necessary for the incarnate logos to become a broken man.”\textsuperscript{142} Keller simply states “God is grieved at our grief”.\textsuperscript{143}

Theologians have noted that a condition of the incarnation must include suffering for the messiah to be called “Emmanuel”.\textsuperscript{144} Indeed if God is to be truly “with us” and take on full humanity then the incarnation necessitates suffering. Hall posits that in doing so Jesus not only

---

\textsuperscript{141} Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, p.11.
\textsuperscript{142} Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, p.33.
\textsuperscript{143} Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, p.166.
\textsuperscript{144} Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, p.33.
has to taste death, but for a moment taste “the sting of death” before ultimately conquering it.\textsuperscript{145} In short, God’s response to suffering is fixed on a love that “suffers” with us. This is his response to the brokenness of the world. God’s “response” to suffering is therefore seen through the incarnation and death of His Son. The cross is a reminder to all humanity that God is for us and suffers alongside us. This then, is the scriptural foundation of the seventh facet of suffering.

One stark difference to this nuanced view is found in the theology of the prosperity gospel. While the “prosperity gospel” is now a broader global phenomenon, it still maintains millions of followers within American Christianity. Sadly may ignore the foundational truth above and instead extrapolate the erroneous idea that because Jesus suffered we don’t have to.

Indeed some assert that “Jesus was wounded on the cross so that every Christian who has enough faith can enjoy complete physical healing”.\textsuperscript{146} Many maintain that through Jesus’ sacrifice the reality of disease and sickness should not merely be rejected, but believers are also “commanded” to experience perfect health through faith.\textsuperscript{147} In this view the incarnation quickly becomes another “benefit” for the faithful instead of a narrative of Emmanuel that suffers alongside us and understands our struggles.

Another theology that is espoused in many American churches is the “triumphalist narrative” of the cross, to the exclusion of the “man of sorrows”. No doubt Christianity is founded on the belief that Christ defeated death. However when we reduce the entire incarnation or atonement account to simply “victory” we miss the facet of Jesus as the suffering servant.

In response to this, disability theology becomes a prophetic voice against the cultural theology of the American church and prosperity gospels. One prominent work that challenges the American church’s view of God has been Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God*. In it, she rejects the triumphalist narrative of a conquering lord, and instead posites forth Jesus Christ as the embodiment of the disabled God. She also calls for a resymbolization of Jesus Christ as seen through communion. Therefore Jesus should be “broken anew at each eucharistic reenactment”.

To be sure this view is a powerful statement against the backdrop of the theology of prosperity gospels. However, as previously stated, disability theology can be a reforming voice within historical orthodoxy. Therefore the calling by some disability theologians to completely “transform” the entire symbolism of Christ and the historic rituals of Christianity away from any notion of “victory” or his eminent power should be viewed as equally reductionistic. The fact of the matter is that Jesus is both “broken man” and “victorious savior” according to the scriptures. Therefore the exclusion of either category should be avoided.

Amanda Tan offers a different perspective on “the disabled God” than Eisland. In her own work *The Disabled Christ*, She offers a guiding perspective;

Jesus' disability then was not a restriction imposed by sickness or by any physical and mental impairment. Jesus' disability was the result of his becoming a human being. As a human being, he experienced what it meant to be weak, to be confined, and to feel pain. Like any person with a disability, he would have preferred not to go through suffering (Matt. 26:39). But he voluntarily relinquished all that he had and became disabled for humanity's sin. Thus, in the willing forfeiture of every thing that he could have and

---

148 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*.
149 Ibid, p.91-94.
150 Ibid, p.23.
everything that was his, and in the suffering that came as a result of his voluntary
deprivation, Jesus became disabled.\textsuperscript{151}

Indeed a nuanced view of suffering posits a “broad view of Jesus”. One that includes his
victory over sin but also includes his broken body and his suffering. In doing so, Jesus as “the
disabled Christ” becomes a rich symbol to those who live with broken or scarred bodies, as well
as all forms of disabilities. In this disability theology once again prophetically calls the American
church back to the foundational scriptures that unveil a “God who suffers with us”.

\textbf{H. Embracing God’s Grand Narrative: Providence, Mystery and Hope.}

This section includes three “foundational truths” that must also be included in any
nuanced view of suffering. Unlike the other facets of suffering outlined above which explain the
“origins” or give reasons as to why suffering might occur, these three facets of suffering point to
“God’s grand narrative”, meaning that suffering should be seen in light of God’s unfolding work
in the world. This includes God’s providence, mystery or God’s “hidden will” and ultimately
hope that even in suffering “we know that God causes all things to work together for good to
those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28). Rather than
separating each of these facets we take all three as “essential” parts that make up God’s grand
narrative, in doing so we hold these together within this section. By looking at these three final
“facets” of suffering that make up God’s grand narrative, we continue to form a nuanced view of
suffering.

Providence concisely defined is, “the foresight, love, concern and care God has for all his creatures.” Other theologians such as Thomas Oden define God's providence as follows, “three affirmations summarize the Christian teaching of providence: God is preserving the creation in being. God is cooperating to enable creatures to act. God is guiding all creatures, inorganic and organic, animal and rational creation, toward ends that exceed the understanding of those provided for”. Furthermore Oden posits two additional “truths” when describing the nature of providence. Namely, that “no creature is so great as to be beyond the need of God's care” and lastly, “no creature is so small as to be overlooked by God's care”.

