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The Limits of Human Flourishing: Reconstructing Theological Anthropology in Light of Cognitive Disability

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Abstract

The concept of human flourishing currently holds a position of prominence within Christian theology. Numerous theologies assert that a person enjoys the fullness of humanity, not through conformity to an essential nature, but through being a living demonstration of what human being can become. This approach to theological anthropology has proven especially useful for advocacy on behalf of marginalized groups. Nevertheless, because this approach identifies human being with the capacity for purposive agency, it remains incapable of affirming the full humanity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities. These persons lack abilities that purposive agency presupposes, such as self-representation, language, and goal-oriented thought. The aim of the present study is to reconstruct theological anthropology so that it includes these persons without qualification and makes their flourishing an ethical priority.

Christian theologians do not typically regard cognitive disability as a topic deserving consideration. I thus establish its vital importance by both engaging disability studies and articulating a relational conceptualization of the *imago Dei*. Disability studies challenges the widespread assumption that "disability" is an identity category pertaining only to a minority of individuals whose bodies or minds are "abnormal." Deborah Creamer's limits model of disability is especially helpful in illuminating how experiences of disablement are common to every human life. The expectation that a "normal" body is entirely free of impairment perpetuates modern ideals of autonomy and self-sufficiency that no concrete person is capable of embodying. Restated theologically, embodied limits are the intrinsic, unsurprising consequence of creaturely finitude. The fact of finitude is itself good rather than a poor alternative to divine perfection.

I further argue that creation in God's image entails living into a relational state of radical interdependence. Human being is the embodied expression of God's own caring embrace of vulnerable, dependent others. Purposive agency is merely one capacity through which this is achieved. Human being remains possible where it is absent. Through careful reflection on creation, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, I identify biblical and traditional resources that, beyond being simply compatible with my anthropology, also provide warrants for affirming the full humanity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE TROUBLING IMPLICATIONS OF A POPULAR ANTHROPOLOGY

For many Christian theologians today, the central questions of theological anthropology—What does it mean to be human? What is this creature's proper relationship to God and other beings? What is humankind's destiny? —cannot be sufficiently answered without invoking the concept of *human flourishing*. A strong emphasis on human flourishing compels the theologian to move beyond purely speculative consideration of human nature to include practical and moral considerations in one's theoretical work. The concern for human flourishing is, at its base, a concern both to understand and promote the sort of well-being that is most appropriate to human existence. The widespread adoption of such an approach has produced an academic climate in which liberationist themes now characterize mainstream theological discourse.[1] Theological texts that do not explicitly address the plight of the marginalized and disadvantaged are increasingly hard to find. To the extent that the concept of human flourishing has facilitated this shift in the field, it has indeed been a valuable resource.

[1] Sheila Greeve Davaney asserts that "the power of the liberationist critique has gained wide enough credence that it is, in this age, a central point for determining the validity of contemporary theological options." See *Pragmatic Historicism: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), xii.

Yet the typical manner in which Christian theologians represent human flourishing leads to a concept of human being that has troubling implications. This concept ties a person's status as a human being to his or her capacity for agency. More specifically, it valorizes the agency of self-determination or, as I will most often refer to it, *purposive agency*.[2] It is this preoccupation with agency that renders numerous theological anthropologies problematic. For all its liberative applications, this portrait of humanity actually perpetuates the marginalization of certain persons; namely, persons with profound cognitive disabilities.[3] As I discuss in further detail below, these persons are incapable of exhibiting what is widely assumed to be a chief marker of humanity, leaving most Christian theologies incapable of affirming them as human without qualification.

In what follows, I explore how the concepts of human being and human flourishing might be purged of their implicit ableism. My main argument is that the most promising means to accomplish that end is to decenter the notion of purposive agency

[2] I borrow this term from Hans S. Reinders. See *Receiving in the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

[3] In referring to "cognitive disability," I primarily have in mind the sorts of impairments medical professionals once classified as "mental retardation" and now more often label "intellectual and developmental disabilities." In the present study, I use cognitive disability and intellectual disability interchangeably. If one were to be precise, however, cognitive disability has a broader application, including not only intellectual and developmental disabilities, but also conditions such as dementia, Alzheimer's, and autism. Not all instances of cognitive disability entail a form of intellectual disability. See Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson, "Introduction: Rethinking Philosophical Presumptions in Light of Cognitive Disability," in *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, eds. Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2010), 1-26, 1n1. Yet it is precisely because cognitive disability has a more inclusive meaning that I choose to make it my primary term. I want to allow the opportunity for the reader to bring to this discussion their own legitimate applications of the term that I might not discuss here. In speaking of "profound cognitive disabilities," I have in mind a person whose impairments place their cognitive abilities below the average toddler or, more to the point, below what current testing can even measure. For a concise discussion of the diagnoses "mental retardation" and "intellectual disability," including the technical distinctions between moderate, severe, and profound cases, see Pekka Louhiala, *Preventing Intellectual Disabilities: Ethical and Clinical Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-22.

and replace it with an ontology of radical interdependence. The theological anthropology I propose continues to affirm agency as a genuine and important manifestation of human being, even as I strive to dislodge it from its current place of primacy. This effort both upholds the liberationist themes currently prevalent within Christian theology and asserts that only an unflinching criticism of even the most cherished, shared assumptions about human flourishing can expand the scope of theological anthropology to include all persons.

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to characterize the assumptions I am critiquing in further detail and to bring its ableist elements into clearer view. I begin with a preliminary sketch of what is common to agency-centered anthropologies, including a brief remark on their historical origins in nineteenth-century continental philosophy. I then examine particular ways in which several prominent theologians develop the concept of human flourishing as part of larger theological projects. Next, I specify the importance that issues of disability hold for theological anthropology as a discipline. Finally, I plot the course the present study will follow as I pursue a solution to this pressing theological problem.

Human Beings as Purposive Agents

A Preliminary Description - The Expressivist Turn

Up to this point, I have made only broad claims about the extent to which the notion of purposive agency currently shapes the theological imagination. To be frank, I find its presence to be so pervasive within Western thought in general that I consider it the predominant understanding of human existence among theologians today. For that

reason, an investigation into the possibility that popular assumptions about human flourishing implicitly justify a type of discrimination is a matter of high stakes. If the majority of Christian theologians operate under these assumptions, then the majority of them are contributing (albeit unintentionally) to the continued dehumanization of persons with cognitive disabilities. A charge such as this cannot be made flippantly. I must be as clear as possible about the sort of theological anthropology I have in mind here. A general description of its content is, therefore, in order—one that identifies the common form and shape of an agency-centered anthropology wherever it appears.[4]

Despite its ubiquity, the form of this anthropology is, historically speaking, quite recent. As the historical research of Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor effectively demonstrates, its origins trace back to the first post-Enlightenment generation of German intellectuals who took Immanuel Kant's revolutionary turn to the subject and his account of the freedom of the will as starting points for their own projects.[5] Berlin singles out early German Romanticism as the most noteworthy of the nineteenth-century

[4] In Plato's early dialogues, Socrates speaks of a *form* as a common characteristic that appears in all the different actions or things human persons describe with a particular term. In "Euthyphro," for example, Socrates wants his interlocutor to identify the characteristic that all pious things possess and that warrants the attribution of piety to these things. My references to the form of an agency-centered approach to theological anthropology assume the Socratic understanding of the term. I am referring to the characteristic themes one will find in all theologians who articulate a version of this approach. See, "Euthyphro," in *Five Dialogues*, 2nd ed., trans. G.M.A. Grube, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 1-20, 6n7.

[5] In my original proposal for this study, my outline included an entire chapter devoted to examining Kant's concept of the will and the ways it has shaped present-day understandings of purposive agency. I intend to revisit this topic soon, perhaps as journal article. For those interested in delving into this topic, see Immanuel Kant, "Chapter I: Passage from Ordinary Rational Knowledge of Morality to Philosophical" and "Chapter II: Passage from Popular Moral Philosophy to a Metaphysic of Morals," in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H.J. Paton (1785; New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 61-113; *Critique of Practical Reason* in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (1788; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 133-272; "Part I: Concerning the Indwelling of the Evil Principle Alongside the Good, or, Of Radical Evil in Human Nature," in *Religion within the Boundaries of Pure Reason*, trans. George di Giovanni, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and eds. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (1793; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39-216, 69-97.

philosophical and cultural movements that assume both Kantian values and appropriate insights from Counter-Enlightenment figures of a decidedly non-Kantian stripe. Taylor's preferred term for the understanding of human being that emerged during this period is "expressivism." Taylor's work builds on the insights of Berlin and demonstrates how other figures who did not expressly participate in the Romantic movement (most notably G.W.F. Hegel) engaged in similar trends of thought and so contribute to the same remarkable developments.[6]

The aggregate effect of these changes is, what Berlin declares to be, "the single greatest shift in the consciousness of the West that has ever occurred."[7] This "gigantic and radical transformation" grasped the imagination of the first post-Enlightenment generation so enormously that, after it, "nothing was the same."[8] This transformation generates an understanding of the human being that Taylor calls "one of the cornerstones of modern culture," an understanding now so deeply entrenched that people find its relative novelty hard to accept.[9] Theodore Vial concurs that most Westerners presently

[6] One famous figure Taylor leaves out of his account of expressivism is Friedrich Schleiermacher. Given Schleiermacher's significant impact on Western thought as "the father of modern theology," Taylor's choice to overlook him appears rather capricious. For an extended treatment of this topic, see Brent W. Sockness, "Schleiermacher and the Ethics of Authenticity," in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2004): 477-517. In a future study, I hope to explore more closely the way in which Schleiermacher is directly responsible for the current prevalence of expressivist values within Christian theology.

[7] Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. by Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 1.

[8] Ibid., 5.

[9] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 376.

have an "expressivist anthropology," whether they justify it theoretically or simply assume it to be true in prereflective ways.[10]

The most fundamental tenet of this perspective is (as Taylor's chosen term indicates) that "human activity and human life are seen as expression."[11] Although the twenty-first century reader's first inclination will likely be to find this claim self-evident and thus unremarkable, its brevity and subtlety also belie the innovation it contains. Perceiving its true weight requires one to consider what long-standing convictions the equation of humanity with expression denies, while also ruminating on the statement's less conspicuous claim that human life *is* human activity. Expressivism challenges both the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions by portraying a human life as a complete interpenetration of form and matter.[12] It rejects the notion of a wholly predetermined and unchanging form of the human that is logically prior to the natural existence of the human being in whom it becomes empirically evident and particularized. In other words, a proper human life does not acquire its distinctive shape and purpose from imitating that which is pure and eternal within the limitations of the natural world.

As an alternative, expressivism sets forth its most original feature—that the actualization and clarification of human nature and purpose go hand-in-hand.[13] Each human life manifests a potential, perhaps unprecedented, form of humanity that only

[10] Theodore Vial, *Schleiermacher: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T & T Clark, 2013), 55.

[11] Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 15.

[12] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 379.

[13] Sockness, "Schleiermacher and the Ethics of Authenticity," 486.

becomes determinate and discernible through its very manifestation.[14] In this way, the expressivist anthropology fashions an ontology that is thoroughly dynamic, steeped in the contingencies of history, and nurturing to individuality. Summing up this portrait of the human being and its agency, Berlin writes, "to live is to do something, to do something is to express your nature."[15]

All the theologians I survey below adopt the values of the expressivist turn in one fashion or another. To be fair, the appearances of expressivism across the theological literature are various and nuanced. Two theologians may share this very same concept of human being and yet arrive at that concept through different methodologies or justify it within different theoretical frameworks. To illustrate the reality of this state of affairs, I turn to the writings of five theologians—Gordon Kaufman, Sheila Greeve Davaney, Dwight Hopkins, Kathryn Tanner, and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki. Each of them hold (or have recently held) a prominent position at a prestigious theological institution. I have selected texts in which these scholars explicitly present their respective understandings of what it means to be human, each text having been published within the last twenty-five years. My intentions in surveying these texts are both instructive and polemical. In one respect, my aim is to provide a sense of how truly pervasive an agency-centered approach is by describing a variety of the theological frameworks in which it operates today. My descriptions of these viewpoints will also highlight the laudable purposes toward which this approach is often directed, thereby shedding additional light on why this motif has become so popular within the theological literature. In another respect, I want to identify

[14] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 375; *Hegel*, 16.

[15] Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 105.

specific instances in which the commitment to purposive agency leads a Christian theologian who is committed to the promotion of human well-being and liberation (of one type or another) to exclude persons with profound cognitive disabilities from his or her concept of human being. To better organize this survey, I note how each theological anthropology treats these common themes: embodiment, embeddedness, relationality, rationality, and agency. I begin my survey with Gordon Kaufman.[16]

Gordon Kaufman

Gordon Kaufman's *In Face of Mystery* is an extended meditation on the proper function and scope of Christian theology as an interpretive framework for orienting life in the world. Kaufman identifies the concept of "the human" as the most appropriate starting point for articulating a Christian world picture. Although he places the human alongside the concepts of "world," "God," and "Christ" as the central (and dialectically interrelated) categories of the Christian theological tradition, he thinks the intuitive clarity of what "human" means gives that concept a natural priority over the other, more contested terms.[17] Kaufman's anthropology, far from being just one prominent theme in his theology, sets the parameters for the rest of his reflections.

For Kaufman, a proper understanding of human being begins with the recognition of their embeddedness. He interprets this state of affairs through the notion of *historicity*. Historicity denotes "the process of grasping and understanding, of shaping and creating,

[16] For a chapter-length engagement of Kaufman's anthropology from a disability perspective, as well as a similar assessment of the work of George Lindbeck, see Molly Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

[17] Gordon D. Kaufmann, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 98.

through which a culture gradually defines and develops itself through the course of its own history."[18] Kaufman identifies the human capacity for prolific cultural creativity as the feature which distinguishes the human form of life from all others. By means of this creative power, humanity has brought an artificial world into being, a symbolic world it then superimposes on the natural one. The emergence of this order of reality produces in human beings new desires, interests, and needs. These exceed (and are sometimes at odds with) strictly biological needs.

This last statement points to Kaufman's consistent emphasis on the embodiment of the human being. It is not simply historical—as though its nature could be sufficiently captured by attending to its capacity for abstract thought and meaning making alone—it is *biohistorical*. Consistent with current popular understandings of the human, Kaufman emphasizes this being's status as an animal and its place in the earth's complex web of life. Humanity's unique cultural abilities have arisen as one trajectory in a process of natural evolution. The conditions of human life and well-being are thus determined, in large part, by their organic connections to other lifeforms and natural phenomena. Human existence cannot be interpreted properly apart from the environmental aspect of human relationality.

Another important aspect of this relationality is, of course, the associations between biohistorical individuals and groups. Kaufman declares, "No individual selves could exist without a community which gave birth to them and continued to sustain them—not least through providing them with language, that medium of signs which…is

[18] Ibid., 103.

an indispensable ingredient of individual selfhood and agency."[19] This quote highlights not only the intimate connection Kaufman draws between selfhood and purposive agency, but also the fact that he sees both as depending upon the capacity for symbolization.

As a mode of existence that produces historical and cultural patterns, human activity is not merely the expression of instincts. It fundamentally involves the attempt to realize self-appointed goals and purposes which may be entirely abstract. At its highest levels, this identification and selection of a goal is called *intention*. The intention of an act serves as the agent's own symbolic standard for bodily motion; it is a plan to direct that motion towards one end rather than others. The capacity to perform an intentional act is, therefore, only available to beings who possess a symbol system. In order to make a choice, an agent must envision a number of possible, as yet unrealized actions. The types and patterns of symbols present within one's mind radically inform (and restrict) the possibilities one can imagine. According to Kaufman, the mind acquires these symbols from infancy onward as the individual human being is progressively shaped by the culture into which he or she is born. This cultural inheritance includes language. It is through learning to speak the personal language of "I" and "we" that human beings come to understand themselves as agents. Human individuals are thus not essentially separate and autonomous. They are "persons-in-community," existing only within "a highly complex sociocultural system."[20]

[19] Ibid., 151.

[20] Ibid., 161.

This account of agency presents rationality as a vital element of selfhood. An agent's mind must not only be capable of retaining inherited symbols but of putting them into practice as well. The capability to act demands that one be able to carry out the symbolizing functions of intention, decision, and attention to relevant sense data as second nature. The individual's performance of these functions personalizes deliberation and introduces accountability into the process of action. Kaufman regards accountability as essential to agency as such and its appearance in the inner life of a human being as a defining development: "When we cross this threshold, we become responsible participants in and bearers of humanity and thus enter into relationships truly and fully human."[21]

More significant than a human being's responsibility for individual actions, however, is the responsibility one has for one's very selfhood. An important consequence of human historicity is that human existence is never grasped directly. A concept of the human is always crafted with reference to past experiences. The variety of historically located experiences inexorably results in a variety of concepts of the human. The particular concept a human individual or group adopts leads to a self-understanding (which is also a self-relation) that is prior to and determinative of the orientation one assumes towards other persons and groups. In other words, different human beings internalize different concepts of who and what they are, and thereby demonstrate different forms of biohistorical existence. Accordingly, human nature is not a fixed, uniform reality. It is instead "diverse and pluralistic to very deep levels."[22]

[21] Ibid., 148.

[22] Ibid., 100.

For this reason, Kaufman regards freedom as an empirical fact of human existence. Humanity's distinctive mode of creativity both presupposes and exemplifies its concrete reality. The moral dimension of human existence thus necessarily involves a respectful consideration of each person's freedom. The work of the conscientious theologian will model that respect. Rather than serving chiefly as expositors of inherited religious doctrine, theologians ought to engage in "imaginative construction" of interpretive frameworks.[23] Furthermore, they should not hesitate to reconstruct any traditional beliefs and practices that can contribute to dehumanization. The notion of human flourishing, therefore, plays a crucial role in evaluating the adequacy of religious symbols, even those of "God" and "Christ."

Sheila Greeve Davaney

The theological anthropology Sheila Greeve Davaney advocates in her book *Pragmatic Historicism* shares much in common with that of Gordon Kaufman, although she also finds his brand of historicism lacking in key respects. In agreement with Kaufman, Davaney asserts that twenty-first century theologies will only be viable interpretive frameworks if they take seriously "the historicist turn" that characterizes Western thought in the present moment.[24] She maintains that "while no single explanatory category will suffice for describing our age, the notion of historicity can be seen to be a persuasive and illuminating theme that runs through much contemporary

[23] Ibid, ix.

[24] Davaney, *Pragmatic Historicism*, ix.

analysis."[25] Davaney aspires to develop a theological method that takes the insights and implications of the historicist turn with utter seriousness. Her critique of Kaufman and other historicist theologians is that their insights have not yet been pushed to their full, appropriate conclusions.[26] She endeavors to articulate such "an expansive historicism" and combine it with "a clear pragmatism."[27]

Davaney's expression of historicism interprets human existence chiefly in terms of the interrelation between traditionedness and agency. This viewpoint repeats Kaufman's emphasis on the relativity, particularity, and plurality of human existence and on the theologian's responsibility to engage in imaginative construction. Davaney nevertheless regards Kaufman as placing "disproportionate stress upon the agential character of human historicity," which results in "an anemic and uncreative view of tradition."[28] On Davaney's reading, Kaufman most often treats the past as a restriction for human agency to transcend. In her view, this overlooks how freedom is both concretely funded and made possible by the inherited past.

Davaney advocates a more materialist understanding of tradition. This emphasis derives from her commitment to express the embeddedness and embodiment of human beings more thoroughly. As biological beings, humans exist within that "network of

[25] Ibid., 26.

[26] Davaney identifies Sallie McFague, William Dean, and Delwin Brown as other historicist theologians. She also critiques the revisionist theology of David Tracy and the postliberal theology of George Lindbeck as examples of a faint-hearted historicism.

[27] Ibid., x.

[28] Ibid., 88.

interdependent entities" called the cosmos.[29] Human distinctiveness does not consist of autonomy and independence from non-human creatures; rather it emerges out of structures of relationality and dependence on other forms of life. She affirms the identification of human distinctiveness with their status as cultural beings, yet insists that the ideas, symbols systems, and languages that comprise culture cannot finally be divorced from "the social and political forces, institutions, and material conditions within which they are located and in relation to which they function."[30] Such an acknowledgment further complexifies a historicist understanding of the web of human existence.

The distinctive emphases of Davaney's expansive historicism include an unflinching rejection of essentialism, a view of human beings as *multitraditioned*, and an insistence that theological norms are entirely pragmatic in nature. She decries Kaufman's categorical scheme (human, world, God, Christ) as attributing an abstract essence to the Christian tradition. Despite his analytical recognition of the concrete details of biohistorical existence, his methodology assumes a purely formal relationship between Christians and their past that allows one to ignore "the concrete specificities of a living tradition."[31] Davaney conceives of a tradition as lacking any essence whatsoever, be it a canon of doctrine, a paradigmatic narrative, or a set of categories. Traditions are instead internally pluralistic and porous for the very reason that they are made up of localized thoughts and practices.

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[29] Ibid., 66.

[30] Ibid., 78.

[31] Ibid., 89-90.

On these grounds, Davaney calls for "the democratization of culture."[32] Such an approach to theology will note ways in which the meaning and value of elements in a tradition are constructed by ordinary people (rather than solely by those in positions of power), as well as the fact that the meaning and value of beliefs and practices are not inherent. Implied in this observation is Davaney's understanding that, insofar as human beings belong to a tradition, they employ their capacities for abstract representation and rationality to determine both the content of that tradition and the worth of that content from within concrete contexts.

The pragmatic emphasis of Davaney's historicism is strikingly evident in her assertion that "we engage historical traditions for the purpose of creating visions and practices for today."[33] The great importance of the past lies in the fact that it places constraints on the present, while also providing resources for creative transformation. Because the location of the constructive theologian takes shape "out of and at the juncture of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes tension filled influences," he or she must look beyond even the pluralistic content of one religious tradition to consider the insights of other interpretive frameworks.[34] Discourses of nation, ideology, gender, race, class and other faiths must be taken into account. The primary impetus behind this wide-ranging and rigorous methodology is Davaney's conviction that the most adequate theological construction of reality is the one that best contributes to the enhancement of historical identities and communities. The central task of theology, therefore, is not a search for

[32] Ibid., 116.

[33] Ibid., 115.

[34] Ibid., x. Davaney regards individual traditions as so porous and internally varied that she thinks of traditions themselves as heuristic fictions.

timeless truth or the authentic form of Christianity. Davaney conceives of theology as a form of cultural analysis; namely, "the identification, examination, assessment, and reconstruction of historical traditions of interpretation and practice *so that humans might more fruitfully and responsibly live* within our complex and interdependent universe."[35] An emphasis on human flourishing is thus clearly present in the anthropological and cosmological assumptions of pragmatic historicism.

Dwight Hopkins

The theological anthropology of Dwight Hopkins provides an account of human being that is developed with reference to a particular community of human beings. Identifying as a black liberation theologian, Hopkins focuses his critical analysis primarily on the embeddedness of African-American existence in structures of poverty and racial inequality. In *Being Human*, he characterizes human persons as material beings whose lives include the transcendent dimension of spirituality. He casts the discipline of theological anthropology as an interrogation of those ways of being and acting for which human beings have been created and called by God. In today's increasingly globalized world, novel possibilities for what human beings may be and do continually present themselves. Yet means of dehumanization also abound within this state of affairs. The key question for Hopkins, then, is: "How can we envision being human in a way that

[35] Emphasis added. Ibid., 114.

supports and enables human flourishing and provides ultimate orientation in such times?"[36]

Hopkins' answer to this question considers both the present and ultimate context of human existence. Addressing the latter, he speaks of God as a creative force or power that imbues the material world but may not be reduced to creation taken as a whole. Indicating his pluralist sensibilities, Hopkins declares that this "supreme spirit . . . manifests, for me, decisively, but not exclusively, in Jesus the anointed one."[37] The God revealed in Jesus is a spirit of liberation. Accordingly, Hopkins identifies the image of God in human beings with a particular type of agency: "the capacity to create healthy life with restrictions removed from the inside and around the poor and working communities."[38] Proper recognition of oneself as an image of God necessarily directs the practice of freedom forward as a love that pursues a divine mission. (Though Hopkins does not state so explicitly, a capacity for rationality must be present in agents who use their freedom in this goal-directed fashion.) Healthy spirituality acknowledges the *imago Dei* in others and shares with them the good news of liberation. Service to others is thus the point of contact between the transcendent and personal dimensions of human existence; it is the active means through which a material being realizes genuine spirit and is vivified. Answering God's call to become fully human finally amounts to a two-

[36] Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), ix.

[37] Ibid., 52.

[38] Ibid., 184.

fold liberation, one that is captured in Hopkins' definition of a human being as "a person who fulfills individual capabilities and contributes to a community's well-being."[39]

Hopkins parallels Davaney's insistence that abstract anthropological concepts must remain tethered to the concrete if they are to provide life-giving explanations of a worthwhile human existence or of humankind's destiny. He endeavors to understand the present context of human existence through careful reflection on the categories of self, culture, and race. [40] As should already be clear, the notion of relationality is central to Hopkins' description of the *self*. Healthy individual relationships with God are found within healthy, harmonious communities. This harmony extends beyond human relationships into a balanced comportment towards animals, plants, and the natural elements. Rejecting individualism as demonic, Hopkins understands the self as logically subsequent to and generated by *selves*—social units of interdependent relationships whose well-being depends on the practice of communal values (such as reciprocity, care, and solidarity) towards the end of a common good. One critical task of the theologian is to reflect intentionally on how to champion the values of friendship above economic or nationalistic understandings of human relations as essentially competitive or even adversarial.

[39] Ibid., 1.

[40] Ibid., 161. As part of his project in this book, Hopkins devotes an entire chapter to each of these notions with the goal of adding precision and consistency to his own use of them. In the name of brevity, my exposition focuses primarily on his concluding chapter where the insights of previous chapters are integrated and expanded.

Selves and the self give rise to *culture*. Succinctly stated, Hopkins identifies the elements of culture as the totality of human labor, the aesthetic, and the spirit.[41] *Race*, meanwhile, is "a shifting signifier" whose content varies according to cultural context and the powers that define it.[42] In the United States, Hopkins asserts, race entails "explicitly combining biological or God-given phenotype with malleable sociological characteristics," thus assigning specific values to forms of embodiment**.**[43] For African-Americans, engaging in matters of culture and race means not only championing healthy spirituality over against individualism, but also combating the white supremacist spirituality that arbitrarily denies the full worth of non-whites. In these concrete ways, a genuine God-human encounter frees the individual to enjoy self-love and a healthy ego.

God's call to full humanity also draws attention to the equally arbitrary class structures that keep persons in poverty. Part of the liberating good news of Jesus is the revelation that the totality of the material world belongs to God and God alone. Hopkins asserts that "all human beings are created with a spiritual purpose to share in the material resources of the earth."[44] The practice of privatizing resources such that certain communities are denied access to God's gifts to all dehumanizes those who are denied. For this reason, Hopkins posits that God commissions every human being to live in solidarity with the poor and working class.

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[41] Ibid., 164. Hopkins further defines the totality of labor as "a fluid dynamic of mutual effectivity between material base and ideological superstructure."

[42] Ibid., 165.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., 168.

In the final analysis, Hopkins' theological anthropology asserts the prerogative of each person to define her or his own identity (contra essentialism). The community is obligated to provide the space, material resources, and opportunities of speech this task requires. Conversely, the individual must acknowledge accountability to the community throughout the process of self-definition. Nurturing and sustaining healthy people requires above all that "we collaborate with nature to engender flourishing of the oppressed."[45] Conditions that provide for their freedom will ultimately provide for the freedom of all.

Kathryn Tanner

Of the five theologians surveyed here, Kathryn Tanner stands out as the most traditional. Rather than assuming the basic incompatibility of early Christian doctrines and twenty-first century understandings of human existence, Tanner identifies an affinity between orthodox formulations of "God" and "Christ" and a concept of the human that emphasizes dynamism, local context, and materiality. In her books *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, and its sequel *Christ the Key*, Tanner aims to redeploy longstanding Christian notions creatively towards present ends.[46] In that spirit, her theological anthropology is informed by a "traditionally articulated but significantly reconceived Chalcedonian Christology."[47] Tanner follows the early church's precedent of affirming both the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus Christ, while still taking seriously "modern concerns

[45] Ibid., 188.

[46] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001); Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[47] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 35.

with human agency and freedom and modern emphases on conflict and process in human history."[48] Tanner regards Christ to be the culmination and completion of God's interactions with the entire created order. Christ is thus the key to understanding what God is doing everywhere, including human lives.

Tanner remarks that explanations of the *imago Dei* typically focus on "human nature in and of itself." They identify "some set of well-defined and neatly bounded characteristics" that establish the human's qualitative difference from animals and relative similarity to the divine, such as rationality, freedom from necessity, or relationality. She thinks these approaches are misguided for two reasons: human nature cannot be predetermined so neatly, and it cannot be properly understood without consideration of the triune God. Following an early church trajectory, Tanner identifies the *imago Dei*, not as a human trait, but as the second person of the trinity (i.e. the Word). It is through being an image of the second person that the human being becomes an image of the trinity as a whole.

In Tanner's theology, God radically transcends the world. Nevertheless, the abundant goodness of the divine life results in a "gratuitous trinitarian overflow" in which God freely chooses to create a world of creatures who exist simply to be the recipients of gracious gifts.[49] Because the divine life is perfect fullness and ontologically distinct from all other modes of being, God's relationships with creatures are non-competitive; that is, God's power does not come at the expense of other entities. The more God's glory is made manifest through giving gifts to the creature, the more

[48] Ibid., 1.

[49] Ibid., 68-9.

empowered and perfected the creature becomes in its own nature. It is through Christ that God may award the goodness of the divine life to beings that do not possess it by nature, and do so without compromising the ontological distinction that establishes the integrity of each creature's nature.

Tanner maintains that the second person of the trinity is the perfect image of God because it is its nature to be so. In the incarnation, the first person sends the Word into the world to become one with the humanity of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. The unity achieved is perfect, and Jesus manifests the image of the Word just as fully as the latter images the first person. The unity is one of action and will—the way that Jesus' life as a whole is a fully human manifestation of the mode of the Son. [50] The incarnation is thus a process spanning Jesus' entire life. As the Christ, he purifies, heals, elevates, and perfects humanity in his achievement of perfect union between what is God and not God. He is the "new man" in the way he lives his life entirely for his human fellows and unfailingly orients his life toward the God he serves. Christ is the paradigm for how human beings may image God through participation in the divine life.

Jesus is also the means by which other human beings participate in the triune God. The Holy Spirit comes to other human beings through the glorified humanity of Christ and makes them one with him through the bonds of faith, hope, and love. This is the form of life for which human beings were created—a form that does not simply unfold from the natural function of their native capacities. Human well-being, like being

[50] Tanner rejects any attempt to define the unity of divinity and humanity in Christ in terms of some empirical or metaphysical meeting point "in abstraction from the soteriological point of what the triune God is doing in Christ." See Ibid., 16.

as such, is God's gift to the creature.[51] Yet the creature must use its native capacities of rationality and agency to choose to accept what is (and shall remain) alien to its nature. As Tanner explains, God calls human beings "to act in a process primarily of self-reformation in service of God's ends for the whole world that the superabundant God wants to be similarly replete with goods."[52]

Interestingly, Tanner's observations about the embeddedness of human existence only reaffirm her Christological assertions. Tanner states that human nature boasts an expansive openness. She finds within human nature a "positive inclination to the universal."[53] Human reason seeks the truth that is above all knowledge, and the human will strives to do what is unconditionally good. Because both these qualities can belong to God alone, there is no fixed limit on the potential of human growth. Any number of excellent ways of thinking and doing remain available for human beings to realize. They are thus defined by a simple malleability.

Accordingly, there is a lack of human uniformity, allowing human life to assume a variety of forms across cultural and historical circumstances. This fundamental plasticity leaves them susceptible to radical transformation beyond the present limits of their created nature. By virtue of their inherent relationality, human beings negotiate a myriad of environmental and social inputs. The self-reflective ability of human beings heightens and complexifies these other traits. They are able to organize their natures

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[51] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 30.

[52] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 69-70. Because human beings receive God's perfecting gifts by grace rather than by nature, the will of the creature is not thoroughly united with the will of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the failure to serve God's purposes always remains a possibility for human beings participating in the triune life.

[53] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 39.

according to a basic moral and religious orientation. What they determine matters most to them "decides in greater part the character of their lives, the identity they come to exhibit in their acts—that is, just their nature."[54] The whole human person is impacted through such processes, including his or her material embodiment. Conformation to the image of God engages all these capacities for alteration; it is merely an extreme case of having one's character transformed by a relationship with what one is not.

In summary, Tanner views human nature in essentially dynamic terms—so dynamic, in fact, that what it means to be human cannot be predetermined through consideration of human nature in and of itself. Only the form of life that attends the new identity one receives in Christ provides definitive shape to human life, transforming its plasticity into a strong image of God and enabling well-being as a result.

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki

Like Kathryn Tanner, Marjorie Suchocki develops a version of the flourishing model that is explicitly metaphysical, although it has a less traditional flavor. Written from the vantage point of relational theology (i.e. process theology), Suchocki's *The Fall to Violence* presents a reconstructed doctrine of *original sin*. Despite its controversial history, Suchocki thinks this doctrine can bring greater clarity to the manner in which each human being is oriented toward sin by forces set in motion long before one's birth. She is interested in establishing how it is that one inherits this predisposition from one's ancestors, as well as how this state of affairs serves as a common source of guilt for all humanity. Yet she does not affirm the classical definition of sin as essentially pride or

[54] Ibid., 48.

unbelief—the human being's refusal to accept the divinely established parameters of life coupled with the self-deception that it can define the terms of its own existence.[55] In this portrayal of sin, a creature utilizes its capacity for transcendence in an effort to outstrip its natural limitations and exhibit a godlike power.

Suchocki regards the classical portrayal as incapable of accounting for present understandings of human embeddedness and relationality. She observes that explanations of sin as a proud rebellion against God often conflate the divinely established parameters of life with the cultural, social, and political structures of a particular society. In these instances, Christian theology fails to challenge forms of oppression and marginalization, thereby exacerbating the suffering of victims rather than facilitating their liberation. Suchocki alternatively characterizes sin as "participation through intent or act in unnecessary violence that contributes to the ill-being of any aspect of earth or its inhabitants."[56] Such an intent or act is sinful "whether conspicuously chosen or otherwise."[57] Suchocki claims this definition of sin directs theological interpretation more squarely towards the concrete data of human evil. It acknowledges, for example, that marginalized groups (Suchocki discusses women specifically) repeatedly contribute to their own dehumanization, not through proud self-assertion, but through accepting the social status imposed upon them and thereby failing to use their agency to defy those

[55] Suchocki's critique of this view focuses primarily on the work of Augustine and Reinhold Niebuhr.

[56] Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 16.

[57] Ibid., 12.

limits that stifle human flourishing. Sin, in other words, is "rooted in the great challenge of becoming oneself."[58]

Suchocki advocates a "horizontal" notion of transcendence *within* the natural order of creation. There is no fundamental opposition here between transcendence and nature or between human spirit and human embodiment. Self-transcendence is achieved through the capacities of memory, empathy, and imagination. By these means, a human being may come to identify past patterns of being that have led to the degradation of oneself, as well as one's fellow creatures, and become conscious of future possibilities for both the enrichment and the destruction of being. Once more, we find the notion of rationality in play insofar as the symbolic representations of self, others, past events, and potential futures play a key role in the enactment of self-transcendence.

The cosmology underpinning Suchocki's theological anthropology depicts the universe as continuously co-created by the interaction between God and every entity that makes up the world. Suchocki does not portray God as radically other than the world; God is the highest exemplification of the metaphysical processes that define every being. God is maximally related to all other entities and, for that reason, is uniquely equipped to influence the overall process of creation's coming to be. God works to promote the maximum level of harmony available to creation in the present, but the inherent freedom each creature possesses limits God's creative influence to persuasion. The well-being of the entire created order thus depends on how each entity chooses to use its capacity for self-transcendence from moment to moment. Accordingly, human sin is "not a contained

[58] Ibid., 32.

act, but an extended event."[59] Violent acts directly cause creation to suffer and, by extension, the human beings and the God who are inextricably connected to the creation and constituted by it.

Within this metaphysical scheme, sin takes on a triadic structure. First, "human personality contains a substructure of violent aggression related to survival."[60] During its evolutionary development as a biological being, the human species relied on animal instincts that far predate the emergence of a moral or religious consciousness. These instincts remain, predisposing human beings to violent behavior and ensuring that a certain base level of violence remains integral to human existence as such. Second, the ontological solidarity humanity enjoys makes an indirect experience of violence possible. Suchocki states, "Through this connectedness comes one's own participation in every evil, and with it, a share in the responsibility for all evil."[61] One human being's sinful act impacts every other member of the race, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. This indirect experience, as well as any response to it, is typically subliminal; it is never consciously registered even as the emotive effect of violence invades one's very interior. Third, Suchocki lifts up the intergenerational quality of sin. She notes the tendency of cooperative institutions to exhibit a collective egotism that privileges the interests of a particular subgroup to the ill-being of others. These institutions have their own intersubjective consciousness that functions as an interpretive grid, establishing social norms for future generations, including values and practices that promote unnecessary

[59] Ibid., 45.

[60] Ibid., 84.

[61] Ibid., 102-3.

violence. "By definition, the inherited norms cannot be questioned prior to enactment; one is caught in sin without virtue of consent. Original sin simply creates sinners."[62]

By emphasizing the ways in which conscientious human beings might oppose or reverse the preceding factors, Suchocki places the concept of well-being at the center of her theological vision of how a human being ought to live. Through the recognition of the necessary violence that its animal inheritance carries into daily life, the human being can begin to identify the excessively violent acts one should not commit. Understanding one's evolutionary past also raises awareness of the instincts of bonding the human animal has likewise come to rely on and may now intentionally choose to promote. Similarly, the recognition of how indirect violence is communicated through human solidarity can lead to a form of empathetic transcendence Suchocki calls *compassionate subjectivity*. This form of consciousness adds to the awareness of human solidarity "the concomitant response of human life lived through compassionate love."[63] Finally, a frank appraisal of one's responsibility for the continued dominance of sinful social conditions amounts to the identification of one's *guilt*; that is, the degree to which one has the freedom to transcend structures of ill-being and fails to do so. Because freedom of self-determination is inherent, all three aspects of original sin may be continually resisted, even where possibilities for well-being are difficult or few. Whenever human action promotes the values of truth, love, and beauty, the positive effects of these achievements

[62] Ibid., 126.

