

## SESSION FOUR: DISABILITY AND ESCHATOLOGY – “WILL WE BE DISABLED IN HEAVEN?”

**INTRODUCTION:** Last week, we discussed theologies of healing surrounding the topic of disability, attempting to reorient our understanding of “healing” away from concepts of medical cure. Instead, we circled around the incarnation of the Son of God in the person of Jesus Christ as a potential corrective. In addressing the topic of healing, we challenged notions that disability is inherently in need of cure, looking alternatively to ideas of mutual care and right relationship with God and one another. This inevitably leads us to notions of the ultimate healing: eschatology, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, etc.

The Apostles’ Creed, an ancient guiding document of Christian theology, confesses the following reality: “I believe... in the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.” Wrapped up in this statement was an early commitment to the body. Yet, once again, in the modern world this theology of the redemption of all things created becomes wedded to modern medical and economic notions of the human body and mind. For example, I was taught as a kid I would have a Hercules body and superhuman abilities.

In the context of disability, the influence of the idea of perfection in the coming Kingdom has led to many harms. Not only does it often undergird the faulty notions of healing we discussed last week, but it informs our daily ethics and responses toward those with disabilities. And for those of us who are disabled, it informs our relationship to our own bodies as well. What we make of the doctrine of the Kingdom and disability will impact our goal of participating in God’s work of a community of mutual belonging.

In this session, we will explore three ways of understanding the relationship of disability and Christian teachings on the resurrection of the body. Our goal, to provide a fresh understanding of the Christian tradition through the lens of disability in a way which aids our participation in a community of mutuality.

### **I. REPLACEMENT: DISABILITY WILL NOT BE IN THE KINGDOM[?]**

Many people in Western churches have long assumed that our bodies will be perfected in the resurrection. All of our problems will be gone, our bodies will work as they are supposed to, all conditions will be healed. Behind this notion is once again the phantom of “normal.” It is assumed that when Christ makes everything right, He will make our bodies perfect: normal. We’ve already discussed the many problems with our notion of the normal body or mind. The idea that disability will disappear in the Kingdom of God reinforces the idea that disabled people are somehow shameful or less human than those who are more “normal.”

Yet, it would not be fair to dismiss this outright. After all, some people with various conditions might desire their conditions be erased, living in a body which is in no chronic pain, or that functions the way they desire.

**Q: What do you make of the tension between assuming disabilities will be perfected and the desire for one's condition to be removed? What does the desire tell us of our social world?**

## II. RETAINMENT: DOWN SYNDROME IN HEAVEN?

Some disabled theologians and disability theologians critique the first model for perpetuating a normal or ideal image of the human. Indeed, they challenge us to think carefully about the types of bodies we assume will be present in the Kingdom. Disabled theologian Nancy Eiseland points to the reality that, while we project ideal images onto the human body in the resurrection, Jesus Himself did not have a perfected body in this way. In the resurrection, Jesus maintains the marks of His crucifixion (John 20:27). The Scriptures tell us that in our resurrection, we will be made like Christ (1 John 3:1-3). Thus, Eiseland argues that disabled bodies need not be corrected into normal bodies in the resurrection. Rather, they are “perfected” in other ways.

In many ways, it is almost impossible to imagine that the *person* would even be the same without their disability. This can be a difficult concept, but in some ways the issue becomes clearer in the context of intellectual disability (ex. Down Syndrome) and autism.

Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong, drawing on his life with his brother who has Down Syndrome, argues that in the resurrection he will be able to recognize his brother – not despite the Down Syndrome, but because of it. Yong argues that the person of his brother is intricately tied to his experiences and existence with Down Syndrome. As some others have argued, to erase Down Syndrome would be to erase the person. Yong argues, Down Syndrome is not inherently a deficit. Challenging our perceptions, Yong's conclusion that a perfected resurrected person would retain their disability upsets our sensibilities regarding wholeness, health, and normalcy. Recall our understanding that Christ became a real, not ideal, human. Even in the resurrection, this stays true.