In this we see the foundational truths of scripture in bringing suffering into perspective. In this assurance is given to the believer that even in the midst of a seemingly chaotic and suffering world, God is actively involved in its affairs. Indeed God is not sitting idly by but according to scripture, He is sustaining and actively “holding” all things together (Col 1:15-20, Psalms 135, Job 38).

However in “postmodern America” grand narratives or “meta-narratives” are being both challenged and discarded. Within the church many have also abandoned such views. In the place of biblical providence they posit a “formulaic theology” of providence, a view that gives more “control” to people in forging their own desired outcomes. In this view God distributes “blessings or curses” based on a person's good works, strength of faith, or ability to pray. When this view of formulaic providence is embraced, disability is seen both as a disruption of

155 Hans S. Reinders, *Disability, Providence, and Ethics*, p.72.
God’s perfect plan or a “divine judgement” by God to the one who suffers. Likewise people who are successful and healthy are “blessed” and are seen as more spiritual.

Beates states that “as Americans we are deluged by images of strength and self sufficiency”.\textsuperscript{156} He questions along with other disability scholars why the church continues to form and mold pastors into “successful CEOs”.\textsuperscript{157} Included in this view is that church leaders need to exude the American ideals of success, health and prosperity for them to be fully qualified to minister.

Albert Herzog states, “in the Roman Catholic Church men with disabilities are prohibited by canon law from entering the priesthood, in Protestantism there is an unwritten doctrine which has historically deterred physically disabled persons from entering the ministry, since it is of course admitted that some forms of disfigurement could cause discomfort or distraction within the congregation”.\textsuperscript{158} Although reforms have happened within the church, and especially throughout the disability rights movement of the later 1970’s-1990’s, many churches still have a long way to go. Unfortunately the presence of disability as “providential judgement” is still a stigma.

Disability scholar Hans Reinders challenges the idea of “providential judgement” and instead posites a rethinking of providence in terms of God’s presence. He states, “understanding providence, therefore, is not about trying to figure out why God sends these events upon you


\textsuperscript{157} Ibid. p.130

\textsuperscript{158} Albert A. Herzog, , Jr. \textit{The Social Contexts of Disability Ministry: A Primer for Pastors, Seminarians, and Lay Leaders}. p.4-5.
rather than others. There's no way of answering the why question in those terms with any degree of confidence...Rather it is about how He is present in the midst of people's affliction”.\textsuperscript{159}

Lastly, Reiders calls upon the disabled community to embrace a “God with us” view of providence. He writes, “believing in providence takes time. Knowing that God has not abandoned you is knowing in hindsight. But not only does it take time; it needs reconfirmation too, from time to time, because the disability experience is not going away”.\textsuperscript{160}

When encountering persons with disabilities churches often fail at this “reconfirmation” objective. In thinking that persons with disabilities are somehow “outside of God’s providential plan” church leaders often overlook a disabled person's potential to be a part of “God’s grand-narrative”. Waters and Zuck recount a story of how one person envisioned how he could serve the church (something that is quite clearly mandated in scripture) in spite of the church leadership's initial opposition. They write,

Tom wanted to be on the greeting team of his church, but he was mute. How could you even think of greeting people as they entered the building? Since the leaders of that ministry turned him down, Tom went home and made a sign that he would wear around his neck each Sunday. On it were three well printed lines. My name is Tom. I cannot speak. Welcome to our church! When Tom walked throughout the foyer and noticed new visitors, he would show them his sign, then give a big smile, and shake their hands as a welcome to the church. Tom's proposal was rejected at first because the leaders feared what visitors might think. But the more Tom showed people his sign, the more favorably people responded to his being on the team. Now he is second in command of the greeting ministry, (and) using his gift of hospitality.\textsuperscript{161}

Tom’s story challenges the theology of “providential judgement” that hinder people from realizing their own role in God’s unfolding story. As long as the church keeps persons with

\textsuperscript{159} Hans S. Reinders, Disability, Providence, and Ethics, p.182.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, p.182.
\textsuperscript{161} Larry J. Waters and Roy B. Zuck, Why, O God, p.62-63.
disability relegated to “objects of charity” they will miss out in welcoming them into the ongoing “story” of God’s creation.

By positioning providence in terms of God’s active presence within His grand narrative, disability theology provides a prophetic voice that calls us back to scriptural foundations. This is the eight facet of a nuanced view of suffering.

We turn now to the ninth facet of suffering, mystery. In forming a nuanced view of suffering we come to the realization along with others that “there are many things happening in our lives that are beyond human understanding”.

In Job 36:26 we read “How great is God--beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out”. If we are to take Job’s assertion seriously we will be slow indeed to try and explain the mysteries of God’s hidden will. Scripture asserts that there are mysteries and “secret things” which are unknown to us (Duet 29:29, Rom 11:33).

However many people are uncomfortable with “mystery” as a facet of suffering. Carson points out two theological views that seek to undermine or stand against the above foundational truth. The first, Carson states, is succumbing to the “crush of the urgent”. In our fast-paced society we seek to have the solutions to our problems “expedited”. Carson remarks, “we think that if God is going to relieve our sufferings, he ought to do it immediately. We want God to respond with the same self efficiency as we expect from our high-speed computers”.

Many books and self help guides have touted numerous ways to “get through suffering” as quickly as possible. As the pace of society continues to accelerate we feel the “crush” to find a

---

162 Ibid, p.123.
solution to suffering. People often withdraw from church life and activities when going through suffering until they (in a very american way) return “victorious”, having conquered whatever ailment or adversity they had to face.