[63] Ibid., 103.

resonate just as extensively as the effects of sin.[64] In the final analysis, the mode of human existence that is the direct contrary of sin is a process-relational mode of human flourishing.

Summary

Having now completed my survey of recent theologians, a concise statement of how they commonly employ the themes of embeddedness, embodiment, relationality, rationality, and agency is in order. On the other side of the expressivist turn, many Christian concepts of human being and its flourishing eschew the idea that human nature has a universal and unchanging essence. They contend that the process of defining humanity is ongoing because humanity is continuously made manifest through human activity. Accordingly, human nature is not an abstract model each person must live into but an endeavor every individual must carry out. In this way, human beings are fundamentally defined by freedom; most importantly, the freedom of self-determination. Purposive agency is not one among many faculties the human being possesses. In the most primordial way, human beings *are* their freedom.[65]

Yet human freedom is not absolute. Agency is always embedded within particular contexts. The manifestation of humanity occurs within antecedent conditions. These conditions establish both the parameters within which individual agency begins and the

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[64] Suchocki devotes her entire fourth chapter to the explication of a universal standard of well-being. Because this exposition involves a nuanced examination of process-relational metaphysics, I have chosen not to present a more detailed account of her thoughts on this matter. Nevertheless, it is important to note her concession that "no finite mode of truth, love, and beauty can be final," due to the local character of concrete human lives. Yet these three values remain the heart of her concept of well-being.

[65] Robert Dell'oro, "Theological Anthropology and Bioethics," in *Health and Human Flourishing: Religion, Medicine, and Moral Anthropology*, ed. Carol R. Taylor and Robert Dell'oro (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 13-32, 23.

future possibilities a human being may choose to realize. As the conditions of freedom, contextual factors shape much of who an individual is and what he or she might become.

Foremost among the natural conditions of human agency is an individual's embodiment. A distinctive contour of the current theological landscape is the attention paid to the material dimensions of human existence. Human beings necessarily have bodies and, consequently, their overall well-being entails bodily health and integrity.[66] The body is thus an end of freedom as well as a means. Through the body, each human being is inextricably linked to the rest of the natural world, adding an ecological dimension to considerations of flourishing.

This approach to theological anthropology also rejects traditional descriptions of the individual self as ultimately autonomous and self-sufficient. It names relationality as a defining feature of human existence. The individual self is constantly shaping and being shaped by other selves. Values of community are important to well-being because, although other human persons are unavoidably the objects and means of one's own free activity, they remain agents in their own right. [67] The flourishing of human individuals is finally inseparable from the flourishing of human communities.

As the human being acts amidst the limiting conditions of embeddedness, embodiment, and interdependent relationships, the individual's capacity for rationality is vital. Human freedom only takes determinative shape if it is directed towards particular ends in pursuit of particular purposes. That direction requires the agent to make use of cognitive abilities for symbolization or language that a selection among possibilities

[66] These themes are also integral to the moral philosophy of Martha Nussbaum. See Chapter 2.

[67] I have in mind here Kant's Formula of the End in Itself. See *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 95-98.

requires.[68] Because goal-oriented thought is integral to the freedom that leads to human flourishing, the brand of agency which sets human being apart as a distinctive type of existence is purposive agency.[69]

In short, present-day theologians often equate what it means to be human with the free exercise of a purposive agency that is both made possible and shaped by a number of contextual factors. The well-being of this creature depends largely on the individual agent's ability to demonstrate his or her freedom and thereby contribute to the progressive and pluralistic manifestation of humanity itself. Wherever this agential capacity is arbitrarily or maliciously denied, dehumanization takes place and human flourishing is absent. *This* is the approach to theological anthropology I critique.

The Challenge of a Disability Perspective

In my critical engagement of the five theologians just discussed, I have attempted to provide a representation of their views that is not only faithful, but also appreciative. Each scholar champions certain values and emphases that I would rather help proliferate than oppose. (For example, Hopkins' call for solidarity with the working class and Suchocki's cry against unnecessary violence highlight pressing human problems that Christian theology ought to take up with great sincerity.) In point of fact, the theological anthropology I propose later in this study shares more similarities with these theologians than points of contention.

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[68] I would add that, apart from these rational abilities, the actions of a human being would not be instances of self-determination but rather random occurrences.

[69] I am convinced that the persistence of rationality as a vital element of theological anthropology is evidence of how a once predominant concept was effectively decentered, yet retained, through critique.

Nevertheless, a critique of their commonly held understanding of human flourishing is exigent. Woven into the shared assumptions of all their anthropologies is a thread of ableism—a normative perspective on being human that, in practice, discriminates against persons with "abnormal" bodies and minds.[70] The ableism of this common understanding is not a product of happenstance; this disposition follows naturally from its core formulations of freedom, self-determination, and agency. Hans Reinders observes that, as long as "the point of our lives is what we are capable of doing," persons with profound cognitive disabilities will fail to qualify as human beings or, at best, they are implicitly relegated to an anthropological "minor league."[71] Persons with profound cognitive disabilities lack those capacities for self-awareness, self-representation, and social-cultural understanding that are indispensable to the predominant concepts of human being and human flourishing. Although these concepts facilitate liberationist projects carried out on behalf of a diverse range of human persons, the methodologies and theories associated with it repeatedly overlook the presence of the cognitively disabled within living human communities. This state of affairs reveals that the conceptual shift from self-sufficiency and autonomy to interconnectedness and relationality does not automatically establish the basic humanity, or promote the well-being, of all those nominally identified as persons in daily life. As Molly Haslam explains, "a second step beyond the move toward a relational anthropology is necessary if

[70] I provide clarification regarding my use of disability language (e.g. the difference between *disability* and *impairment*) in Chapter 2.

[71] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 8, 12.

we are to construct an understanding of human being that promotes the flourishing of all human beings, including individuals with profound intellectual disabilities."[72]

Haslam's statement serves as a caution to all theologians, including those already working on theologies of disability. In her landmark book *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland casts the theology of disability as "a theology of coalition and struggle in which we [persons with disabilities] identify our unique experiences while also struggling for recognition, inclusion, and acceptance from one another and from the able-bodied society and church."[73] This quote highlights the genetic ties between disability theology and liberation theology and, by extension, between disability theology and agency-centered understandings of human flourishing. Eiesland's work draws attention to the fact that a commitment to liberationist understandings of freedom and agency ought to compel Christians (in the church as well as the academy) to take account of the ways in which persons with disabilities exercise these capacities or are denied opportunities to do so. However, a strict commitment to self-determination and self-advocacy within the theology of disability reproduces an unfavorable result. As Deborah Creamer notes, when disability scholars demand that "liberation *for* people with disabilities come through actions taken *by* persons with disabilities," they reinscribe a paradigm into which

[72] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 7. Again, note that I use the terms *cognitive disability* and *intellectual disability* synonymously throughout most of this study.

[73] Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 29.

cognitive disability does not neatly fit.[74] Persons with profound cognitive disabilities remain "hard cases" for theological anthropology, even within disability studies.[75]

My investment in these issues is a personal one. My older brother Jarrod is a person with profound cognitive disabilities. When he was four months old, he contracted a case of spinal meningitis that was initially misdiagnosed and, therefore, improperly treated. The damage to his nervous system was extensive. Jarrod was eventually diagnosed with cerebral palsy, epilepsy, mental retardation, and deafness. Having grown up with him in a Christian household, my own experiences of community and religious practice have always been informed by Jarrod's presence.[76] For this reason, although I am not a person with disabilities, many of the arguments and concerns disability scholars raise resonate with me. Jarrod is my closest living relative. Any concept of human being that excludes him is, in my estimation, too limited in its explanatory power.

A more expansive and representative concept of the human is in order, not only for my scholarship, but for the entire discipline of theological anthropology. Profound cognitive disability is an abstract category, but this abstraction manifests itself in the persons of one's neighbors, relatives, and friends. Its appearance transgresses the social delineations of gender, class, race, and nationality. If the promotion of all human beings within their lived contexts is indeed a common objective of Christian theologians today,

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[74] Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 107.

[75] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 30.

[76] In the next chapter, I will also discuss our mother Debra. In 1992, our parents were in a car accident. Our father Dale died instantly but our mother was rendered comatose. When she awoke, she was mostly paralyzed along the left side of her body, and her cognitive functions were significantly impaired. She spent the last eighteen years of her life in various care facilities before passing away in the spring of 2011. Immediately following the accident, Jarrod and I moved in with our paternal grandparents. Jarrod lives with our grandmother Gloria to this day.

how could a phenomenon as widespread as cognitive disability remain the purview of only a subset of theologians?

What remains to be articulated is how my certainty about Jarrod's basic humanity is at all warranted in light of Christian theology's common assumption that human flourishing results from the proper exercise of purposive agency. The present study levies the contention that anthropologies organized around that capacity do not yet arrive at what is most fundamental to human being. The goal of this study, therefore, is to provide theoretical support for what is, at present, a mostly intuitive conviction: a sufficiently robust concept of the human must include persons with profound cognitive disabilities.

Outlining the Present Study

Having stated the impetus behind my resistance to agency-centered anthropologies and their concepts of human flourishing, I must offer a few words previewing the remainder of the present study. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to lay out an expanded account of ableism and make a case for the fact that disability issues go to the heart of what it means to be human. I discuss several different models for conceiving of "disability" and "normality," including medical, moral, and social perspectives. This survey of disability studies uncovers that even the theories and methodologies of that discipline regularly prove incapable of establishing the full humanity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities because they also tend to assume an agency-based anthropology. I critically examine the moral philosophy of Martha Nussbaum as an example of how even earnest scholarly advocacy on behalf of these persons falls short as long as purposive agency remains fundamental to human flourishing. Chapter 2

concludes with an exposition of Deborah Creamer's limits model, an approach to issues of disability and embodiment that challenges the ability/disability binary and promises a fruitful vantage point from which to envision a sufficiently inclusive theological anthropology.

I devote the remainder of the present study to my constructive proposal for Christian theological anthropology. Over the course of three chapters, I articulate an ontology of radical interdependence and make the case for why it, rather than purposive agency, ought to operate centrally within Christian representations of human being and human flourishing. After identifying the concept of the *imago Dei* as the signature concept of theological anthropology, I discuss several ways in which this concept is amenable to an ontology of radical interdependence, treating it within the doctrinal contexts of creation, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Throughout my constructive proposal, I challenge the traditional tendencies to either stigmatize cognitive disability or ignore it completely through my demonstrations that the dependency, vulnerability, and need for care that is most conspicuous in the lives of profoundly disabled persons are, in truth, fundamental structures of human being in general.

In Chapter 3, I champion a relational approach to conceptualizing how human creatures are made in the image of God in opposition to the more traditional substantialist and functionalist approaches. I then contend that the most salient truth of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is not an assertion about the origins of the cosmos but rather the fact of humankind's absolute dependence upon God. Turning to Christology, I note how the person and work of Jesus Christ are determinative for understanding the *imago Dei*. This proves to be an invaluable methodological insight insofar as the story of Jesus is replete

with details of his own interdependence, as well as his commitment to promote the well-being of the marginalized.

The reflections on the doctrine of the church in Chapter 4 focus most intently on the Pauline metaphor that the ecclesial community is the body of Christ. The church becomes authentically itself both through carrying on the earthly ministry of Jesus and by being a communal embodiment of diversity within interdependence. While discussing the thoroughly ontological fashion in which the church is the image of God, I engage the theological anthropologies of Hans Reinders and Molly Haslam—two theologians who arguably provide the most sophisticated proposals for how to bring profound cognitive disability into the center of theological reflection on human being. The result is my own account of the relational ways in which persons with and without cognitive disabilities are human in the same basic sense.

The fifth and final chapter takes up the question of the final end of human being. Treating the eschatological dimension of human being in terms of how eternal life in God already infuses the church's earthly existence, I enumerate reasons for including the flourishing of persons with profound cognitive disabilities in the content of Christian hope. I also adopt the long-standing confession that the human creature's ultimate end is to know God, advocating a version of it in which knowledge of God is fundamentally non-conceptual and thus a real possibility for Jarrod and other similarly embodied individuals. Any adequate notion of the *imago Dei* must affirm this. The cumulative result of the last three chapters is a portrait of human being in which its authenticity includes the embrace of profound cognitive disability rather than its elimination and where its flourishing requires living more fully into radical interdependence instead of

transcending it. The construction of this theological anthropology begins in the next chapter with a discussion of disability studies.

CHAPTER TWO: NORMALITY, DIGNITY, AND OBSTACLES TO AFFIRMING HUMAN WORTH

Constructive theological discussions of human flourishing and human being often begin with questions concerning human worth. A theological anthropology, therefore, is more than simply a descriptive model in that it aims to provide theoretical grounds on which to affirm the worth of a distinctly human mode of existence. The assertion that a human being boasts an inherent (even superior) value is not an eventual conclusion of such inquiry but an initial hypothesis that drives investigation, making the investigation a clear instance of faith seeking understanding. The great challenge of positing a hypothesis that affirms the value of persons with profound cognitive disabilities is that the Christian theological tradition is decidedly lacking in ready-made resources.

Cognitive disability does not count among the perennial topics of Christian thought. For that reason, it is typically life experience that inspires a theologian to reflect on the subject, rather than the standard content of his or her theological education. The inspiration for the present study comes primarily from my relationships with my immediate family, especially my older brother Jarrod, who is a man with profound cognitive disabilities.[77] My experiences with Jarrod leave me convinced of both his full

[77] As I stated in Chapter 1, Jarrod was not born with profound disabilities. At four months, he nearly died from a bout of spinal meningitis that was initially misdiagnosed. Afterward, he was diagnosed with cerebral

humanity and his unqualified worth, and I devote space below to reflecting critically on those experiences. To make a case that supports my convictions, the first step is to consider why the mere fact of having a cognitive disability might call a person's very worth into question. I begin with a piece of family history—a piece that focuses chiefly on our mother Debra.

Taking Up the Question of Human Worth

In 1992, when Jarrod and I were still children, our parents were in a car accident. Our father Dale died instantly, while Debra suffered a traumatic brain injury. When she awoke from a coma lasting several weeks, we discovered that she was mostly paralyzed along the left side of her body and her cognitive functions were significantly impaired. Debra spent most of her remaining eighteen years living in a modest nursing home under the guardianship of her father Howard. She passed away at age fifty-seven from what appeared to be natural causes.

Spending time with Debra after the accident was always difficult for me. In a typical year, I would only visit her two or three times. When I reflect on what made those visits so hard, I do not fixate on the environment in which she lived or the fact that entering her room brought past loss to mind. The hardest part was the sheer difficulty involved in simply being present with her. Most noticeably, the injury to her brain led her to develop a tick of sorts: she would compulsively grind her teeth or chew something, usually a sheet, a bib, or her shirt. Merely keeping her mouth clear for conversation could

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palsy, epilepsy, deafness, and "mental retardation" (a term that has been replaced by "intellectual and developmental disabilities").

be a challenge. Even if Debra appeared to give someone her attention, she would often continue to move her head around or scan the room with her eyes seemingly at random.

Yet the true challenge to engaging Debra was her broken memory. There were certainly days her recollections were clearer but, even then, her statements never cohered into a proper narrative and she consistently confused the chronology of events. It also became increasingly difficult for her to identify people. The more a person's appearance had changed since the time of the car accident, the less likely Debra would be to recognize who he or she was. Although Howard ate lunch daily with Debra during those years, he never grew comfortable with the ways the car accident changed his daughter. I visited Howard for a month in the summer of 2005. On multiple occasions, his reports from his visits with Debra ended with the statement, "Your dad was the lucky one, David. 'Cause what's happened to your mom . . . . That ain't livin'."

The moments I found hardest to bear were the moments Debra became visibly agitated with her own limitations of memory and concentration. In those moments of self-assessment, Debra would often launch into a cycle of rapid questions, a near rant that always took the same basic shape: *"Are we just stupid and worthless? Are we stupid and worthless? Are we? Are we dumb? Are we just dumb? Are we just stupid and worthless?"* That refrain echoes in my thoughts regularly to this day.

As I consider these memories with an academic interest, I am struck by the way in which the link Western society forges between human worth and cognitive function is so blatant that even a woman with significant brain damage could both recognize it and fret

over its implications.[78] I am equally struck by the abiding power of Debra's questions. Her chosen pronoun alone is provocative: "Are *we* stupid and worthless?" This is the sort of question that eliminates the safe distance of detached observation and places me in the exigency of her anxiety and concerns. On this topic, Hans Reinders asserts that, when the humanity of a person with a cognitive disability is brought into question, the humanity of the supposedly "healthy" investigator cannot be assumed. In the investigation, "my conception of my own humanity is at stake."[79] If there is indeed a common humanity that binds Jarrod, Debra, and myself together as persons with identical worth, despite our disparate mental capacities, in what does it consist?

In the preceding chapter, I interrogated a concept of human being that is currently popular among Christian theologians. This concept portrays a fully human life as a flourishing life—a state of well-being in which one is free to exercise and enjoy the capacity for *agency*. Surveying the anthropologies of five prominent theologians (Gordon Kaufman, Sheila Davaney, Dwight Hopkins, Kathryn Tanner, and Marjorie Suchocki), I expressed appreciation for the fact that their shared concept of the human draws attention to the *embedded*, *embodied*, and *relational* character of human existence. I also affirmed their common choice to decenter *rationality* from its traditional place as the defining

[78] On the subject of persons with cognitive impairments becoming momentarily aware of their own limitations, journalist Ian Brown makes a similar observation about his son Walker, a child born with cardiofaciocutaneous syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that includes (among other symptoms) delayed cognitive development and the lack of speech. Commenting on how Walker continually attempts to injure himself, Brown writes, "Why does he do it? Because he wants to talk, but can't? Because—this is my latest theory—he can't do what he can see other people doing? I'm sure he's aware of his own difference." See Ian Brown, *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Journey to Understand His Extraordinary Son* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 2, 5. Theologian John Gillibrand notes the same phenomenon in the life of his son Adam, a young man diagnosed as being "at the extreme end of the autism spectrum." See John Gillibrand, *Disabled Church – Disabled Society: The Implication of Autism for Philosophy, Theology and Politics* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010), 18, 49.

[79] Reinders, *Receiving in the Gift of Friendship*, 28.

capacity of human being. Nevertheless, I critiqued this form of theological anthropology on the grounds that it is not sufficiently inclusive. The overarching argument of the present study is that this vision of a flourishing human life tacitly excludes persons with profound cognitive disabilities, such as Jarrod, insofar as it equates basic humanity with the personal capacity for goal-oriented action, i.e. *purposive* agency.[80] In short, the key task of Chapter One was to name this problem for an academic field that does not typically acknowledge profound cognitive disability as a topic worthy of theological reflection.[81] Yet there remains much to explore regarding the complexity of this problem and the implications it has for long-standing assumptions about the human being.

The purpose of the present chapter is to provide a more in-depth critique of the ways in which Christian thought has represented or ignored persons with disabilities, as well as to identify resources (ready-made or not) for constructing a theology that affirms the great significance of profound cognitive disability for understanding human being. Its central contention is that the failure of Christian theology to affirm the full humanity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities renders it incapable of affirming the inherent worth of these people's lives. A sufficiently inclusive anthropology will validate the ways

[80] As noted in Chapter 1, I borrow the phrase purposive agency from Reinders. I think it communicates concisely the link between the notions of rationality and agency and the restricted sense of agency that these anthropologies employ. An exhaustive conceptualization of human agency would also include involuntary actions, which do not require rational direction but are instead performed under impulse or external force, as well as voluntary actions that are not the result of deliberation. See Aristotle, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed., trans. and ed. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), 30-33. But the characterization of agency articulated by the theologians in Chapter 1 is voluntary and deliberate. It necessarily takes the form of intentional action or deliberate desire aimed at the realization of a self-appointed end, and the lack of such intentionality signals the absence of genuine agency. From such a perspective, speaking of agency as "purposive" is redundant. Using that adjective, then, keeps a shared presupposition from escaping observation.

[81] The case for treating disability as a topic worthy of theological reflection is a recurring theme in Deborah Creamer's *Disability and Christian Theology*, and I borrow that language from her.

in which loved ones and faith communities already engage and care for the profoundly disabled, and it will also provide strengthened theological warrants for drawing these individuals more intimately into the human family in theory as well as practice. In pursuit of these objectives, I will reexamine the embodied, embedded, and relational dimensions of human existence and posit that a proper commitment to these notions logically necessitates reconsideration of the significance of purposive agency.

Thus far, the rhetorical strength of my argument depends on a considerable amount of goodwill from my audience. If the reader is already convinced of the severity of the problem at hand, it is likely because he or she already shares my conviction that Jarrod and other persons with profound cognitive disabilities are as fundamentally human as the most capable of purposive agents, despite the general lack of anthropologies that justify this conviction. In light of this absence, referring to Jarrod as a *person* with cognitive disabilities is a dogmatic use of that word, a label that operates more as a promissory note for what my project strives to achieve than a statement of accomplished fact.

The concept of personhood shares an intimate connection with the concept of *dignity*. In the history of Western thought, the term dignity denotes a life possessing inherent worth, a value that is never merely instrumental or conditional.[82] The concept of human dignity often provides the conceptual warrant for claims that human beings ought

[82] The term *person* often identifies an individual who is dignified. Within the worldview of classical liberalism, one must demonstrate the possession of certain cognitive abilities to be considered a person. John Locke provides a representative expression of this tradition when he defines a person as "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places." See *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (1689; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 335.

to be treated with the utmost respect; unconditional worth makes an unconditional demand on those able to perceive it. As Molly Haslam explains, "the word 'human being' names that which is valuable to the degree that it is deserving of care and protection from harm."[83] For anthropologies preoccupied with purposive agency, dignity is denied wherever a potential agent has been deprived of meaningful possibilities for self-determination. Just and caring relations between fellow human beings entail active opposition to the mechanisms of this deprivation, be they political, economic, or social in nature.[84] Despite the great usefulness of this anthropology for numerous theologies constructed on behalf of the marginalized, it does not provide grounds on which to affirm the dignity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities because they do not exhibit the symbolic and rational abilities purposive agency requires. The effort to include persons with profound cognitive disabilities within a Christian concept of the human is thus geared toward a theoretical and methodological problem with serious ethical implications: The ongoing failure to include those individuals in popular concepts of the human leaves their very dignity in question and, as a result, allows the promotion of their well-being to remain a matter of debate rather than a moral requirement.

The effort to construct a sufficiently inclusive theological anthropology must begin with an informed understanding of the practices of exclusion already operative within Christian communities and, more broadly, Western society. For this reason, a

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[83] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 89.

[84] Here a life of purposive agency is so inherently valuable that even an individual in which this capacity is mostly unrealized possesses absolute worth. Eva Feder Kittay, "Disability, Equal Dignity and Care," in *The Discourse of Human Dignity*, eds. Regina Ammicht-Quinn, Maureen Junker-Kerry, and Elsa Tamez (London: SCM Press, 2003), 105-15, 107.

closer examination of the category "disability" is in order. Entering into conversation with the field of disability studies, I discuss three common models for conceptualizing disability—the medical, moral, and social models. My key objective here is to highlight the ways in which the application of the category often fails to account for the personhood of the individuals it supposedly describes. Following this examination, I discuss work on the subject of disability by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum's capabilities approach represents perhaps the best known and most earnest attempt to affirm the dignity of persons with cognitive disabilities within a liberative project that valorizes agency, but even her valiant attempt cannot help but fall short. Finally, I present Deborah Creamer's limits model of disability. Her expressly theological approach to representing disability experiences promises a perspective from which to affirm the full humanity of persons with profound cognitive disability with an efficacy that other models of disability fail to provide. Through the completion of these three tasks, I identify the most helpful resources for articulating my own theological anthropology, as well as possible pitfalls for my project to avoid.

Disability, Ableism, and Normalcy

If Christian theologians have typically neglected profound cognitive disability as a topic of reflection, what exactly is it that they have failed to consider? What factors have enabled this failure to such a degree that even theologies attentive to the embedded, embodied, and relational character of human existence do not register the presence of cognitive disabilities in the congregation, the home, or the public square? In the pursuit of

answers to these questions, it is important to note that reflection explicitly on disability is a fairly new development within the academy at large. Although scholarly writing on the subject of disability began as early as the 1950s, the first disability studies programs in the United States did not appear until in the mid-1990s.[85] This appearance paralleled the initial emergence of disability culture at a national level, particularly in the United Kingdom and the U.S.[86] It was not until 1994, with the publication of Nancy Eiesland's *The Disabled God*, that theologies of disability began to draw any substantial attention from the theological mainstream.[87] Even with an increase of books, articles, and conference sessions on the theology of disability over the last two decades, a theological treatment of disability aimed at a mainstream audience still cannot assume its readers are familiar with how this category is typically employed and understood.

The very definition of "disability" remains a matter of debate among scholars of the subject.[88] Consistent with the discussion of embeddedness in Chapter 1, the meaning of this term is "diverse and complex, constructed and reconstructed according to

[85] Steven J. Taylor, "Disability Studies in Higher Education," *New Directions for Higher Education*, no. 154 (Summer 2011): 95.

[86] Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 11. Writing as a journalist, Shapiro's account of the disability rights movement focuses almost exclusively on the United States.

[87] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*. Eiesland's book is certainly not the first theological publication in which the topic of disability comes up. Yet her book is a watershed text due to its unprecedented engagement of disability studies and corroboration with the disability rights movement.

[88] Deborah Beth Creamer, "Toward a Theology That Includes the Human Experience of Disability," in *Graduate Theological Education and the Human Experience of Disability*, ed. Robert C. Anderson (New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2003), 57-67, 62.

particular times, cultures, contexts, and intentions."[89] A sizable portion of the literature on disability remains devoted to conversation over which model of disability boasts the most explanatory power or most effectively facilitates liberative ends. An examination of these models is thus an essential task for the project at hand.[90] It will become abundantly clear that, whatever "disability" might signify, the content of this category is neither simple nor straightforward.

Perhaps the most widely-assumed understanding of disability in Western society is the *medical model*. Interpreted through this lens, a disability is, first and foremost, a medical or biological condition found in the body.[91] A body is disabled if its particular morphology or physiology prevents the performance of statistically normal human activities. In other words, a disability is an individual defect (e.g. *his* legs are incapable of walking, or *her* brain has suffered a traumatic injury).[92] The medical community bears the responsibility of identifying and describing these defects, singling out what contrasts to the common, typical human body.[93]

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[89] John Swinton, "Disability Theology," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 140-41, 140.

[90] In what follows, I do not mention every thread of disability studies. I do not provide a representative history of the field either. I address only those insights from the field that I regard to be most relevant to an academic project centrally focused on profound cognitive disability. For a concise history of disability studies, see Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 15-22. For more information on the various projects and perspectives currently operating within the borders of disability studies see Lennard J, Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2013).

[91] Deborah Beth Creamer, "Disability Liberative Ethics" in *Ethics: A Liberative Approach*, ed. Miguel De La Torre (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 223-38, 224.

[92] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 3.

[93] Elizabeth DePoy and Stephen French Gilson, *Studying Disability: Multiple Theories and Responses* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011), 36.

The detection of a disability is not only a matter for diagnosis, it is also a warrant for medical intervention. Inherent to the medical model is the assumption that disabilities are pathological and must be treated like a long-term illness.[94] Deviations from the bodily norm represent a harm that leads to suffering, and that suffering must be prevented or minimized. In short, intervention by medical or rehabilitation professionals is necessary to bring patients as much as possible into line with the normal expectations for a human body.[95] For example, with regard to a man who has lost the use of his legs, intervention would take the form of surgery or physical therapy or, where those options fail, the provision of a wheelchair or some other assistive technology. Another prominent example would be research devoted to the treatment or elimination of genetic birth defects, such as spina bifida or dysmelia (a limb anomaly). The physicians, nurses, therapists, and pathologists that comprise the medical community share the objective to cure or alleviate an irregularity that prevents the person with a disability from experiencing fullness of life. For many in Western society, the medical model's portrayal of disability appears naturally obvious and beyond doubt.[96] The status of disability as a bodily condition is objective and efforts to correct that condition seem to be the necessary, ethical response. The warrant for intervention, then, would ultimately appear to be a commitment to a particular vision of human flourishing.

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[94] Tom Koch, "The Ideology of Normalcy: The Ethics of Difference," *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 123.

[95] John Swinton, "Disability, Ableism, and Disablism," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 444.

[96] Sharon V. Betcher, "Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission: Religion and the Politics of Disablement" in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press), 79-99, 95.

A medical interpretation of Jarrod's disabilities was unquestionably operative within the Scott household. Beyond the fact that my parents relied on the opinions of medical specialists to understand and attend to their son, they were both nurses. Debra was a registered nurse specializing in pediatrics, while Dale was a licensed practicing nurse working in an orthopedic clinic. The sights, sounds, textures, and smells of hospitals provided many of the contours of their shared world. It would have been only natural for them repeatedly to perceive Jarrod diagnostically as "a child with sudden, recurrent episodes of convulsion" or "the boy with spastic paralysis." The house was full of material reminders that their child's life deviated from the norms that governed their common profession; objects like Jarrod's wheelchair, his uniquely designed bed, his increasingly larger diapers, and the bottles of prescription drugs that were daily ground and mixed into his food. As an interpretive lens, the medical model directed our family's efforts to understand and manage the uncommon challenges that Jarrod's body introduced into daily life.

The evaluation the medical model facilitates is not, however, restricted to objective assessment and diagnosis of bodily conditions. It also shapes perception of the emotional and existential dimensions of a life touched by disability. In cases where deficits of mind or body resist all available means of corrective intervention, this model interprets the inability to conform as a *personal* tragedy, a misfortune with its locus in the incorrigible body.[97] As much as any parents of a child with special needs, Dale and Debra must have felt the emotional pain of seeing profound abnormality in their son and, on top

[97] Swinton, "Disability, Ableism, and Disablism," 444.

of that pain, the frustration of being unable to utilize any of their knowledge, training, or professional connections to return him to the embodied state into which he was born.[98]

This conceptualization of disability often operates in conjunction with a second interpretative framework, what scholars call the *moral model* or, alternatively, the *religious model* of disability. With roots deep in the ancient world, the moral model operated as the default understanding of disability until the Enlightenment.[99] Like its medical counterpart, this model regards disability as an individual and deficient trait. Its signature claim is that this deficiency is the result of sin or wrongdoing. Once again, the presence of a disability is warrant for intervention, here taking the form of religious measures or divine action.[100] Paralleling the medical model's dichotomies of normal/abnormal and health/illness, the moral model interprets the spiritual status of a person as either saint or sinner and the fact of their embodiment as either a blessing or curse.[101]

The story of Jesus healing a man who is blind in John 9 illustrates the typical structure of "miracle stories" in the Christian tradition.[102] Upon encountering this man,

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[98] Debra kept a journal from May 19 to June 2, 1981, providing details about Jarrod's initial illness and hospitalization. In the final entry, she reflects on the most recent prognosis provided by a doctor at the children's hospital: "He thinks Jarrod continues to do well. He hasn't had a temp [sic.] for several days now. I just wish he would 'perk-up' faster. He will watch things but doesn't make much of an attempt to do anything else. He acts like his back and neck feel much better, but he still hasn't smiled yet. I get impatient waiting, sometimes, for the 'old' Jarrod to reappear." Debra's journal does not chronicle Jarrod's release from the hospital or the days in which it became clear that the "old Jarrod" would not return.

[99] Joel S. Baden and Candida R. Moss, "The Origin and Interpretation of *sara 'at* in Leviticus 13-14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 658.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Creamer, "Disability Liberative Ethics," 224.

[102] All biblical citations in the present study come from the New Revised Standard Version.

Jesus' disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus' responds, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Jesus then uses the divine powers at his disposal to enable this man to see for the first time in his life. Whatever subversion of the medical and moral models might be read in Jesus' verbal response, this narrative plays with the presupposition that only in the removal of the man's bodily deficiency could his life be a revelatory site of God's presence.[103] As in other miracle stories, the narrative presents a problematic body as clearly in need of intervention, some religious activity corrects the deficiency, and this correction testifies to the reality and character of the true God. This evaluation of the disabled body undergirds the long-standing practice of using blindness, deafness, and other disabilities as metaphors for an impoverished spiritual condition. These traits exemplify a state of brokenness, standing in for insensitivity to or ignorance of God's ways.[104] To put the matter more sharply, in the absence of divine restoration, embodied disabilities and the persons who have them are aligned with evil and sin, antithetical to the fullness of human life experienced only by those in whom God's Spirit dwells.[105]

Present-day expressions of the moral model often exhibit a secular bent. Operating collaboratively with the medical model, the moral cause of disability is not sin but the failure to abide by well-known principles of health and nutrition. As Dawn

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[103] For interpretations of John 9 as a text that supports a positive valuation of disability, see Kerry H. Wynn, "Johannine Healings and the Otherness of Disability," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2007); Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 322-35.

[104] Betcher, "Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission," 92-3.

[105] Baden and Moss, "The Origin and Interpretation of *sara 'at* in Leviticus 13-14," 658.

DeVries notes, the birth of child with congenital defects will likely prompt people to ask, "What did the mother do, or what did she ingest, during pregnancy to make the baby this way?"[106] Cases in which debilitating forms of obesity or diabetes result in part from patterns of poor eating and exercise can give rise to a similar habit of mind—this condition is a punishment for one's transgression against the instruction of medical authorities. These authorities serve as the analogue of God here, just as biotechnology and pharmacology replace spiritual healing as the means by which the diminishing effects of one's imprudence might be corrected.

The moral/religious model has the potential to both reinforce and supplement the medical model in powerful ways, especially in cases of persons with profound cognitive disabilities. As discussed above, the logical conclusion arrived at through the medical model would seem to be that the embodiment of a profoundly disabled person like Jarrod amounts to a personal tragedy with no identifiable remedy. In one sense, interpreting such a life within the religious parameters just described only intensifies the tragic element; that person is not only "less than whole," but also "unholy." Yet, in a second sense, the moral model provides a ground for hope the medical model cannot—the possibility of a bona fide miracle.[107]

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[106] Dawn DeVries, "Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 124-140, 136-37.

[107] The moral model also shares a tight connection with theodicy. When a religious perspective assumes that the presence of disability in one's life is always reason for lament, it is only natural for one to question why a loving God would allow, or even actively cause, human persons to have disabilities. The constructive proposal I lay out in the remaining chapters of this study details several reasons why Christians should not assume theodicy is most appropriate theological context for reflecting upon disability.

The truth of our parents' love for Jarrod was beyond question. Yet their fervent hope that Jarrod would one day be cured of his disabilities was also evident. Although our parents had always been active and professing Christians, when I was roughly eight years old, I began to notice their spiritual practices take on a more charismatic flavor. I saw these changes most clearly in our mother. Debra talked with increasing frequency about the power of intercessory prayer and speaking in tongues. Although our family rarely had much expendable income, she began sending money to television ministries that placed a heavy emphasis upon "gifts of the Spirit" and healing. On more than one occasion, Debra told me about visions she had of myself and a disability-free Jarrod working side-by-side in the mission field. She also informed me that Dale had spoken in tongues for the first time while praying fervently for my brother.

One of my most vivid, childhood memories captures the time our family attended a service led by televangelist Benny Hinn (a consistent recipient of my family's money). At the time, Hinn's services always ended with his invitation for persons in attendance to come on stage if they sought healing or desired to be "slain in the Spirit." My mother's anticipation for this event was immense. At the time of invitation, my entire family rose and went to the base of the stage. Yet that service ended without Hinn's assistants bringing Jarrod on stage. Instead, following the time of healing, we heard testimonies from congregants who claimed to have been healed of migraine headaches and sinus infections; nothing so spectacular as deafness or cerebral palsy. I can still remember our parents' dejected silence as we made our way to the parking lot.[108] Despite the depth of

[108] My abiding thought as we left that evening was, not that the faith of my parents had somehow come up short, but that there was something suspicious and unfair about that evening's events.

their love for their son and the tenacity of their faith in their God, Jarrod's deficits remained. With the event of their car accident occurring mere months later, Dale and Debra each died without witnessing the medical or spiritual restoration their hearts desired.[109]

A third approach to conceptualizing disability challenges the basic assumption that a person with a disability is in some way less than whole. The *social model* of disability (sometimes called the *minority group model*) portrays disability, not as a deficit lodged in an individual body, but as the discriminatory treatment of an atypical body.[110] Being a person with a disability, therefore, is not an inherently tragic or pitiable state of being; instead it is the stereotypes, myths, and fears of the larger society that make that person's life difficult.[111] Insofar as disability is the product of social arrangements, the level of disability one experiences can be reduced, perhaps even eliminated.[112]

To communicate the constructed character of disability more effectively, the social model also employs the term *impairment*. Impairment is often defined as "an abnormality or loss of physiological form or function."[113] The term *disability* here describes the consequences of a particular impairment, which may be the inability to

[109] In Debra's case, her prayers that Jarrod's profound disabilities be corrected were followed by her own disabling.

[110] DePoy and Gilson, *Studying Disability*, 35.

[111] Shapiro, *No Pity*, 5.

[112] Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (London: Routledge, 2006), 29.

[113] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 13.

perform some task or activity, especially one a society deems necessary.[114] Creamer, Eiesland, and other (but not all) disability scholars also use the term "handicap" to refer specifically to a disadvantage resulting from an impairment or disability.[115] For the sake of clarification, consider the example of a woman whose inner ears have sustained extensive damage and is now deaf. Losing the ability to receive auditory information is the impairment. This woman is disabled to the extent that she experiences limitations on account of this loss of function, such as her inability to hear announcements delivered through the speakers of a public address system, the dialogue of a motion picture, or the voices of people who engage her in conversation. Because the statistical majority of human beings are not impaired in this particular way, and most forms of human communication or popular media thus assume an individual ability to hear, being deaf is often socially disadvantageous and a handicap.

Reconsidering this example through the lens of the social model, the woman's lack of auditory function is not an inherently negative trait, but a neutral fact of her physical constitution.[116] It is the larger society and culture that declares certain traits "abnormal" (and others not) based on particular value systems. These value systems also establish which tasks are *necessary* for each individual to perform. Accordingly, the disabling consequences of impaired hearing are not the inexorable outcome of entirely natural structures of human existence. "Deafness" amounts to "disability" in a society

[114] Ibid., 14.