**Q: What are your thoughts on the retainment of “disability” in the Kingdom? Does it challenge your idea of what perfection might be like?**

## III. DISABILITY AND REDEEMED SOCIALITY

In comparing the two above approaches, we have seen how reading our theology alongside disability challenges our assumed notions of resurrection and perfection.

***However, what if I were to say that there is a fundamental problem in everything we have discussed so far today?***

Our preoccupation with whether or not there will be disabled bodies and minds, both those who think they will and those who think they won't, is a preoccupation that *overly emphasizes the individual body, individual resurrection, and the physical condition of one's humanity*. Likewise, these above notions rely on an interpretation of the Kingdom of God and of Christ that is also heavily individualistic, leaning into assumptions of individual wholeness in the Kingdom of God.

While the above discussion certainly raises valid concerns, and gives us profoundly helpful insights, I believe it does not fully capture God's work of mutual belonging in Christ.

Christ's teachings on the Kingdom of God and the church's teachings on the body regularly emphasized the transfiguration of our social reality. While it is important to affirm the bodily resurrection and the value of our created material world, it is vital that we understand that resurrection and Kingdom are *social* notions to Jesus. Jesus taught that the "end" or "future" was inaugurated now as the Kingdom of God. In doing so, He embodied, as God, an alternative social order. As theological ethicist and disability theologian Brian Brock summarizes, "the first concern of eschatology as we learn it from Jesus is that the kingdom of heaven consists in redeemed modes of presence to one another."

Disability and its reality teach us to attune our attention to one another more carefully in a way which requires that we participate in God's reordering of our social surroundings. Instead of a preoccupation with the bodies of disabled people, we are reminded of our discussions in the past weeks to orient our understanding of healing, wholeness, and health around a redeemed community. Recall the social model of disability that says disability is a socially constructed reality, conditioned by decisions of the larger community. In Jesus' Kingdom, we find instead that our perceptions of normalcy are "healed." A community which participates in God's work of mutual belonging and redemption radically embraces disability, not for mere inclusion or diversity's sake, but because Jesus reveals to us a radically different understanding of what it means to be human than the one our capitalist and powerful society provides. In other words, an eschatology which takes the disability experience seriously is not overly concerned with the future of the body but "shakes up the present."

### **CONCLUSION: I HAVE LOVED *YOU!* THE KINGDOM OF GOD ANNOUNCES NEW REALITY**

I want to end with a story which exemplifies this, and some discussion if we have time. The 20<sup>th</sup> century German theologian Karl Barth was once asked by a friend and fellow theologian named Heinrich about what resurrected bodies would be like. You see, Heinrich's daughter was disabled and had various conditions. Heinrich was insistent on his position, his daughter was not whole but, in the resurrection, "SHE WILL WALK!!!" God needed to correct His "mistake." Here was Barth's response:

"Is it not a much more beautiful and powerful hope that something becomes apparent there [in the Kingdom] that at present we cannot understand at all – namely that this life was not futile, because it is not in vain that God has said to it: 'I HAVE LOVED *YOU!*'? *She* will sit at the head of the table, while we – if we are admitted at all – will have to sit right down at the other end."

### **QUESTIONS/COMMENTS:**

**NEXT WEEK:** We will conclude with a short time to discuss our concept of health, and what it means to radically reorient our attention to one another in a way which challenges normalcy and ableism in church. After we have a short reflection, I invite you to bring any questions related to disability and theology. *Please come with lots of discussion and questions!* We will end with a short reading of a Psalm (although, this reading may surprise you).

**RESOURCES USED:**

*The Disabled God* – Nancy Eiesland

*Disability: Living Into the Diversity of Christ's Body* – Brian Brock

*Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* – Brian Brock

*Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* – Amos Yong

“Sin, Resurrection, and Disability” – Devan Stahl <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2022/04/sin-resurrection-and-disability/>