Disability theology offers a candid response to this viewpoint. One such response comes from the witness and testimonies of those who have life-long genetic illnesses or chronic pains. Disability theologian Marva Dawn writes from out of such a perspective in her work *Being Well When We’re Ill*, and highlights the fact that “wholeness” can happen even in the midst of infirmity. In fact she posits that this unique viewpoint that is shared by many with life-long debilitating conditions can actually be a strength. She writes,

“We who have chronic health problems have an advantage in that our very tribulations have already put us in a desert, where we have been stripped of all that makes life seem secure, of the comfort most people feel in their bodily health. But we are endlessly distracted by the necessities of caring for our afflictions. Our desert trial, then, is to turn those disturbances into vehicles for growth in our intimacy with God and in the maturity of our character.”

Rather than being a detriment, Dawn asserts that this “desert experience” can lead to spiritual life and growth. She also points out how our culture often stifles such growth through our preoccupations of busyness, advancement and self-indulgence. In short “We never seem to be satisfied, we always seem to want more”. It is only in “the desert” that the shallowness of our cultural thinking is truly seen.

---

165 Ibid.p.252
166 Ibid. p.252-253.
167 Ibid. p.253.
Instead of worldly comforts we find grace, and in losing our own security, we might truly rest in the mystery of God’s peace. In this disability theology offers a prophetic voice in calling the church back being “still before the Lord” (Psalms 37:7) in the midst of suffering.

Carson states that the second flawed view is to have a theology with all the answers.\textsuperscript{168} He asserts that “our certainty and dogmatism give us such assurance, our systematic theology is so well articulated, that we leave precious little scope for mystery, awe, and unknowns”.\textsuperscript{169} Not only can this be bad theology but Dawn states that such thinking can also lead to emotional exhaustion and even “spiritual danger”.\textsuperscript{170} In this she finds, “the more we long to make sense of things the more our desire is for meaning rather than for God in all God's mystery”.\textsuperscript{171}

One of the ways forward she states is in changing our questions of “why” to the questions of “what and where”.\textsuperscript{172} “In doing so, the new questions become ‘what is God doing in the midst of this?’ and ‘where do I catch glimpses of the Trinity’s grace?’”.\textsuperscript{173} By changing our view from “why is this happening to me” to “where is God working in the midst of this” our perspective of suffering radically changes. In doing so we can “rest” in the goodness of God even when we don’t have all of our questions answered.

The tenth and final facet of suffering is hope. This is also the final “answer” that the Christian witness has for a fallen and broken world (John 16:33,1Thess 4:13-18). Indeed Paul reminds his readers; “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid. p.26.
\textsuperscript{170} Marva J. Dawn, \textit{Being Well When Were Ill: Wholeness and Hope in Spite of Infirmity}. p.41.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid. p.41.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid. p.42
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid. p.42.
with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). For the Christian it is our echatological view of God’s “grand narrative” that brings us both hope and assurance even in the midst of our sufferings. Keller reminds us, “human beings are hope-shaped creatures. The way you live now is completely controlled by what you believe about your future.174

Peter also reminds the church to take such a view. “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Pet 5:10). Indeed in the area of “present sufferings” we are encouraged time and again to take a “long view” of things and keep the reality of eternity in mind. Finally the scriptures attest that the ultimate “hope” for the believer is the reality of being in the very presence of God. In this, suffering, disability and “every tear” is wiped away in God’s grand-narrative (Rev 21:4).

Therefore to have a nuanced view of suffering is also to include “hope” as seen through scriptures’ counter-cultural reply to a broken world. By examining the different facets of suffering in light of God’s grand narrative, we come to a nuanced view that correctly describes the complexity of forming a robust theology of suffering.

In concluding our examination of these ten “facets of suffering” we’ve outlined our first “response” by positing a change of perspective from reductionist theologies to a contextual theology of suffering and disability. By examining the interconnectedness of theology, suffering, disability and culture we have called for a “spirit of reformation” to take place.

As stated previously, It is imperative that we understand the depth and complexity of suffering and resist one-dimensional and shallow explanations. Throughout this first response,

174 Timothy Keller, Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, p.314.
we have shown the various dangers of reductionism within the American church. We have also shown how these theologies uniquely continue to ostracize or even disparage people with disabilities. In this we form a nuanced view of suffering that takes a metaphorical “diamond” perspective, with many facets making up a whole. It is through this view of suffering we can begin to understand one another and build the solidarity to stand together as a church community.

VI. The Second Response: Groaning and Lament: The Need For Community

This next section moves us from theology to action. Our first response was in short, a call for a change in thinking and perspective. Put in another way we answered the question “how should I view suffering?” The question must now turn to “what now ought we do?” or “how should we live?” Therefore, the second “response” that this research advances for American churches to reclaim “public lament” as outlined within the scriptures.

Scripture is full of laments. From accounts in Genesis to the Psalms and New Testaments and lest we forget an entire book (Lamentations) that expresses deep sorrows and cries to God over the destruction of Jerusalem. Indeed Hall reminds us that, “One of the foremost characteristics of the faith of Israel in particular is the forthright nature of its language of lament”. One only needs to read some of the “national” public laments found in the Psalms to see the forthright nature of public lament. We read, “Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?” (Psalm 44:24).

Paul even declares that as believers our “response” should be to help comfort others. He writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God

of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor 1:3-4). Indeed Peterman states, “while individuals may suffer, the family and community never sit passively by...whether in help or hindrance, suffering becomes a communal concern.”  