[115] Ibid; cf. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 27.

[116] Candida Moss, "Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79: 3 (2011) 1-27.

because a hearing majority has most often crafted its practices and technologies without taking this specific type of embodiment into account. Likewise, deafness is only a handicap where a lack of hearing results in a *social* disadvantage. Wherever the society provides reasonable accommodations for "abnormal" bodies and minds, the disabling limitations associated with one's impairments are indeed lessened or removed. So a woman who cannot hear is neither disabled nor handicapped in situations where over-the-air announcements are accompanied by textual messages, motion pictures are subtitled, and she is able to communicate with other people using sign language.[117] Illustrating this point strikingly, the terms Deaf community and Deaf people represent a culture of persons who self-identify as a linguistic (not medical) minority that proudly claims sign language as their first or preferred language.[118]

The social model of disability developed in conjunction with the beginning of the disability rights movement.[119] The rallying cry of this movement is a call for

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[117] The term "handicap" does not occur frequently in the recent literature on disability. I attribute this to the fact that disability scholars use "disability" primarily to refer to forms of social mistreatment and exclusion and not to any unavoidable limitations that might result from impairment, effectively making the two terms synonyms. For this reason, I will continue making use of "disability" but not "handicap." One could just as easily prefer the latter term. I have chosen to discuss "handicap" here because it is customary to do so in introductions to disability studies and, more importantly, because the social model's tendency to overlook natural limitations resulting from impairment is an important point raised in the critiques of this model.

[118] Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris, *Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability* (London: SPCK, 2002), ix.

[119] In the United Kingdom, political and academic advocacy on behalf of the disabled grew out of Marxist concerns for an oppressed underclass, focusing almost single-mindedly on society as the root of disability. See Baden and Moss, "The Origin and Interpretation of *sara 'at* in Leviticus 13-14," 658n53. In my native United States, the disability rights movement emerged as a later expression of the civil rights movement. This period of activism and political organizing was prompted in large part by the return of disabled veterans from the Vietnam War. The movement's greatest victories are represented in the passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Both as a political and academic movement, advocacy for persons with disabilities is still a first- or second-wave enterprise. See Lennard J. Davis, "The End of Identity Politics: On Disability as an Unstable Category," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (London: Routledge, 2006), 301-315, 301-02, and DeVries,

accessibility, both in terms of the physical modification of facilities and living spaces and of the legally protected right to move and participate throughout society.[120] In short, the emergence of the social model provided activists and scholars alike with a paradigm in which the disabled are neither plagued by God nor disease—they are minority citizens being deprived of their rights by a dominant, able-bodied majority.[121]

Much of the intellectual labor of disability studies has been to identify the nature of the prejudice against persons with disabilities, as well as the oppressive structures this prejudice underlies and validates. The common term for this prejudice is *ableism*. Ableism is similar to other "-isms" that feature prominently in theological discourse today without being reducible to any one of them. As in other liberative theologies, theologies of disability heed a call, simultaneously ethical and methodological in character, to address a distinctive set of problems that boasts a signature complexity.

Where ableism is concerned, the complexity involves the organization of human bodies such that the statistical minority of persons with disabilities are widely represented

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"Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities," 124. Writing as a journalist covering the disability rights movement, Joseph Shapiro observes how the legal recognition of persons with disabilities as having minority status has opened up possibilities for new breakthroughs in equality, but also for "clashes, misunderstandings, even backlash" with the larger U.S. public. Shapiro considers the ADA to be the most significant civil rights legislation since 1964. Yet, in the cases of that earlier legislation, consciousness-raising preceded and facilitated society doing the right thing. The disability rights movement lacks any clear parallels to freedom rides; it boasts no speeches in the vein of "I Have a Dream." The disability rights movement has also lacked one highly visible figure: "Diversity is its central characteristic. No one leader can claim to speak for all disabled people" Quite unlike the activists of the 1960s, the disability rights movement is a powerful coalition of millions that nonetheless has gone mostly unnoticed by nondisabled people. See Shapiro, *No Pity*, 11, 324. For more on the legislative side of the disability rights movement See Leslie Francis and Anita Silver, eds., *Americans with Disabilities: Exploring Implications of the Law for Individuals and Institutions* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[120] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 28.

[121] Davis, "The End of Disability Politics," 302.

as less than fully human and constituted strictly in terms of their "problem" aspects.[122] The disabled body comes to stand for "the precariousness of the human condition," in particular, the susceptibility of human persons to change, decline, and death.[123] The perceived inferiority and undesirability of disabled bodies takes the material form of architectural barriers which keep them at a physical and social distance.[124] Specialized facilities and other accommodations continue to be difficult to secure for many individuals who need them and, when they are available, the institutions providing them often remain more concerned with meeting minimal legal obligations than helping those individuals succeed or flourish. Victimization within an ableist society is not necessarily the outcome of a mean spirited system, just a life-deadening one.[125] The average citizen does not have to harbor hate against the disabled to be both a member and beneficiary of this "constant, unspoken conspiracy of exclusion."[126]

Fiona Campbell observes that, within the scholarly literature, there is "limited definitional or conceptual specificity" in the use of ableism as a technical term.[127] In response, she offers this concise definition. Ableism is:

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[122] Paul Abberley, The Concept of Oppression and the Development of a Social Theory of Disability," in Overcoming Disability Barriers: 18 Years of Disability and Society, ed. Len Barton (London: Routledge, 2006), 21-36, 32.

[123] Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 5.

[124] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 63.

[125] Shapiro, *No Pity*, 261.

[126] Rowan Williams, "Foreword," in *Disabled Church – Disabled Society: The Implication of Autism for Philosophy, Theology and Politics*, by John Gillibrand (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010), 9-11, 10.

[127] Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5.

> A network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human.[128]

As an ideology, ableism makes a preference for able-bodiedness the baseline for determining humanness.[129] The medical model frequently regulates this determination, and the ostensible purpose of medical science is ultimately to bring humankind to a state of wholeness free of disease and genetic mutation.[130] Ableism provides an "ideology of normalcy" to background medical, bioethical, and therapeutic decisions with a set of essentially political and social values.[131]

The use of disability as an identity marker is, above all, "a containment strategy for that which troubles the cultural ideal;" namely, the ideal of normalcy.[132] While the term "normal" technically functions to describe what is common or unsurprising, ableism employs "normal" to validate a worldview based in an ideal of what it means to be human which, as an ideal, is not actually achievable.[133] Only in recent history has the concept of a norm come to imply that the majority of people must somehow conform to its

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[128] Ibid.

[129] Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 8. Thomas Koch remarks that such determinations often make a Darwinian assumption concerning the unproductive and undesirable status of traits deemed to be uncompetitive. See, 124.

[130] Betcher, “Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission," 80.

[131] Koch, "The Ideology of Normalcy," 123.

[132] Betcher, “Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission," 96.

[133] Creamer, “Disability Liberative Ethics,” 224.

content.[134] "Normalcy" often functions in tyrannical ways. Standards of measurement that make it possible to adjudicate growth, capacity, or development become assessments that effectively force a population to fit into categories of what is normal or suffer ostracization.[135]

Robert McRuer refers to this state of affairs as *compulsory able-bodiedness*.[136] Nearly everyone acts on the desire to be normal, which is a reasonable attitude given that the alternative is to be "abnormal" or "deviant" and experience the social consequences of segregation from "the rest of us."[137] The notion of compulsory able-bodiedness helps expose the insidious nature of ableism as an ideology which presents the appearance of choice where there actually is none. Meanwhile, the compulsory role of persons with disabilities is to "embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, 'Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?'"[138] McRuer also points out the *stigmaphobic* dynamic at play here: "people scrambling desperately to be included under the umbrella of the 'normal'—and scrambling desperately to cast somebody else as abnormal, crazy, abject, or disabled."[139] In mainstream North American culture, stigmaphobia carries the intolerance of the abnormal beyond the confines of medical

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[134] Lennard J. Davis, "Introduction: Disability, Normalcy, and Power," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (London: Routledge, 2013), 1-16, 3.

[135] DeVries, "Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities," 127-29.

[136] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 7.

[137] Ibid., 7-8.

[138] Ibid., 9.

[139] Michael Bérubé, "Foreword: Another Word is Possible," in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, by Robert McRuer (New York: New York University Press, 2006), vii-xii, viii.

diagnoses to include eccentricity, rejecting as alien or dangerous what might otherwise signify harmless expressions of individuality.[140]

The inherent instability of the category of disability only heightens the anxiety of persons passing as normal or who are attempting to do so. Disability is "the one minority that anyone can join at any time" through countless mechanisms, including accidents, malnutrition, or simply aging.[141] In point of fact, every human person that does not die young will eventually be disabled in one way or another.[142] On the whole, then, disability identity is less stable than gender, race, sexuality, nation, or class.[143] When one takes into consideration that all persons are virtually disabled, "both in the sense that able-bodied norms are intrinsically impossible to embody fully and in the sense that able-bodied status is always temporary," the arbitrariness of restricting this identity category to only certain segments of a population becomes increasingly evident.[144]

Campbell makes the argument that the category of "normal" is equally unstable. She asserts, "Ableism sets up a binary dynamic that is not simply comparative but rather co-relationally constitutive."[145] There is an elusive core to the corporeal perfection able-bodiedness claims for itself. "Normal" is only ever loosely coherent, establishing its significance through purging threatening bodies from itself and drawing attention to

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[140] DeVries, "Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities," 129.

[141] Shapiro, *No Pity*, 7.

[142] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 74.

[143] Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 5. Siebers gives the example that, although it is impossible for a man to go to sleep and wake up another race, he could wake up paralyzed.

[144] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 30.

[145] Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, 6.

supposedly unruly, uncivil, and disabled bodies as counterexamples to "true," "real," and "essential" human being.[146] Normalcy is simply "not disabled" and, in the same moment, disability is simply "not normal." The content of what is stigmatized or idealized stays inconstant amidst the shifting significations of different cultures across history and the globe. Campbell claims that there is a fundamental sense in which disability is unthought; feared as strange or foreign but never truly positively signified. This adds further support to the proposition that what makes the presence of disability so threatening to the dominant culture is its inherent instability. Where efforts to establish a universal and unchanging concept of human being is concerned, disability "upsets the modern craving for ontological security."[147]

A consistent line of discussion in recent disability literature is to point to the ability/disability binary's shortcomings of intelligibility and stability as grounds to critique the social model of disability itself. Tom Shakespeare remarks that what was once this model's greatest strength has become its most conspicuous weakness. Beginning as it did in the social justice movements of the twentieth century, the social model initially consisted of the formal definitions underlying a set of political propositions, and these propositions were easily turned into effective slogans.[148] This had the unfortunate consequence of its proponents identifying with the social model so

[146] Ibid., 10-11.

[147] Ibid., 13.

[148] Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, 33.

thoroughly that disability studies failed to revise or reconceptualize it in any substantive way for thirty years.[149]

There are presently several disability scholars who have started the work of bringing the resources of postmodern thought into critical engagement with disability issues. Perhaps their foremost critique of the social model is that it mimics the moral model's tendency to explain disability universally and, for that reason, ends up creating totalizing meta-historical narratives that exclude important dimensions of disabled peoples' lives and much of their knowledge.[150] Lennard Davis contends that the continued, persuasive power of disability studies will suffer and its larger relevance decrease if the field were to "ignore the current intellectual moment" and cling dogmatically to "increasingly antiquated models."[151] Not only does the diversity of lives included in the category of disability make a single, unitary disability perspective impossible, it is also the case that persons with disabilities always employ a disability perspective alongside and in collaboration with other critical lenses and other identity categories.[152] Whether or not one can successfully group this new wave of disability scholars together under a heading such as the *postmodern model* or the *cultural model*, there remains an agreement among them that disability studies must improve in its ability

[149] Ibid., 33-34.

[150] Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, "Mapping the Terrain," in *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, eds. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-17, 15.

[151] Davis, "The End of Identity Politics," 301.

[152] Creamer, "Disability Liberative Ethics," 232.

to capture the complexity of people's lived experiences of impairment, empowerment, and oppression.[153]

Of special relevance to a project on profound cognitive disability is the critique that the social model overlooks how concrete bodies experience disability not only on account of oppressive environmental factors, but also involuntary restrictions that themselves lead to pain and discomfort (e.g. a child with autism experiencing frustrating obsessions that do not have a direct, social cause).[154] Likewise, there are different emotions and adjustments one goes through when dealing with a congenital impairment rather than an acquired one.[155] Davis warns that honoring these insight properly will mean staying mindful of the ways that even postmodernism posits a universal subject—one that retains the modern subject's qualities of wholeness, independence, unity, self-determination, and normal capability.[156] As an alternative, he posits the notion of a subject that only comes to be itself under conditions of dependence and interdependence rather than independence and autonomy.[157] Tom Koch similarly advocates opposing the ideology of normalcy with an "ideology of difference," where it is assumed that each

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[153] Licia Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 8-9; Baden and Moss, "The Origin and Interpretation of *sara'at* in Leviticus 13-14," 658n53. Moss notes how Davis and other proponents of the cultural model also call into question the distinction between impairments and disability, claiming that impairments are likely not as natural as even the social model assumes them to be. See "Heavenly Healing," 994.

[154] Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 27.

[155] Arne Fritzson and Samuel Kabue, *Interpreting Disability: A Church of All and for All* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2004), 14.

[156] Davis, "The End of Identity Politics," 311.

[157] Ibid., 313.

individual is somehow "incomplete and un-able, gaining full personhood only interpersonally and socially."[158] When a disability perspective takes up this agenda, the perceived messiness and strangeness of persons with profound cognitive disability, especially their lack of purposive agency, no longer count as valid reasons to exclude them from human communities or the theoretical consideration of human being itself.[159]

What this survey of different models of disability makes clear is that the academic study of disability is now at a crossroads. The path (or paths) that future research and theorization ought to take is a matter of fervent debate. Given this situation, a theological project, such as my own, cannot simply adopt a methodology or theory base wholesale from disability studies. A true conversation must be had—one in which the salient arguments of disability literature come into constructive engagement with the elements of theological discourse that resemble, amplify, or even challenge those arguments.

Before considering two proposals for how best to put the insights of disability studies to use, a brief summary of the preceding journey through disability studies should prove helpful. What the term “disability” actually signifies is indeed underdetermined. The medical and moral models each present disability as a defective trait lodged in the body of an individual person, and everyday usage of the term would seem to affirm this characterization as common sense. Nevertheless, a closer examination of these two models shows them to be reductive—focused so intently on the diagnosis of a deviation from an ideal human body or the assessment of the spiritual connotations of one’s bodily function that the very personhood of a person with disabilities goes unaccounted for and

[158] Koch, "The Ideology of Normalcy," 124.

[159] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 107-08.

is tacitly qualified or denied. The social model, introduced amidst the rise of disability studies and disability culture, highlights the ways in which persons are disabled chiefly by the stigma and prejudiced structures of human communities, rather than by their own embodiment. The exposure of ableism, as well as the artificiality of "normalcy," facilitates the liberative end of promoting greater attentiveness to bodily difference and the diversity of human abilities. Yet the social model itself also loses sight of an individual's personhood by making disability entirely a matter of social construction, overlooking concrete frustrations and bodily pains that cannot be reduced to oppressive ideology. The current dilemma for scholars interested in disability issues is what the focus and goals of the next wave of scholarship should be.

One well-known scholar who attempts to integrate the insights of disability studies into a universal theory of justice is Martha Nussbaum. Adopting what she calls a *capabilities approach*, she is straightforward about her intentions to include all persons with disabilities into her moral and political philosophy.[160] I now turn to consider the potential value of her work for my own project.

[160] Another well-known version of the capabilities approach appears in the work of economist Amartya Sen. Sen and Nussbaum began developing their respective versions of this approach independently, although they continue to engage one another in public dialogue. See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999); *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011).

Dignity in the Capabilities Approach of Martha Nussbaum

At the heart of Martha Nussbaum's theory of justice is a commitment to address three significant problems that even the strongest, contemporary theories of justice consistently leave unsolved. The first is "the problem of doing justice to people with physical and mental impairments."[161] To deal with this problem effectively, Nussbaum urges us to adopt "a new way of thinking about who the citizen is."[162] She seeks to develop a social contract theory in which the contract is not fundamentally an arrangement of "mutual advantage" between "free, equal, and independent" parties.[163] Her focus moves beyond just mutual advantage to include benevolence and altruism among the basic motivations for entering into the contract.[164] On this view, the citizen is a political animal who is both dignified and needy.[165] Proper treatment of such a being demands that the element of care define just relationships between citizens in addition to the modern value of respect.

Nussbaum christens her theory the capabilities approach because it begins by examining "what people are actually able to do and to be."[166] A *capability* is an

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[161] Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2006), 1-2. The other two problems Nussbaum names are extending justice to all world citizens and the just treatment of nonhuman animals. Within the present study, I only discuss Nussbaum's proposed solution for the first of her three problems.

[162] Ibid., 2.

[163] John Rawls is the theorist she has most in mind here. See *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[164] Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2011), 150.

[165] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 182.

[166] Ibid., 70.

"opportunity to select," in other words, an area of free choice.[167] For Nussbaum, the guarantee of certain freedoms is the heart of justice. She identifies a specific set of capabilities as "core human entitlements"—substantial freedoms that all governments should honor and provide.[168] She arrives at this list by explicating what is implicit in the idea of a life worthy of dignity. She admits that dignity is a vague idea, yet remains adamant that "this intuitive starting point offers definite, albeit highly general, guidance."[169] When dignity is placed alongside other important notions (such as *freedom* and *justice*), its content becomes more fixed. The argument for each core entitlement, or *central human capability*, is thus also intuitive; it entails imagining a form of life where conditions that honor and enable each person's substantial freedoms are present.[170]

Nussbaum asserts that a life worthy of human dignity requires, at a bare minimum, "an ample threshold level of ten Central Capabilities."[171] The central human capabilities Nussbaum identifies are: life itself; bodily health; bodily integrity; the development of the senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation (both communal and political); relationships with other species; play; and control over one's environment.[172] When examining this list, Nussbaum would have the

[167] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 25.

[168] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 70.

[169] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 78.

[170] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 78.

[171] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 32.

[172] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 76-7; *Creating Capabilities*, 33-34.

reader note that the ends of a just society are necessarily plural and diverse.[173] A governing body, therefore, must provide *all ten* central capabilities. Furthermore, it may not engage in trade-offs whereby one capability is provided at the expense of another.[174] Nussbaum also follows the Kantian tradition that every person ought to be treated as an end and never "as a mere tool of the ends of others."[175] In short, Nussbaum's theory of justice prescribes that the governments of all nations secure for each and every citizen the minimal conditions required for human flourishing—"not just mere human life, but *good life*."[176] A life that lacks one of the central capabilities is a life "not worthy of human dignity."[177]

Another noteworthy methodological commitment Nussbaum makes is that she intentionally abstains from grounding her theory in "divisive religious or metaphysical principles."[178] She regards the intuitive consideration of the notion of dignity to be a sufficient conceptual base. She writes, "We can accept without profound metaphysics that human life has a characteristic shape and form, and that certain abilities…are

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[173] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 175.

[174] Ibid., 75-6.

[175] Ibid., 75.

[176] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 181, 185; *Creating Capabilities* 25. Once a capability has been secured for a citizen, it is his or her right to make use of it or not. Also, because this theory specifically emphasizes capabilities, the justness of a society is not judged according to whether it secures particular *functionings* for its citizens, that is, "beings and doings that are the outgrowths or realizations of capabilities." For example, governments must provide the opportunities necessary for bodily health and integrity, but it is the individual's choice whether to take proper advantage of these opportunities or instead risk bodily illness or injury.

[177] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 78.

[178] Ibid., 6.

generally agreed to be very important to success."[179] The capabilities approach would appear to have global applicability because a nation may adopt it without joining its policies to a particular religious or philosophical system.

Nussbaum's hesitance concerning theoretical foundations is motivated by her commitment to *political liberalism*. Her rigorous emphasis on free choice requires her approach to be "pluralist about value."[180] The fact that personal abilities combine with environmental factors to create areas of freedom means that societal understandings of each central capability will inevitably vary across cultures and across time. Nussbaum's list is general and abstract by design in order to leave room for citizens and legislatures to deliberate on each item, while taking "their histories and special circumstances into account."[181] The central capabilities list is thus subject to revision. Nussbaum maintains that this quality makes the capabilities approach a sufficiently complex and versatile theoretical framework.[182] What appears to be nonnegotiable is the notion of human flourishing this approach is designed to promote. The disconcerting implications of this notion become apparent in Nussbaum's remarks on disability.

On matters of disability, the capabilities approach first appears to be an instance of the social model. The altruistic orientation of Nussbaum's social contract obliges governments to ensure that persons with impairments have access to public spaces and

[179] Ibid., 186.

[180] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 18.

[181] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 78-9.

[182] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, x.

political processes.[183] Nussbaum observes that the perceived impediments to assisting these persons are often social and far from inevitable. Policy makers incorrectly point to the "naturalness" of certain impairments to justify their refusal to spend the money necessary for large-scale changes.[184]

Justice, however, demands that persons with disabilities receive diverse opportunities for choice, as well as the care necessary to reach socially appropriate threshold levels.[185] This will require an honest assessment of what each person with a disability is truly capable of doing. On these points, the capabilities approach dovetails with the disability rights movement and scholarly efforts to deconstruct the category of disability. Yet these liberative elements do not constitute the whole story of how Nussbaum theorizes disability.

For all its attentiveness to social concerns, the capabilities approach resembles the medical model in its basic characterizations of the "disabled" and the "able-bodied" alike. Nussbaum's intuitive explication of dignity depends heavily on scientific and clinical interpretations of human life. In her book *Frontiers of Justice*, Nussbaum acknowledges that the process of naming the central capabilities takes into account "the species norm," that is, "the many actual features of a characteristic human form of life."[186] This emphasis on a species norm is not necessarily problematic for persons with impairments who remain capable of self-expression, self-advocacy, and participation in "characteristic"

[183] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 15.

[184] Ibid., 188-89.

[185] Ibid., 189.

[186] Ibid., 179, 181.

human relationships. But this evaluative description of human nature is highly problematic with regard to persons with profound cognitive disabilities who, as a statistically small minority group within a minority group, are unlikely to influence the discernment of what is characteristic.

Nussbaum, to her credit, openly addresses this difficult issue. She maintains that a being must be considered a subject of justice if its life demonstrates "the presence of any type of agency or striving accompanied by sentience."[187] Persons with cognitive disabilities who nevertheless appear capable of perception, affiliation, and forms of play meet these criteria.[188] Nussbaum advocates the political strategy of treating these persons as if they could demonstrate all ten central capacities. In the absence of such a strategy, a society could reasonably absolve itself of its obligation to promote the flourishing of those with severe impairments. In the case of someone in a permanent vegetative state, however, Nussbaum frankly asserts that the human form of life is absent because such a state of being is close to "the medical definition of death."[189] It seems that, for Nussbaum, the important difference between the being in a vegetative state and one with a severe impairment is that, only in the former case is an entire group of major capabilities completely and irrevocably cut off. She claims one may justifiably regard whatever flourishing persons with profound disabilities may achieve to be achieved within a human form of life.[190]

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[187] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 88.

[188] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 188.

[189] Ibid., 180-81.

[190] Ibid., 192.

On this point, I do not think Nussbaum has sufficiently dealt with the disconcerting implications of the capabilities approach. On the same page as her comments about vegetative states, she declares that each central capability is an entitlement so fundamental that "a life without any possibility at all of exercising one of them, at any level, is not a fully human life…even if the others are present."[191] Amplifying the cause for concern here is her claim in *Creating Capabilities* that practical reason (alongside affiliation) plays "a distinctive *architectonic* role" within the list of Central Human Capabilities in that it organizes and pervades the others.[192] In light of this, the denial of the humanity of someone with profound cognitive disabilities would appear warranted.

Reconsider this example of Jarrod. By any standard convention, he is incapable of reaching minimum thresholds of practical reason or control over his environment. It is highly probable that no amount of state-provided care can further develop these capabilities in him. From Nussbaum's political perspective, our government has not done Jarrod an injustice so long as his equal citizenship is affirmed and his political interests are represented through an assigned guardian.[193] But the representation of Jarrod's interests is not equivalent to the establishment of his full humanity. Within the capabilities approach, nonhuman animals also qualify as subjects of justice. Insofar as

[191] Ibid., 181.

[192] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 39.

[193] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 196-97.

Jarrod is markedly deficient in certain Central Human Capabilities, advocating on his behalf would arguably be a matter of animal rights rather than of human rights.[194]

Nussbaum has set up a framework in which those with severe cognitive impairments *are* disabled, not just in terms of how they are treated, but in their very way of being. This framework leads inexorably to the claim that the life these persons live is not to be preferred and that a distinctly human mode of flourishing is unavailable to them. Adding credence to this interpretation of her position, Nussbaum explicitly states that it is always better for someone to have a central human capability on one's own than to have it provided through a guardian.[195] Furthermore, if a cure for a condition such as Jarrod's became available, then "a decent society" would pay for its implementation, up to and including the performance of gene therapy on the unborn.[196]

Apart from these alarming elements, there remains much to appreciate about Nussbaum's theory of justice. Her placement of disability rights at the heart of her political philosophy is certainly laudable. Nevertheless, I contend that the most disconcerting elements of the capabilities approach have their source in Nussbaum's reliance on an ableist concept of human flourishing. On the surface, Nussbaum seeks to maximize the applicability and appeal of her theory by denying allegiance to any particular metaphysical foundations. All the while, the coherence of the central

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[194] I take up the distinction between human and non-human life in more detail in Chapter 4.

[195] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 193.

[196] Nussbaum notes that the capabilities approach neither requires nor precludes the implementation of such a cure in cases of persons with less severe disabilities, such as Down Syndrome, Asperger's, blindness, or deafness, "precisely because there is a realistic prospect that they will attain the capabilities we have evaluated as central."

capabilities list depends on a particular ontology.[197] A specific vision of being human must be taken as given by any government that may adopt Nussbaum's theory of justice. This ontology perpetuates the assumption that purposive agency is indeed the basis of human dignity. Nussbaum urges the world's citizens to affirm that worth as a political strategy, but her theoretical framework cannot mandate such generosity.[198] I believe that to see this problem for what it is and dismiss it would extend a theoretical shortcoming into moral failure.

If one is to reconstruct the concept of human flourishing in a manner which thoroughly affirms that profound impairments count among the plurality of ways human being manifests itself, then one cannot simply adopt the capabilities approach any more than the social model of disability. What is required is a model of disability where the lives of persons with profound cognitive disabilities do not represent problematic, outlying data but are instead inexpendable content for discerning the distinctive shape of

[197] I need to clarify the sense in which I employ the term "ontology," especially since it becomes a important term in my theological proposal. Consistent with traditional uses of the term, I understand "ontology" to refer to a theory of being. Contrary to traditional uses, however, I do not use it to refer to an essential nature or substance and, similarly, I sever the historical connections between ontology and metaphysics. My understanding of ontology, then, is a distinctive way of being or becoming in the world. In other words, ontology refers to a mode or pattern of existence that may be intelligibly defined without being reified. For example, I make the case from Chapter 3 onward that one ought to understand human being in terms of relationships of radical interdependence. This is an ontological claim insofar as I posit a particular mode of embodied life as distinctly human. But it is not a metaphysical or essentialist claim because I do not presuppose that the anthropology I am constructing boasts a one-to-one correspondence with reality as such and neither do I endeavor to provide a positive description of a human nature that transcends the material conditions of embodied and embedded existence.

[198] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Politics of Gentleness," in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, by Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 77-100, 89. More to the point, Hauerwas remarks that Nussbaum can give "normal" citizens justifications for *helping* persons with disabilities, but she cannot provide reasons to *live* with those persons.

a dignified human existence. I find such a resource in the constructive theological proposal of Deborah Creamer.

The Embodied Limits of Human Being

Deborah Creamer asserts that Christian theology has a vital contribution to make regarding the current dilemma in disability studies. I find that the approach to disability issues she outlines opens up a conceptual space in which informed and fruitful consideration of profound cognitive disability is possible. What Creamer proposes is a *limits model* of disability. This model provides a strong warrant for deconstructing the binary of ability/disability that undergirds the medical, moral, and social models. The core insight of the limits model is that being human necessarily entails regular encounters with the limits of one's capacities and functions.[199] If disability is understood broadly as a condition that falls short of some ideal human embodiment, then disability is a more normal human experience than nondisability, making each human being, at best, temporarily able-bodied.[200] Not merely a topic of "special" interest for those with

[199] As Lennard Davis states, "What is universal in life, if there are universals, is the experience of the limitations of the body." See "The End of Identity Politics," 314.

[200] Creamer, "Disability Liberative Ethics," 226. John Mcquarrie makes a similar claim, using language more in line with the social model: "There is a sense, therefore, in which a very large number of earth's inhabitants are handicapped, that is to say, unable to realize potentialities which others may take for granted. Indeed, there is a sense in which all are handicapped." See "Theological Reflections on Disability," in *Religion and Disability: Essays in Scripture, Theology, and Ethics*, ed. Marilyn E. Bishop (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 27-45, 36.

personal (read: nonacademic) investments, disability illuminates something fundamental—not exceptional—about being human.[201]

Creamer's efforts to articulate her limits model grow out of her discontent with how Christian theology has treated the body over the past few decades. While she affirms the methodological commitment to understand human existence according to its embodied and contextual dimensions, Creamer critiques the widespread tendency of theologians to assume that the "normal" human body is a "healthy" body. In this way, the constructive work of many theologians is not nearly as grounded as they profess. Creamer's entry point into theological anthropology is primarily epistemological, as her project repeatedly interrogates the hermeneutical claims involved in appeals to embodied experience. To direct one's reflections on the body through the lens of the limits model requires one to remain vigilant against practices of thought that abstract too greatly from the materiality of the body.[202] In short, the aim of the model is "to reflect upon and to represent the experiences of actual bodies in all their lived and constructed diversity."[203]

As a theological understanding of what it means to be human, Creamer organizes the limits model around three religious claims present within the Christian tradition. First,

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[201] Creamer expresses frustration at the tenuous and partial position disability still holds in theological education, despite the tremendous advances that have occurred since the publication of *The Disabled God*. She writes, "Too often I hear disability as an 'and' statement—as, for example, when we talk about race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability. When religious studies or seminary courses engage disability at all, it is often in a separate unit or discussion (often at the end of the semester), an addendum or afterthought." Three years after writing these words, another essay Creamer wrote on the topic of disability was included in a textbook on ethics. The editor placed it as the last chapter of the book. See Deborah Beth Creamer, "Embracing Limits, Queering Embodiment: Creating/Creative Possibilities for Disability Theology" in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 126.

[202] Ibid. In her use of "queering," Creamer has McRuer in mind and cites him explicitly in the article.

[203] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 11.

limits are an *unsurprising* characteristic of humanity.[204] This recognition divests limits of the negative connotations of lack and deficiency. Positively, consideration of personal and communal limits can lead toward creativity, as well as a refined understanding of the boundaries and possibilities specific to a particular context.[205] To encounter limits in the other or oneself is commonplace and theorization should reflect that.

Second, limits are an *intrinsic* part of human existence, rather than strictly environmental constraints impeding the full exercise of human capacities from the outside. Accordingly, Christian thought should not consider limitation as such to be either punishment for sin or an obstacle on the path to human perfection. To do so would lose sight of the fact that Christianity has long held to a view of living in community in which personal inability positively serves to define the divinely bestowed gifts each member possesses.[206]

Finally, to have intrinsic limitations, what Creamer calls the quality of "limitness," is *good* or (at a minimum) not evil.[207] It is not an unfortunate alternative to omnipotence.[208] To find a theological precedent for this valuation, one need look no

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[204] Ibid., 94.

[205] Ibid., 93, 113. It is this part of Creamer's proposal that most excites Luke Penkett. He writes that attending to embodied limits "can offer invaluable insights not only into the human condition but also our relationships with God and our fellow creatures that can be so often overlooked when we deny or try to forget about them." See Review of *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, *Heythrop Journal* 51, no. 3 (May 2010): 510. I articulate my own understanding of humankind's relationship with God in the eschatological discussion of Chapter 5.

[206] I discuss this topic at length in Chapter 4 as part of my description of the church as the body of Christ.

[207] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 95.

[208] Ibid., 94. This remark parallels Descartes's declaration, made in the Fourth Meditation, that "no matter how skilled I understand a craftsman to be, this does not make me think he ought to have put into every one of his works all the perfections which he is able to put into some of them." See *Meditations on First*

further than Genesis 1:31, where God surveys the entirety of finite creation and acknowledges, in simply being as it was created to be, creation is very good. In this light, a more appropriate way to define the connection between limitness and sin is as "an inappropriate attitude toward limitness as we both exaggerate and reject our own limits and the limits of others."[209]

Together these three claims express a vital insight that Christian theology brings to the discussion about disability: *human beings are creatures*. To flourish as a human being, therefore, requires one to live as a creature. Restating this remark in Creamer's exact terms, "We are called into limit-ness to be fully present in our embodied limits."[210] Such full presence remains impossible as long as human aspirations and self-understandings find their source in illusory concepts, such as the ableist portrait of normalcy. The most meaningful visions of flourishing will instead be informed by a renewed grasp of the boundaries and possibilities that both restrict and enable human becoming.

Within this interpretive framework, "disability" is present wherever one's environment fails to accommodate one's limits, whether or not those limits have been

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Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies, rev. ed, trans. and ed. John Cottingham (1641; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39.

[209] Creamer, "Toward a Theology That Includes the Human Experience of Disability," 66. If one were to adopt this definition of sin, caution must be exercised not to fall into the oppressive uses of the doctrine of sin as pride, as discussed during my exposition of Marjorie Suchocki's anthropology in Chapter One. The acknowledgment of limitness is not the equivalent of "knowing one's place" as some idealized anthropology defines it.

[210] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 119.

traditionally defined as "impairments" or "conditions."[211] A limits approach to disability pursues questions about *what* disability is, rather than attempting to classify *who* is and is not disabled.[212] What Creamer's constructive proposal amounts to, then, is a challenge to examine our limits honestly, embrace the fact of them earnestly, and interpret them in ways that continue to pursue the complexities of embodied existence.[213]

The limits model's ability to expose how long-established categories gloss over the full variety of human abilities is precisely what makes it so promising as a resource for reconstructing theology in light of profound cognitive disability. The persistent assumption that a profound disability is obviously and quite naturally a deficiency is the primary obstacle to affirming the inherent worth and full humanity of persons like Jarrod. Following the cues of the limits model, one can bring insights regarding the embodied and embedded diversity of human existence to bear on the theme of relationality since acknowledging the fact of this plurality requires one to conceptualize how these differences exist together with one another. Reconceptualizing relationality in these terms offers a challenge to homogenizing anthropologies that name rationality or purposive agency as humanity's universal marker. Within the human family, embodied diversity certainly includes human encounters with cognitive limitation, from the mundane experience of forgetfulness to the comparatively rare manifestation of profound impairment. The limits model thus provides me with a cogent agenda and flexible

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[211] Ibid., 112; cf., "Toward a Theology That Includes the Human Experience of Disability," 65. It is on this point that the deep influence of the social model on a limits approach is most evident.

[212] Creamer, "Toward a Theology That Includes the Human Experience of Disability," 64.

[213] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 119. What Creamer literally says is that the complicated proposal of her monograph is "to examine and embrace and reinterpret our limits."

framework to utilize as I endeavor to give theoretical expression to the connections I feel to Jarrod as both brothers and fellow human beings. Although Creamer notes the appropriateness of using the limits model for a project on cognitive disability, she has thus far left the performance of that work up to other scholars.

Alongside this promise, however, there remain challenges for any scholar who would incorporate Creamer's limits perspective into his or her own methodology. In its present form, this model aims at capturing great complexity while offering little in the way of clear guidelines for theorizing the embodied limits of particular individuals or communities. The critical consensus in peer-reviewed journals is that Creamer's proposal is insightful and important, but strikingly underdeveloped.[214] Creamer owns up to this characterization, identifying the end of her project as "uncertain and indeterminate" and acknowledging the need to name criteria for discerning which limits are "good" and which are "wrong."[215] As Julia Watts-Belser notes, "the immense cultural tendency to regard disability as a devastating limit" may lead to unintended appropriations of the limits model; namely, uses that deepen the perception of persons with disabilities as more limited than others and, in that sense, victims of a tragic condition after all.[216] Michael Mawson raises the concern that Creamer occasionally loses focus on the radical nature of

[214] For example, Marilyn Martone refers to Creamer's theology of disability as "nascent." See Review of *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, by Deborah Beth Creamer, *Theology Studies* 71, no. 1 (March 2010): 262. Aaron Klink observes that Creamer's book "takes scant time developing its own constructive proposal," which is perhaps due to its origins as a dissertation. See Review of *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, *Religious Studies Review* 35, no. 3 (September 2009): 157.

[215] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 116-17.

[216] Julia Watts-Belser, Review of *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, by Deborah Beth Creamer, *Theology Today* 68, no. 2 (July 2011): 186. Such an observations points to a need for a limits approach to continue to rely on the most salient insights of the social model.

human limitness and, as a result, her proposal may overestimate how fully human beings are able to grasp and embrace their limits.[217] Adding further complexity to the deployment of a limits perspective is Creamer's insistence that her model is a necessary "companion piece" to the other three models of disability, supplementing their insights without superseding them.[218] To date, she has not specified a strategy for how to best utilize these lenses alongside each other or deal with the inherent tensions and contradictions between them.

Yet one need not regard these apparent weaknesses as fatal flaws. They are instead simply a few of the specific challenges theologians and other theorists will need to address if they assume Creamer's vantage point on disability issues and theological anthropology. In the final analysis, I see Creamer's primary contribution to Christian theology to be the articulation of a basic orientation for reflecting upon human being in innovative ways. Her work is an effort to flesh out the deep implications of values that are popular within her field, especially the commitment to capture the reality of human embodiment more fully. Instead of producing a full-fledged theological anthropology or detailed methodology, what she provides are insightful prolegomena to that constructive work. She compels her peers to consider what directions Christian theology ought to take if they embrace limitness as an unsurprising, intrinsic, and good aspect of being human.