It is this kind of “public lament” that needs to be reclaimed within our churches. 

But Hall reminds us that, “it has always been religion or the ‘temptation of the church’ to be comfortable, free of suffering, to have arrived while avoiding the way”. Indeed one of the greatest disadvantages the American church faces today within our western culture is its inability to lament as community. In losing its ability to publically lament, the church has lost an essential characteristic. Hall states, “suffering is necessary for the body of Christ - and is one of the indispensable marks of its authenticity”. Keller also remarks, “Christians are encouraged to express their grief with cries, laments and questions”.  

Unfortunately to many in America a “successful church is judged to be so by the members it attracts, the number of its organizations and activities [and] the prestige and popularity it enjoys”. Rather than lament, many church-goers fall into the trap of masking their suffering while in church by putting on a facade of success. In many instances those who are “in suffering” are prayed for, then quietly relegated to the sidelines while the successful are lauded as the most spiritual due to God’s abundant blessing in their life. Other times people who are  

---

suffering, such as those with disabilities, become objects of pity or shame within the church. This is the picture of many current congregations in America.

Marva Dawn recounts the story of a spiritual advisor who posited that a disabled woman was still “in suffering” because she wasn't thanking God for her handicap. In this she notes two flaws within the spiritual advisors theology. The first is that it avoids lament. Dawn states, “we can weep and cry out to God all the time. There's no “stage” at which we should switch to thanksgiving instead. In fact, if we are still burdened, it would be a lie to stop lamenting”.

The second flaw in this advisor's theology is that the woman was told specifically to thank God for her disability. Dawn states quite bluntly “I do not thank God for my pile of limitations. I thank God that he is there in the midst of them...but I do not thank God for the evils themselves because I don't believe that God's creation intention was for us to be ill and handicapped”. Furthermore, she states, “we are encouraged to lament and ask the Trinity for help at all times and to give thanks in the midst of every situation. God's will is not for us to be afflicted, but for us to turn to him within those afflictions”.

The fact remains that people within the American church are far less likely to “lament with” the suffering of disabled persons. Instead the common trend within the church has been to relegate persons with disabilities to segregated objects of charity, or to continue marginalizing them through theologies of pity and “shame” rather than empathy.

---

182 Ibid, p.76.
183 Ibid, p.76-77.
184 Ibid, p.77.
186 Ibid, p.42.
By continuing to “shame” people because of their disabilities, or to simply regard them as objects of pity or charity, the church remains a “club for the healthy and successful” instead of a community that cares for the needs of its members. Clara Schuster remarks, “physical accessibility is a critical issue for many disabled members of the church family, but emotional accessibility plays an even greater role in a Church's attempts to integrate such persons into the congregation... If adults politely ignore the couple with an autistic child, then those persons will not return. Our love for Christ must translate into a love for all people (John 13:35).”

If we want the American Church to become a faith community in which persons with disabilities not only take part in, but flourish, we must reclaim public lament. By standing together as a church community and sharing in the unique sufferings of all its members, the church can become a welcoming community for all persons, regardless of disability.

While the first response of this paper called for the church to change it’s “perspective” on suffering, this second response is a call to “share in our sufferings” with others. These are the first two steps to creating a church culture that embodies what scriptures teach and welcome people with disabilities into its congregation. However it must also be noted that this is only the first steps in achieving a welcoming church community. The third response of this paper moves the conversation forward and is also essential for the church to witness and worship alongside people with disabilities.

VII. The Third Response: The Reformation of Disability & The Church

The third response “the reformation of disability and the church” takes us from the theology of suffering and engages in the task of creating a new theology of disability and posits a

plan of action for the church. Taken together, the three responses throughout this paper will form
“a contextual theology of suffering and disability” that examines our unique cultural and
theological landscape, and posits new ways in which the church can actively welcome and
worship alongside people with disabilities.

Many disability scholars and activists have advocated for church inclusion using political
change or social reform arguments instead of “theological reformations” based on a prophetic
scriptural model, as this research does. The danger however in political or social models is that
they can quickly lead to forms of “tribalism” that have become increasingly present in American
culture and academia. Wilkens states that this “postmodern tribalism” can create a culture of
“victimhood”.\textsuperscript{188} He continues “many groups use their status as victims as a means to stake their
claim to resources of power”\textsuperscript{189} Disability scholar Beth Creamer also voices the fragmentation
and isolation that can occur within these approaches. She writes,

The liberationist model attracts allies only insofar as we are seen to have common
commitments and concerns. Some may join with us out of a sense of duty or outrage;
others may see ways in which the liberation of one group is tied to the liberation of
others. Thus, we may work together in protest of inaccessible public transportation or
build coalitions around health care policies, but these alliances dissolve once an issue is
closed or energy and funds are exhausted. I would not want to argue that we let go of
these alliances or identity politics—any day’s newspaper will show how much remains to
be done—and yet we have seen that these movements are not enough. Identity politics
can only take us so far, and clinging too firmly to them leads to fragmentation and
isolation.\textsuperscript{190}

\textsuperscript{188} Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, Hidden Worldviews Eight Cultural Stories That Shape
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid. p.157.
\textsuperscript{190} Deborah, Beth. Creamer. 2010. “Embracing Limits, Queering Embodiment: Creating/Creative
Therefore this third response, continues in advancing “reformation” through a contextual theology of suffering and disability within a “prophetic” model that calls the church back to scriptural foundations instead of using a social or liberationist models of theology that call for a dismantling of institutional power structures.

The call for reformation then, starts with this question. Does your church community welcome people with disabilities? For many, the answer to that question would be in the affirmative, and yet the countless stories and testimonies of people with disabilities reveal a different normative reality. A cursory glance online and within disability studies will show ample evidence of this ongoing reality. Disability studies seeks to bring this reality to the forefront of public discourse by giving voice to the experience of disabled individuals. One example of these “voices” or testimonies from the disabled community comes from a recent article within a major media outlet entitled, *Kids with disabilities face many challenges. Church shouldn’t be one of them*. The author states:

As parents, it’s difficult to have to continually explain, apologize and advocate for your child, especially in a faith community that might not see including them as important (and might be annoyed when moments of silent prayer are interrupted). Congregations themselves are a pivotal reason children with chronic health conditions attend at much lower rates… And sometimes, the attitudes from congregants can be devastating. These include degrading comments or behaviors signaling that a child with a health condition is not welcome. We have had people tell us that a child who is a disruption in church probably shouldn’t attend. Others have asked whether children with certain health conditions “really get anything out of participating.” Many parents report that their children with disabilities have been unable to participate because of lack of support and said their congregations had never asked how to best include their children.\(^{191}\)

Testimonies and stories such as this one point to the ongoing reality of prejudicial sin within churches that effectively withhold any hopes of full participation or inclusion by people with disabilities and their family members, into faith communities. Therefore what is needed within the American church can be no less than a reformation of theology and practice.

Justo Gonzalez reminds us of Luther’s words, “We cannot deny such manifest wrongs... the power of the keys is abused and enslaved to greed and ambition”. In keeping with the “spirit of reformation” this research calls for the people of the American church to no longer deny such “manifest wrongs” that happen every week throughout the nation against people with disabilities and their families. In addition, this paper calls for the reformation of disability and the church by forming a new theology of disability and a plan of action for the church.

This new theology of disability will examine the imago dei, the equipping of the Church body and the Great Commission. By examining each of these three areas and their scriptural foundations, we will develop a theology of disability that along with our nuanced view of suffering, constitutes a contextual theology of suffering and disability.

Within each of the following three sections we will also posit new “church practices” that move us from theology to action. In doing so we along with other scholars note that, “every Christian has an innate need to actively express [their] relationship to God”. Therefore we, along with Schuster, posit that, “disabled persons need to find a place of service too. Christ’s gifts of joy, peace, and love are for everyone. These can be shared in our communication and

---

interaction.” Therefore a reformation of disability and the church calls for both a change in theology and practice within the American church.

A. **Imago Dei: Disability and the Image of God.**

We start our development of a theology of disability with the “Imago Dei” or Image of God. We arrive at this theological term from the creation account found in Genesis which states;

26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” 27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Gen 1:26-28 NIV).

Throughout church history theologians have debated the interpretation of this account along with other verses, and have subsequently located the “Imago Dei” within reason, dominion over creatures, freedom of the will, righteousness and purity, or sometimes within a “Christological framework” of relationship and receptivity. Theologian R.G. Crawford states that “a traditional idea of the image of God has been that man was created originally in knowledge, righteousness and true holiness”. On the other hand, many disability scholars have advocated for a “relational and Christological view” that locates “imago dei” as; relationship with God, interrelationality with other persons and finally their interdependence with the world around them.

---

194 Ibid. p.40.
195 Ibid, p.233-236
Imago Dei also has profound ethical and moral implications. One example of this is the need for bioethical decision making, especially in regards to “societal pressures that seek to ensure children are free from any significant mental or physical disabilities” which in turn, can quickly lead to forms of euthanasia. Thus Imago Dei is not merely a theological abstraction but rather has broad implications for society and life. In understanding these implications of what it means to be created in the image of God, many theologians have asserted that the Imago Dei is the source of all human dignity.

Therefore as we develop a theology of disability, we will seek to broaden our perception of the Imago Dei. Our first foundational point, like many other disability theologians, is that human value and worth is intrinsic upon all persons regardless of physical, intellectual or social capabilities. In forming this theology in context, we will briefly examine two marginalizing theologies of Imago Dei in the American church that undermine the above foundational point.

The first theology comes out of “enlightenment rationalism” which centered on the ideas of reason, intellect and will as the primary characteristics of humanity. The philosophies that came out of the Enlightenment era or “Age of Reason” had profound impacts on theology in the Western world. As such, some theologians in America today still locate the Imago Dei within

---


199 Ibid.

200 Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2007), 169-172.

“cognitive capacity” or the ability to reason, think and deduce. In this it is humanity's ability to reason that separate us from the rest of the earthly created order.

However, the danger of this view is in its valuation of intellect. Immediately questions arise such as “what if a person's cognitive faculties are not as great as others? Do we state that they do not reflect the Imago Dei?” In looking at the Image of God, theologian Amos Young gives a guiding perspective in not limiting Imago Dei to rationality. He states;

Undoubtedly omniscience and wisdom constitute a significant dimension of the nature of God, but they are by no means the very essence of divinity. If we understand the image as being primarily human reason, then our dealings with others will be basically of an educative and cognitive nature, the implications for those unable to compete cognitively being, as before, exclusion and devaluation.

In stating the consequences of such a view, Yong concludes that, “severe and even profound intellectual disability cannot be used as the sole measure of determining the personhood and intrinsic value of such individuals”. Therefore in positing the intrinsic value of all persons, a contextual theology of disability calls the church to reject views that locate the Imago Dei within a purely rationalistic framework.