I suggest that, as with constructive theology in general, the limits model only takes on a more discernable shape, and it can only provide more specific guidelines for

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[217] Michael Mawson, "Subjectivity and Embodied Limits: Deborah Creamer's *Disability and Christian Theology*" *Journal of Religion, Disability, and Health* 17, no. 3 (August 2013).

[218] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 32.

reflection, once the theologian brings this basic orientation to bear on particular subject matter. In the remaining chapters of this study, I will put the values of the limits model to work in the construction of my own theological anthropology. In the process, I intend to demonstrate by example how generative and enriching a limits perspective can be within a discussion of human being and its flourishing.

CHAPTER THREE: RADICAL INTERDEPENDENCE IN CREATION AND CHRISTOLOGY

Setting the Terms for a Constructive Theological Proposal

The chief and abiding aim of the present study is to construct a theological anthropology that funds a vision of human flourishing robust enough to include persons with profound cognitive disabilities. As I have stated since its opening pages, my personal incentive to reconceive human being in these terms stems primarily from my relationship with my brother Jarrod. When I share space with Jarrod, I encounter a being whose dignity and humanity appear to me as full and as certain as my own. In the preceding chapters, I have identified, interrogated, and challenged numerous understandings of the basic nature and structure of human existence that privilege abilities—rationality and purposive agency foremost among them—that Jarrod seems to lack or possess only in small measure.

According to the prevailing assumptions about human being, Jarrod's diminished abilities correlate, if only implicitly, to the diminished worth of his life. Here a life marked by profound cognitive disability is worth-less to such a degree that it is effectively invisible, typically failing even to register as a way of being in the world for which a concept of the human must account. Christian theology and ethics are just as apt to marginalize or ignore persons such as Jarrod from theorization as any other discipline

(as detailed in the survey of recent theological anthropologies in Chapter 1). On what possible grounds then might I credibly maintain that Jarrod is indeed "one of us," a person every bit as deserving of a flourishing life as those with the intellectual and symbolic abilities to understand the words on this page? What warrant might there be beyond "personal incentive" to justify a study like this in the first place? The purpose of the remaining three chapters is to offer a careful and extended response to these questions.

In the argument that follows, I transition from the task of identifying common obstacles or potential resources for theoretical reflection on profound cognitive disability to the task of articulating what it means to be human in a manner that is actively constructive and overtly theological. The central tenet of the anthropology I present here is that human being is best understood in terms of an ontology of radical interdependence. As I noted in my brief discussion of expressivism in Chapter 1, the notion that "human being" is not a static essence, but rather something that manifests itself pluralistically amidst the historical conditions of individual lives, is a nineteenth-century invention and thus a relative novelty. Much remains to be done to separate it further from the Enlightenment portrait of the autonomous, rational subject it arose to challenge. An emphasis on radical interdependence drives theological anthropology in precisely that direction.

The insistence that human interdependence is radical involves the affirmation of a second, similar proposition: community precedes individuality. There are numerous theoretical models of human being that assume the truth of this proposition, yet also

perpetuate the identification of basic humanity with the exercise of a specific ability. But there is no strict necessity to hold those two convictions simultaneously. The fact of human relationality is the logical precondition of rationality and purposive agency alike, and it often becomes manifest without the expression of either ability. An emphasis on interdependence seeks to honor the full extent to which human existence is primordially communal.[219] The onus now falls on me to explore at greater length how human persons, as embodied beings, are entwined with one another by virtue of their vulnerabilities and their persistent needs for care and cooperation. By the time I have finished articulating my theological anthropology, it should be abundantly clear that a notion of interdependence that shies away from the concrete details of true dependence is a false notion.

Placing the lives of persons with cognitive disabilities at the center of theoretical reflection on human being serves as a check against any half-hearted embrace of interdependence or its radicality precisely because their lives lack the qualities with which today's scholars are typically enamored. I intend to demonstrate that an ontology of radical interdependence finds a welcoming home in the context of Christian theology, despite the current persistence of the modern subject within the discipline. Beyond this, I will demonstrate how several perennial Christian doctrines are not only compatible with efforts to affirm the full humanity of persons like Jarrod; they already contain an inner rationale that speaks to the necessity of such a project.

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[219] Bernard Loomer uses process philosophy to make the case that interdependence is a primordial fact of existence in the world. See "The Size of God," in *The Size of God: The Theology of Bernard Loomer in Context*, eds. William Dean and Larry E. Axel (Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 20-51, 32.

Theological Themes and Methodological Commitments

Before identifying and reflecting upon these doctrines, however, some clarifying remarks about my methodological commitments in this chapter are necessary. My intended audience in this chapter is my most immediate colleagues and peers—theologians, clergy, and laity who identify with the Christian religious tradition. The interdisciplinarity of earlier chapters does not disappear below, but it is deemphasized in favor of a discussion with a distinctively theological orientation.[220] For all the careful theorization and critical correlations with concrete, lived experience I endeavor to perform here, an element of confessionalism permeates my treatment of the subject matter. In other words, there is a degree to which, for my proposal concerning theological anthropology to be entirely convincing, the reader will need to concede (if only for the sake of argument) that a project of Christian theological construction is a worthwhile endeavor.[221] I aim to show how, when traditional elements are freshly arranged in "the key of disability," Christian theology's unrealized potential to affirm disabled lives becomes powerfully evident.[222] Even subtle tweaks in doctrinal content can have a tremendous impact on its interpretation. Along the way, the sheer arbitrariness behind the

[220] Whenever I do draw upon other disciplines below, my approach basically amounts to a reversal of Paul Tillich's famous method of correlation: I ask a question out of the context of Christian theology, turn first to whatever theological resources I identify as being ready at hand and, only after those options appear lacking, do I look to the tools and insights the wider culture and academy make available.

[221] So what I do not offer here is a justification of theology as an academic discipline or an explanation of how its boundaries ought to be drawn in relationship to proximal fields, such as comparative religion or philosophy of religion.

[222] The phrase "the key of disability" comes from Mary Jo Iozzio, "Norms Matter: A Hermeneutic of Disability/A Theological Anthropology of Radical Dependence," *ET Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 91.

marginalization of profound cognitive disability from theological reflection should become equally obvious.

Because the interconnected arguments of Chapters 3-5 build upon the conceptual space I have cleared up to this point, I should also identify how I plan to bring the salient insights of the preceding chapters into my constructive proposal. The combined purpose of Chapters 1 and 2 has been to provide my theological reflections with both a framework and a set of resources customized to the task before me. Although the core argument of Chapter 1 is the call to remove the capacity for purposive agency from the center of theological anthropology, I want to reaffirm and adopt several of the key values and assumptions that are common among the theologians I surveyed. Above all, I affirm the basic assertion of expressivism, that "human being" manifests itself dynamically and pluralistically within the conditions of concrete existence and, as such, the revelation of its content is ongoing. As I posit an *ontology* of radical interdependence, I am envisioning human being in largely phenomenological terms as a distinctive way of being in the world. This brand of ontology resists both traditional essentialisms and any perceived need to portray the human as one cog in some elaborate metaphysical apparatus. Also from Chapter 1, I shall continue to work with the five common themes of theological anthropology I identified there: embodiment, embeddedness, relationality, rationality, and agency. I maintain that each of these themes will be present in any adequate theological anthropology; it is the chosen configuration of these themes that determines the descriptive power of one's anthropology.

The engagement of disability studies in Chapter 2 makes the case for why critical consideration of the theme of embodiment remains to be done, largely because most theologians fail even to take notice of "disability" as a topic worthy of theological reflection. Although this chapter presents several strands of disability studies, the approach to this discourse I identify with most closely is Deborah Creamer's limits model. The limits model facilitates the present study in two significant ways. First, Creamer's work highlights how disability scholars also tend to valorize purposive agency, making it rare for cognitive disability to register as a topic of importance even within disability studies. Second, the limits model is an explicitly theological model that provides a strong foothold for additional theological reflection upon cognitive disability. The vital insight of this model is that, if one takes seriously the fact that every human being lives an embodied life, then every human life bears the quality of "limit-ness." There is a sense, therefore, in which every human person experiences disability as a basic consequence of being a finite creature, unable to perform certain functions because of either bodily limitations or environmental constraints. The fact of being limited is thus not an unfortunate or undesirable state to bemoan but an aspect of human existence that each person must embrace to know oneself truly. In short, embracing embodiment means focusing more on where "disability" occurs for any of us rather than attempting to constrain this category to an identity marker that applies exclusively to people whose bodies do not appear "normal." Creamer also insists that the limits model be employed as an interpretive lens alongside other prominent models of disability—namely, the medical and social models—in order to protect the limits model itself from abuse and

misinterpretation. I will demonstrate through example what it might look like to allow for the interplay of these models as part of theological construction.

My preferred configuration of the five anthropological themes is to treat relationality, here understood in terms of radical interdependence, as the focal point of authentic human being. Arriving at a more rigorously conceived concept of relationality will require tightening the conceptual bonds it shares with embodiment and embeddedness, while simultaneously loosening its familiar ties to rationality and agency. The limits model facilitates this reconceptualization through its central insight that taking embodiment seriously means paying attention to all the forms and functionings human persons exhibit, not merely the ones that fit neatly into the concept of human being that one's preferred theology presupposes. From this perspective, ignoring the lives of persons with profound cognitive disabilities is not only ill-advised, it is outright irresponsible. Nevertheless, even if this is conceded, there is still an outstanding need to provide convincing warrant for representing persons such as Jarrod as "one of us," as opposed to living examples of the undesirable low end of human finitude. The limits model is once again helpful here, directing attention to Christian theology as the specific field in which this crucial warrant awaits discovery.

Creamer's signature affirmation of "limit-ness" derives its own justification in no small part from the doctrine of creation, in particular God's declaration that all the creatures God has made are "very good" (Genesis 1:31). In picking up this thread of reflection, I meditate at much greater length on the subject of creation than Creamer has done in her publications to date. As I will show, the task of teasing out the importance the

doctrine of creation has for theological anthropology very quickly leads one to trace its systematic connections to other doctrines. The effort to understand what human life is before the Creator demands that one also attend to matters of the person and work of Christ (Christology), the nature of the church (ecclesiology), and the final end of human being (eschatology). My treatment of these other relevant doctrines will be comparatively narrow, discussing each only in as much detail as I need to highlight the anthropological thread I see running through and binding them together. That thread is the concept of the *imago Dei*. It is ultimately through my reflections on how the distinctive shape of human existence resembles the divine life that I establish the secure place persons with profound cognitive disabilities ought occupy within the web of human interdependence.

Creation *Ex Nihilo* as the Backdrop for Human Being

Since the classical period, creation has provided the primary doctrinal context for theological reflection upon human nature.[223] Among the varied attempts of Christian theologians to generate a compelling account of humankind's creation, two Latin phrases consistently appear: *creatio ex nihilo* ("creation from nothing") and *imago Dei* ("image of God"). I find great promise for theological reconstruction in both of these traditional resources. Although my examination of creation *ex nihilo* is relatively brief, and my mediation on the *imago Dei* takes up most of the present study, my preferred interpretation of the former phrase shapes my chosen understanding of the latter.

[223] David H. Kelsey, "Human Being," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. Peter C. Hodges and Robert H. King (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 167-193, 168.

The idea that God brings all earthly entities into being "from nothing" is a generative idea with the potential to fund a vision of creation that is expansive in scope, as well as attuned to the nuances of life in the world. Unfortunately, the typical use of creation *ex nihilo* in modern times has been to minimize the scope and explanatory power of the doctrine. In point of fact, the doctrine of creation has served many purposes across the long history of Christian thought: a rejection of metaphysical dualism, affirming the inherent worth of the natural order, establishing the quality of the relation between God and creation, providing a characterization of the Christian God, tracing an etiology of human sinfulness, or articulating a cosmogony, i.e. an account of the origins of the universe.[224] Yet, in the modern era, Christian theologians have tended to restrict the content of the doctrine to etiology and cosmogony. As a result, there is a prevalent assumption that creation *ex nihilo* is strictly a statement about the Creator's past activity "in the beginning."

Resisting this trend, Ian McFarland posits that the doctrine of creation is only marginally concerned with the question of temporal origins. “Far more fundamentally, the doctrine of creation from nothing is a proposal about the character of God's relationship with the world."[225] Dawn DeVries concurs, identifying the character of this relationship as the absolute dependence of all created beings on God as their common

[224] DeVries, “Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities,” 125. I do not take up the doctrine of sin directly anywhere in the present study.

[225] Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), xiv.

source.[226] This leads her to the related observations that the "radical meaning" of creation *ex nihilo* is that "in relation to God, we are all alike God's creatures, even though we are all very different in relation to one another."[227] Succinctly put, the chief relevance of these remarks for the present study is this: If one affirms and appropriates the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, this doctrine precludes the theologian from establishing ontological hierarchies. All creatures, human or otherwise, are ontologically the same in that they are all radically different than their common Creator and Sustainer.[228]

This doctrine also resists the identification of autonomy as the natural state of human existence. Before God, no creature enjoys ontological autonomy.[229] Profound dependence is *the* fact of creaturely existence, a fact that logically precedes and directs any theological efforts to describe what is peculiar to humankind among its fellow creatures. Furthermore, whatever one ultimately concludes about human being as a reflection of divinity, this imaging will occur in and through a state of absolute dependence, neither circumventing nor nullifying this most primordial condition.

It should not be overlooked that the complement to the fact of this dependence is the continuous, generative activity of God. The conceptual distinction between creation and providence thus proves to be largely artificial. As Descartes observed, a finite being

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[226] Although I do not make explicit reference here to the Introduction to Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*, it is nigh impossible for those familiar with this text to encounter the words "absolute dependence" and not have it spring to mind. DeVries is both a translator and scholar of Schleiermacher's works, so it is likely his thought has influenced her conceptualization of the subject at hand.

[227] DeVries, "Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities," 138. Recall also Kathryn Tanner's maxim, mentioned in Chapter 1: God differs differently.

[228] McFarland, *From Nothing*, xi, xiii.

[229] Ibid., xvi.

cannot exist through its own powers and so requires divine power to continue to sustain it.[230] The Creator's activity is thus ongoing rather than a finished act.[231]

A recurring concern among present-day theologians, process theologians in particular, is that any reference to creation from nothing unavoidably assumes a cosmogony inconsistent with the current models of natural science. Catherine Keller is one prominent scholar who advocates a doctrine of creation from chaos.[232] Much could be said about this important debate. Nevertheless, I wish to engage it only insofar as doing so helps draw attention to the opening verses of Genesis 1 and what they communicate about the nature of God's creative action. As Amos Yong notes, this narrative presents God as establishing the form of the world by subjecting primordial disorder to processes of division, distinction, and particularization.[233] Thomas Reynolds sees a basic compatibility between this biblical scene and creation *ex nihilo*. Creation from nothing, he explains, is "not out of a negative absolute nothing, but rather out of a positive relative nothing, a matrix of chaotic non-being full of potentiality for God's ordering work."[234] Conceding this point does not compromise the most important implication of the doctrine, that literally no earthly being can exist outside of the Creator's providential activity. Yong further remarks on the way in which the God of

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[230] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 33.

[231] DeVries, "Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities," 139.

[232] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Amos Yong provides a concise yet informative remark on this controversy, including a list of helpful resources. See *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 159n2.

[233] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 159-60.

[234] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 155.

Genesis 1 "revels in plurality and difference," as evidenced by the multitude of forms God guides into being during the six reported days.[235] A theology of disability can do much with a God who delights in difference. As the product of the same developmental advance that produces all creaturely qualities, embodied impairments may be human traits that God neither spurns nor intentionally wills.[236]

Focusing one's understanding of creation *ex nihilo* on these insights (as opposed to cosmogony) also protects against certain idolatries. On the one hand, the theologian avoids the reification of any "best-case anthropologies" by eliminating the need to posit an ideal, prelapsarian world in which the first human creature lived.[237] On the other hand, this understanding mitigates against excessive confidence in the content of Christian theism. The doctrine points towards the source of all creation as One who transcends the finite and contingent processes of this world and, in doing so, places that source beyond the grasp of metaphysics and all other human means of rationalizing the universe.[238]

Moving from the consideration of transcendence to immanence, this portrait of creation affirms an ontological solidarity that pervades all creation as an alternative to ontological hierarchies. The wide threads of continuity between human and nonhuman life ought to inform anthropology while simultaneously undermining anthropocentrism. As Sallie McFague argues, attention to the embodied and embedded character of human

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[235] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 181.

[236] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 177.

[237] Brian Brock, "Introduction: Disability and the Quest for the Human" in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, eds. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 1-23, 10; DeVries, “Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities,” 139.

[238] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 146, 158.

existence also requires recognition of how materiality binds human beings into a web of radical relatedness and interdependence that spreads beyond intrahuman relationships to the larger cosmos.[239] Closely tied to the need to affirm the reality of this web is the need to recognize the theological importance of practices of care. Creation *ex nihilo* establishes that everything, insofar as it exists at all, is of immediate concern to God; therefore, there are no grounds on which to be indifferent toward the flourishing of any part of creation.[240]

The Case for a Relational Approach to the *Imago Dei*

The recognition of the material and ontological continuities human being has with the rest of the created order does not preclude further investigation into what might distinguish or differentiate this family of creatures from the rest of creation. The *imago Dei* is often the conceptual tool theologians use for just this intellectual labor.[241] Curiously, as important as this notion may seem at present, it has not historically been a topic of central emphasis or ecumenical debate within the Christian tradition. There is no creedal statement that prescribes orthodox teachings about what it means for humankind to image God in the manner that the Nicene Creed regulates consideration of the Trinity or the Chalcedonian Definition governs Christological discussion. As a result, churches continue to have imprecise and speculative understandings of the *imago Dei*, and

[239] Sallie McFague, "Human Beings, Embodiment, and Our Home the Earth" in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 141-169, 144, 150.

[240] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 185.

[241] Alistair McFadyen, "Imaging God: A Theological Answer to the Anthropological Question?" *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 47, no. 4 (December 2012): 920-1.

disagreements on the subject never held enough importance to serve as grounds for schism.[242] Olli-Pekka Vainio characterizes the notion of the *imago Dei* as a placeholder where concerns regarding the nature, value, and place of the human being before God present themselves for theological reflection.[243]

The turn to scripture does little to resolve the indeterminacy. Despite the phrase's prominent appearance in Genesis 1, biblical authors only mention "the image of God" six times, or a mere eight times when one also considers intertestamental literature. Genesis 1:26 provides the famous declaration of the Creator, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness," while the narration of 1:27 reports the performance of that act.[244] The language of both Wisdom 2:23 and Sirach 17:3 essentially just echoes the Genesis account. Genesis 9:6, however, does provide more explicit warrant for associating human dignity with creation in the image of God, appealing to the *imago Dei* as grounds for prohibiting acts of human bloodshed.[245] Yet this is the last time the phrase

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[242] Olli-Pekka Vainio, "*Imago Dei* and Human Rationality," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 49, no. 1 (March 2014): 122-23.

[243] Ibid., 122-23.

[244] All biblical quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version. One theological issue I pass over in this chapter is how to interpret the figure of Adam in the primeval narrative. There is a sense for me in which his historicity is irrelevant, primarily because any normative status this figure might have is trumped resoundingly by the figure of the Second Adam (1 Cor. 15:45, cf. my treatment of Christology below). Even if one were to identify the confession of a historical Adam as an essential article of faith, I argue that the following statement by David Kelsey still applies: "It is not logically necessary that the first human being should also be normative for what it is to be human." Anticipating the discussion of the substantialist approach to the *imago Dei*, Kelsey also questions the possibility of identifying a principle of selection that would definitively indicate which of Adam's concrete features should be universalized as humankind's normative capacity. See "Human Being," 168.

[245] 1 Corinthians 11:7 and James 3:9 are two verses that, although they do not feature the precise phrase "the image of God," both appeal to the belief that the human being is made in the image or likeness of God to support statements about proper conduct. See Philip Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image: A Reflection on the Image of God in the Light of Disability and on Disability in the Light of the Image of

occurs in Genesis or the remainder of the Hebrew Bible. In the New Testament, the *imago Dei* reappears in Colossians 1:15, 3:10, and 2 Corinthians 4:4, all of which associate the image of God with the life of Christ (a point to which I return at length below). In short, although this handful of verses certainly seems to support the traditional consensus that the *imago Dei* signifies both the inherent worth and distinctiveness of human being, their collective lack of forthrightness regarding how exactly human existence images or is the likeness of God leaves open questions concerning what it is about human being that reflects and concerning what is reflected.[246]

Because none of these ancient authors chose to define this phrase, it is likely futile for later scholar to attempt a precise definition.[247] Furthermore, as McFarland observes, although the *imago Dei* remains an evocative phrase, "such a sporadic pattern of use would seem to suggest caution in according it excessive theological weight."[248] I maintain that the vitality of the *imago Dei* as a resource for constructive theology resides in its ability to forge intimate links between doctrines more central to the Christian tradition than itself. When these links are viewed from a limits perspective, it becomes readily evident that radical interdependence remains a consistent feature of the *imago Dei* across a number of doctrinal contexts. These assertions beg the question of how a notion that is seemingly underdetermined in biblical texts, and often inconspicuous within its

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God," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 16, no. 2 (May 2012): 134; Ron Highfield, "Beyond the 'Image of God' Conundrum: A Relational View of Human Dignity," *Christian Studies*, no. 24 (2010): 21.

[246] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 178.

[247] Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 119.

[248] Ian A. McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2005), 1.

own religious tradition, can play such a determinative role. This is the juncture at which the prioritization of the theme of relationality becomes a revolutionary shift for theological anthropology.

Since the patristic period, the most common strategy for giving determinate content to this vague yet venerable idea has been the *substantialist* (or *structural*) *approach*. A substantialist portrait of the *imago Dei* interprets the phrase as referring to the human being's possession of "some quality, capacity, or characteristic inherent in its creaturely substance that renders it similar to God."[249] In other words, this approach adopts the classical philosophical assumption that "human being" is an essential, universal nature and then seeks to identify how it is structurally composed in a manner that resembles the structure of God's own revealed nature. It is also typical of this understanding of the *imago Dei* to emphasize capacity over against latency, meaning that truly imaging God entails the conscious demonstration of privileged abilities rather than the possession of a status all persons share in common irrespective of individual behavior.[250] The substantialist approach is thus directly responsible for the Christian tradition's penchant to produce the sort of anthropologies I am singling out as problematic, especially those that insist on the centrality of rational thought (be it theoretical or practical). Despite its historical ubiquity, there is a considerable amount of recent theological literature that finds the substantialist conception of the *imago Dei* unsatisfactory.

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[249] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 93.

[250] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 134-37.

Several critics highlight the substantialist conception's basic incompatibility with the understanding of the doctrine of creation articulated above. William Barr remarks that its casting of the *imago Dei* is excessively static and abstract, which prevents it from adequately representing the cultural, racial, and economic differences that characterize life in a pluralistic world.[251] One result of this insensitivity to human embeddedness is that the traits Christian theologians valorize as identical with the image are often the qualities already esteemed by the societies to which they belong.[252] Because this conflation collapses any critical distance between the prevailing concepts of the human and the *imago Dei*, it deprives Christian communities of a distinctive anthropology by which to critique contemporary social biases.

A substantialist approach also encourages the reinstatement of hierarchies undone by creation *ex nihilo*. Ron Highfield observes how the location of dignity in structural qualities that can be quantified leads directly to a "moral catastrophe"—theologies in which it becomes thinkable that some human beings possess more dignity than others.[253] Meanwhile, as Molly Haslam points out, the identification of a particular capacity with the ground of human distinctiveness often also leads to the identification of that same trait as the grounds of humanity's unique superiority vis-a-vis all creatures.[254] Yet, even when that superiority goes unchallenged within theological discourse, discoveries within the sciences persistently undercut them by demonstrating that the revered qualities appear

[251] William Barr, "Life: Created in the Image of God." *Mid-Stream* 21, no. 4 (October 1982): 475.

[252] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 94.

[253] Highfield, "Beyond the 'Image of God' Conundrum," 22.

[254] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 94.

in comparable form or degree in the animal world as well.[255] For example, Vainio remarks that human reasoning is not as distinct from non-human reasoning as previous scholars believed. Rather than rationality being the instrument of the human being's self-possession, it is "to a large extent subconscious and not under our direct voluntary control."[256]

Other criticisms lift up the shortcomings of the substantialist approach as a *theological* framework. Drawing on the insights of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Barr takes exception to any effort to narrow the locus of the human life before God down to one part of its existence. Instead it is the entirety of humankind's creaturely existence that God has brought forth and to which God has laid claim.[257] Corroborating this point, McFarland notes how creation *ex nihilo* also precludes the establishment of hierarchies *within* the human creature because all features of creaturely existence are absolutely other than God and thus equally distant from God.[258] On an even more poignant note, Highfield warns that the identification of the *imago Dei* with inherent, natural qualities results in "theological disaster."[259] By endeavoring to define human being precisely in terms of a particular observable structure, the theologian implicitly eliminates the need to take

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[255] Reinders, *Receiving in the Gift of Friendship*, 238n27. Reinders's primary interlocutor here is Francis de Waal. See *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[256] Vainio, "*Imago Dei* and Human Rationality," 127. He further asserts that "the majority of our choices and actions are 'irrational' and 'a-rational.'" A significant portion of his article is devoted to the exposition of contemporary scientific studies into the nature and function of human reasoning. The reported findings provide the grounds for Vainio potentially controversial claims regarding the nature of human rationality.

[257] Barr, "Life," 475.

[258] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 3.

[259] Highfield, "Beyond the 'Image of God' Conundrum," 22.

account of the God this capacity ostensibly resembles. Alistair McFadyen likewise asserts that this methodology "suggests that theological anthropology is primarily descriptive, oriented toward a reality already set unproblematically in place (which might therefore equally be approached through empirical as well as more speculative nontheological disciplines)."[260] A truly theological anthropology will not treat the idea of God as an optional adjunct to a concept of human being already articulated by other disciplines.[261]

Substantialist approaches to the *imago Dei* thus continually run the risk of vitiating the notion itself of any true relevance or descriptive power. In point of fact, a recent textbook in the area of theological anthropology recommends that Christian scholarship "drop the structural approach entirely."[262] Nevertheless, Christian theology as a discipline currently lags behind philosophers and scientists in the exploration of more holistic and dynamic models of human nature.[263] Substantialist assumptions remain so firmly entrenched in the tradition that many Christians believe they are essential to a biblical understanding of human being in general and the *imago Dei* in particular.[264]

The *functionalist approach* provides a second conceptualization of the *imago Dei*. Although it can be distinguished from the substantialist approach categorically, it shares a number of the same shortcomings. Functional theories identify the imaging of God with

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[260] McFadyen, "Imaging God," 920.

[261] Ibid., 921-22.

[262] Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2010), 18-20, 29.

[263] F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 174.

[264] Ibid., 166.

humankind's performance of a particular role, such as being God's representatives within the created order.[265] Thus a human creature reflects the life of its Creator by means of something it does rather than by the structure of what it is.[266] The most common example of the functionalist approach at work in the Christian tradition involves the theme of dominion. Appropriately enough, in the effort to figure out what the image of God means in Genesis 1:26-27, many interpreters have pointed to verse 28 as the hermeneutical key. Here the Creator utters two initial commandments to humankind: be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth. Although this interpretive move shifts the conversation about the imago Dei in a more specific direction it simultaneously introduces a new conundrum: What does "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" look like when it truly images God?

Regardless of the answer, a functionalist approach ultimately amounts to another species of a capacity-based anthropology and another framework amenable to ontological hierarchies. It is no secret that the biblical motif of dominion has repeatedly functioned throughout Christian history to justify anthropocentrism and the exploitative treatment of nonhuman creatures. Similarly, whenever the divine likeness amounts to the successful performance of a certain task, a bias against those who are less capable will be operative. Finally, mirroring how fixation on structural qualities often directs attention away from the *Dei* of the *imago,* functionalists anthropologies can become so enamored with the observable, agential role that humankind plays in the theater of creation that the Commissioner of this vocation falls easily from view. This, in turn, allows the

[265] Vainio, "*Imago Dei* and Human Rationality," 121.

[266] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 173.

responsibility of being God's representative to degenerate into human carte blanche. A third conceptualization of the *imago Dei* is thus required: a vision of human being before God that is compatible with creation *ex nihilo*, that honors the dynamic and egalitarian character of creaturely existence, and that accounts for how the doctrine of God is determinative for the content of theological anthropology.

A *relational approach* to the *imago Dei* offers the most promising framework for achieving all of these objectives. Proponents of this approach tend to note that the very notion of an image logically requires one to conceive its meaning in terms of the relationship between what images and what is imaged. Given that the first biblical reference to the *imago Dei* is in a creation narrative, discerning its content is not chiefly a matter of ascertaining the semiotics between two abstract symbols but is, first and foremost, a matter of identifying the personal dynamics between living beings. The *imago Dei* is accordingly *something that occurs* as a result of the relationship between the Creator of all and a particular sort of creature.[267] This imaging centrally concerns being or activity rather than something possessed. Identifying the image-bearing quality in relationship itself is consonant with the conviction that God lays claim to the whole of the person because relationship is irreducible to any single capacity.[268]

This bit of conceptual analysis is consonant with the work of Hebrew Bible scholars. Christopher Wright notes that the contextual function of the phrase "in our image" is adverbial (the way the human is made) rather than adjectival (describing a

[267] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 94-95.

[268] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 142.

human attribute), and thus best understood as describing a dimension of humankind's very creation.[269] Claus Westermann likewise asserts that Genesis 1:26-27 describes a process of creation rather than the character of human nature.[270] For him, the assertion that humankind is made in the image of God serves the purely narrative function of setting the stage for God's future interactions with these creatures. Indeed, the narrative thread of God's ongoing desire to be in relationship with human beings and responsiveness to the concerns of God's people runs throughout the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings.[271]

When developed against the backdrop of creation *ex nihilo*, a relational approach does not ignore what empirical observation suggests about human structures and human functions, but widens the boundaries of an anthropological framework to take account of the interrelationality between embodied persons.[272] As the details of the narrative in Genesis 1 indicate, God's initial statements about creating humankind in the divine image have immediately to do with male and female beings, not one human creature in isolation from all others of its kind.[273] Weaving in the themes of embodiment and embeddedness here becomes a necessary safeguard against inherited methodologies that would treat the

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[269] Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 119.

[270] Claus Westermann, *Genesis: 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1984), 156. My succinct exposition of Westermann relies heavily on McFarland's summary of his exegetical work on Genesis 1. See *The Divine Image*, 3.

[271] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 107.

[272] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 174.

[273] The creation narrative found in Genesis 2-3, of course, presents the creation of Adam first in isolation and only later Eve. I do not think it is necessary to dive deep into a comparative reading of the two creation narratives here. I am only interested in the immediate context of Genesis 1:26-27 where image language explicitly appears.

relational dimensions of the *imago Dei* as accidental expressions of some underlying and universal nature instead of a phenomenon that only becomes manifest in the concrete details of human entanglement.[274] As a shorthand for this relational vision of human being, I will use the term *being-together*.

Amidst the current variety of relational approaches to theological anthropology, one must be careful to avoid equivocation on the theme of relationality. Thus how I play out my commitment to an ontology of radical interdependence becomes key. A relational approach to the *imago Dei* could just as easily collapse into the mimicry of nontheological anthropologies as do substantialist or functionalist approaches if attentiveness to being-together becomes just one more methodology in which consideration of the Creator is optional. I concur with McFarland's thesis that "knowing what we are as human beings is less important than knowing who makes us what we are."[275] To appropriate the *imago Dei* as a constructive resource into one's theological reflection is to concede (if only tacitly) that the conceptual content of "human being" must be discerned in concert with one's constructive treatment of the doctrine of God. Within a relational approach, that means acknowledging that humankind has its being as

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[274] Herman P. Meininger, "Authenticity in Community: Theory and Practice of an Inclusive Anthropology in Care for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities," in *Spirituality and Intellectual Disability: International Perspectives on the Effect of Culture and Religion on Healing Body, Mind, and Soul*, eds. William C. Gaventa and David L. Coulter (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001), 13-28, 21. I am only loosely paraphrasing Meininger's point about relationality here.

[275] Ian A. McFarland, *Difference and Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press: 2001), 1. In this stretch of my argument, it could sound like I am veering into the same Barthian territory that McFarland, Tanner, McFadyen and others occupy by positing some reified notion of a personal (not to mention Triune) God. While I do not intend to rule this out as an option for my reader, I am engaging the doctrine of God here at the level of conceptual analysis. By asserting the primacy of God the Creator's movement toward humankind, I am most concerned with the relationships of logical priority that may obtain between various doctrines. As much as I am currently willing to disclose about my personal doctrine of God appears in the section on eschatology.

a reflection of the divine life only because God is already engaged in the more primordial movement of initiating relationship with these creatures. No theological reflection is needed to establish the fact of relatedness, but the details of that fact are rife with ambivalence.[276] However, understanding human relationality within the context of the doctrine of creation is one powerful avenue for rendering the conceptual and moral content of being-together more determinate. Human being is, above all, a manner of living under the conditions of embodiment, embeddedness, and interrelatedness in such a way that the observable details of that life reflect the character of the God of all creation. Here is a broad thesis about what it means to be human that demands further specification and more explicit reference to the lives of persons with profound cognitive disabilities. Further interrogation of the relational approach to the *imago Dei* will provide both.

This acknowledgement of the primacy of God's movement toward humankind has several important implications for how best to conceptualize the *imago Dei*. First, just as God's creative and providential activities prove to be one and the same, God's creation of human being and God's self-disclosure to humankind are the very same divine action. God not does creatively act to establish the existence and nature of a human being, then providentially act to sustain it, and then, at some later point, perform yet a third act of divine revelation. God's creation of human being is a particular instance of a continuous calling forth of an order of finite creatures, oriented toward establishing a creaturely

[276] I revisit this point in further detail below in my discussions of both Jesus's ministry and the ministry of the church. I also have in mind here "Hume's law" that one cannot derive an *ought* from what *is* or (to use a few of his own words) "the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason." David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, 3.1.1. (1738; Waiheke Island: Floating Press, 2009).

embodiment of God's own way of being. In short, a relational image of God is simultaneously a revelational image of God. Second, because God's movement *towards* humankind is also God's movement *for* humankind, to encounter the Source of creation is also to encounter the Consummator of creation. This is the One whose generative embrace of all creation has a deeper purpose than bare existence, which is a more intimate mode of relationality than even creation *ex nihilo* provides. This means that the pursuit of a fully wrought *imago Dei* will go beyond the boundaries of the doctrine of creation and into the territories of other doctrines, such as eschatology.[277]

This discussion of creation makes the vital contribution of orienting an expressly theological construction of human being, but its insights fall short of constituting a sufficiently robust anthropology. Perhaps its most important takeaway is that the fullness of human being has not been reached since the *imago Dei* that informs it is best thought of as "an ever active and extending potentiality."[278] Accordingly, the theologian ought not treat the concept of the human in terms of either a settled definition or universal criteria but as a question to be taken up or something to be sought though never finally captured.[279] This understanding of creation in the divine image is a tremendous boon for my efforts to recognize common dignity among a plurality of concrete embodiments.

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[277] McFadyen, "Imaging God," 922. McFadyen also names soteriology here.

[278] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 184; Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 149.

[279] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 177; McFadyen, "Imaging God," 922.

However, even this conceptualization of the *imago Dei* is still too indeterminate and far too abstracted from the fleshy realities of life of the ground.[280] This state of affairs is due in no small part to the fact that the primary participant in humankind's most fundamental relationship is a transcendent reality that is ultimately unknowable. As Anne Inman notes, "what it means to be human is and will remain a mystery *since what defines the human being is its relationship to that which is Absolute mystery*, that is to say God."[281] Attention to the idea of a wholly other divine Creator may undercut creaturely hierarchies, as well as bring notions of purpose and care into the heart of theological anthropology, but an absolute mystery contributes no flesh. Epistemologically speaking, if there is no earthly analogue for the Creator, what framework can the theologian rely upon to know how to move from the image of God to an accurate understanding of its Prototype?[282]

A second outstanding issue is that there needs to be more distance between the relationality at play here and the notion of purposive agency. An anthropology that conceives of human relations as always the result of self-conscious centers of agency choosing to reach out to one another could affirm the relational approach to the *imago*

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[280] Sharon Betcher argues that the term "flesh" serves theologies of disability more effectively than the term "body." She sees "body" as a term that denotes wholeness and, accordingly, submits itself easily to use in the transcendentalist metaphysics that undergird ableist anthropologies. "Flesh," on the other hand, refers to "the dynamic and fluid physics of embodiment," making it much more resistant to use in idealized anthropologies. See "Becoming Flesh of My Flesh: Feminist and Disability Theologies on the Edge of Posthumanist Discourse," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 108. My use of "flesh" draws on Betcher's understanding of it, but I am not as skeptical as she is about the ongoing viability of references to "body."

[281] Emphasis added. Anne E. Inman, "Profound Disability and the Theology of the Human Person," *The Pastoral Review* 7, no. 3 (May-June 2011): 55. It is important to note that, in providing this observation, Inman is expositing the theological anthropology of Karl Rahner.

[282] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 11.

Dei and effectively reestablish the values of the substantialist approach and the autonomous self.[283] Nevertheless, in the face of this uncertainty, there is no need to abandon hope of bringing increased intelligibility to the *imago Dei* or to despair that ableism is too firmly entrenched. The Christian tradition's most definitive Word on the divine image will speak to these concerns.

Jesus Christ as the *Imago Dei*

The assertion that the figure of Jesus Christ ought to be at the center of Christian reflections on human being would appear to be a truism. Yet it is no more assured that the methodology of a particular theological anthropology will bear this out than that an investigation into the image of God will treat the idea of that God as inexpendable. For this reason, it is meaningful to note biblical statements that undercut the practice of treating Christology as an optional gloss on a theologian's concept of the human. This is especially true when it comes to articulating a cogent understanding of the *imago Dei*. Several New Testament passages unequivocally state that Christ is the human creature "who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4) and the person in whom the invisible God has been made visible (Col. 1:15). The author of Hebrews likewise asserts, "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (1:3). Although scripture never explicates the epistemological basis on which this is so, it leaves no question that this man is how God may be concretely seen and known.[284] It is passages

[283] Reinders calls this understanding of human relation "an enrichment rather than a replacement of the classical concept [of the self]." See *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 15, 244.