We now turn to the second marginalizing theology, the Imago Dei of the prosperity gospel. Reynolds states that the prosperity gospels theology of the Imago Dei can be seen in its bent towards individualism, rationality and self autonomy. In her examination of the prosperity gospel.

202 Ibid.
204 Ibid.
gospel, Bowler states that God is undoubtedly a creator of abundance, prosperity and health.\textsuperscript{206} Furthermore, Christ’s embodiment of wealth is seen through the extravagant gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh he received as a baby.\textsuperscript{207} Also the accounts of the alabaster oil poured on his head and his riding on a donkey into Jerusalem are further proof of “Christ’s affluence”.\textsuperscript{208} Therefore prosperity preachers assert that as Christians we best “reflect Christ” when we too live abundant, healthy and prosperous lives.\textsuperscript{209}

This locates the Imago Dei in a christological framework, in this view all we need to do is pray by faith and we shall receive our abundance.\textsuperscript{210} In short, the prosperity gospel locates our reflection of the image of God within health, wealth and correct reasoning. Aversely disease, poverty and sickness are seen as “sinful” and being unfaithful.\textsuperscript{211}

In contrast to this, many disability theologians locate the Imago Dei within vulnerability, humility and interdependence.\textsuperscript{212} Medi Vlope states “The key to grasping our humanness is seeing our own vulnerability before God, and embracing that vulnerability as God does by becoming human and undergoing suffering and death.”\textsuperscript{213}

However, as we have noted throughout this research, we do great harm by being reductionistic in our theologies. In examining each of the rationalist, prosperity and vulnerability positions the conclusion is that all must be avoided. While Vlopes view of vulnerability, humility

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid, p.95-97.  
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{212} Medi Ann Volpe, "Irresponsible Love: Rethinking Intellectual Disability, Humanity And The Church1," Modern Theology 25, no. 3 (July 3, 2009). p.495.  
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid, 495.}
and interdependence is indeed more inclusive to persons with disabilities, it also falls into the trap of the reductionism of God’s attributes or characteristics. Furthermore such a view cannot be exegeted from the Genesis text.

In examining the Imago Dei within the Genesis text refine Wayne grudem definition to be particularly helpful. unless he States, “the fact that man is in the image of God means that man is like God and represents God”. p.189

Furthermore he asserts “when we realize that the Hebrew word for ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ simply informed the original readers that man was like God, and would in many ways represent God, much of the controversy over the meaning of ‘image of God’ is seen to be a search for too narrow and too specific a meaning”. P189.

In positing a broad view of Imago Dei we also advance, along with Grudem, an equally broad view of human worth, dignity and respect. In this writes;

It means people of every race deserve equal dignity and rights. It means that elderly people, those seriously ill, the mentally retarded, and unborn children deserve full protection and honor as human beings. If we ever deny our unique status in creation as God's only image-bearers, we will soon begin to deprecate the value of human life, will tend to see humans as merely a higher form of animal, and will begin to treat others as such. PG 192 - 193

Taken together with our first foundational point, “that human value and worth is intrinsic upon all persons regardless of physical, intellectual or social capabilities” a theology of disability posits a “broad view” of the Imago Dei and an equally broad view of human dignity, value and honor as God’s unique image-bearers.
As previously stated, the first response in any change must start from a change in thinking and perspective. Therefore a reformation of disability and the church begins with this new perspective of Imago Dei and the honor and value of all human life as God’s image-bearers.

B. Equipping the Many Parts of the Church Body

This next section of the reformation of disability and the church takes us from “Imago” to “Equipping”. After the church has recognized the value, honor and dignity of people created in the Image of God, the next task that follows is to “value, honor and equip the unique gifts” of all its members, regardless of disability. Therefore the American church needs to reclaim the biblical mandate to fully equip the “many parts” that make up the whole church body (1 Cor 12:12-27).

In examining the broader context of 1 Corinthians a few things become readily evident. The church has struggled with division (1 Cor 11:18) and pride (1 Cor 4:18) within its members. From dietary laws to spiritual gifts, Paul addressed a host of various problems. Indeed Paul's opening address to the church is an appeal to unity (1 Corinthians 1:10). His exhortation “Has Christ been divided?” (1 Cor 1:13) is a clear indicator of his views on the church body and its need to reform.

Likewise the book of James is a stark reminder of the favoritism shown to the wealthy and the exhortation rings true even today “have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:4 NIV). It seems that since its very beginnings the church has struggled with the concept of unity and have valued various groups of people, or spiritual giftings above others.
In examining the reality of “divisions” in our American context, disability scholar Stephanie Hubach states,

“we live in a fragmented culture, one that is full of distinct lobbying groups. Typically these groups communicate at each other but not with each other. To the degree that we passively absorb current postmodern cultural constructs about the impossibility of communication across different groups of people, we will fail even to attempt to connect with others whom we perceive to be different from ourselves. When we do this, we implicitly accept society's view of community which is not a group of people bonded by intentionality but a group of people defined entirely by their exclusivity. Pg 36

To overcome this “fragmented” culture, there needs to be intentionality. However as we note above, this cannot come from a version of “lobbying” the church to include persons with disabilities. Nor does simply handing out “positions of power” within the church to disabled members arrive at a solution. Rather we must be led by the scriptural call of 1 Corinthians 12 to be “one body” of “many parts”. In this we recognize that “God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired” (1 Cor 12:18).

In examining the biblical text of 1 Corinthians 12, Mare and Harris posit, “Paul concludes that regardless of what spiritual gift each person has, the Holy Spirit has sovereignly distributed them to produce his own spiritual results (v.11). Therefore, no one should despise another person's gift, a gift given by the Spirit for the good of all (v.7). Furthermore it is key to understanding that the latter verses of 21-26 display the mutual dependence, concern and dignity for the various members of the body.

215 Ibid. p.93.
216 Ibid.
1 Corinthians 12 also remains a foundational text for the community of L’Arche (an international network of communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities experience life together). They identify with Paul’s exhortation, that within the body of Christ the weaker or less presentable parts of the body are seen to be essential and should be honored. In examining these biblical foundations, Vanier voices the stark contrast that he finds within western society in which “the weakest and least presentable are the ones we hide away in institutions or try to get rid of”.

In Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* he offers a guiding insight as to what it means to be a Christian community. He states:

In a Christian community everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. A community which allows unemployed members to exist within it will perish because of them. It will be well therefore if every member receives a definite task to perform for the community. That he may know in hours of doubt that he too is not useless and unusable. Every Christian community must realize that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of fellowship.

In examining this insight we posit, along with Bonhoeffer, that true fellowship can only occur in light of active participation of “all the members” of the Christian community. Indeed, research suggests that one of the key factors of “worth” in being a part of any religious group is a

---

218 Ibid. p.36.
219 Ibid.
sense of “belonging” and can even lead people to a higher quality of life.\textsuperscript{221} As Waters and Zuck posit, “value and dignity are often felt through usefulness”.\textsuperscript{222}

Gene Newman and Joni Eareckson Tada also agree with this view. They write, “how should the church respond to disabled individuals? We could respond with despair, depression, and a sense of hopelessness, or we could view these people as the catalyst of great opportunity”.\textsuperscript{223} Newman recounts the story of one such “catalyst of great opportunity” in the story of Debbie. He writes,

Debbie has faithfully served in her churches Special Ministries department for several years. In addition to being a highly organized, efficient, personable, and godly woman, Debbie is physically disabled. As a young girl she contracted polio, which left her a quadriplegic with only partial use of her arms…Debbie's Ministry represents an important principle that should undergird every disability ministry, that is, our disabled friends should not only be ministered to, but also be permitted to minister their gift to the body of Christ. Debbie's gift of administration and exhortation has had a dramatic impact on the congregation of her church. I hasten to add that, as a result of her ministry, Debbie has not only touched many lives, but also she has developed the self-esteem and dignity that comes through participation in the Lord's work.\textsuperscript{224}

Justin Reimer recounts a similar story in which his son Eli, who was born with Down Syndrome, dramatically shaped the church community through the use of his own spiritual gifts. The worship pastor at a local church in which they had been attending noticed Eli’s love for worshipping Christ through song. Soon afterward, he asked Eli to be a part of the worship team during the Sunday morning service. Reimer states that

“His first Sunday on the team arrived and we stood anxiously while he played the ‘shaker’ with an offbeat fervor and joy. Immediately after that service, and many times over the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[222] Larry J. Waters and Roy B. Zuck, \textit{Why, O God}, p.62.
\item[224] Ibid. p.23.
\end{footnotes}
next two years, people came to us in tears telling of how Eli’s presence on the stage served to redirect their hearts from a posture of going through the motions to engaging more fully in worshipping our God. We were humbled by the Lord's Grace to and through Eli.225

Reimer further states that, “Eli was being recognized as an active participant in the body of Christ, not only as a recipient of mercy and compassion from others in the body”.226 As these testimonies show, the active participation of persons with disabilities gives dignity, purpose and ultimately, is a part of God’s sovereign plan for the good of Christ’s body, the Church.

Therefore a reformation of disability and the church calls American Christianity back to the biblical foundations of 1 Corinthians 12 and advances that, in order to fulfill God’s sovereign plan for the church, that all members, including those with disabilities, become active participants within the body of Christ and in doing so, use the gifts that The Holy Spirit has bestowed on them for the good of the faith community.

C. The Great Commission: Disability & Discipleship

The call for a reformation of disability and the church began the question. “Does your church community welcome people with disabilities?”. We now conclude with this final question “how does your church disciple persons with disabilities?”. In looking at Jesus’ final “great commission” to his disciples, the scriptures call for “all nations” to be discipled. From the proclamation of the Gospel message to the continued teaching and training of fully mature believers, the path is laid before the disciples (and the church) to continue spreading the “good news” of Jesus the Messiah.

226 Ibid. p.125.
“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt 28:19-20. NIV). Using Matthew 28 as our scriptural foundation and “prophetic voice” to The American church, we assert that the church be actively engaged in witnessing and discipling one of the most “unchurched peoples” among them, the disabled community. And in doing so become a witness of Christ to a hurting world.