[284] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 13.

like these that first led early Christians to focus on references to the *imago Dei* in Genesis and to elevate that phrase to a prominence it did not (and still does not) hold in Hebrew and Jewish thought.[285] Yet the original warrant for prioritizing these references has all too often fallen from view, enabling the Christian tradition's tendency to forge an overly tight association between the *imago Dei* and the doctrine of creation. When effectively isolated from the soteriological and eschatological concerns that first grounded its importance, the idea of the image lends itself all too easily to essentialist treatments and idealized anthropologies.

Contrary to this precedent, Christian scripture's identification of the divine image with Jesus of Nazareth places primary focus on the life of a historical individual rather than simply an example of a universal human nature.[286] So much is Jesus the true image of God that to see him is to see the divine (John 14:9). The uniqueness with which this life images the divine has centrally to do with Jesus's embodiment. Far from a postmodern sentiment eisegeted into ancient texts, Colossians 2:9 explicitly states: "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." It is thus fair to say that the biblical starting point for a Christological conception of the *imago Dei* is to consider the bodily existence of this one human creature as well as it can be known. Under the terms of substantialist approaches, the insistence on this criterion amounted to a "scandal of particularity," for how could the life of one Jewish peasant in the first century possibly be abstracted from its immediate context and transmuted into a normative model of human

[285] McFadyen, "Imaging God," 920.

[286] Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Christian Redemption between Colonialism and Pluralism" in *Reconstructing Christian Theology,* eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 269-302, 299.

being. But under a relational approach that values the embeddedness of creaturely existence alongside human embodiment, the particularity of Jesus Christ does not signal the impossibility of meaningful speech.

Without dispelling all mystery from the doctrine of God or reifying the descriptive power of theological language, the story of Jesus Christ provides a fixed starting point for faithful description of the God reflected in human being. As McFarland puts it, this story is "the unique and unsubstitutable touchstone against which all talk about the nature and character of God (that is, all claims to know God) must be tested."[287] Jesus brings the flesh to the discernment of the *imago Dei* that absolute mystery cannot.

To comprehend this claim in the register of a limits approach leads to the refusal to accept just any Christology that may nominally acknowledge the theological importance of Jesus's body. The recovery of the soteriological and eschatological implications of the image of God prevents the creatureliness of human being from receding into the background instead of promoting that recession.[288] Humankind's origin is equally as christomorphic as its destiny.[289] The particularity of Christ's embodiment means that the criterion of true humanity is also caught up in and constituted by the dynamic processes of creation's coming to be and human being-together. Conceptualizing the *imago Dei*, therefore, does not amount to the progressive abstraction of a best-case

[287] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 51.

[288] McFadyen, "Imaging God," 921.

[289] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 142.

anthropology or metaphysical theism from the concrete details of empirical reality.[290] It involves delving into the revelation that both divinity and humanity disclose themselves in the fragility and vulnerability of an earthen vessel.[291] In more technical terms, what this critical correlation of the doctrines of creation and Christology calls for is a reimagining of the Incarnation within a limits perspective.

The Incarnation Embraces All of Human Being

Early orthodoxy's confession of the Incarnation was, of course, an affirmation of the fact of Christ's embodiment in opposition to movements, particularly Docetism, which taught his body was an illusion without true reality. This entailed the dual claim that the life of Jesus "was in the form of God" and that he was "born in human likeness" (Phil. 2:7). Yet classical Christology never successfully relinquished late antiquity's discomfort with the flesh. Because of the debt patristic theology owed to Neoplatonic metaphysics, this dual affirmation amounted to a paradox. (How could a mortal, mutable, and corruptible body enjoy a fundamental unity with the eternal, unchanging, and pure nature of the divine?) The Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) dictated approved parameters for reflecting up this paradox but did not seek to resolve it.

In mentioning this bit of church history, I am not any more interested in a tangential debate about the two natures of Christ than I was keen to indulge in the

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[290] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 47. I am riffing on McFarland's relevant insight here rather than paraphrasing it. I suspect he may be uncomfortable with my choice of the phrase "metaphysical theism."

[291] Xavier de Pichon, "The Sign of Contradiction" in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 94-100, 95. As part of his remark, de Pichon cites Jeremiah 18:6.

controversy surrounding cosmogony. *How* Jesus is the incarnate God is not the aspect of the Incarnation that interests me. *That it is a core confession* of Christian theology does. Methodologically speaking, merely the acknowledgement that Jesus is the incarnate God makes him the most necessary touchstone for theological anthropology, irrespective of whatever theoretical conundra continue to attend it. For instance, even if the theologian declares, as Dwight Hopkins does, that God "manifests, *for me*, decisively, but not exclusively, in Jesus," that qualified confession still ought to have the direct and substantive impact of making Jesus's humanity the determinative element in one's theological approach.[292] My adoption of the limits model is the means by which I endeavor to do just that. I contend that maintaining a tenacious emphasis on the material dimensions of Jesus's life is the most effective resistance to the Christian tradition's lingering temptation towards docetic Christologies.

Including the doctrine of the Incarnation in the understanding of the *imago Dei* under development here makes it possible to begin specifying the attributes of the God whose relational movement toward the human creature determines the fact and the form of its existence. The task is not one of anthropomorphizing an impersonal metaphysical principle but of discerning the eternal significance of embedded existence as modeled by God enfleshed. Exceeding even Genesis's declaration that human finitude is inherently good, the Incarnation expresses that human being is so far from being antithetical to godhood that the divine life is able to join intimately with it. Although the deepest mysteries of God in God's self remain forever beyond the grasp of creaturely knowledge,

[292] Emphasis added. Hopkins, *Being Human*, 52. I cite this same sentence as part of my exposition of Hopkins' theological anthropology in Chapter 1.

God makes some measure of creaturely knowledge possible by entering into creation as one of its constituents.[293]

God's attributes have always permeated the cosmos, but only in the light of Christ do they truly become visible.[294]Above all, this light reveals that God's providential activities are ultimately *redemptive* in purpose.[295] God is neither a dispassionate unmoved mover nor a malevolent cosmic power. In becoming "one of us," God also proves to be "with us" and "for us."[296] Empirical observation of the natural order reveals forces of cruelty and destruction as well as those which promote flourishing. Insofar as Christ is the evidence that God has embraced human being so thoroughly that it is raised up into God's own being, the fundamental nature of the Creator-creature relation discloses itself to be compassion.[297]

The vital detail of the doctrine of the Incarnation, the one that keeps the present discussion from considering only the abstract Christ and never the concrete Jesus, is that *God's assumption of human being is total*. The church father Gregory of Nazianzus famously wrote, "For that which [Christ] has not assumed, He has not healed."[298] Through the greater determinacy it brings to the conceptualization of the *imago Dei*, the

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[293] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 46-47.

[294] Ibid., 41.

[295] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 169.

[296] Iozzio, "Norms Matter," 102.

[297] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 177.

[298] Gregory Nazianzen, "To Cledonius the Priest against Apollinarius" in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, vol. 7, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1894), 439-43, 440.

doctrine of the Incarnation establishes an indispensable continuity between the doctrines of creation and soteriology: God in Christ moves to embrace the whole of human being just as God the Creator lays claim to the whole of the human creature. The claim of Hebrews 2:17 further buttresses this assertion: "he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect." Redemption elevates all that creation dignifies. In short, the intimate union of divinity and creaturely form does not nullify a single vicissitude or vagary of the human condition; accordingly, the process cannot leave out human vulnerability and brokenness.[299]

Nor is it the case that, in addition to the assumption of all these creaturely traits, Jesus' body exhibits singular functionings that ameliorate the vulnerabilities of concrete human life. On this point, orthodoxy dovetails with a limits approach in its promotion of the biblical theme of *kenosis*. According to this teaching, the God enfleshed does not bring redemption through the ostentatious display of a divinized, superhuman embodiment. Instead of viewing his divine status "as something to be exploited," Christ "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:6-7). Once again, irrespective of Chalcedon's concerns over the mechanics of this emptying, to acknowledge the kenotic character of the Incarnation is to confess that Jesus is the definitive likeness of the invisible God strictly through the earthly features of a thoroughly human life. The confession that to see Christ *is* to see God directs attention to a story organized around a material body that is no more empirically remarkable than countless others. The combined effect of these statements is the necessary realization that, in the embodied and embedded existence of Jesus of

[299] Iozzio, "Norms Matter, 102; Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 18-9.

Nazareth, the Incarnate God lives under the conditions of limitness and thus experiences the human frustrations of disability.

What would it look like to conceptualize the *imago Dei* according to the story of this Jesus? At a minimum, it will mean revisiting that story, if only briefly; hearing it in the key of disability. For the God whose primary movement initiates the relationship that constitutes human being unexpectedly approaches humankind as a fellow human creature. Even as the definitive likeness of the Creator, Jesus of Nazareth remains profoundly dependent on the Source, living an earthly existence that includes the dependencies best-case anthropologies habitually overlook but the lives of persons with profound intellectual disabilities most clearly exhibit. Like any other human creature, not one of his capacities is a more exemplary instance of his image-bearing than any other.[300] To learn from this exemplar what it truly means to image God, one must examine his whole person and, because his incarnational being is no less in process than that of any other person, also the entirety of his life.[301]

This is precisely the juncture at which adopting a disability perspective becomes invaluable. Disability theologies have spent decades establishing a vantage-point from which to overturn the tradition's tendency to restrict Christology to the terms of best-case

[300] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 60.

[301] My exposition of Kathryn Tanner's anthropology in Chapter 1 mentions that she also interprets the Incarnation as a process spanning the duration of Jesus's earthly life. Yet my description differs from Tanner's on two key points: She has a vested interest in maintaining that, as the incarnate God, Jesus is also the second person of the Trinity, and she claims that the unity between Jesus and the Son is based in will and action. Even as I actively draw on Tanner in my section on eschatology, I am going to resist this latter assertion for its ableist implications.

anthropologies.[302] Proper utilization of that perspective inclines the theologian to make clear note of when dependency, vulnerability, and impairment are key details in the story of Jesus. This is especially true with regard to the moments of his life that the history of Christian thought has tended to treat only generally or swiftly in favor of those reported events where most believers regard his divine agency to be most evident (e.g. his crucifixion and resurrection).[303] Furthermore, identifying which of the moments in Jesus's life may receive short shrift should also bring to the surface aspects of well-traveled narrative territory that go similarly underexamined.

The limits model rounds out these observations by keeping a suspicious eye out for the reestablishment of capacity-based approaches, cataloging when the ongoing event of the Incarnation embraces material aspects of Jesus' life that are non-agential or, more importantly, signal a marked absence of self-assertion and self-determination. Drawing these details into the open will go a long way toward establishing what place profound cognitive disability ought to occupy within a relational approach to the *imago Dei*, as well as how the lived experiences common to this minority within a minority are actually basic to human being itself. Toward this end, before offering my own reading of the Jesus story, I want to draw in one last hermeneutical resource.

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[302] Brock, "Introduction," 10. Brock's original statement addresses the vantage-point that Christian theology in general provides, while I refer more narrowly to a disability-sensitive Christology.

[303] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 177.

Eva Feder Kittay on Interdependence

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Creamer effectively establishes the promise a limits approach offers for theological reflection on cognitive disability, but she has yet to publish more thoughts on the subject. Accordingly, there remains a need to bring her insights into conversation with scholarship that more closely examines the lives and relationships of persons with profound cognitive disabilities. In this area, one would be hard pressed to find a better interlocutor than Eva Feder Kittay. In the short treatment of her moral philosophy that follows, I am most interested in her signature understandings of three ideas: interdependence, the transparent self, and "some mother's child." I will draw on these understandings as I interpret the life of Jesus through the lens of the limits model.

Kittay articulates a relational anthropology of her own, one that emphasizes the tight connections between the concept of "human being" and those of "dignity" and "justice."[304] She recognizes that, in the final analysis, to identify certain individuals as "human beings" is to identify them as persons who deserve the dignity and respect associated with that designation.[305] Kittay parallels the criticisms of substantialist approaches to the *imago Dei* in arguing that a person's dignity is not established by comparing one's attributes to a universal, abstract model of humanity. Dignity, and by extension humanity, is encountered and conferred within the context of embodied

[304] Kittay's most extensive treatment of these issues appears in her only single-author book on the subject. See Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essay's on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[305] Kittay expresses this sentiment, but this way of phrasing the point comes from Haslam. See *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 89.

relationships of dependency and care. Kittay thus shares the present study's commitment to resisting the Western valorization of autonomy and self-sufficiency. As a feminist philosopher, Kittay observes that even her colleagues who emphasize human interdependence still portray human relationality as a connection between comparably able parties that finds its most authentic expression in mutually chosen and reciprocal arrangements. Regardless of whatever postmodern considerations might inform it, this notion of interdependence ends up reiterating the social contract theories of the Enlightenment by basing the moral community on a union of independent wills.[306] What is missing in this interdependency, Kittay says, is a proper account of *dependency*.

Kittay defines a dependent as someone who relies on another "in order to meet essential needs that they are unable to meet themselves because of their youth, severe illness, disability, or frail old age."[307] Theories that base dignity in rationality or agency fail to account adequately for why dependents make moral demands on other persons and why human communities continue to devote so much time and resources toward caring for members who are the most vulnerable and contribute the least.[308] Given the fact that Kittay's daughter Sesha is a woman with cerebral palsy and severe-to-profound cognitive disabilities, she certainly has those sorts of dependencies in mind here. But Kittay is most concerned with the inevitable dependencies any human community encounters, such as

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[306] Again, this is a point Kittay makes, but my chosen wording more closely reflects statements made by Martha Nussbaum, whose Capabilities Approach I discuss at some length in Chapter 2. See *Frontiers of Justice*; *Creating Capabilities*.

[307] Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder, "Introduction," in *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*, eds. Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 1-11, 2.

[308] Eva Kittay, "Disability, Equal Dignity and Care," 112.

infancy and frail old age. Caring for these people is a relationship that is often decidedly asymmetrical, not always voluntarily chosen, and frequently lacks any promise of reciprocity.

The most effective caregivers must become a *transparent self*, a person who looks through one's own needs and desires to those of a dependent, thus prioritizing the well-being of another.[309] A transparent self, in turn, experiences a secondary dependency on persons outside of the caregiver-dependent relationship to promote one's own well-being because one's responsibilities limit opportunities for securing goods for oneself. This is especially true of those caring for persons with profound disabilities, as the period of required care is unending. As long as prevailing theories of dignity and justice continue to neglect the lived reality of dependency, they will continue to promote a low estimation of the profoundly dependent and their caregivers. This has the practical effect of making one of the most essential forms of human relatedness either an unwelcome necessity or an ignoble vocation.

Yet even with the marginalizing attitudes surrounding dependency and caregiving, Kittay identifies the seed for an alternative perspective. Although popular opinion finds a lack of self-sufficiency and dependency work undesirable, there remains the begrudging concession that a just society owes some support to the profoundly dependent. Kittay sees this as the meager form of a robust moral intuition. She captures that intuition with the aphorism: "We are all some mother's child."[310] Here the mother-child relationship stands in metaphorically for any relationship of dependency or

[309] Kittay, *Love's Labor*, 51.

[310] Kittay, "Disability, Equal Dignity and Care," 113; Kittay, *Love's Labor*, 25-6.

interdependency. This aphorism expresses the sense that, even if our estimation of another person is unfavorable, the fact that someone else has invested care into that person is reason enough to grant them a measure of respect to be who they are. For Kittay, finding dignity in being some mother's child is attractive insofar as it is an inherently relational ground. The worth of the dependent is realized in the reception of care, and the promotion of the dependent's well-being reveals the worth of the caregiver. Kittay asserts this dynamic is true of all human relationships. It is merely most evident in relationships involving persons with profound disabilities because there the signs of rationality and agency with which we are easily enamored are largely stripped away.

The main point I glean from Kittay is that the disclosure of human dignity occurs within interpersonal encounters where dependency is embraced rather than denied or named only as an obstacle to true humanity. In short, a person does not command my respect through a demonstration of what he or she can do. Instead, an individual's worth is revealed by the moral demand placed on me as I encounter what he or she is incapable of doing. I recognize that this vulnerable being will only survive and flourish with the assistance of others and—in that vital sense—this individual is “one of us," regardless whether he or she has all the same attributes as "me." Because the encounter between interdependent beings is always an embodied encounter, the moral demand on me is always local, personal, and particularized. In attending to that demand, my care reveals the dignity and worth of my own existence as a way of being that is open and attentive to

being present with another. Humanity is co-humanity, as Barth would say.[311] Where the flourishing of that humanity is concerned, well-being is being-together.

I find in this rich, philosophical account of human being a perspective entirely congruent with the relational conceptualization of the *imago Dei* I am still constructing here. Kittay's reflections on the material and political dimensions of dependency work make substantive additions to my claim that relationality is more primordial to human existence than the capacities for rationality or purposive agency. Her case for the relational ground of human dignity provides warrant for claiming that, more than simply the precondition of those capacities, relationality constitutes the highest end of an authentically human existence, making rationality and purposive agency each conditional goods whose worth depends upon their potential to facilitate being-together. Nevertheless, despite the great promise these insights might provide for constructing an anthropology that includes persons with profound cognitive disabilities, there remains the question concerning whether they can serve as fundamental resources for a distinctly theological anthropology? Does the story of Jesus Christ as the touchstone for all Christian claims concerning the nature and character of humankind's Creator support such an account of human relationality? I answer both these questions in the affirmative. As I will now demonstrate, attention to Kittay's reflections helps illuminate threads of

[311] Tracy A. Demmons, "Tacit and Tactile Knowledge of God: Toward a Theology of Revelation for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities," in *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 11, no. 4 (September 2008). Demmons brings together the topics of cognitive disability and Barthian co-humanity to promising effect. I draw on her insights briefly in my discussion of eschatology. For a few of Barth's most relevant remarks creation in the image of God, see *Church Dogmatics* III,/2, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 2009), 243-4, 250-67

radical interdependence that weave inextricably throughout the narrative of the God's incarnate image.[312]

Radical Interdependence in the Life of Jesus

The earliest experiences of Jesus's life occur within a relationship of asymmetrical power. Yet this asymmetry is the reversal of the power relationship one encounters in Genesis 1, not its recapitulation. The birth narratives of the New Testament present God-in-the-flesh as utterly dependent upon a human being, specifically a young woman. At Bethlehem, the Son of God enters creation as some mother's child. Although the ongoing significance of December 25th for the Western calendar alone guarantees that this birth remains the subject of widespread veneration and reflection, religious considerations of the iconic infant typically address him with regard to what he is expected to accomplish in his adult life.[313] Soteriologies that conceive of Christ's redemptive activity in punctiliar rather than processive terms discourage even pious imaginations from dwelling for long on the ways in which human, all too human frailty colors every detail of the Incarnation's inaugural event.

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[312] As I retell the story of Jesus from a limits perspective, I make no claims to be engaging in academic biblical interpretation. I am certainly not going to stake out a claim into how historically reliable each Gospel's portrait of the man may be or how their varying accounts might best be harmonized with one another or the rest of the New Testament. My primary objective is to show that Christian theology cannot finally suppress the fact that the themes under consideration here are strikingly evident in the story of its central figure, especially as it is commonly told among believers.

[313] When commenting on an early draft of this chapter, Katherine Turpin noted the prevalence of images of the infant Jesus and Mary throughout the history of devotional icons. I see this as an example of popular piety being keener than formal theology to identify a significant locus of reflection.

Reynolds finds in the infancy stories about Jesus clear indication that the self-revelation of God "traffics in vulnerability," for there is no more poignant image of vulnerability and dependence than a child.[314] The baby Jesus develops in utero like every other human creature, requiring both the autonomic functions and healthy maintenance of Mary's own body to enflesh his existence. It is the maternal agency of her love push that delivers him naked and screaming into outside world.[315] He is swaddled and placed in a manger to meet his frail form's needs for warmth and rest. Immediately, the God-child craves the love of his mother's heart and the milk of her breast.[316] Irrespective of the adult he might grow to be, this newborn lacks purposive agency, self-sufficiency, and intentional communication. In short, aspects of embodied human existence that often fail to register for Christian theologians are the very first dimensions of human being to be elevated into the divine life and through which the progressive disclosure of the *imago Dei* begins.

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[314] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 200-2. Much like persons with disabilities, Christian theology rarely considers the lives of children worthy of "serious" reflection. Not coincidentally, children are another segment of the human family marked by dependence, vulnerability, and the inability to self-advocate. Nevertheless, several theological books on the topic have been published in recent years. See David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005); Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005); Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009); Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

[315] I borrow this image of the love push from Cornel West. See *Examined Life*, directed by Astra Taylor (Zeitgeist Films, 2008), DVD 2010.

[316] de Pichon, "The Sign of Contradiction," 95. The footnoted sentence is only loosely based on de Pichon's actual statement, which poses the irresolvable question of why an all-powerful God chose to take on the life of an infant that craves its mother's love. Given the limits model's concerns for materiality, I have added the remark about milk.

Tracing the bonds of Jesus's radical interdependence to Mary herself brings into relief a striking illustration of the dependency worker. Her responsibility to her newborn son challenges the modern dichotomy between coerced and voluntary action. For years, the well-being of the incarnate God will depend mostly upon her continued willingness to be a transparent self ensuring his care. In Mary's case, the great vulnerability that typically attends parenthood is intensified by the fact that she has conceived this child out of wedlock, marking her as an unsuitable bride in a thoroughly patriarchal society. The fact that Joseph, her husband to be, would honor and care for her in the midst of her dependency work was not a foregone conclusion. As one Gospel account indicates, the stigma surrounding her pregnancy was so great that it took divine intervention to convince Joseph not to annul their betrothal (Matt. 1: 18-25). The life of the incarnate image of God begins in acute social vulnerability as well as biological and emotional dependency.

In the face of all this, Mary took on the role of caregiver day after day. The infant Jesus evoked her care and love, not because of his latent potential to develop distinctly human qualities or because she saw past his humanity to some unique ontological substance, but because his vulnerable presence made a demand on her for which she knew herself to be responsible. It is in the image of blessed mother and holy infant being-together, bodily present with one another in love and affirmation, that we see the life of our Creator and Sustainer first mirrored in the intimacy of human relationship. Insofar as this familial relation is emblematic and not exclusive, a photograph of Eva and Sesha Kittay, or of Debra and Jarrod Scott, has as much potential as, say, Michelangelo's *Pietà*

to communicate powerfully the image of God. My careful consideration of Jesus's story has only got as far as his birth and already the embodied existence of human being's exemplar defies the assumptions of capacity-based anthropologies and the model of a "normal" family.

It is no secret that the New Testament canon has precious little to say about the remainder of Jesus's childhood. Apart from the brief accounts of a flight to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-23) and an adolescent Jesus showing precocious wisdom at the Jerusalem temple (Luke 2:41-52), biblical accounts also seem to be in a hurry to get to his adult ministry. Yet even the adult Jesus—the one who displays considerable powers of purposive agency, self-understanding, critical analysis, and language communication—provides a model of human being that honors radical interdependence. His status as some mother's child is not left behind as some requisite but lesser stage of his personal development. Jesus instead becomes the transparent self par excellence and remains in a position of considerable dependency even as he actively adopts values and activities associated with dependency work.

In the oldest of the canonical Gospels, the first saying attributed to Jesus is: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). The invitation to join this kingdom does not take the form of a triumphalist monarch enlisting knights into his service. Examined once again through a social lens, this man who was born a bastard is also a peasant from a village of poor repute (John 1:46). When divinity enters the world through the kenotic process of the Incarnation, it assumes the humble and obedient posture of a servant (Phil. 2:7-8). What

history tells of Jesus of Nazareth is that his preaching and his life-praxis emphasized his solidarity with the outcasts of society and with the victims of prevailing power structures (Matt. 11:4-6; Luke 4:18-21).[317] The healing he promised he himself pursued through a ministry that countervailed exclusionary practices.[318] Numerous liberative theologies have put this historical information to great rhetorical use. But such a characterization of Christ reaches its fullest resonance when the liberation in view is those with a profound need for care.

When Jesus makes the constructive theological move of summarizing the heart of Hebrew faith, he famously distills all of inherited religion down to two commandments: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," and, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30). The fulfillment of these two commandments are no more separate tasks than are the creative and providential activities of the God Jesus commands his followers to love. It is precisely through his work of inviting others to participate in the coming of God's kingdom into the world that Jesus is most of all himself; in his ministry to and with others—and never apart from it—he lives in the power and presence of God and communicates them to others.[319] He instructs his disciples that the one who would become great must also assume the role of a servant to all, just as he has (Matt. 20:26-28; Mark 9:35). It is by virtue of his active orientation to promote the full humanity of the

[317] Schüssler Fiorenza, "Christian Redemption between Colonialism and Pluralism," 295. Schüssler Fiorenza is careful to emphasize that all accounts of Jesus's preaching and life-praxis are "revisable historical constructions."

[318] Ibid., 295.

[319] Barr, "Life," 483.

women, children, and men around him that Jesus perfectly images God and discloses that flourishing is indeed an emphasis of the Creator's providential relationship with humankind.[320] As the *imago Dei*, Jesus is simply "the man for others."[321]

In modeling what this involves, Jesus exhibits a subversive attitude toward established honor codes.[322] He has regular physical contact with persons with disabilities and persons with chronic illnesses whom religious tradition labels unclean. He makes lepers and Samaritans the protagonists of parables concerning authentic faith and love.[323] He dares to share a dinner table with other people of ill-repute, such as tax collectors and sex workers. Jesus does not move towards others in affirmation and friendship based upon the principle of how observably alike those persons are to him, but upon a principle of *grace*.[324] Jesus invites each person into the Kingdom of God as gratuitously as the Creator offers life itself. Summing the matter up nicely, Jason Reimer Greig remarks that the ministry of Jesus establishes a "pattern of reality" in which the “strange and

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[320] McFadyen, "Imaging God," 931-32. McFadyen's own remarks here are focused on Jesus's orientation. I have added the link back to the doctrine of creation.

[321] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enl. ed., ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 382.

[322] Brian Brock, "Theologizing Inclusion: 1 Corinthians 12 and the Politics of the Body of Christ," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 15, no. 4 (November 2011): 368.

[323] Jason Reimer Greig, "Shalom Made Strange: A Peace Church Theology for and with People with Intellectual Disabilities," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 38; Fintan K. Sheerin, "Jesus and the Portrayal of People with Disabilities in the Scriptures," *Spiritan Horizons* 8 (Fall 2013).

[324] John Swinton, "Using Our Bodies Faithfully: Christian Friendship and the Life of Worship," *Journal of Disability and Religion* 19, no. 3 (September 2015): 239.

disturbing are not pushed outside the community's boundaries but called, hosted, and included."[325]

Jesus thus proves to be a transparent self in a decidedly theological sense. In his radical availability to the rest of humankind, the Christ becomes a transparent image of God's own radical openness to what is other than God.[326] Nevertheless, this transparency makes him vulnerable in precisely the ways Kittay describes. As Jesus devotes the last three years of his earthly life towards building and maintaining healing relationships with the poor and the marginalized, he remains greatly dependent upon external support to enable his efforts and, more importantly, meet his daily needs.[327]

The material details of his adult life disclose anything but the modern ideal of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Despite his status as the son of a carpenter, the New Testament makes no mention of Jesus keeping up a trade or earning a wage. Additionally, the itinerant nature of his ministry meant he continually relies on the hospitality of persons in numerous towns and villages for food and housing. He regularly leans on the twelve disciples to manage the crowds that come to hear him preach, to mediate communication for him and, in the case of Judas, to serve as treasurer for him and his entourage (John 13:29). In their relationships of transparency toward Jesus, these men expose themselves to greater vulnerability. Having left their own vocations, they are no longer wage-earners and, because of the subversive nature of Jesus's preaching, political threats are very real. In yet another reversal of man-made hierarchies, it falls to several of

[325] Greig, "Shalom Made Strange," 39. He credits Donald Senior for the phrase "pattern of reality."

[326] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 198.

[327] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 85-6. This was also true of Paul and his ministry.

the women who travel with Jesus to provide for him and his male disciples out of their own resources (Luke 8:1-3). As the center of this group, Jesus draws all around him into a life of increased dependency and decreased security.

The biblical portrait of Jesus's earthly ministry bears out the limits model's assertion that disability is normal to human experience. Even in the life of the incarnate God, the encounter between embodied and embedded limitations and the conditions of environment lead to the impediment of certain actions and the continual frustration of purpose. In precisely this way, "Christ is normatively impaired."[328] Jesus's solidarity with the materially disadvantaged is personally born out in his own lived experiences of struggle and pain, of physical ability falling short of what imagination can conceive. To borrow another thought from Reynolds, Jesus lives out the image of God and authentic humanity "neither by denying nor suppressing human limitations, but by opening them up to God in a relational praxis of transformative love."[329] Jesus is the icon of the vulnerable God, imaging God by being the embodied expression of God's creative, relational, and available presence.[330] Concepts of human flourishing that exclude impairment,

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[328] Richard Cross, "Disability, Impairment, and Some Medieval Accounts of the Incarnation: Suggestions for a Theology of Personhood," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (October 2011): 651. Working strictly with a social model of disability, Cross draws upon the anthropologies of John Duns Scotus and Hervaeus Natalis to argue that the totality of Christ's human nature was a prosthesis for his divine activity in the world. As interesting as I find this argument to be, I suspect one would have to embrace substance metaphysics for it to hold up.

[329] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 202.

[330] Ibid., 197. There are several instances in the theology of disability literature of scholars arguing that these Christological insights should also inspire challenges to classical versions of Christian theism, producing a doctrine of God whose creative activity discloses necessary limits on divine power. See Samuel George, "God of Life, Justice and Peace: A Disability-Informed Reading of Christology," *The Ecumenical Review* 64, no. 4 (December 2012): 461; Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 180; Cross, "Disability, Impairment, and Some Medieval Accounts of the Incarnation," 655; Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 111-14.

incapacity, frustration, and profound dependence thus stand at odds with Christology. What reconstructions of theological anthropology ought to do is reflect more intently on how these inherent and common, yet ambivalent, limits of human embodiment become elevated and expressed within the grace-infused pattern of reality Christ images. No event in the story of Jesus is more relevant to this reflection than his crucifixion.

Paul famously explains that the faithful proclamation of Christ crucified is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23).[331] Nonetheless, the scene of a condemned criminal's slow and public death captures and communicates "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (v. 24). The sense in which the divine foolishness and divine weakness evident here are superior to the best of human wisdom and human strength (v. 25), although always mysterious, is especially confounding to substantialist approaches to the *imago Dei* and to Christology. As Nietzsche noted, Western rationality judges Christianity's "god on the cross" to be "as remote as possible from the image of the most powerful."[332] Anthropologies devoted to upholding the triumphal agency of Christ typically point to what his divine nature is accomplishing behind the scenes of his material, concrete situation. Resisting both trends, a disability perspective interprets the crucifixion in a way that fits more easily with Paul's explanation to the Corinthians. The portrait of Jesus's ministry just articulated provides cogent insights into how the creature

[331] Several recent publications attempt to reinvigorate theological reflection on the scandalous nature of the crucifixion: See Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011); James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); Elizabeth Rae Coody, *Imagining the Scandal of the Cross with Graphic/Novel Reading* (PhD diss., University of Denver, 2015); David J. Lose, *Making Sense of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2011).

[332] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 468.

who is wounded and tortured under Pontius Pilate (John 19:1-3) and then nailed to a tree is, precisely in that moment, the only fully human being.[333]

The event of the crucifixion is best understood as the likely outcome of Jesus's life-praxis and public proclamations on behalf of his society's outcasts.[334] The kenotic Christ is obedient to what his orientation requires of him even when it means his death (Phil. 2:8). As Samuel George remarks, "It is precisely Christ's willingness to go to the cross that shows he meant what he taught."[335] The pain, torment, and stigma that Jesus experiences on the cross is the apotheosis of his solidarity with human suffering.

Through this event, the incarnational process elevates experiences of tremendous disability into the divine life, including the foremost restriction of embodied existence—the vulnerability of mortality. The body of this fully human Christ is far from whole, undergoing disfigurement, scarring, and physiological malfunction.[336] Nor is it a paragon of purposive agency. Here the likeness of God is decidedly incapable of self-assertion to the point of utter helplessness.[337] Living in a bodily state that is undeniably closer to a person with profound disabilities than a soldier or athlete, "Jesus could not act, he could

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[333] Inman, "Profound Disability and the Theology of the Human Person," 55; de Pichon, "The Sign of Contradiction," 95.

[334] Schüssler Fiorenza, "Christian Redemption between Colonialism and Pluralism," 295-96.

[335] George, "God of Life, Justice and Peace," 460. I also contend that regarding the crucifixion in continuity with the rest of Jesus's life events offers a measure of protection against unhealthy preoccupations with his suffering. Jesus fulfills his role as Christ through a lifetime of modes of being-together with others, not through an isolated and grueling trial.

[336] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 139.

[337] Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2011), 101.

only *be*."[338] After the many subversive words and deeds of his ministry, his greatest subversion of established systems occurs here, as the invisible God becomes most clearly visible when he is at his least capable. The redemptive work of God on the cross, therefore, proves to be just as inconspicuous as God's providential activity.[339]

The theologian who takes the scandal of the cross seriously also comes to see that, not only is Christ's way of being human inclusive of embodiments where physical capabilities are profoundly lacking, it likewise embraces disabling emotional and social experiences. Suspended above the gathered crowd, he is both exposed in his nakedness and as an object of ridicule. Jesus reveals the specifically psychological agony of his final hours through utterances such as, "My soul is sorrowful to the point of death" (Matt. 26:38), and "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) Fintan Sheerin remarks that these statements resonate with persons who have felt the effects of shame, humiliation, and degradation, feelings especially common among those institutionalized on the grounds of cognitive difference.[340] Because the crucifixion represents such a social scandal, Jesus's incarnational solidarity extends even to even the most despised person. As Mary Jo Iozzio writes, "In the face of oppression, marginalization, isolation, erasure, and abuse, God remains in solidarity with humankind even in its most socially despised expressions through the condescension of kenosis and the injustice and sin that was the crucifixion."[341] Divine participation in these forms of

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[338] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 139.

[339] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 180.

[340] Sheerin, "Jesus and the Portrayal of People with Disabilities in the Scriptures."

[341] Iozzio, "Norms Matter," 104.

pain and destitution lovingly pulls all crosses into the redemptive process and so denies them the possibility of being "the final word of human existence."[342]

Disability and the Risen Christ

Crucifixion is obviously not the final word of Christian theology either. No Christology can be complete without some meaningful consideration of Jesus's resurrection from the dead. By its very nature, the doctrine of the resurrection presents problems for a retelling of Jesus's story that tries to stay focused on the earthly details of his life. At this narrative juncture, the bodily imprint of the divine life itself transforms into an entity that, like the invisible Creator, has no observable analogue in common experience. Rather than become embroiled in speculation about how the materiality of a resurrected body differs from typical human embodiment, I want to focus on New Testament passages that emphasize that the form of the crucified Christ remains prominent in his reconstituted flesh.

Whatever one's beliefs about the nature of a resurrection body, Paul asserts that it will bear a basic continuity with the earthly body that has perished, even if it is as empirically loose a resemblance as that of a wheat grain to a wheat plant (1 Cor. 15:35-55). This continuity is especially evident in Luke 24:36-39. This passage describes a scene in which the risen Christ appears to his disciples, not as a ghostly presence, but as a tangible, embodied being who still bears the marks of his violent death (cf. John 20:24-29). In an oft-cited passage of *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland offers this commentary

[342] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 205.

on the significance of Luke's report for body theologies and theologies of disability in particular:

> Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. . . . In doing so, the disabled God is also the revealer of the new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revealer of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.[343]

In contradistinction to best-case anthropologies, as well as concepts of human flourishing that assume a medical ideal of wholeness, the glorified body of Christ carries concrete evidence of his mortal disfigurement and the moments when he was bereft of both honor and purposive agency. Instead of purging these signs of brokenness and vulnerability from his flesh, Jesus draws attention to his wounds as the verification of his true identity.[344] These marks are indelible to this embodied person, and his friends and followers cannot know him in any other way.[345] The Incarnation's assumption of impairment into the divine life was not a stop-gap measure of redemption, a cluster of lesser human qualities and experiences to be erased once Christ's glorification made it possible.

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[343] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 99-100.

[344] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 149.

[345] Iozzio, "Norms Matter," 102.

The body of the risen Christ exemplifies how disability is redeemed, even redemptive, without being "healed."[346] What Jesus presents to his disciples is a body that remains normatively impaired but is no longer disabled.[347] Whatever else the theologian might conclude about the new life the resurrection makes available, the overcoming of death is not tantamount to the overcoming of limitness any more than redemption is deliverance from embodiment. As the image of a disabled God, the redemption found in Christ is for the sake of bodily existence in all its capacities, and it opens up the richest of possibilities for communion with God and humankind alike.[348] Evident here is the utmost sort of accommodation: The one who bears the stigmata cares for the stigmatized.[349]

In numerous remarkable ways, reflecting upon the material details of Jesus's life has proven generative for constructing a theological anthropology centered around radical interdependence. The particularity of his story truly is a valuable touchstone for conceptualizing the *imago Dei* in relational terms. Nevertheless, this particularity may once again become scandalous in a destructive sense if Christian theology overcorrects and begins seeking the divine image strictly within the Jesus story. Because Jesus's specific embodiment cannot possibly assume the multitude of possible human morphologies, nor can his embeddedness allow him to belong to every social, cultural, or political climate realized across history, restricting the content of the Incarnation, the

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[346] Medi Ann Volpe, "Irresponsible Love: Rethinking Intellectual Disability, Humanity, and the Church," *Modern Theology* 25, no. 3 (July 2009): 492.

[347] Cross, "Disability, Impairment, and Some Medieval Accounts of the Incarnation," 654.

[348] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 206-7.

[349] Harold H. Wilke, "The Church Responding to Persons with Handicaps," in *Partners in Life: The Handicapped and the Church*, 2nd ed., ed. Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz (Geneva: Word Council of Churches, 1981), 146-61, 154.

imago Dei, or human being to his person could provide a new avenue for questioning the full humanity of certain groups.[350] I have in mind here groups far more common than persons with profound cognitive disabilities. For example, appeals to Jesus's maleness could reinstantiate patriarchy and sexism. His ethnicity could provide grounds for constructing a hierarchy with Semitic identities (not whiteness) as its apex. The fact that he was crucified at age thirty-three calls into question whether old age failed to be a part of the incarnational process. Since the canonical scriptures never record Jesus having a wife or children, the details of his life might suggest that marriage and procreation diminish one's possibilities for manifesting full humanity.