A research study posted in Disability Studies Quarterly revealed that;

Persons with disabilities are 40% more likely than those without disabilities to report that they never attend worship, and 28% more likely to say that religion is not important in their lives. Regardless of their gender, age, or race/ethnicity, persons with disabilities are less likely than persons without disabilities to attend religious services and to regard religion as important in their lives.227

Clara Schuster observed that within congregations, persons with disabilities “are conspicuously absent”.228 Her follow-up question to this was a straightforward, “where are they?”.229 Yong asserts that “people with profound disabilities are not agents of ministry in the normal senses of that notion, but they are conduits of the revelatory and transformative gifts of God’s Spirit for those who will slow down enough to befriend them”.230 The result of these friendships, he argues, are precisely what can transform and renew the people of God as “a sign to the world of the salvation that is expected in the coming kingdom”.231

229 Ibid. p.18.
231 Ibid. p.116.
However for the American church to become a witness and sign to the world, we must first recognize our own flawed theology of “mission” and discipleship. Guder argues that there has been a “reductionism of mission” in Western theology and the term “mission” has gradually changed within our culture to focus more and more inwards. The focus of missions now is on the “individual blessedness” church members receive to the neglect of our “vocational witness”.232

Furthermore “mission” has shifted from a congregational vocation of witness to the professional duty of the clergy. Now, he argues, “mission” primarily consists of the administration of personal salvation and the providing of spiritual rights by the clergy.233

Turning to the church he states;

The individualism of such a reductionist soteriology has only intensified in the self-centered and consumerist culture of present-day North America. The church’s focus on the tending and maintenance of the ‘savedness’ of the saved is well attested today in churches that advertise themselves as ‘full-service’ congregations that function as purveyors of the religious programs and products their member-consumers want.234

In the short he concludes that, “the ecclesiological mindset we inherit tends to define the church in terms of the benefits it provides its members”.235 By examining our theology and culture Guder calls the church back to its vocation of witness. He states, “God calls a people into discipleship, formation by Jesus, in order to send it out as an apostolic community, so that each of its members can be an apostolic witness with that flame of the Spirit ignited on every head.”236

233 Ibid. p.117-118.
234 Ibid. p.119-120.
235 Ibid. p.124.
236 Ibid. p.125.
Therefore, a “reformation of disability and the church” calls the church back to Jesus’ commission to “make disciples” of all nations. In doing so the scriptures prophetic voice can be heard against a reductionist ecclesiology and soteriology of the American church. What is needed is a reformation of theology and practice, so that the church can reclaim its vocation of witness to the world.

In doing so the American church can witness with and alongside persons with disabilities. By reflecting on the various stories and testimonies above, one can quickly see that persons with disabilities can flourish in a church community that embraces scriptures “imago” and “equips” them for service. This last section, advocates for a change in discipleship.

Lastly we must posit that by discipling and “sending out” persons with disabilities, the church can broaden its witness to a hurting world. No one can deny the ministry of persons like Joni Eareckson Tada who has been able to uniquely witness to others in ways a healthy able-bodied person could not.

Marva Dawn recounts a story in which she was wheelchair bound because of her ongoing health problems and had to give a lecture at a conference. She writes, “During the conference a somewhat cynical man came to me after one of my ladder lectures and said ‘I wouldn't believe a word you say- except that you are sitting in that chair.”

In recounting that story she concludes that “We do not understand how God accomplishes using even our brokenness for the fulfillment of the Trinity’s purposes for the cosmos, but I am convinced that the Holy Spirit does”.

By fulfilling the scriptural call to reach the nations, the church can become a witness to one of the most unchurched people groups among them. Those who have been placed out of

---

238 Ibid. p.21.
societies view can be taken from obscurity to “apostolic witness”. In doing so the church not only broadens its vocational witness, but becomes a deeper and fuller reflection of the coming kingdom of God amidst a hurting and broken world. Be reclaiming discipleship and vocational witness, the American church goes from an “inward consumerist theology” to a theology of disability and discipleship.

VIII. Concluding Remarks

Throughout this paper we have examined the theological and cultural landscape of American Christianity. We have also listened to scripture’s prophetic voice as well as the experience of persons with disabilities within the church community. In doing so we called for a “spirit of reformation” within church theology and practice.

By positing a contextual theology of suffering and disability made up of ten “facets” of suffering and three responses of church thinking and practice that specifically addressed the needs of persons with disabilities we have advanced a new “way forward” for the church in America.

The first “response” in a new way forward is in the formation of a contextual theology of suffering and disability. The second “response” that this research advanced was for American churches to reclaim public lament as outlined within the scriptures. The third and final response was a call for the reformation of disability and the church. In doing so we advocated for new ways in which the church can actively welcome and worship alongside people with disabilities.

In doing so we want to clarify one final point of “reformation” by listening to the voice of another disability scholar Stephanie Hubach. Within her own treatment of disability theology in her book *Same Lake Different Boat* she called for a change through “reformation instead of
revolution”, She wrote, “in stark contrast to revolution, reformation is energized by God's mercy, promotes spirit-led change from within the human heart, retains a sense of personal perspective while simultaneously valuing all people, and focuses on the expression of love toward others”. 239 She concludes that “at the center of the heart of reformation are truth and grace, not power and control”. 240

We alongside Hubach take the approach of “reformation instead of revolution” in calling for the church to change its theology and practice. In this we ask for the continual leading of the prophetic voice of scripture against a culture in desperate need of its guiding truth.

As we conclude, we recognize that not all questions have been answered. As the arguments put forth in this paper display, forming a contextual theology of suffering and disability is complex work. Maybe in fact, there are more questions after reading this than when we first began this exploration into the interconnectedness of theology, suffering, disability in culture. To that we posit a resounding “may it be so!” for all readers and listeners. For in doing so we advance the theological discourse of disability theology and call for others to engage in a “spirit of reformation” alongside us and the many others who have gone before us and on whose “theological shoulders” we stand. In all we call on other scholars, theologians and laypersons to be guided by scripture’s prophetic voice, to listen to the testimonies of persons with disabilities and finally, become faith communities in which all people can flourish by carrying out the work that God has called them to.

240 Ibid. p.212-213.
Bibliography