McFarland warns against any "Jesusolatry" that would seek to honor Jesus's centrality by making the contemplation of the *imago Dei* only about him.[351] Such a strategy forgets that the Incarnation occurs within the context of creation and considers Jesus abstractly, "as though it were possible to cut the [Christ] free of the myriad earthly attachments that accompany the act of taking on creaturely existence."[352] That approach also ignores the biblical statements that all of humankind is made in the image of God (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). Other verses profess that the totality of even Christ's person remains to be revealed. As the doctrine of the *ascension* communicates, the risen Christ

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[350] Cynthia L. Rigby, "The Scandal of Particularity," in *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, eds. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 184-88, 187-88.

[351] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 46, 49. McFarland discourages the sentiment that exhaustive historical information on the life of Jesus would lead to an improved Christology. "Would not all such artifacts quickly be transformed into so much more fodder for humanity's idolatrous inclinations?" See *The Divine Image*, 14. I see a link here to David Kelsey's critique of how the substantialist approaches tend to treat the figure of Adam.

[352] Ibid., 46.

remains alive and well but on some other plane of existence (Acts 1:9), making it impossible for any embedded person to "see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).[353] For the time being, the fullness of human being remains hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3).[354] The pursuit of the question of human being remains ongoing because the revelation of the person and work of Christ has yet to reach its culmination.

The good news of the ascension is the promise that Jesus's departure from the earth does not amount to the impossibility of encountering him or imitating the pattern of his being for others. According to the author of Acts, Jesus's final words to his disciples include the promise that the same Spirit of God that manifests itself decisively in his flesh will enable the community of his witnesses to be living images of God themselves (Acts 1: 5, 9). This observation requires the present study to move on from Christology to the reconstruction of ecclesiology within a limits perspective.

[353] McFarland, *Difference and Identity*, 28; McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 4.

[354] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 9.

CHAPTER FOUR: RADICAL INTERDEPENDENCE IN ECCLESIOLOGY

A theological anthropology that adopts a relational approach to the *imago Dei* blurs the long-standing distinctions between the concepts of human nature and the nature of the church. What the biblical portrayals of the resurrected Christ make clear is that the redemptive activity of the Incarnation spills out from the individual existence of Jesus of Nazareth to include the lives of all who are made in the divine image. What God's embrace of the full range of the human condition ultimately establishes is the concrete reality of a liberative and inclusive human community.[355] While the life of Jesus Christ reveals this community to be the end of the Creator's generative and providential activity, it is the life of the faith community formed around the praxis and teachings of Christ that reveals that this relational way of being in the world is the purpose for which God creates human being. The church is the social space and material place where the being-together that ought to characterize all humankind occurs most intentionally.[356]

The great anthropological truth of ecclesiology is that the *imago Dei* is not something human creatures possess but "something God does to us by grafting us into the

[355] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 176.

[356] Ibid., 191.

life of Christ."[357] Realizing the fullness of human being in one's own life, therefore, never begins with the initiative of an autonomous individual who changes to become God's friend and ally.[358] The Spirit of God empowers the community of faith as it did Jesus himself. Rather than this entailing the regeneration of each believer into a carbon copy of the Nazarene, there is an incorporation of each uniquely embodied and embedded person into the transformative process the Incarnation inaugurates.[359] Understood in this context, the warrant for identifying Jesus as the sole individual who *is* the *imago Dei* is not that his embodied person exhausts that image, but that he alone provides the source and unity of a human community's gradual transformation into a state of divine likeness.[360] Human persons thus participate directly in the *imago Dei* instead of just mimicking it. As the space and place of intentional community, they are more than the creaturely context of divine disclosure; they are part of its content.[361]

Several biblical metaphors support these constructive moves. Jesus's status as the one, true vine means that all branches depend upon their connection to him simply to be, let alone thrive (John 15:5). To paraphrase Paul, Jesus is ever and always some mother's child but, as the firstborn child of God, he also belongs to a very large family (Ro. 8:29).

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[357] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 166. To clarify, I am not making a soteriological claim to exclusivism. Instead, I am claiming that the church is the specific place where Christian theology's vision of authentic humanity is intentionally pursued. Seeing this pattern of reality manifest in the life of the church equips one to see where that pattern might also be manifest elsewhere in the world. The vital element that the idea of engrafting brings to this discussion is that, whenever or wherever a community realizes authentic community, the realization always involves grace and is never the guaranteed outcome of human effort.

[358] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 289.

[359] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 54, 165. The word choice of "incorporation" is mine.

[360] Ibid., 56, 165.

[361] Ibid., 53.

Yet the most relevant analogy for the present study is that church is itself a body that has Christ as its head (Col. 1:18, cf. 1 Cor. 12). I want to concentrate primarily on this metaphor and explore how the life of the church images God through living into the realities of radical interdependence. It does this in two ways—first, by being a community that simultaneously imitates and continues to encounter Christ within the world through its continuation of his earthly ministry and, second, by being the actual, ontological body of Christ by virtue of its authentic being-together. On this last point, the unequivocal affirmation of the humanity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities receives its firmest theological support.

The Service of God as the Task of the Church

The Christian theological imagination often employs spatial terms to represent the various relationships that constitute human life before God. When discussing the *imago Dei* in the contexts of creation and Christology, attention most often goes to the vertical dimensions of creaturely existence: the Source's generative energies well up from unknowable depths to bring form and motion to creation, while the incarnate Christ condescends from unfathomable heights to heal a broken world. A relational approach notes how these vertical movements unavoidably prompt reflection on the horizontal vectors of a dynamic, earthly existence: each creature is entangled in the web of all finite beings who are also absolutely dependent upon God, and Christ lives his life for others rather than merely alongside them.

To continue conceptualizing the *imago Dei* in the context of ecclesiology is to pick up these threads and focus the imagination in a decidedly horizontal direction. What are the material, concrete details one should expect to find in a community of persons who earnestly seek to follow the example of Jesus Christ but none of whom are him? Christology casts the image of God in terms of a specific creature living fully into both the divinity and humanity of his flesh; that is, Jesus images God simply by remaining faithful to who Jesus is. But ecclesiology must wrestle with the New Testament principle that, for any other human being to integrate successfully into the life of Christ, he or she must undergo a dramatic transformation. As Paul writes, anyone who is in Christ is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Whereas Jesus is born a model citizen of the Kingdom of God, the rest of humankind is called to become one.

I contend that a limits perspective on the doctrine of the church will responsibly elide the traditional notions of the regeneration and the vocation of the believer. As the kenotic interpretation of the Incarnation emphasizes, Jesus brings redemption into the world by means of the constitutive elements of concrete human existence, by elevating them rather than replacing them. His superlative imaging of God and his role as the Christ are accomplished through earthly and material means that are not all unique to his personal embodiment. His story validates the hope that mortal instruments are able to promote eternal life as long as grace imbues them. To be a new creation in Christ, therefore, does not involve a supernatural reconstitution of one's creaturely substance. Regeneration is instead a fundamental reorientation of the sum total of one's naturally ambivalent capabilities and functionings.

Being a new creation, therefore, parallels being a creature in the more basic sense in that God in Christ moves to revivify every personal aspect that has become "conformed to this world" in its dehumanizing patterns of being (Ro. 12:2). Within the matrix of this divine activity, transformation is never limited to "the renewing of your mind," if by that one means "merely giving an intellectual assent to a state of affairs, creeds, or metaphysical propositions." That activity instead effects "a new state of being" inclusive of whatever an individual's capabilities and functioning might be.[362] This new state is, of course, Jesus's own pattern of reality—one in which the orientation to God is the service of God and the service of God centrally involves pursuing the well-being of one's fellow creatures.[363] To be a member of the body of Christ is indeed, then, a certain sort of liberation, yet it is not a liberation whose core quality is a will free from the heteronomy of external constraint. One's new state of being is that of a "living sacrifice" (Ro. 12:1), of experiencing the fullness of personal deliverance from dehumanizing practices by continually giving over the members of one's own body in righteous servitude to the only One who deserves such devotion (Ro. 6:17-19).[364]

To be the church of the regenerated is, in short, to be a community genuinely oriented towards others as Christ was. In this sense, the call of vocation is ecclesiology's synonym for the call to be human. Whatever further theological considerations one might address under the heading of personal vocation, enlisting in the ministry of Christ-like

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[362] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 198.

[363] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 257.

[364] Swinton writes that, within the Kingdom of God, "the idea that 'I' am a discrete individual free to do whatever I want to do and to create myself in whatever way I want, as long as I do not prevent others from doing the same (the standard assumption about individuality in modernity), makes no sense." See "Using Our Bodies Faithfully," 230.

service to others is the responsibility that ought to inform and take priority over all individual pursuits. The preceding reexamination of the Jesus story becomes immensely valuable at this juncture. What he embraces about self and others is the criterion of the church's signature activity in the world. As the body of Christ, the church realizes its true identity by engaging in the bodily practices that Jesus performs and, in that way, meeting the material needs he prioritized. For it is the bodily gestures a person commonly performs that both distinguish him or her from others and indicate association with particular cultural or linguistic groups. It is likewise gestures of care, concern, and assistance that most set the body of Christ apart from the forms of social organization his ministry opposes.[365]

This line of reflection thus arrives at a conclusion that would appear to be a truism of the Christian religious tradition but, nevertheless, remains a confession of faith that history shows is difficult to exposit exhaustively or to embrace thoroughly: God is love, and the presence of love in one's own life is the surest possible evidence that one truly knows God (1 John 4:7, 8). Western thought has typically eschewed the idea of love when engaged in "serious" consideration of fundamental truths. The present-day academy's ongoing discomfort with matters of care and dependency shows that this practice persists, even on the other side of the turns to expressivism and relationality. But it is fundamentally through love that the church images the praxis of the life of Jesus, which is itself a disclosure of the compassion of the Creator. The love named here is not

[365] I get the metaphor of the gestures of Christ's body from Brett Webb-Mitchell, but he and I do not employ in the precisely same way. See Brett Webb-Mitchell, "Crafting Christians into the Gestures of the Body of Christ" in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, eds. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 267-80.

some "touchy-feely" and disembodied abstraction, but an idea that orients thought towards the interconnections and interactions of embodied beings. It captures an affective dimension of human experience that, although irreducible to the explanatory models of the natural sciences, never occurs apart from the material reality those disciplines seek to understand. A relational approach to the *imago Dei*, conceptualized through the lens of the limits model, boldly asserts that a particular idea of love must be taken into account if the concept of human being is to have any true meaning or relevance.

The abiding indeterminacy at the heart of even this idea of love has everything to do with that fact that it is a creaturely mode of existence and so necessarily engaged in the open-ended manifestation of what human being is capable of becoming. Accordingly, the body of Christ distinguishes itself not only by means of its gestures but also by its posture. A community that displays the Creator's compassion acknowledges that the fundamental unity of the human family is realized from a position of openness.[366] To take on Christ's orientation of being for others channels openness into an improvisational alertness and readiness to help when help is required.[367] Once again, in resistance to substantialist approaches, the relational imaging of divine life is irreducible to a single channel of human interaction because true relationship involves the whole person.[368] Doctrinal agreement or mutual respect for one another's agency is still too shallow a basis of unity. The responsibility of Christian love extends to every aspect of the

[366] Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 10th anniversary ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 97.

[367] Barr, "Life," 482, 484.

[368] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 143.

interdependence between self and other because God's claim on each human creature is total.

Responding to people aright necessarily entails *knowing* them, rather than sticking to methods of interaction patterned after some best-case anthropology.[369] Continuing Jesus's ministry also means that this love is not provided from afar, but by crossing boundaries to provide comfort and to form attachments to meet specific needs for tenderness and security.[370] Themes of dependency work and transparency of self prove relevant here as well because, as Jesus's network of discipleship exemplified, a community that maintains this posture renders itself vulnerable in the context of a world that operates according to contrary values. This church risks falling behind other communities in the acquisition of public goods and becomes susceptible to violence from those who continue to find the life-praxis of Jesus an actionable threat to the status quo.

For these reasons, Reynolds observes that the vocation of a Christian is to learn to live according to a new economy—one in which the community rejects the dominant narrative that advocates acquiring the greatest possible wealth under conditions of scarcity in favor of a framework in which the collective need is "to respond to what we have received out of the plenitude of God's goodness."[371] The divine act of incorporating humankind into the life of Christ is as equally gratuitous as the divine bestowal of mere existence. Likewise, the concept of grace undermines ontological hierarchies in

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[369] Brock, "Introduction," 20.

[370] Stephen G. Post, "Drawing Closer: Preserving Love in the Face of 'Hypercognitive' Values" in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 27-36, 31.

[371] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 158.

ecclesiology as thoroughly as absolute dependence does within the doctrine of creation. Christian visions, stories, and doctrines of church must be careful to maintain this underlying truth because where they position particular persons within community relationships will determine what particular responses their presence ought to elicit.[372] This "ought" brings considerations of dignity back into the conversation. Within an economy of grace, dignity never depends upon the utility of an individual body's capabilities because a recipient of God's grace boasts a worth that exceeds any finite system of value.[373] Here is a theological (and non-Kantian) understanding of human being as an end in itself: A fellow member of Christ's body is dignified because that person's presence is a gift and, insofar as another receives that gift in a loving posture of availability, a genuine instance of being-together manifests itself.[374]

Above all, therefore, community is an experience available only in the midst of brokenness.[375] Learning to receive other people as a gracious and divine gift means letting go of any pretense that the recipient of care must satisfy some sort of prerequisite, such as being generally self-sufficient and only in need of temporary assistance or that, once aided, that person will clearly be able to make useful contributions to the group. Those may be "normal" expectations for dependents in the political discourses of the

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[372] John Swinton, Harriet Mowat, and Susannah Baines, "Whose Story Am I? Redescribing Profound Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of God," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 15, no. 1 (February 2011): 7-8.

[373] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 138.

[374] Ibid., 139. The thoughts here about the end in itself and being-together are my own.

[375] Hans S. Reinders, "Human Vulnerability: A Conversation at L'Arche," in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 3-15, 4.

West, but the church's task is to be faithful to Jesus's strange and scandalous story. That will require thinking and being in "abnormal" ways.[376] God does not give as the world generally gives (John 14:27), and neither should the human community that intends to be the space where the divine image appears.

The economy of ecclesial life cannot ever simply reinscribe the larger society's already established relationships of power and privilege, because the church's relationship to the marginalized is an integral feature of its identity.[377] Furthermore, the establishment of horizontal connections of grace should never be unilateral. The precedent of the Incarnation goes beyond the demonstration that divine life can join itself to humanity. It also discloses that humanity can embrace divinity when the latter draws nigh. A relationship truly operates according to a principle of grace when love is extended to the person who fails to meet society's expectations for "one of us" and that person returns the Christ-like embrace.[378] The full integration of the marginalized into the body of Christ requires that all other members allow them to exercise their capabilities and functionings to the edification of all.[379]

In the immediacy of being-together, there is no creaturely height from which one party may condescend to the other or, remaining at that height, reduce the other to an

[376] Greig, "Shalom Made Strange," 33.

[377] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 96.

[378] Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, "Whose Story Am I?," 16.

[379] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 148-9.

object of either charity or pity.[380] With specific regard to disability, the active awareness that every human person is incomplete mitigates against that common assumption that the incompleteness of people with disabilities is greater and more significant than one's own, simply because their impairments are more visible.[381] That sort of high place is a site of idolatry. The caring affirmation of another's presence does not amount to the declaration, "You are fortunate that I arrived to help you." Nor does it involve expectations of the sort of strict reciprocity of *quid pro quo*. As a word of reassurance, care is a gentle affirmation: "It is good that you exist; it's good that you are in this world."[382]

To acknowledge one's own brokenness and limitation in the face of someone else's is a gesture of community truly befitting the body of Christ. Concrete instances of such gestures make possible a deeper current of reciprocity—one that obtains even when the empirical details of exchange appear decidedly asymmetrical (e.g. the daily support of a parent diagnosed with late-stage Alzheimer's). The divine economy of care requires that those popularly regarded as "weaker" receive a greater portion of honor than what is typical and, for those deemed less deserving of respect, a measure of respect exceeding what is average (1 Cor. 12:21-22). As the parable of the unforgiving servant illustrates (Matt. 18:21-35), the proper response to receiving God's grace in the midst of personal

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[380] I am not directly engaging the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas in the present study. Yet this sentence undeniably brings to mind his signature notion of the height of the Other. However, my own claim arguably embraces Jacque Derrida's critique of Levinas on this point. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 86; Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79-133.

[381] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 144.

[382] John Swinton, "Introduction: Living Gently in a Violent World," in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, by Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 9-20, 20.

limitations and shortcomings is to extend the same unconditional acceptance toward those whose also live before God, irrespective of whether one of the world's prevailing economies would justify claiming superiority over someone else.

Another important reason for the church's care for the marginalized is that, in addition to being a continuation of Jesus's ministry, *relationships of hospitality with the oppressed and alienated are the means by which the church continues to encounter Christ himself*.[383] In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus famously allies himself with those society at large would deem a stranger. Mirroring the words of God in the Pentateuch, his teachings emphasize justice for the widow and the orphan and a concern that the stranger be fed and clothed (Duet. 10:18). Yet, in this Gospel, Jesus goes beyond allying himself with the marginalized to identifying with them in the strictest sense: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (v. 40). When the body of Christ performs the gestures of feeding the hungry, providing a drink for the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, going to see the prisoner, or otherwise welcoming those who appear strange, it is not simply imitating Christ but experiencing Christ's very presence *in them*. In these earthly encounters, the servant concretely assumes the posture and gestures of Jesus, and the one served is precisely the other for whom Jesus was. This is the embodied and relational incarnation of the Spirit of Christ. This is also arguably the strongest point yet in favor of conceptualizing both the *imago Dei* and human being in terms of an ontology of radical interdependence.

[383] John Swinton, "Known by God" in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 140-53, 150.

Even if the entirety of these assertions concerning ecclesiology goes uncontested, the abiding influence of agency-centered anthropologies may continue to prevent full acceptance of the radicality of interdependence. A person with a cognitive disability continues to be the stranger par excellence because their presence calls into question canons of reason and custom that justify the dignity and flourishing of most other identity groups.[384] An apparent truism of liberation theology that has also proven difficult to embrace fully is that genuine liberation entails the liberation of all without exception. When the ethos of theological anthropology is saturated with love and grace, rather than *ressentiment*, the point of liberation is not to supplant the oppressor to enjoy his power for oneself, but to dismantle oppressive systems without reinstantiating the values that constituted them.[385] An instrument nominally devoted to liberation is not *de facto* a gesture of the body of Christ; it is an ambivalent tool like any other. A value system that refuses to welcome the stranger with a cognitive disability, and so treats that person as something less than a child of God, keeps an economy of scarcity in play.

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[384] Volpe, "Irresponsible Love," 500-01.

[385] Nietzsche uses the term *ressentiment* to name the unhealthy psychology he sees at the root of Christian morality. In his account of the origins of the moral value "evil," the ancient priest envied the social power of the noble class and hated the noble as a result. Because the priest could not usurp the noble's place through external, physical violence, he invented an alternative moral system in which he condemned the power he desired for himself and, through the popularization of that system, enacted a form of spiritual revenge upon his enemy. As the priestly morality became the prevailing ethos of Western civilization, the priestly class came to enjoy the position of political superiority originally occupied by the nobles. In using Nietzsche's term, I want to caution liberative theologies from adding validity to his claims that spite and self-promotion are actually the emotional core of Christian critiques of worldly power. In theological perspective, the sin of the oppressor is not that he arbitrarily keeps political power for himself and those who share his identity group but that the very order of power he cherishes is inherently dehumanizing. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1967), 469-88.

At a minimum, honoring persons with cognitive disabilities with greater honor will mean the forthright rejection of the stigma and marginalization specific to their experiences.[386] Loving a person as Christ loves means valuing the well-being and security of another as much as one's own.[387] The alternative structure of relationality will be to cease defining their place in the body of Christ in terms of deficits and aberrance and begin seeing their personal embodiments as particular ways of being human that require understanding, esteem, and support.[388] When the community successfully regards the life and vitality of human existence to be a gift, it will become increasingly apparent that this gift arrives in countless ways throughout each person's lifetime and that the medium of giving is "a nexus of reciprocity that is based in our vulnerable humanity."[389] Congruent with the limits model, here there is no clear dichotomy between ability and disability because the material details of community building run roughshod over that construct. Within this nexus, persons with disabilities are constitutive members of the body of Christ who incarnate his Spirit by extending their hospitality to others even as they embrace the hospitality other persons extend to them.[390] The concept of wholeness too takes on a relational orientation, where genuinely inclusive companionship takes the place of the medical model and substantialist approaches alike. As Reynolds succinctly

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[386] Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 95.

[387] Post, "Drawing Closer," 31.

[388] George, "God of Life, Justice, and Peace," 462.

[389] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 14, 41.

[390] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 224.

states, "This is what it means to be God's representative on earth, a counterpart to the divine."[391]

The combination of these ecclesiological considerations with a relational approach to the *imago Dei* yields an understanding of the church as simultaneously natural and unnatural. It is a discrete earthly entity and yet also the expression of the Spirit of God in Christ, which makes it more than what empirical observation of its embodied members could possibly uncover.[392] This community discloses that human being becomes what it ought to be by being caught up in the dynamics of God's relating as it both receives and responds to God's vocational call.[393] The love and service at the heart of this community reveal that the new creation of its community experience involves neither the eradication nor the rejection of material existence in favor of an otherworldly mode of being.

Jean Vanier writes, "Love doesn't mean doing extraordinary or heroic things. It means knowing how to do ordinary things with tenderness."[394] Authentic love is the being-together that images the incarnational movement of bringing divine transformation to the mundane, to the everyday details of deep dependence and limitness that theory continually misconstrues as negligible. The church is most the *imago Dei* when it shares a table, when it celebrates through laughter and fooling around, and when it gives thanks

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[391] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 186.

[392] Brock, "Theologizing Inclusion," 362-63.

[393] McFadyen, "Imaging God," 929.

[394] Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 220.

together for the gift of life.[395] This list also includes the dependency work of a transparent self, following the precedent Jesus consciously set when washing his disciples feet (John 13:1-17). Through all these activities, there is a shared posture of expectation and welcome as the ongoing addition of new members fleshes out the contours of Christ's body in ever-new and often unpredictable ways.[396] That community's concept of itself and of the God it images, accordingly, remain under construction.

Humility remains the necessary correlate to the church's love, first, because it informs the nature of Christian service and, second, because its active demonstration protects against the various temptations toward idolatry facing the church. While piety and doctrine alike ought to avoid the false image of "Jesusolatry," Jesus Christ's perennial status as the head and unifying principle of proper relationality should never be forgotten either. The church is the space of Christ's objective presence in the world but Christ's objectivity exceeds any earthly, historical community.[397] This state of affairs prohibits (what one might call) "ecclesiolatry"—the mistaken assumption that one's own faith community boasts a one-to-one correspondence with God's own mode of being. In other words, the church also resembles Jesus in being less than the full content of the *imago Dei*. The humble awareness of this should lead to the recognition of a collective sense of limitness. Human groups have their own distinctive impairments in addition to their combined capabilities; this guarantees that shared experiences of disability are inevitable.

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[395] Jean Vanier, "The Fragility of L'Arche and the Friendship of God," in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, by Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 21-42, 37.

[396] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, viii.

[397] Ibid., 56.

Even when its liberative efforts are maximally effective, a particular manifestation of the church can only accomplish so many of the historical possibilities the theological imagination can perceive.

Another idolatrous temptation is to conflate being an image of God so thoroughly with abstract concepts like "justice," "inclusion," or even "love," that the figure of Jesus recedes into the background of the Christian story, making only the occasional cameo as an exemplar of ethical principles rather than as their criterion.[398] This makes Christ as dispensable to discussions of his own body as God is to substantialist conceptualizations of the divine image. A similar vigilance ought to govern the discernment of Christ's presence in the neighbor. The Christological safeguard against categorically dismissing one's neighbor from being made in the image of God is that the particularity of Jesus's life shows the God enfleshed to be a man for others.[399] Theological discourses that exclude his particularity from the warrants they employ to establish the neighbor as a child of God, and then characterize Jesus according to the qualities in the neighbor these other warrants prioritize, run the risk of misrepresenting the figure of Jesus, as well as the One he makes known. This caution applies just as fully to theologies of disability as to best-case anthropologies.

The primary purpose for naming these idolatries is not to sharpen the methodological parameters of theologizing human being (although those are valuable clarifications), but to keep the present course of reflection focused as squarely as possible in the most promising direction. I concluded above that the church most effectively

[398] Ibid., 62.

[399] Ibid.

imitates Christ and so, by extension, is most clearly a creaturely expression of the divine image precisely when its members engage one another in a certain mode of reciprocity. The best examples of these engagements come from mundane instances in which all parties honor their radical interdependence. The vital question to raise at this juncture is this: How can persons with profound cognitive disabilities actually participate in reciprocal relations (even asymmetrical ones) as anything other than objects of charity for purposive agents? If one of the markers of being-together is that the welcome neighbor returns the offered embrace, how does someone like Jarrod do this in a way that is anything other than deficient? Answering these questions satisfactorily requires further explanation of how labeling the church as the body of Christ is not just a poetic flourish or a regulative ideal of practical reason. The body of Christ is an ontological reality that incorporates persons with profound cognitive disabilities just as fully as persons with the highest powers of representational thought and intentional action.

The Body of Christ as the Model of Radical Interdependence

The commitment to understand the Pauline notion of the body of Christ as a material reality in the physical world undermines a dichotomy that commonly appears in the history of New Testament interpretation. As Richard Hays explains in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, scholars have long debated whether Paul's description of the body in chapter twelve is purely metaphorical or whether the apostle has some mystical union in mind.[400] Hays insists that Paul would not have understood the terms of

[400] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 213.

this dichotomy. Consistent with the description above, he portrays the church as an undeniably human community which owes its being to the activity of the Spirit of Christ as it binds all members intimately together and with the risen Lord.[401] That Paul uses the idea of communal body to deliver an admonition for unity and reciprocity is itself an instance of reconstructive thinking and a challenge to first century social structures. Roman politicians would use this image to urge the lower classes to remember their ordained roles and avoid disturbing the natural equilibrium of the body politic.[402] His revolutionary insight is that, at an ontological level, the very being of the church presupposes interdependence and it needs diversity to be authentically itself.[403] In my ongoing efforts to sound out the depths of human interdependence as thoroughly as possible, and thereby bring the theological imagination nearer to the concrete details of human relationality, closer attention must be paid to the tight conceptual linkages interdependence shares with diversity and difference.

It may be impossible to overemphasize that the hospitality one extends to the stranger is always mediated through concrete practices of flesh and blood, for these practices form the scaffolding that gives the church its structure.[404] Beyond the verbal assurance that one's existence in this world is an intrinsic good, affirmation of the person on the margins consists of bringing him or her into the historical, physical space which an

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[401] Ibid., 213-14.

[402] Ibid., 213.

[403] Swinton, "Using Our Bodies Faithfully," 230. For an interpretation of Paul's understanding of diversity framed in terms of "an indifference that tolerates differences," see Alain Badiou, Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 98-106.

[404] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 57.

embedded instance of the church universal currently occupies. The most genuine welcome is not satisfied with casting someone favorably in the community's shared narrative. True welcome acknowledges the difference that oppressive systems find unpalatable chiefly by finding it a concrete place within the church's space. This place is one of regular embodied encounter as opposed to compartmentalized socialization and brief, unsettled engagements. There is "direct sympathetic communication between all members" such that, if one member suffers, all suffer together and, if one member receives honor, all rejoice together (1 Cor. 12:26).[405] In short, when the church welcomes the stranger, it welcomes them to a place of *belonging*. Incorporated into the life of Christ, the outcast finds a home.

If the principle of the Incarnation informs the initiative for forming community, then the principle of belonging names what keeps community together. The desire for welcome is "a desire for a meaningful and vitality-giving place with others in creation."[406] It is a human creature's recognition that the open-ended and relational qualities of human existence require a companionship irreducible to a partnership geared only toward survival. In this way, the recognition that one does belong is both the means by which the dehumanized find edification and the mechanism for breaking any member out of the shell of individualism and self-centeredness.[407] To know one belongs or—more to the point—to *delight* in the fact that one belongs is a tacit admission that one is not

[405] Brock, "Theologizing Inclusion," 363.

[406] Ibid., 183.

[407] Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 35.

self-sufficient and instead reliant upon the diversity of abilities and contributions that neighbors make to one's life.

Among the most troubling implications of the modern political notion of equality is that its attribution of the same fundamental identity to all persons means that all persons are basically interchangeable.[408] By contrast, the Pauline insight is that "the unity of the body under Christ does not preclude but rather presupposes a multiplicity of genuinely different, non-interchangeable, and mutually dependent members."[409] In this way, ecclesiology deepens a truth encountered in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*: diversity is not simply a consistent quality of creaturely relationships; diversity is the necessary precondition of authentic human relationality.[410] Considering oneself to be basically independent and in no need of the rest of the body would thus appear to be one of those instances of immature thinking Paul encourages believers put behind them (1 Cor. 13:11).[411]

Thinking diversity and interdependence together delineates precisely the sort of path a limits perspective on the *imago Dei* sets out to travel; namely, to continue to think outside the substantialist box without then falling into an exhaustively social model of the self that overlooks the person amidst its focus on constitutive, environmental factors.[412]

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[408] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 64. McFarland refers specifically here to John Rawls.

[409] Ibid., 86.

[410] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 182.

[411] Jeff McNair, "The Indispensable Nature of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities to the Church," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 12, no. 4 (December 2008): 322.

[412] Recall Creamer's critique of the social model of disability in Chapter 2. Also, see my discussion of eschatological essentialism in Chapter 5.

Rigorous commitment to the position that "diversity" always signifies an embodied and relational state of affairs ought to put to an end any vestige of the view that "differences" are accidental qualities attached to some core self. Agency-centered anthropologies bring diversity into theological reflection by noting the vast and unpredictable manifestations that self-determination may assume, and they laudably draw attention to a multitude of ways that the relative scope of any specific agency leaves human persons reliant upon one another and their environment. Yet, despite all that, the value of diversity remains anchored in sameness—the common font of expressive activity at the center of each individual. As I have been arguing since Chapter 1, the ubiquity with which agency-centered anthropologies assert the evolutionary and historicist character of the human self only soften their recapitulation of this tradition, and they function in much the same way that hardcore essentialisms do. The limits model alternatively emphasizes how the idea of diversity is an attempt to represent the embodied fact that the presence of each person discloses a unique configuration of finite strengths and vulnerabilities alike. This uniqueness provides the grounds on which to posit an intelligible understanding of diversity that amplifies interdependence without reservation and reduces essentialism without remainder.

Diversity is the necessary precondition of relationality because embedded dependencies characterize every feature of the body of Christ, just as absolute dependence colors every aspect of the web of creation. In addition to whatever ways each person may experience brokenness, even one's most impactful abilities boast only so

much potential. The bonds of relationality form at points of dependency.[413] Far from being antithetical to a meaningful notion of individuality, the material details of both one's dependent attributes and the specific connections they enable and require are the very parameters that make the identification of a distinctive individual possible at all.[414] Only through the diversity of interdependent relations does one become knowable as an individual self. This is why a biblical statement that, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free (Gal. 3:28; cf. 1 Cor 12:13), cannot be read as the obliteration of difference for the sake of some core sameness, but an injunction against using difference as an occasion for exclusion from historical, Christian communities.[415]

To be at home amidst the innumerable, often imperceptible, bonds that distinguish one's position vis-a-vis a multitude of neighbors is to enjoy one's self as a place of regular edification and security. It is not uncommon for theologians to cite the Southern African proverb, "I am because we are," and to do so quite casually.[416] What this ecclesiological treatment of diversity accomplishes is to bring the theological imagination closer to the material details that support a Western appropriation of this claim. In short, individuality is only possible because embodied specificities of human interdependence flesh out each person as a living site where relational connections converge, emerge and redirect.

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[413] Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 40.

[414] Iozzio, "Norms Matter," 100-01.

[415] McFarland, *Difference and Identity*, 23.

[416] For a book-length, theological treatment of this theme, see Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009).

Following the precedent of 1 Corinthians 12, the concept Christian theologians typically employ when making sense out of the church's unity within diversity is that of spiritual gifts. In this concept, ecclesiology receives a valuable assist from pneumatology; in other words, the doctrine of the Spirit whose coming Christ promised to his disciples. The intersection of these two doctrines is especially prominent in the work of Amos Yong, who theologizes disability within a Pentecostal framework.[417] Yong develops a powerful hermeneutic for understanding the body of Christ by reading Paul's remarks on gifts alongside the account of the Spirit's bestowal of astonishing abilities in Acts 2. His exegesis of the latter highlights that, beyond the famous "tongues of fire" that appear in the story, this chapter presents a portrait of community where a variety of embodied abilities are empowered to establish community where differences of language and nationality might otherwise prevent it.[418] What makes a spiritual gift "spiritual" is that not that the gift itself is always some sort of otherworldly ability (e.g. prophecy, supernatural healing, etc.) but its Source. A relational account of the *imago Dei* ought to explore the full theoretical implications of the strict identity between the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of Christ in Paul's writings, and the Spirit that hovers over the primeval waters in the first creation narrative.

In the second genesis of transformation in Christ, the one and only Spirit of God continuously activates gifts among all members of the body of Christ for the benefit of the entire community (1 Cor. 12:11), with purposes that are finally as mysterious as those

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[417] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 196.

[418] Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 15. Yong succinctly refers to his hermeneutic as one of "many tongues, many senses."

of creation in the most fundamental sense. No human calculus of utility can provide either a rationale or predictive model for the manifestation of spiritual gifts. God's relational approach towards humankind is once again liberal and gracious, yet never wasteful, equipping each member to be just as capable of edifying the faith community and making each necessary.[419] This is why, within the diverse and interdependent network that is the church, the "eye" cannot say to the "hand" that it can get along just fine without the other member's distinctive contributions (v. 21). It is also the vital reason for a member to resist negative regard for itself, such as the "foot" lamenting it is not a "hand," or the "ear" concluding it must not truly belong to the body because it not an "eye" (v. 16). God's relational approach to all the members of the body is simultaneously the wellspring of the community's diversity and its unity, and this dual assertion must always be a confession of faith since nothing like a grand schematic of divine engrafting finally unveils itself, even to the faithful.[420]

A theological anthropology that owns the full implications of this confession will encourage reflection upon how the embedded manifestations of spiritual gifts defy conventional wisdom surrounding the nature and origins of community contributions. First and foremost, there is a need to recognize that each permutation of the human condition and each age of life offers unique gifts.[421] This will entail a collective effort to look beyond the sociological and demographic certainties members of the body

[419] Ibid., 94.

[420] Swinton, "Using Our Bodies Faithfully," 235-35.

[421] de Pichon, "The Sign of Contradiction," 96.

customarily attach to particular individuals.[422] Within a limits perspective, gifts are not what a present person does to provide for the well-being of the group; the material details of their gifts comprise one's presence. This adds rich nuance to the preceding assertion that, under an economy of grace, one should accept the other person as a gift.

Furthermore, the proper discernment of spiritual gifts is not chiefly a matter of isolating which person's individual capacity correlates most directly with this or that specific benefit to the community. Although there is pragmatic value to such practices, they are not sufficient in themselves. The significance and special character of each gift is not an automatic outgrowth of a particular person's empirical capacities because the Spirit of God apportions them.[423] The Spirit may direct a much-needed contribution to come from an unlikely source. For example, a word of wisdom might come from a mouth generally observed to be foolish, or a forgetful mind might rekindle a crucial memory. The profoundly dependent person may provide the decisive acceptance that makes the caregiver's flourishing a genuine reality. On Brian Brock's reading, Paul encourages a posture of openness to these reversals by instructing faith communities to orient themselves according to the question, "How do I embrace the giving of the Spirit?" rather than getting stuck on the identity question, "Which gift is yours or mine?" Consideration of what brings relational wholeness resoundingly trumps inclinations to secure credit for the self in isolation.

This orientation also undermines yet another common avenue for introducing hierarchy into the human family—the ranking of spiritual gifts. The fact that, through the

[422] Brock, "Theologizing Inclusion," 352.

[423] Ibid., 359.

initiative of the Spirit, a person's presence introduces a gift into the community's experience automatically means in theological perspective that this gift cannot be done without. Therefore, as Yong writes, "no gift—and no individual believer—is to be suppressed, dismissed, or minimized, and there is no hierarchy of gifts."[424] To do so would be to close the door on fresh, revelational possibilities, namely in the form of unanticipated experiences of being-together, as well as the recovery of underappreciated blessings from the past.

Embracing the giving of the Spirit thus proves to be nothing less than the welcoming of the stranger already present within the body of Christ, the one that ought to have a place within the church yet does not quite belong. This involves giving concrete expression to the principle of Incarnation through the lived affirmation of the entire multiplicity of sensory modalities which may foster reciprocal modes of interdependency and so image the divine life disclosed in Christ.[425] With specific reference to persons with disabilities, this will mean giving careful attention to ways in which their embodied lives are already transformative presences in the body of Christ because the Spirit of God has elevated their impairments rather than "fixing" them.[426] These statements bring the present study back around to its central concern: When the Christian communities of the present day place the abilities of intentional communication (speech, writing, artistic performance, etc.) atop a hierarchy of spiritual gifts, while also associating the fulfillment of Christian vocation with purposive agency, how can the theologian credibly affirm that

[424] Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 95.

[425] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 77.

[426] Ibid., 72.

persons with profound cognitive disabilities are anything but junior members in the body of Christ? How are their ways of being in the world genuine instances of "human being"? It is to these poignant questions I now turn.

Theological Anthropologies that Include Profound Cognitive Disability

The two theologians who have given the most direct answers to these questions are Hans Reinders and Molly Haslam. In this regard, they count among my most important interlocutors. Both scholars provide generative insights about how best to bring profound cognitive disability into a relational conceptualization of the *imago Dei*, although I find problematic elements in their respective proposals as well. Through the process of engaging the most relevant strengths and weaknesses of those proposals, I will arrive at my culminating statement concerning the place persons with profound cognitive disabilities occupy within the body of Christ, as well as articulate the most robust version of my ontology of radical interdependence.

In his book *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, Hans Reinders sets forth a theological anthropology fully committed to the aforementioned notions that being human is primarily a matter of belonging and that knowing what we are as human beings is less important than knowing Who makes us what we are. He takes a further step beyond the turn to relationality by asserting that the ground of personhood is extrinsic to the human creature, residing entirely in God's movement toward humankind. He insists that, unless Christian thought establishes God's friendship as the particular relationship

that precedes all other facts about human existence, ableist accounts of subjectivity and difference will continue to govern theological reflection.[427]

When constructing his own anthropology, he draws heavily (though not uncritically) on the thought of Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas.[428] Zizioulas conceives of human being as both *extrinsic* and *ecstatic* in nature. Reinders explains that "something has an extrinsic cause when it does not have its own cause in itself but in another being outside itself."[429] This amounts to a total rejection of substantialist and capacity-based approaches to anthropology in that the possibility of personhood exists only in the reality of God's gracious action and never in any biological or historical potentiality one might actualize.[430] Human being is also ecstatic in the sense personhood is not "a condition that is received and henceforth our own," but instead "a gift that continues to be given because it stands in constant need of regeneration."[431] The human creature's distinctive mode of being in the world can, therefore, never be the natural manifestations flowing forth from some essential human substance. Alternatively, ecstatic being has its ground in communion or, to be more precise, a movement towards communion.[432] God's own being is ecstatic in that God exists as the communion between Trinitarian persons. Paralleling Kathryn Tanner's anthropology, Reinders and Zizioulas

[427] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 284.

[428] Reinders only significant reservation about Zizioulas's anthropology as that it too seems to take a postmodern notion of subjectivity as given. See Ibid., 269.

[429] Ibid., 244n41.

[430] Ibid., 367.

[431] Ibid., 368.

[432] Ibid., 252.

agree that the purpose of the dynamic movement of human existence is to become progressively incorporated into the very life of the Triune God. There can be no sense in which human being or the *imago Dei* is something human individuals accomplish. In short, being the image of God is "a way of *relationship* with the world, with other people and with God, an event of communion, and that is why it cannot be realized as the achievement of an *individual*, but only as an *ecclesial* fact."[433]

Because divine agency, not human agency, is "the primary concept of Christian anthropology," a person with profound cognitive disabilities cannot be demoted within the human family, or excluded from it completely, because he or she lacks the capacities of goal-oriented reason or purposive action.[434] Nor is human flourishing any less a possibility for these persons than "normal" persons because the final end of human existence is identical with a unique relationship with the triune God rather than the development of *any* intrinsic capacity.[435] In Reinders's sense of relationality, human being is fundamentally ecclesial in that it aims at communion and never merely at enriched subjectivity; the latter does not constitute the former.[436] An embodied life like Jarrod's and the life of a temporarily able-minded person such as myself share the same basic humanity because our respective statuses as images of God, and as members of the body of Christ, have the same extrinsic foundation: God's loving kindness. In both

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[433] John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 15.

[434] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 275.

[435] Ibid., 273.

[436] Ibid., 252.

instances, personhood is a gift that can only be received, a primordial movement of existence passively accepted.[437]

Nevertheless, Reinders does not reject the traditional confession that to live in Christ is to be set free. Genuine freedom, in his view, it to be set free to be God's friend and thereby be friends with others.[438] Once again, the gift of being is not an abstraction, but the gift of being who one is. Although the endorsement of freedom *to* over freedom *from* introduces a verb tense into human being, this is a movement of being irreducible to purposive action—freedom *to* is freedom to *be*.[439] God's love and care for persons with profound cognitive disabilities draws them into the experience of this freedom "regardless of whether they have—or can have—any sense of it."[440] As with any child of God, reception of divine love is not contingent upon whether one meets certain thresholds of merit.[441] The security of each person's humanity, regardless of what capabilities they possess or the uses to which one puts them, lies in the constancy of God's friendly approach.[442] Like every other human person, those with profound disabilities participate in the freedom of being who and what they are without further need for justification.[443] Like every other human person, they enjoy the benefits of the friendship others extend to

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[437] Ibid., 270.

[438] Ibid., 313.

[439] Ibid., 314.

[440] Ibid., 244.

[441] Ibid., 314.

[442] Ibid., 308.

[443] Ibid., 349.

them when the embrace of their presence brings transformation to the body of Christ. The church is continuously recreated in the image of God in its resemblance of God's freedom of being free for somebody.[444]

What I find most promising about Reinders's theological anthropology is the way in which, more poignantly than any other source I have engaged thus far, he articulates an ontology of belonging that defuses the tendency to regard profoundly disabled lives as having a fundamentally different order of being than lives rich in rationality or purposive agency. This is a tremendous contribution toward the goal of liberating persons with profound cognitive disabilities from the pejorative judgments about them that standard conventions engender. He accounts for why they are no less lovable in the eyes of God and, on that basis, no less deserving of human attachment and care than the rest of humankind. Reinders also provides an unapologetically theological case for basic humanity and human flourishing alike that corroborates many of the intersections I have already highlighted between creation *ex nihilo*, Christology, and ecclesiology.

That having been said, his ontology of belonging does raise a few pressing concerns for an ontology of radical interdependence. On the one hand, Reinders's anthropology may not sufficiently honor the diversity of the body of Christ. In an article that postdates *Receiving the Gift of Friendship* (but does not explicitly name it), Reynolds expresses suspicion concerning any theological anthropology that moves "quickly past

[444] Ibid., 238. Reinders understands himself to be in agreement with Karl Barth on the matter of God's freedom.

disability to favor 'the person' God sees in love."[445] His concern is that such a move establishes a dualism of person/disability reminiscent of traditional dualisms of soul/body. A person's true value hides behind the fleshly signs of his or her disabilities. Reinders does indeed seem susceptible to this criticism when he declares, "Difference can be celebrated only because it has *no theological significance*; in the eyes of God, human beings are equally worthy of his loving kindness, no matter what differences the bodies of these human beings may exhibit."[446] In the final analysis, the material details of embodied diversity are conceptually separable from the ground of personhood and dignity. Reynolds worries that relegating disability to the background of personhood in this way effectively perpetuates the denigration of disability that a theologian like Reinders expressly sets out to oppose.[447] It may also promote an ironic state of affairs where it successfully promotes practices of care and genuine welcome but also dismisses the embodied difference and vulnerabilities that constitute and distinguish each individual. While inviting further theological reconstruction on these issues, Reynolds writes, "Perhaps instead there is a way to see vulnerable bodily differences as graced features of an embodied and relational creaturely life, such that minding differences matters."[448] My reflections on spiritual gifts above begin to map out such a way, but I will need to say more on this in moment.

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[445] Thomas E. Reynolds, "Past and Present with Disability in the Christian Tradition," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 17, no. 3 (August 2013): 292.

[446] Emphasis added. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 284.

[447] Reynolds, "Past and Present with Disability in the Christian Tradition," 292-93.

[448] Ibid., 293.

Another concern is that Reinders may not devote sufficient attention to theologizing the interdependence of the body of Christ. Molly Haslam argues convincingly that his triune God is so outside the material world that he reinscribes a cosmological dualism that most constructive theologians find simply untenable.[449] To this I would add that Reinders's turn to an extrinsic ground of human being moves the theological imagination further away from, not only the material details of particular disabilities, but also the radical interdependencies that comprise both human communities and human individuals. In this way, his version of an ecstatic anthropology runs counter to my argument that an embodied nexus of reciprocity is precisely the medium through which God most fully relates to human creatures and the image of God becomes manifest in their being-together.

Relatedly, Haslam notes how Reinders's insistence on humankind's complete passivity in receiving personhood from God creates a further dualism: While human being is a fundamentally passive movement into the life of God, the divine nature is the active initiation of friendship. God is, therefore, essentially a purposive agent. This begs the question, "In what way does human passivity image this divine agency?"[450] If Reinders is describing God at God's most divine, then it would seem irrefutable that persons with purposive agency more fully manifest the *imago Dei* than those without it. Despite his earnest advocacy on behalf of persons with profound cognitive disabilities, Reinders's doctrine of God provides a backdoor for agency-centered hierarchies to

[449] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 8.

[450] Ibid., 8-9. Haslam likewise critiques Reynolds and Yong for finally making some version of purposive agency central to their relational anthropologies. See pp. 2-7.

maintain their dominance. In the final analysis, even though Reinders provides useful strategies for thinking about the common ontological ground between individuals with cognitive impairments and all other individuals, a theological anthropology committed to a limits perspective cannot facilely adopt the theoretical underpinnings of those strategies, particularly his assertions concerning the thoroughly extrinsic nature of personhood.[451]

Haslam calls for theologians to do more than simply reverse the traditional intrinsic/extrinsic binary in much the same way Creamer critiques the social model's reversal of the medical model's framework. She is equally suspicious of moves to place the dignity of persons with profound intellectual disabilities in the extrinsic attachment to a human caregiver.[452] She has specifically in mind Yong's assertion that such a person is dignified because "she is a being who has become who she is through the loving care of a mothering person—a persons who herself embodies intrinsic worth."[453] What concerns Haslam about this portrait of dignified humanity is that it neglects to address the unfortunate fact that caregiving relationships can be abusive and neglectful.[454] The dignity of a profoundly dependent person would thus appear to be in question wherever a

[451] Consequently, Haslam explicitly adopts the limits model in her reflections on human being. See Ibid., 12-13.

[452] Haslam makes regular reference to persons with profound intellectual disabilities rather than profound cognitive disabilities. In my estimation, the two phrases function synonymously. Nevertheless, as I exposit her anthropology, I will use her preferred terminology.

[453] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 184-85.

[454] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 6.

caregiver fails to respond to the vulnerability of those individuals with the requisite care and respect.[455]

Haslam alternatively constructs an anthropology that is not only relational but also *dialogical*. She arrives at her concept of human being by bringing the philosophy of Martin Buber to bear on the embodied lives of persons with profound intellectual disabilities. The position she articulates is so germane to the conceptualizations of human being and the *imago Dei* I am constructing here that it demands sustained attention.

Haslam draws on her years of experience as physical therapist to construct an individual she names "Chan." She describes Chan as a twenty-year-old man with cerebral palsy who is developmentally at the level of the infant. His behavior does not indicate the ability either to comprehend or produce words or sentences or to use gestures or sounds with the intent to communicate his wants or needs.[456] His behavior does, however, suggest an awareness of the world around himself and of the position of his body in space. But he never evidences that awareness of awareness we associate with self-consciousness.[457]

The objective here is not to fixate on these impairments, but to describe the responsiveness Chan does demonstrate through his behavior. I find two of Haslam's

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[455] Ibid., 5. Haslam never directly engages Eva Kittay's writings about dignity and "some mother's child" in this text, although she certainly could have. For one instance where Kittay seems susceptible to Haslam's critique, see "Disability, Equal Dignity, and Care," 112-15. Kittay's more recent thoughts on these issues, however, arguably avoid the concerns Haslam raises. See Eva Feder Kittay, "The Personal Is Philosophical Is Political: A Philosopher and Mother of a Cognitively Disabled Daughter Sends Notes from the Battlefield," in *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, eds. Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2010), 393-413.

[456] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 57.

[457] Ibid., 63.

examples especially illuminating for the present study, particularly because they depict instances similar to interactions I have witnessed between Jarrod and his caregivers. Chan lives in a group home where Philip is his primary caregiver. Philip and the other caregivers observe that, when Philip enters Chan's room in the morning to bathe, dress, and transfer him to his wheelchair, Chan exhibits more "awake behavior." There is increased motor activity in his arms and legs, his eyes remain open, he smiles, and he begins vocalizing at the sound of Philip's voice. To the contrary, when Philip is ill or has the day off, Chan responds to other caregivers with more "asleep behavior;" he arouses less easily, his eyes open only intermittently, and he may grind his teeth as he often does during sleep. Chan is also quicker to relax and go to sleep when Philip is the one who prepares him for bed. The caregivers of the group home interpret these differences in behavior as indicative of Chan's desire to interact with Philip, and they respond by ensuring that Philip tends to Chan as often as possible.

Haslam also describes an instance of Chan participating in a game of volleying a balloon. Late in the day, Philip transports Chan to the common room at his day treatment center, a place where persons with intellectual disabilities and their caregivers socialize. In response to the noise of the balloon game happening near him, Chan begins to vocalize, his head flexes back and forth, and the motor activity in his limbs increases. Philip responds by wheeling him over to the group at play. Haslam observes that, even though Chan is unable to help volley the balloon, he does participate in the game through his presence as he responds with changes in his behavior. Philip, in turn, interprets these changes as indicative of Chan's interest in the game.

Haslam provides this and additional observations as evidence that Chan communicates with others at a preintentional level, expressing wants and needs of which he himself may be unaware.[458] Chan responds to changes in his world and these behaviors prompt a response from persons around him to engage him in particular ways. This is mutual interaction in the absence of agency or symbolic communication. Haslam argues that these relationships are more fundamental to human being than relationships that require intention or agency and make the latter possible.

While the vast majority of Western anthropologies may be incapable of affirming Chan's full humanity, Haslam finds that Martin Buber's anthropology is. His view of human being is dialogical in that its dynamic manifestation occurs only in (what he calls) the realm of "the between." Here the I meets the other in a relationship of mutual responsiveness, totalization, and immediacy.[459] Buber famously calls this the I-Thou relationship. Although Buber's language often tends toward the abstract or poetic, the encounter he describes is a face-to-face meeting, a relationship initiated by the other "bodying over against me."[460]

Buber portrays the disclosure of the other's presence as a word spoken to the I that demands an answer. I am responsible to respond to that word, and the word I speak back will determine whether this is an I-Thou or I-It relationship.[461] In the case of I-It, the other exists for me as a value-neutral object for the projects of the self. I assert my

[458] Ibid., 63.

[459] Ibid., 54.

[460] Ibid., 71, 82.

[461] Ibid., 73.

individuality by imposing my subjective designs between us, thus rendering myself incapable of listening or responding to a word that is not my own. Alternatively, in an I-Thou relation, I acknowledge how the other makes herself known to me by way of her bodily expressions, and I engage the other in an open sharing that transcends my individual designs.[462] This dialogue is *mutually responsive* in that I and Thou reciprocally constitute each other; only in being addressed is one truly an I and only by addressing the other are they truly a Thou. It is only in their being present together that the fundamentally relational character of human existence is realized and known. Only there are any of us persons.

The element of *totalization* in I-Thou relationships has to do with the fact that the I's attention is on the subjective whole of the Thou rather than on any isolatable trait. The Thou is set free from the oppressive effects of scrutiny and categorization. Human being is thus also marked by *immediacy* in that the address of whole to whole is unmediated by reflexive activity. Buber explains that "the melancholy of our fate" is that I-Thou relationships inevitably give way to I-It relationships, as we rely upon the latter to order our world and find a sense of security within it.[463]

Haslam notes that, within Buber's anthropology, a person with profound intellectual disabilities is remarkably well-positioned to experience the sheer presence of full humanity.[464] Chan demonstrates how the manner in which these persons relate to

[462] Ibid., 71, 74.

[463] Ibid., 69.

[464] Ibid., 83-4.

others is non-objectifying in the most genuine sense. For example, Philip is never an object of Chan's individual projects because Chan lacks the self-consciousness and symbolic reasoning needed to regard Thou as It. Yet, through behavior like his awake activity, Chan evidences his mutual relatedness to others and his experience of their embodied presence. Haslam remarks that, to the degree that other persons engage Chan without reducing him to an object in service of their needs, Chan would be seen as unequivocally human.[465] Regarding persons who do possess that non-essential and ambivalent capacity to address others as Thou or It, one must discipline its exercise with an ethics of care—one that prioritizes the inclusion and loving treatment of persons with profound intellectual disabilities and opposes their social and conceptual marginalization. To refuse to be present together with them dehumanizes them *and* oneself. Haslam clarifies that possessing the capacity for mutual response is merely a necessary precondition of human being. Being present together in dialogue is everything.

To summarize, Haslam argues that "human being" is realized only through the reciprocal constitution of self and other that occurs in relationships of mutuality and response. Buber's realm of the between is an embodied encounter in which I and Thou are present with one another as subjective wholes, free from the calculative reflection that reduces subjects to objects. Haslam's phenomenology of Chan demonstrates how a person seemingly incapable of agential or symbolic activity still responds concretely to changes in the world and evokes responses from others. Persons with profound cognitive disabilities thus participate in human being just as fully as persons with rational

[465] Ibid., 89.

capabilities. Haslam's dialogical anthropology grounds an ethics of care in which promoting the flourishing of persons like Chan is a nonnegotiable requirement.

At this juncture, it is necessary to integrate Haslam's insights more explicitly into my preceding account of how the church images God by being the body of Christ. With her constructive reflections upon Chan as a precedent, I want to bring other conversation partners back into the discussion to articulate explicitly how this engagement of Haslam either enriches or advances my treatment of both the church's continuation of Jesus's earthly ministry and its ontological condition of diversity in interdependence. Making her vision of human being my own will occasionally require embellishment or pointed critique.

A Critical Appropriation of Molly Haslam's Anthropology

What I find most promising about Haslam's work on profound cognitive disability is how effectively it directs thought toward the material details that differentiate an ecclesial economy of grace from the dominant economy of scarcity. Her portrait of human being as occurring strictly in the realm of the between provides a conceptual means to further separate the concept of being-together from anthropologies that continue to understand human relationality largely in terms of a union of wills and otherwise autonomous agents electing to cooperate. The theological literature on cognitive disability contains several felicitous instances of parallel thinking where, independent of any direct engagement of Haslam, theoretical and experiential evidence appears that corroborates her notion of the between. Returning to theme of spiritual gifts, Brock

argues that a properly Pauline understanding will recognize these gifts as situated in between their bearer and their recipient. "This in-between is the particular theatre of operations of the Spirit who does not only *donate* the gifts, but needs actively to donate them right into the middle of inter-personal relational space."[466] Just as one is only an I when engaged in dialogue with a Thou, a member of the body of Christ is only ever a bearer of spiritual gifts when actively engaged with a recipient of what the Spirit has donated in and through that member.

Recalling an assertion I made above, these gifts are not some discrete commodity that may be held in reserve at the bearer's discretion. The embodied and dynamic life of the bearer constitutes the content of the gift as well as the means of its sharing. The gift that a Thou gives the I is its uniquely embodied self. Reynolds mirrors Buber's remarks on the reception of that gift when he writes that, by virtue of encountering the sheer givenness of the other, "I am lured into the between-space of relation, and thus available to another, involved to the point where my own good is caught up with and connected to his or her own good. Sympathetically attuned, I participate in the giftedness of the other as someone akin to me."[467] Conceptualized in these terms, the body of Christ's signature posture of openness is an abiding receptivity to this lure into the between, a space that is only real in the dialogical exchange of gifts and that occurs ever and always through the Spirit of Christ moving through the embedded conditions of interpersonal encounter.

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[466] Brock, "Theologizing Inclusion," 370.

[467] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 139.

Swinton offers a concrete example of what it looks like for a person with profound cognitive disabilities to experience this lure in a congregational setting. He profiles Mary, a member of a Quaker community whose diagnoses are similar to those of Chan, Jarrod, and Sesha Kittay. During meetings, Mary often behaves noisily during meetings *until* the community moves into its time of silence. "As the silence of the community engulfs the room, so Mary shares in the silence. Precisely what that silence means is unclear; but her response is regular... patterned... [and] engaged."[468] Swinton interprets Mary's behavior as evidence of her participation in the shared spirituality of the congregation. Seeing the marks of relationship much like those apparent between Chan and Philip, Swinton asserts that Mary exemplifies something fundamental to Christian spirituality rather than some atypical or deficient version of it. In other words, "Mary's experience seems to communicate that spirituality may be a corporate event in which a person is greatly dependent on others."[469] The difference of profound disability does not disqualify a member of the community from being lured into the space of the between and so being grafted into body of Christ as fully as anyone else.

The example of Mary also adds support to Haslam's speculative assertion that Chan's cognitive impairments favorably predispose him to authentic human being since he is unable to thematize the life another and thereby reduce a Thou to an It. Drawing on decades of experience working in church settings alongside adults with intellectual disabilities, Jeff McNair argues that these members of the community exemplify the

[468] Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, "Whose Story Am I?," 13.

[469] Ibid., 14.

child-like faith Jesus said one must have to enter God's kingdom (Matt. 18:2-4).[470] If it is indeed the case that human sinfulness finds one of its chief sources in the impious use of reason, then the unreflective immediacy that consistently informs a profoundly disabled person's experience might also place his or her life somehow more squarely within the presence of God.[471] Following much the same line of argument, Yong posits that persons with severe to profound cognitive disabilities do not resist the Spirit making them the persons within the church "who are most able to be iconic charisms of God's presence and activity in the world."[472] What sharing these remarks in conjunction with Haslam's anthropology brings even more clearly to light is that persons like Mary participate no less fundamentally in being-together than persons who are presently able-minded. Theological anthropology should, therefore, depict those diagnosed with profound cognitive disabilities as human, no more or no less.[473]

These further reflections on how the realm of the between defines life in Christ also highlights the sense in which the lived experience of human embodiment is not even just one of interrelatedness but also interpenetration. In dialogical encounter between

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[470] McNair, "The Indispensable Nature of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities to the Church," 327.

[471] Hans S. Reinders, "Watch the Lilies of the Field: Theological Reflections on Profound Disability and Time" in *The Paradox of Disability: Response to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans S. Reinders (Grand Rapids, MI: WB Eerdmans Publishing C., 2010), 154-68, 167; *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 231.

[472] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 218.

[473] Reinders, "Human Vulnerability," 6. Opposite the tendency to underestimate the humanity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities is the contrary tendency to regard them as "holy innocents," i.e. persons who are important because their uncommon qualities make them moral exemplars or because they display an uncomplicated approach to life. This is another means by which a profoundly disabled life get treated as a way of being in the world that is fundamentally different than that of the average human person. For this reason, even though the appellation of "holy innocent" is ostensibly positive, the practice may justify the exclusion of disability from theological reflection.

subjective wholes, the other does not merely body over against me, like the surfaces of two self-contained shapes pressing flush against one another. There is an undeniable, if still difficult to articulate, sense in which the lure into the space of between exposes the arbitrariness of borders between one body and the other. If a relationality of being-together captures the heart of human being, then there remains a mystery at the heart of humanity as such—the mystery of authentic communion. To borrow the words of Vanier: "[Communion] means accepting the presence of another inside oneself, as well as accepting the reciprocal call to enter into another."[474] Finding a welcome place within the intentional space of the church is to belong so fully that one can dwell in the other; that is, one is at home dwelling in the other and with other dwelling in oneself.[475] This is where phenomenological language comports the theological imagination toward a recurring experience that medical models of the body and autonomy-centered understandings of subjectivity cannot faithfully capture. This language also leads to a preferable alternative to Reinders's proposal that authentic communion depends entirely on the transcendent God's movement toward humankind in friendship. Authentic communion is an embodied interdependence of such radicality that it transcends the physical boundaries of any individual body and, in their overlapping, the earthly lives of the members of the body of Christ truly do combine into an ontological unity.

Admitting the mysterious character of this mutual indwelling is not the reinstantiation of unbridgeable chasms between the realms of scientific and religious truth (Reinders understanding of communion would seem to do that); it is instead an

[474] Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 28-29.

[475] de Pichon, "The Sign of Contradiction," 99.

identification of where the commitment to honor the embodied and embedded conditions of human existence leads organically into a consideration of the sort of ineffability upon which theology is accustomed to reflecting and the natural sciences have traditionally found unpalatable. The embrace of the mystery of communion as the heart of humanity is not a retreat into untethered fancy and blatant irrationality. Methodologically speaking, it is more akin to the commitment to map a discovered, yet largely unexplored, territory in as much concrete detail as possible, knowing full well that some of its terrain will continue to prove inaccessible to the cartographer's finite powers of observation and representation.

Nor is the identification of the mystery of communion a compounding of mysteries; that is, yet a further mystery on top of mysteries already named over the course of my treatment of the *imago Dei*. The mystery of communion *is* the mystery of encountering Christ in the neighbor, which is also the mystery of being grafted into the body of Christ by the Spirit, which is the mystery of being made in the image of the Creator. Like the concept of the *imago Dei* itself, the sense in which mystery remains central to the concept of human being assumes various permutations contingent upon the doctrinal context of theological reflection. Yet, also like the *imago Dei*, overt continuities bind those permutations together in a fashion that aims at the utmost intelligibility possible given the subject matter.

One final positive outcome of integrating the insights of Haslam's anthropology into my ecclesiology is that her work highlights the concrete ways in which persons with profound cognitive disabilities do indeed express and receive love. What is love if not

genuine mutuality and response? What is love if not sympathetic attunement to the presence of another? What is love if not a desire for communion with another that runs so deep that it directs one's embodied activities in the world irrespective of one's express awareness of this fact? These questions are, of course, rhetorical. These statements express the quintessence of love. If everyone who loves is born of God, Haslam's anthropology better equips Christian theology to assert under no uncertain terms that persons with cognitive disabilities are members of the body of Christ *and* creatures made in the image of God.[476]

As this chapter's final exercise, I want to make two important clarifications of the relational understanding of the *imago Dei* my reflections on ecclesiology have established, and I will make them by engaging two potential weaknesses that appear in the closing pages of Haslam's book: her own articulation of the *imago Dei* and her assessment of the human-animal distinction. The former needs only a brief assessment, while the latter calls for a more sustained engagement.

Haslam is explicitly aware that any constructive proposal about the *imago Dei* assumes a particular doctrine of God as well. She identifies the two primary resources that inform her notion of God as the Hebrew Bible and the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, especially the text *The Divine Names*.[477] Given her conceptualization of human being as mutuality and response, she appreciates the Hebrew portrait of God as a deity who

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[476] For brief discussion of how significant declines in cognitive function do not eliminate the possibility of the loving relationships described, see Post, "Drawing Closer," 28-30; Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 190.

[477] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 106-8.

desires and actively seeks covenantal relationships with human creatures. Nevertheless, she is wary of anthropomorphic representations of the divinity human being resembles. She approvingly cites three reasons Gordon Kaufman provides for eschewing this sort of God-talk. First, there is the tacit assumption of cosmic dualism on account of which Haslam critiques Reinders. Second, it represents God not only as the proper object of human desire but also a distinct being who self-consciously desires relational partners in the way that persons like Chan cannot. Finally, the Hebrew Bible's characterization of God as "an all-powerful cosmic agent" slides too easily into notions of a God who may be arbitrary or unjust in the dispensation of omnipotence.[478] Human beings can then justify their own penchants toward oppressive and warring actions by claiming they are simply emulating God's own behavior.

To steer Christian theism away from these unsettling possibilities, Haslam uses the thoughts of Pseudo-Dionysius to articulate a non-personal doctrine of God. Summarizing the heart of this discussion clearly, Haslam writes, "If with Dionysius we conceive of God in bodily terms as longing itself, rather than in intellectual terms as the object of longing, then we have the conceptual space to include the ways in which Chan's body testifies to this longing as expressive of God."[479] She notes how Chan's behaviors indicate a desire for Philip's presence or to participate in the balloon game in nonsymbolic ways, desires concerning which he himself may be entirely unaware.[480] In

[478] Ibid., 107.

[479] Ibid., 109.

[480] Ibid., 109-10.

short, his responsiveness to the world around him may be interpreted as nonconceptual desire. Persons with profound cognitive disabilities thus image God "not because of some intellectual capacity they possess, but because their participation as responders in relationships is expressive of the longing that God is."[481]

While this casting of the doctrine of God is indeed congruent with Haslam's dialogical anthropology I cannot help but find its content thin and, for that reason, unsatisfactory. It represents for me a contrary extreme to the doctrine of God attached to Reinders's theological anthropology. While the ecclesiology articulated above certainly emphasizes a relational sense of longing and yearning as necessary to the wholeness of the body of Christ, being-together in the image of God goes beyond those manifestations of bodily desire. A Christian doctrine of God is necessarily personal because the person of Jesus Christ is the chief criterion for the discernment of genuinely divine attributes. Haslam's theological anthropology is one clear example of where God is an optional corollary to a concept of the human worked out in conversation with a philosophical account of what it means to be human and references to Christology are few and far between. Furthermore, I think that, rather than eschewing all descriptions of God as person, Christian theology can assuage Haslam's legitimate concerns about possible abuses through an insistence that personal and non-personal metaphors for God function alongside one another and that no one metaphor be allowed to monopolize the theological imagination. It is only natural for human users of language to find spiritual power in understandings of a God whose attributes resemble human qualities. The error appears when one dogmatically makes an idol of one of these understandings.

[481] Ibid., 110.

In her remarks about the possible distinction between human beings and nonhuman animals, Haslam raises another valid concern about the dangers of allowing anthropocentrism to operate unchecked within Christian theology. Yet, once again, I disagree with her proposed solution. Haslam observes that the degradation of nonhuman animals, like the marginalization of persons with profound intellectual disabilities, has typically been justified by their perceived lack of rationality.[482] Having just argued that human beings are not necessarily rational, Haslam plays with the idea of greatly broadening her anthropology to include these other embodied creatures. She cites Buber's affirmation that objects in nature also body over against the I as a single whole, and they too call for an affirming response from the I; albeit the effect of that response on the nonhuman other remains shrouded in mystery.[483] Buber asserts that "man [sic.] is commissioned and summoned as a cosmic mediator to awaken a holy reality in things through holy contact with them."[484] In light of these statements, Haslam stops *just short* of claiming that animals and other life should be included in "human being" in order that they may receive the dignity and respect associated with that concept. She identifies the desire to define humanity in contradistinction to the rest of creation as anthropocentric, in service of the need to justify the denigration and exploitation of other creatures and nature's resources.[485] She claims such separation and exclusivity depend on the reification of "the human," a reification she rejects.

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[482] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 114-15.

[483] Ibid., 82.

[484] As quoted by Haslam, Ibid., 73.

[485] Ibid., 115.

There are certainly things to admire about how Haslam forges a link between non-human animals and persons with intellectual disabilities. First and foremost, she exhibits what Licia Carlson calls an *inclusive* approach to the matter, rather than an *exclusionary* approach, in which these two groups operate conceptually in opposition to one another and their respective flourishings are leveraged against one another as mutually exclusive.[486] One finds prominent examples of the exclusionary approach in the animal rights scholarship of Peter Singer and Jeff McMahan.[487] In brief, both scholars claim that animals that demonstrate the psychological capacities typically associated with moral personhood ought to be granted the same moral status, if not higher, as persons with severe-to-profound intellectual disabilities. This twist on the bias toward the rational self aims to trump a supposedly arbitrary species bias and allows for the minting of new moral categories, such as *nonhuman persons* and the alarming *human nonpersons*. Admirably, Haslam's proposal seeks to elevate the dignity of all parties. In the process, this amicable association emphasizes the continuity of embodied limits shared between traditionally defined realms. The same qualities of responsiveness, dependency, and vulnerability we share with Chan, we share with other creatures as well.[488] For these

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[486] Licia Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability*, 158.

[487] To be sure, McMahan and Singer together represent only one strand of the animal welfare movement, and a most utilitarian strand at that. For extended expositions and critiques of Singer and McMahan, see Chapter 5 of Carlson, The Faces of Intellectual Disability; Eva Feder Kittay, "The Personal Is Philosophical is Political," 393-413; Eva Feder Kittay, "At the Margins of Moral Personhood" *Ethics* 116 (October 2005): 100-31. In the latter article, Kittay closely engages McMahan's book *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). As for Singer, a good work to begin with is *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*, updated ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

[488] Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability*, 158-61.

reasons, I sympathize with Haslam's aspirations of parlaying her anthropology into a more global ethics of care.

Yet I remain skeptical that her massive expansion of the concept of human being is required either to validate nonhuman life or to check the hubris of human exceptionalism. More importantly, I think the accomplishment of Haslam's primary objective—establishing the full humanity of persons with profound intellectual disabilities—depends on keeping the boundaries of human being narrow. I say this for two reasons; the first is methodological. Recall that moment Buber describes when the immediacy of the I-Thou inevitably gives way to the I-It. For persons who are capable of agency and symbolic expression, part of articulating an ethics of care is theorizing the specific, concrete actions one must be prepared to take to respond appropriately to a given Thou. To paraphrase Kant using Buber's terminology: efforts to treat the other as Thou will necessarily involve treating the other as It, though never merely as It.

I second Creamer's insistence that the limits model ought to function in conjunction with other models of disability. Recall that she says the ongoing viability of the medical model lies largely in its ability to inform Christian theology about the diversity of human embodiment.[489] Care-fully attending to persons with profound cognitive disabilities involves acknowledging that their embodied limits, including their genetic make-up and physiology, share family resemblances with persons with agency or language that they simply do not share with other mutual respondents encountered in the

[489] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 93.

world.[490] Sensitivity to the social model should protect against the naïve acceptance of biological classifications as anything more than fallible constructs. But even in their fallibility, these constructs continue to provide empirical insights into what Chan's embodied limits might actually be and how a relationship with Chan has to differ from a respectful treatment of, say, a potbellied-pig, a starfish, or a birch tree. This is where I think keeping human being narrow and distinctive is a practical necessity.

As an alternative, I think the portrait of "creature" I articulate in Chapter 3 accomplishes what Haslam is after in broadening human being. To encounter a nonhuman animal as "creature," rather than a mere It or thing, is to encounter a presence created and sustained by the same mysterious Source as oneself. Such a presence calls for a show of respect—the sort of respect that precludes humanity's colonial exploitation of other forms of life.

At this juncture, my methodological reason for concern transitions into my ethical reason. I think one ought to entertain the thought that, as an embodied being presents itself to me as a subjective whole, the immediacy of sheer presence produces in me a *feeling* that, although never fully captured by rational reflection, qualitatively distinguishes the nature of the response I must offer one Thou from the response I owe another.[491] This is the affective, embodied dimension of a human-to-human encounter—

[490] I am reminded here of the Stoic principle (introduced into Reformed theology by John Calvin) that "people are born from people." See Marjolein de Mooij, "People Are Born from People: Willem Van den Bergh on Mentally Disabled People" in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, eds. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 321-52, 330.

[491] My use of the word feeling owes much to the early German Romantics. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Fourth Speech: On the Social Element in Religion; or, on Church and Priesthood," in *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 2nd ed., trans and ed. Richard Crouter (New York, Cambridge

the sort of feeling moves in and through the members of my body even as it convicts my conscience. I suspect there is a place for this sense of feeling in Haslam's understanding of dialogue. Put another way, not every word communicated in dialogue evokes my responsibility in exactly the same way. It is my conviction that I experience this regularly with Jarrod. To be present with Jarrod produces a feeling of solidarity and of obligation that is stronger and richer than has any pet or plant for which I have cared. My certainty of his humanity is the surplus of my being present with him. It is a haunting experience insofar as I largely fail to speak it into a discernable form. Haslam's anthropology gets me closer to articulating this difference for an academic audience, but I need to push for more.

Eva Kittay expresses a similar dynamic between herself and Sesha. Paralleling Haslam's phenomenology, Kittay reports that Sesha is enormously responsive to her world and has formed deep personal relationships with her family, caregivers, and friendly relations.[492] In her essay, "The Personal is Philosophical is Political," Kittay reflects on a conference panel she participated in with McMahan and Singer. In answer to Singer's request for a capacity that grounds the humanity of the severely disabled, Kittay insists, "[T]here is so much to being human. There's the touch, there's the feel, there's the hug, there's the smile . . . there are so many ways of interacting. . . . It's a way that you are, a way that you are in the world, a way you are with another."[493] She admits to trying

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University Press, 1996), 72-94; Friedrich Schlegel, "Critical Fragments," in Lucinda and the Fragments, trans. and ed. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 143-159.

[492] Kittay, "The Personal Is Philosophical Is Political," 403.

[493] Ibid., 408. The quotation comes from the excerpt of a transcript Kittay provides. The first ellipses is hers, the second is my own.

to satisfy Singer's request after the conference, observing Sesha disinterestedly in the effort to identify what set her apart empirically from nonhuman animals. The experience made Kittay feel nauseous and cut off from her daughter.[494] To try to define the human within these parameters is already to concede the outcome to ableist, capacity-based approaches.

Meanwhile, I worry that even a well-intentioned collapse of the distinction between nonhuman animals and persons with profound cognitive disabilities would have a similar effect; that it might consolidate the lack of affinity the average person feels for Chan, Sesha, or Jarrod, rather than spurring people toward loving and mutual engagement with the profoundly disabled. I am convinced that the church's collective likeness of God the Creator fails to materialize as long as the well-being of certain members of the human family is an acceptable casualty in the struggle to promote the flourishing of nonhuman animals. To borrow a thought from Sallie McFague: "Until we rectify gross injustices among human beings, in other words, begin our ecological work at home, we will have little chance of success abroad, that is in relation to other species and the planet as a whole."[495] As long as the theology and doctrine of a church community remains incapable of affirming the full humanity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities, at least one gross injustice persists.

[494] Ibid., 400.

[495] McFague, "Human Beings, Embodiment, and Our Home the Earth," 161.

From Ecclesiology to Eschatology

The preceding discussion of the doctrine of the church reveals how an ontology of radical interdependence is not merely compatible with a relational approach to the *imago Dei*; the two concepts share an affinity that dates back to Christian antiquity. Just as the Creator lays claim to the entirety of the human creature and not just one venerated capacity, just as the process of the Incarnation embraces the entirety of Jesus's humanity, the life of the church is one in which the Spirit of God weaves together a diversity of persons into common mode of embodied existence such that their diversity is not obliterated. Both in its continuation of Christ's earthly ministry of service to God and in the material details of its practices of care and hospitality with one another, the church is the earthly space where authentic human being becomes most intentionally manifest. Each member of the body of Christ participates through spiritual gifts, distinctive contributions that one's embodied presence within the community provides. Like existence itself, these gifts are provisions of God's grace and compassion.

Persons with profound cognitive disabilities may not be categorically ruled out as members of this network of exchange because there is neither a hierarchy of gifts nor an idealized model of necessary abilities to account for the church's unity within diversity. Once the valorization of either rationality or purposive agency is set aside, careful attention to the lives of profoundly disabled persons uncovers the truth of their participation in relationships of interdependence. More than objects of charity or pity, they engage other embodied persons in mutual and responsive ways. The details of their atypical embodiments thus prove to be material for fresh theological reflection about the

distinctive character of human being rather than trivia unworthy of consideration. They are no less a child of God than any other member of the body of Christ, and they are no less human than any other man, woman, or child one might encounter. For all these reasons, the theological consideration of how ecclesial being discloses what it means to be human must account for how persons of all levels of physical and cognitive abilities are a constitutive part of the ongoing revelation of Christ and, by extension, the *imago Dei*.

It is the ongoing nature of this revelation and, more specifically, the future-oriented aspects of human being, that still require additional attention. One further consequence of the Incarnation is that, in joining itself to human flesh, divinity has joined its destiny to that of humankind with an intimacy not found in God's relationship with any other creature.[496] How should this confession impact the way that theological anthropology describes the final end of human being? How should one comprehend the place and participation of persons with profound cognitive disabilities within the body of Christ when the culmination of its manifestation remains unrealized and largely unforeseen? As I take up these questions in the final chapter, my treatment of the *imago Dei* transitions from the doctrinal context of ecclesiology to eschatology.

[496] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 53.

CHAPTER FIVE: LAST THINGS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

Any sustained examination of the concept of the *imago Dei* will inevitably address matters of eschatology. Yet, for a theological anthropology that aims to affirm the full humanity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities, this is doctrinal terrain where one must tread carefully. Because both traditional and popular forays into eschatology tend to perpetuate the sort of ableist assumptions I have named and challenged in previous chapters, my own theological construction of human being would be incomplete without providing an account of how to reconceptualize these matters in terms of an ontology of radical interdependence. The purpose of this chapter is to complete that task by bringing common features of eschatology into critical engagement with the relational understanding of the *imago Dei* that has emerged over the course of my discussions of creation *ex nihilo*, Christology, and ecclesiology. After discussing the insights that this engagement produces, I offer some concluding thoughts on my extended treatment of human being as the image of God and on the present study as a whole.

Christian theology has traditionally defined eschatology as the doctrine of "last things." Its signature questions and assertions typically focus on events that still belong to the future, such as death and resurrection, the end of the world, the last judgment, eternal

damnation, and eternal life.[497] When one considers the *imago Dei* within this context, the most pressing question of theological anthropology becomes, "What is the final end of human being?" There is an important sense in which this question has already been a matter of concern in the present study, where I have addressed this "final end" in terms of the "highest end" or "underlying purpose" of human existence. Most eschatological discussions, however, interpret the final end of human being and the world in terms of a temporal ultimacy. Often attending this interpretation is an expectation that biblical passages stating the heavens and the earth will pass away (e.g. Rev. 21:5; Matt. 24:35) will prove to be literally true. In other words, creation in its current form will cease, and God will bring into being some new order of existence. The anticipated event that will inaugurate this new order is the Parousia of the risen Christ, i.e. the Second Coming. His return to the earth will also precipitate the resurrection of all Christians who have died since his ascension (1 Thess. 4:16) and the ontological transformation of the believers who are still alive that they may enjoy everlasting life in heaven.

Without dismissing common beliefs on these matters altogether, I want to challenge the assumption that the proper content of Christian eschatology is strictly these kinds of last things. I contend that the central theological significance of eschatology lies in its ability to affirm and elaborate upon the themes of creaturely interdependence, materiality, and being-together I have exposited thus far. When a limits perspective orients the discussion of last things, the vital tether between Christian expectations for the future and the shape of Christian existence in the present becomes clearer. This

[497] Carl E. Braaten, "The Kingdom of God and Life Everlasting," in Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks, ed. Peter C. Hodges and Robert H. King (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 328-52, 328.

orientation also emphasizes the reasons to posit continuities (rather than disjuncture) between the world humankind currently occupies and the fully redeemed world the church faithfully anticipates. In what follows, I will highlight how this brand of eschatology also embraces an ontology of radical interdependence instead of seeking to overcome it.

Parousia Now – The Immediacy of Eschatology

In the latter half of the twentieth century, eschatology experienced a renaissance. Led by theologians like Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, theological approaches emphasizing the primary significance of Christian hope began to proliferate. A common theme of these "theologies of hope" is that eschatology is not the perfunctory conclusion to a systematic theology, as though its defining purpose is strictly that of epilogue. To the contrary, the content of one's eschatology regularly influences and determines one's thought and conduct in day-to-day life.[498] A proper theology will thus prioritize eschatological concerns throughout its constructive efforts, if not attend to them at the beginning. As Moltmann explains, "Christianity *is* eschatology, *is* hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present...[It] is the medium of Christian faith as such."[499]

Taking this statement seriously requires a willingness to suss out meaningful ways in which God may currently be realizing the final ends of the world within the

[498] Hans Schwarz, "Eschatology," in *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology*, rev. ed., eds. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 166-69, 166.

[499] Emphasis added. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 16.

structures of temporality and history rather than holding that realization in abeyance until a forthcoming punctiliar event when those structures will undergo violent disruption. This course of reflection also demands consideration of how theological claims that concern more mundane content nevertheless bear the connotations of ultimacy traditionally reserved for apocalyptic subjects. To borrow the words of Carl Braaten: "Every theological statement is at the same time an eschatological statement in the sense that eschatology deals with what is ultimate;" namely, the reality of God.[500] There is, then, an inherently eschatological dimension to the notion of the *imago Dei* that needs further explication.

My construction of creation *ex nihilo* provides a model of the God-world relationship that is instructive for how to articulate the ultimate end of human being within a limits perspective. In much the same way that Christian theologians fall into error when they identify the primary significance of creation *ex nihilo* with cosmogony, it would be a mistake to reduce the function of eschatology to prognostications about the eschaton. First of all, scripture is clear that this event is so impossible to predict that not even Jesus claims to know the day or hour of its occurrence (Matt. 24:36). Like the doctrine of creation, the deepest significance of eschatology alternatively concerns the abiding character of human life before God. The common theme here is the human creature's absolute dependence upon divine providence. Above all else, this primordial

[500] Braaten, "The Kingdom of God and Life Everlasting," 328. In making this claim, Braaten draws explicitly on Paul Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern." See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Reason and Revelation, Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 11-15.

dependency is the intimate link between the genesis of human being and it *telos*.[501] Just as the human creature has no option other than to live in the world God creates, he or she must finally concede that God alone possesses the power to ensure that the world reaches its rightful conclusion, not any individual or combined human agency.[502] Whatever material details may come to define humankind's collective future, this fact will never cease to be true. For precisely this reason, Kathryn Tanner asserts that the fundamental meaning of Christian hopes for the world has no definitive stake in how or even whether the world ends.[503]

When considering the systematic connections between eschatology and this understanding of creation, it also important to recall how the latter represents God's generation of the world as ongoing rather than a finished act. This assertion undercuts the presupposition of an ideal, prelapsarian world that, among its original perfections, hosted an ideal human creature. This tenet of the doctrine of creation preemptively disallows eschatology from depicting eternal life or heavenly existence as a return to an Edenic state. Otherwise, last things are yet another point at which best-case anthropologies, ontological hierarchies, and substantialist approaches to the *imago Dei* can easily reassert themselves. It is only natural for the theological imagination to ponder what the culmination of human being's process of dynamic unfolding might look like and attempt to depict a pinnacle state. However, if the assumption persists that God engages

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[501] Inman, "Profound Disability and the Theology of the Human Person," 51.

[502] John Swinton, "Conclusion: L'Arche as a Peace Movement," in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, by Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 101-105, 103.

[503] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 101.

humankind in order to repair it according to some presupposed original and ideal form, then the picture of heaven one imagines is bound to be a community purified of impaired bodies and minds.[504] Rather than a God who delights in difference, this deity would appear, at best, to tolerate the multiplicity of human embodiment until the Second Coming homogenizes the human family.

This is precisely the point at which eschatology tends to fund ableist concepts of human flourishing. Hope presupposes that something is currently lacking, and eschatology promises the fulfillment of what human existence most desperately lacks.[505] The problematic element of traditional eschatology is not confidence in divine promises. Far from it, this is a positive donation eschatology makes to the doctrine of creation. (Because God's benevolent power governs all life, finite existence is neither aimless nor meaningless.) Eschatologies go awry when the values systems and attitudes that define lack operate without critical evaluation. For example, when many Christians reflect upon the promise of Revelation 21:4—humankind will dwell with God and there will be no more crying, mourning, or pain—they do not tend to have in mind the impairment without disability Jesus exemplified in his own resurrected body. They instead define the absence of pain and other suffering according to the dictates of the medical model of disability and expect the literal fulfillment of prophetic passages that foretell the opening of blind eyes, the unstopping of deaf ears, and the singing of once speechless mouths (e.g. Isa. 35:3-6). If eternal life entails the correction of these lacks, then it is no surprise that most theological discussions of human flourishing do not even consider the lives of

[504] Betcher, “Monstrosities, Miracles, and Mission,” 82.

[505] Braaten, "The Kingdom of God and Life Everlasting," 329.

persons with profound cognitive disabilities. One cannot wholeheartedly say to a neighbor, "It is good that you are in this world," when there is no expectation of dwelling with such persons in the world to come.

The great challenge of reconstructing eschatology from a limits perspective thus proves to be the dilemma of how to honor the created goodness of earthly, finite humanity alongside confident hopes that the life found in Christ leads to an ultimate well-being that earthly terms strain and fail to describe. Like the resurrection and ascension of Jesus himself, Christian imagery of a general resurrection of the dead, or of eternal life as afterlife, carries thought beyond the material details of human being-together that the limits model strives to keep at the center of theological reflection. The concept of a reconstituted, spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:35-54), much like the concept of an immortal soul, by the very nature of its content refers to something that human understanding seems incapable of perceiving, let alone conceptualizing.[506] Nevertheless, certain biblical promises require that a theological anthropology give some explanation for how to incorporate that imagery into its larger account of human being. The Pauline epistles in particular make claims that "we will certainly be united with [Christ] in a resurrection like his" (Ro. 6:5), and, "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49). Ian McFarland takes this language to indicate that the way in which humankind bears the image of God is more a matter of its destiny than its origin.[507] The answer to the challenge at hand, therefore, would seem

[506] Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. by Gary Hatfield (1783; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87-88.

[507] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 53.

to be articulating the irreducibly eschatological dimension of the *imago Dei* while simultaneously insisting that eschatological depictions of humanity's ultimate flourishing remain congruous with a limits understanding of human embodiment and creaturely dependence.

One strategy for producing such an articulation involves the notion of *eschatological essentialism*. This approach to theological anthropology, much like the limits model, strives to occupy a middle position between the substantialist assertions of traditional essentialisms and the insistence that "human nature" is never anything more than the product of social construction. While acknowledging both the open-endedness of creation and expressivist values concerning the irreducible plurality of human being, eschatological essentialism insists that the person and work of Christ make it possible for theologians to assert that a peculiarly human form of existence is discernible in the here and now.[508] As the chief criterion for discerning how human being images divinity, the incarnational process of Jesus's life is the concrete revelation that human existence not only begins with God but is destined for God. The dual confession of Christ's resurrection and ascension indicates what he has accomplished through elevating human being into the life of God remains intact beyond the vicissitudes of history and the subjective conditions of human language and understanding. The defining content of human life remains hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3) in the sense that it is safely stored and that it remains a mystery to earthly minds. Where these confessions bolster Christian hope, even as they fail to satisfy epistemological demands, is that "even though we are not able to

[508] McFarland, *Difference and Identity*, 145.

define what it means to be human, our destiny is secure in the one who made and redeemed us."[509]

Yet there is epistemological value here as well. Even if the definitive unveiling of God and Christ truly will not occur until the future event of the eschaton, what it means to be created in the image of God has still been initially glimpsed in Jesus's unequivocally human life.[510] Therefore, while believers should expect that any complete revelation of human being will include surprises, they should also expect to observe a specific ontological relation between the content of this disclosure and the form of human life under its present, created conditions.[511] This continuity, combined with the security of human destiny, provides theological warrant for maintaining that constructive proposals about human being are not merely arbitrary and that certain proposals may more faithfully capture the truth of human existence than others. The label of eschatological essentialism names the theological anthropologies that overtly adopt these warrants.

These theological anthropologies owe much to the notion of "strategic essentialism" that feminist theorists first developed in their efforts to define woman's nature apart from the essentialist/constructivist dichotomy. Driven by the same pragmatic orientation that drives Sheila Davaney's theological anthropology (see Chapter 1), strategic essentialism makes normative claims about the common nature of women—or of all human persons—with full acknowledgement that there is an inherently functionalist

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[509] Ibid., 1.

[510] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 191.

[511] McFarland, *Difference and Identity*, 145.

character to these claims and that a single, unchanging model of human nature is impossible.[512] Here the measure of a theory's strength is its practical effect. Congruent with the orientation of constructive theology, the theorist who employs this highly qualified brand of essentialism is a politically engaged analyst whose primary objective is to provide a regulative ideal that is emancipatory and life-giving. This approach remains ever strategic in that the theorist never disregards the contextual character of the universals proposed and never presumes to occupy a "view from nowhere."[513] As Serene Jones explains, eschatological essentialism is likewise a "boldly pragmatic universalism," and its measure of truth is its ongoing transformative power.[514] What makes it distinctly theological is that it roots its claims in the "vision of an already/not-yet future—a vision of God's will for a redeemed humanity where all persons live in a right relation to God and one another."[515]

While I remain wary about retaining the term "essentialism," I nevertheless appreciate the way in which eschatological essentialism equips theological anthropology to make normative and liberative claims about human existence. I am also encouraged by how this constructive strategy, by the very nature of its operation, identifies a basic agreement between the human family's current state and its anticipated future. I do not advocate completely abandoning the idea of eternal life as afterlife because it honors the

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[512] Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 44-46. Alternate names for this approach are normative constructivism, pragmatic utopianism, pragmatic universalism, and utopic essentialism.

[513] Ibid., 45.

[514] Ibid., 54.

[515] Ibid.

Christian confessions that death cannot separate the believer from God revealed in Christ (Ro. 8:35) and that, whatever the true nature of that afterlife might be, its defining marker is a state of perfect peace.[516] A truly life-giving eschatology, however, will not be "so heavenly minded it is of no earthly good." It will not bleed dry "the already" on the altar of "the not-yet."

Owning up to the pragmatic character of eschatology will mean staying critically aware of how Christian hope not only emboldens theological anthropology but stands in a dialectical relationship with it. What I consider the overriding pragmatic objective in reconstructing eschatology should now be obvious: To portray the shape of human being, from its ultimate origins to its ultimate end, such that the full humanity of persons with profound cognitive disabilities and the radical interdependence of being-together are the preeminent values. By extension, the lacks that ought to define the core of Christian hope are the material and social ways that humankind currently fall short of being-together with one another and before God. In offering a proposal about how Christian theology might best meet this objective, I will not address every aspect of last things one could conceivably discuss, but instead make a case for how the eschatological dimension of the *imago Dei* adds further credence to an ontology of radical interdependence.

In making this transition, I begin with another important systematic connection between eschatology and the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*: Both portray the human creature as inextricably embedded in the larger cosmic order. The redemptive benefits of God's compassionate engagement of creation are not limited to the freedom of human

[516] Donald W. Musser, "Eternal Life," in *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology*, rev. ed., eds. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 170-71, 171.

creatures to be authentically themselves. As Paul describes it, creation itself will be set free from its present state of decay and "will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Ro. 8:21; cf. Rev. 21:5). Two key implications follow from this expectation. First, anthropocentrism has no place in a biblical image of afterlife. The entire order of absolutely dependent beings shall enjoy God's everlasting care. In this way, eschatology only strengthens the sense in which humanity is responsible for the flourishing of nonhuman creatures, rather than providing a justification for abdicating this responsibility on the auspices that human dominion amounts to human caprice.

Second, since the theme of human embeddedness persists within this vision of humanity in its glorified state, the theme of human embodiment must persist as well. Once again, humankind's organic, animal bodies provide strong empirical proof of its intrinsic solidarity with all other created life. The concept of the eschaton, therefore, is not a loophole through which either body/soul or disability/person dualisms may reestablish themselves. Accordingly, Christian thought should devote attention to conceiving how any human body will still bear resemblance to its earthly impairments—much like Christ's resurrected body retained the scars of his crucifixion—rather than perpetuating notions of disembodied souls or of bodies perfected according to the ableist norms.

Even when it is granted that solidarity with the larger cosmos defines origin and destiny alike, there is still the question of how humanity's creation in the image of God invests human with a unique role to play in the process of creation's renewal.[517] In taking

[517] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 53.

up that question, I want to embellish upon my Christological and ecclesiological conclusions concerning the *imago Dei* with a few observations about how to conceptualize eternal life within a limits perspective. The teachings and life-praxis of Jesus of Nazareth remain the definitive touchstone for any claims about the divine image. His earthly ministry begins with the declaration, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). As the rest of Jesus's story bears out, the declaration of this good news is more of a call to certain kind of existence than an affirming description of existing conditions; the reign of God remains unrealized as long as the injustices of human society instigate and prolong the brokenness of creation.[518] Yet the declaration itself is evidence that the reign of God has already begun to infiltrate the world's brokenness; namely, in the process of Incarnation and transformation that are the heart of Jesus's existence as the man for others. The coming of Christ brings judgment in that his way of being in the world challenges the world as it is. Yet this coming also presents humanity with good news in that God's judgment serves the salvific purpose of healing.[519] One can thus understand "the already" of the eschatological kingdom of God as an immediate and expanding reality, a material and relational order of being in the world that gains in content as the Incarnation elevates more and more of creaturely existence into the divine life. Jesus Christ is an

[518] Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology*, rev. ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 185.

[519] I find in this notion of judgment and repentance a theological corrective to the assumption that a flourishing human life is free of all forms of pain and sorrow. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

eschatological image of God in that his life, death, and resurrection simultaneously delineate and secure the shape of human destiny.

As discussed in the previous chapter, neither the process of the Incarnation nor the revelation of Christ remain confined to Jesus of Nazareth. The church is the body of Christ in its continuation of Jesus's earthly ministry and in the diversity within interdependence that constitutes the relationships between its members. As the head of this body, Christ's relationship to the church is not that of an otherworldly presence that communicates with a human community from a distant metaphysical height. The church regularly encounters Christ in its welcome and care for the neighbor. By being the intentional space in which the Spirit of Christ becomes manifest in the interpenetrating lives of human creatures, the church images God by *being* the body of Christ. In this sense, the Parousia is not just a one-time event set to occur at a time yet to be announced. The Parousia is now!

The Second Coming of Christ occurs repeatedly, whenever the church lives out the relational mode of being that is its ultimate end. For this reason, it is possible to live the resurrected life now, "even in the midst of death and dying that is characteristic of life under the conditions of creaturely limitations and finitude."[520] Similarly, the theologian ought not conceptualize eternal life as "the endless extension of our present existence into an endless future," but as the new quality of life found only in God that is even now seeping into creation.[521] Eternal life belongs to human creatures by virtue of their union

[520] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 179.

[521] Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 111.

with Christ, a union based in an absolute dependence that the church enjoys now just as fundamentally as it will in the future. Regardless of what the temporal event of an eschaton might change or reveal, the in-breaking of eternal life both empowers and requires those who are in Christ to promote the pattern of reality he inaugurates and to oppose competing patterns that imbue life with futility and hopelessness.[522] Regardless how fervently a believer awaits the full manifestation of divine glory, christomorphic life is necessary to remain faithful in the meantime (Titus 2:12-13).[523]

As I lay out my own concept of the final end of the human being, I adopt this detemporalized understanding of eternal life and emphasize the ways in which the reign of God is an immediate reality. Following the biblical insight that, among the most enduring values of the Christian religion, love is greater than even faith and hope (1 Cor. 13:13), I contend that what is hoped for should be defined according to the deficits in Christ-like love that the church continues to experience in its finitude and fallibility. As an image of the Creator, the ultimate end of human being is to be the fleshly expression of a love with an expansive, rather than provincial, scope. To cite Moltmann once more: "We love only as far as we can hope. Only if we include all things into our hope will we be ready to love all things and meet them with respect."[524] This statement, of course,

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[522] Ibid., 112. Tanner provides her own account of what it would look like for creation to continue to exist spatially within God following the natural, historical event of this solar system's cosmic death. Suchocki offers her own account of everlasting life as subjective existence within God using the categories of process-relational metaphysics. See *God-Christ-Church*, 199-216; Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988), 81-152.

[523] For a book-length discussion of this assertion, see Barry L. Callen, *Faithful in the Meantime: A Biblical View of Final Things and Present Responsibilities* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997).

[524] Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope," in *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology*, rev. ed., eds. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 249-51, 251.

applies to all persons as well, especially persons with profound cognitive disabilities. I want to explore what portrait of the eschatological community comes into view when Christian desires for destiny acquire their signature content from the earthly mission of Jesus and the engrafting activity of the Spirit of God. By identifying the shape of human life encapsulated in such images, theological anthropology names the concept of human flourishing that ought to govern Christian life under the conditions of history and limitness. To offer what might initially seem a counterintuitive claim, I hold that the central tenet of this concept is that *the final end of human being is to know God*.

The Knowledge of God as the Final End of Human Being

As I ruminate over the question of what sort of future the church ought to hope for, a passage from Marjorie Suchocki's book *God, Christ, Church* repeatedly comes to mind. Suchocki states that, in the reign of God, "humans shall know and obey God, rejoicing and living in this knowledge, with the result that all shall participate in the good life of the community."[525] To be part of this community is to be in covenant with God and neither disability nor illness nor age may be grounds for exclusion; "the reign of God is well-being toward all and for all."[526] This description resonates with my relational approach to the *imago Dei*, and yet it also prompts me to consider whether, by adopting it as my own, I would hand the reigns of the theological imagination back over to the themes of rationality and purposive agency. After all, even if one recognizes the validity of Molly Haslam's argument that persons with profound cognitive disabilities participate

[525] Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, 185.

[526] Ibid.

in relationships of mutuality and response, the nature of their impairments seems to rule out the possibility that they could *know* God, let alone rejoice in that knowledge. Similarly, how can these persons *obey* God when they lack the self-awareness and intentionality that obedience requires? This line of discussion raises another immensely important question: If there is reason to doubt whether persons with cognitive impairments know God, then it is also possible that they are capable of having faith? A theological anthropology would deny the necessity of faith for inclusion in the body of Christ would be peculiar to say the least.

The most effective course for addressing these concerns is to problematize the assumed connection between knowledge and rational abilities in a manner that parallels my argument that human relationality runs far deeper than the cooperation of wills. There is a sense in which Jarrod and I may each know God in the very same fashion, one that logically precedes, and so ought to inform, any propositional knowledge I might profess to have. In the Gospels, Jesus declares that it is only possible to know God by knowing him (Matt. 11:27) and that, if one has seen him, one has seen God as well (John 14:9). Yet recall that the believer does not see Jesus through the empirical observation of his individual person. The church encounters Jesus through compassionate relationships of being-together, especially caring and welcoming gestures toward the outcast and the stranger.[527] One thus never knows Jesus through individual and strictly mental apprehension, but only through the participatory encounters that comprise the body of Christ. By extension, knowledge of God does not come merely through theory; it is the

[527] Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, "Whose Story Am I?," 14-15.

embodied and embedded practices of the church that make the reality of God's presence known.[528] Corroborating this assertion, the same passage of scripture that identifies God's being with love also states that love is the means for knowing God (1 John 4:7-8). The systematic influence this has on the doctrine of God is significant: God is a living encounter, not a concept.[529]

There is, then, an important distinction between knowledge *of* God and knowledge *about* God.[530] The intellectual content of any theological proposition (including this one) stands at a remove from the immediacy of God's presence.[531] To call back to Buber's discussion of I-It relationships, God-talk is necessarily a form of thematization, making even the most reverent conceptualization of God an activity during which God is absent. The theologian is never justified in reducing knowledge of God to the dictates of logic or the proper functioning of the human nervous system.[532] Each member of the body of Christ comes to grasp God in different ways, including non-conceptual and preintentional ways, because of the variety of forms embodied love assumes.[533]

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[528] Demmons, "Tacit and Tactile Knowledge of God," 17.

[529] Swinton, "Known by God," 149.

[530] Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, "Whose Story Am I?," 14.

[531] I have in mind here something like David Hume's distinction between vivid, forceful *impressions* and the *ideas* that are a pale representation of those impressions. See *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748; New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 2004), 11-15.

[532] Demmons, "Tacit and Tactile Knowledge of God," 9.

[533] Swinton, "Known by God," 147.

Admittedly, there is a sense in which Christian piety is already receptive to this characterization of the knowledge of God. Nevertheless, the inertia of both Western history and Christian doctrine makes it exceptionally difficult to affirm without qualification. First and foremost, this position undermines the widespread identification of authentic faith with intellectual assent to particular doctrinal statements, as this type of knowledge of God now takes on a secondary and derivative significance. For the academic theologian, in particular, this relativizing of the value of the intellect can be outright frightening.[534] So much of a scholar's social capital, economic security, and sense of self-worth depends upon the continued esteem of superior intellectual abilities. It may even seem like "career suicide" to admit that a person incapable of theoretical reflection or language use is just as capable of knowing God as the most skilled systematician or rhetorician. When one is well-versed in technical vocabulary or numerous languages, it might be painful to concede that the embodied "language" of love is more important than all other forms of human communication.[535] But such a concession is a clear and public way in which Christian theology can honor the vulnerability and diversity that comes along with humanity's radical interdependence. Besides, the purpose of decentering rational capabilities is not to deny them any value for human being.

Another reason to emphasize the participatory rather than conceptual nature of knowing God is that the valorization of the intellect is arguably human pride's last line of defense against accepting that mystery and gift occupy the heart of human existence, not

[534] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 108.

[535] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 112.

certitude and personal merit. For example, according to hierarchical conceptualizations of the *imago Dei*, the intelligent person might consider themselves superior to the person with an intellectual disability because one's own knowledge better resembles the divine attribute of omniscience. However, when reevaluated from the vantage point of creation *ex nihilo*, "the smartest human being is far more like a person with an intellectual disability than he or she is like God."[536] The similarity between these two persons becomes more evident when one considers that all knowledge about God is tentative and partial, occupying that strange place between revelation and hiddenness.[537]

A helpful precedent for how to conceive of the proper role intellect should play in the knowledge of God comes from the medieval theologians, especially the contemplative tradition. In this tradition, there is a concerted effort to use the intellect to move beyond the confines of an intellectual relation to God and open up the whole of one's self for the purposes of learning to love God for God's sake alone.[538] As part of a critical reading of works by Bonaventure and Meister Eckhart, Erinn Staley notes how these theologians regard the final success of one's contemplative efforts as entirely a matter of grace and, given the sense in which the infinite God remains unknowable, an achievement one cannot hope to quantify.[539]

Josef Pieper explains how even the medieval scholastics assumed a notion of intellect in which the possession of knowledge is never thoroughly the product of human

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[536] Erinn Staley, "Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing: Contemporary Insights from Medieval Sources," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 3 (July 2012), 385-401, 398.

[537] Swinton, "Known By God," 145.

[538] Ibid.

[539] Staley, "Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing," 393-4.

effort. This epistemology distinguishes between intellect as *ratio* and *intellectus*. As *ratio*, intellect is the labor that the human mind must put in to acquire knowledge; that is, "the power of discursive thought, of search and re-searching, abstracting, refining, and concluding."[540] As *intellectus,* it is the ability of simply beholding the way in which the truth presents itself, "as a landscape presents itself to the eye."[541] This aspect of intellect pertains to what surpasses human limits and gives human thought, not actively acquiring but receiving access to (what the scholars of this period regarded to be) to the order of angels. All knowing involved both senses of intellect. But insofar as the vision of *intellectus* accompanies and penetrates *ratio*, there is something essential in human knowledge that is not work.[542] Pieper notes the decisive way in which the modern turn to the subject led Western thought to lose this instructive insight. If, as Kant in particular argued, knowledge is exclusively work, then what the laboring subject knows is "only the fruits of his own, subjective activity and nothing else."[543] In short, when an element of grace is eliminated from the knowledge process, human knowledge is indeed strictly confined to propositions and the boundaries of natural reason alone. Insofar as Christian theology crafts the definition of faith according to these parameters, there will remain (if only implicitly) an understanding that one's own efforts have taken possession of the

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[540] Josef Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998, 11.

[541] Ibid.

[542] Ibid., 13.

[543] Ibid., 14. Pieper further accuses Kant of promoting the principle that the *effort* one puts into knowing determines the *truth* of what is known. He sees the undeniable loss of *intellectus* in Kant's assertion that the power of the understanding does not look upon anything. For Kant's own discussion of the logical use of the understanding, see *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (1787; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 204-18.

knowledge of God, and the perception of individual capability in this area may become the basis for bringing reason-centered hierarchy back into theological anthropology.

The alternative view that the element of gift always pervades the knowledge of God is more consistent with a relational conception of the *imago Dei*, where the understanding of human being in all its aspects begins with the Creator who lays claim to the entire creature. Under these terms, even persons with the use of intellect and reason cannot know anything about God apart from what the divine discloses to them. Retaining any merit-based notion of faith runs contrary to doctrines of justification and sanctification rooted in the scandal of the cross. What is so foolish about the divine wisdom disclosed in the crucifixion is that the means and rationale according to which God redeems any person is always beyond human comprehension. Yet each member of the body of Christ is saved in spite of persistent noetic and cognitive limitations.[544] Affirming that a person with profound cognitive disabilities genuinely knows God, therefore, is not without warrant nor should the belief that this is so produce feelings of anxiety or discomfort in believers who currently possess able minds.[545] It is a humble affirmation that recognizes, in Christ, embodied love takes priority over the certainty of knowledge. As Thomas Reynolds notes, the church's shared commitment to honor its

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[544] Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 102.

[545] Staley, "Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing," 393-94. Demmons uses the work of Michael Polanyi to make the case that persons with profound cognitive disability possess tacit knowledge even if they are incapable of grasping propositional truth statements. See "Tacit and Tactile Knowledge of God." David Coulter proposes the use of multiple intelligences theory to explore how persons with intellectual disabilities who appear to struggle with linguistic, logico-mathematical, and intrapersonal (theory of mind) intelligence may nonetheless possess musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, or interpersonal intelligence. See "Recognition of Spirituality in Health Care: Personal and Universal Implications," in *Spirituality and Intellectual Disability: International Perspectives on the Effect of Culture and Religion on Healing Body, Mind, and Soul*, eds. William C. Gaventa and David L. Coulter (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001), 1-12, 3.

diversity and mind differences will often require lingering in moments of theological apotheosis, unsure of what to say when the disruption of normalcy leads to the breakdown of conventional language and thought.[546]

One should also note how the preceding discussion leads to an important ecclesiological insight: Because the church is the earthly community that images the invisible God, and the embodied relationships of its members are the means by which Christ brings eternal life into the world, the Spirit's activity of grafting them together is also the means by which humanity comes to enjoy a deeper fellowship with God. If someone can assent to the content of the concept of God, then a formal affirmation of God's love, compassion, and goodness is possible. But one only comes to the true knowledge of God's attributes by encountering them in their living expressions and in the thick of earthly existence.[547] As the members of the body of Christ find their dwelling in one another, the process of the Incarnation culminates in God finding an earthly dwelling place in human being. Philip Thomas goes as far as to say that the regeneration of believers into the *imago Dei* is simultaneously the communication of God's attributes to human creatures.[548] Consistent with my comments about regeneration in the previous chapter, I do not understand this communication to be a metaphysical deification of a finite being. Even still, I think that a recovery of the notion of God's communicable

[546] Reynolds, "Past and Present with Disability in the Christian Tradition," 293.

[547] Demmons, "Tacit and Tactile Knowledge of God," 16.

[548] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 141-42.

attributes does bring increased intelligibility to the confession that one encounters God through the material particularities of interdependent human relationships.

Brian Brock interprets Paul's description of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 in a way that I find to be congruent with the point I am making now. When providing an analogy for how spiritual gifts are given and received within the earthly body of Christ, Brock suggests that the members of this body behave like nerve cells:

> A nerve cell is capable of receiving and passing on the electric pulse that constitutes the firing of the nerve, but this electrical signal is different from the substance of the nerve cell itself. Each cell does not originate a special signal that is all its own (as if each cell sent out a pulse that could be identified at any time further down the line, like we do from the light spectrum emitted by stars) but receives and hands on an entity different in kind from itself (electricity, not organic material).[549]

Like a nerve cell, the human person who belongs to the body of Christ contributes the spiritual gifts associated with his or her embodied presence, yet, in the act of giving, is also one of the material instruments through which God becomes present and knowable. In Chapter 4, I noted that even an exhaustive empirical study of a member's capacities will not account for the nature of those gifts. Something irreducible to, but operating in conjunction with, the embodied form and functionings of human persons becomes manifest in their being-together. Naming this "something" as the presence of God does not dispel the mystery of how the exchange of spiritual gifts effects the engrafting of all the body's members, What this naming does do, however, is show how the eschatological dimension of a relational *imago Dei* matches up with the ecclesiological dimension and amplifies its. In short, human being's final end of knowing God is only possible because

[549] Brock, "Theologizing Inclusion," 259-60.

the Spirit of Christ transforms a community of interdependent human creatures into the space where God's dwells.

Knowing God in the most fundamental sense, therefore, is to be lured into the between and thereby experience the love, compassion, and goodness which God is. The relevance of this discussion of last things for a project on human flourishing amounts to this: *Authentic human being is knowing God*. This insight allows for the reappropriation of Hans Reinders's description of human being as ecstatic, while still maintaining that embodied differences have positive theological significance. To grow in the knowledge of God is to become more thoroughly engrafted into the body of Christ which, in turn, is to be drawn deeper into God's own life. Informed by this vision of ecstatic existence, I see a more nuanced vision of the church's economy of grace that is specific to the places persons with profound cognitive disabilities occupy in the body of Christ, which is an economy infused with eschatological hope for eternal life.

Profound Cognitive Disability in the Life of the Church

My extended discussion of a relational approach to the *imago Dei* has come full circle, returning to the confession that the human reflection of divine life begins with God’s generative movement toward the human creature through the confession that the defining desire of human existence should be to know the God who unites human persons together in order to dwell in them. The doctrine of creation meets the doctrine of last things through the mediation of Christ and church. Over the course of this discussion, numerous reasons arose for conceptualizing creation in the image of God in terms of an

ontology of radical interdependence. Because God draws near to human persons and human persons encounter God through the fleshly, finite parameters of their embodied limits, bodies are of ultimate importance to theological reflection. Because careful attention to the material details of living bodies brings intrinsic vulnerability, dependence, and the need for care to the fore, disability is a topic of ultimate importance as well. And because accepting these qualities as necessary contours of human existence leads to an understanding of relationality that is more primordial than the interconnectedness purposive agency can establish, profound cognitive disability is a topic of ultimate significance for theological anthropology.

Perhaps more than any other person, the loving engagement of a person with profound cognitive disabilities exposes the relative worth of all the particular capacities standard convention extols. For in this engagement, one finds the mutuality, responsiveness, and welcome sought in any human relationship. The highest good possible in God's creation is the gracious gift of another's presence in conjunction with that person's reception of the gift of oneself. The theological insight regarding this rich manifestation of being-together is that such a mutual encounter is possible only because of God's gracious activity in Christ. Both in its mystery and its gratuity, Christian friendship is the very means by which God brings human creatures deeper into the divine life. This theological truth ought to be the foremost principle guiding Christian valuations of all human abilities and the structures of communal organization.

To clarify the sort of valuation I have in mind, I draw on the description of the God-world relationship Augustine articulates in Book I of *On Christian Doctrine*.[550] There he asserts that reality, as the human mind understands it, is made up of things to be enjoyed and things to be used. To enjoy something is to cling to it for its own sake, and through this clinging one is made blessed. To use something is to employ it towards obtaining that which one loves, provided the latter is worthy of love. It is the failure of the creature that things which should only be used are enjoyed in themselves—a situation which leaves the creature "shackled by an inferior love."[551]

For Augustine, God as "the single Trinity" is the thing most deserving to be enjoyed.[552] God is that thing to be placed above all other things and to be regarded as that "which there is nothing better or more sublime."[553] Augustine encourages the estimation of God as life itself, and so the creature should only love things that "pertain to God" and, by enjoying God, live in right relationship to the source of one's being.[554] In short, love of God is placed first and all other loves must flow into it.[555]

This proper arrangement of relationships became distorted after the historical event of the Fall, when the introduction of sin into the world led to the corruption of the creature's nature and the direction of its desires. Amidst this misdirection, creatures use

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[550] Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine*. Translated by D.W. Robertson, Jr. New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1958.

[551] Ibid., 9.

[552] Ibid., 10.

[553] Ibid., 11.

[554] Ibid., 12, 19.

[555] Ibid., 23.

the eternal and the spiritual as means to enjoy temporal and corporeal things and thus wander away from God. If they loved created things properly, they would regard such things strictly as vehicles for bringing them into proper relationship with God, which is the enjoyment of God.

I think there is much promise in integrating Augustine's distinction between enjoyment and use into my own model of the God-world relationship, provided one recasts this distinction, not in terms of Augustine's own Neoplantonic cosmology, but in terms of the material, interdependent creation I have described. If Christ becomes present to the church in the encounter with the neighbor and the stranger, and knowledge of God comes primarily through concrete expressions of love, then the main criterion for placing a value on an earthly good is whether or not the use of that good leads to the enjoyment of embodied relationships of mutuality, welcome, and respect. In this economy, the human capabilities of purposive agency, rationality, and even relationality have a market worth, as opposed to an unconditional value.[556] A proper love of created things is to appreciate them for the ways in which they facilitate the enjoyment of God through the highest love found only in being-together. In other words, purposive agency and rationality are markers of human being only to the extent that they help draw one's life deeper into the matrix of radical interdependence.[557]

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[556] I have in mind here Kant's understanding of price within his discussion of the Kingdom of Ends. Although Kant would completely disagree with the claims I make here about the conditional worth of a rational nature, which is the foundation of his own concept of dignity. See *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 102.

[557] These comments also suggest a way in which limits define the doctrine of God. The God human creatures know is limited to what human being has thus far exemplified about love within the web of ecclesial existence. This makes it literally possible to grow in the knowledge of God as human beings become more thoroughly grafted together in the body of Christ.

This course of theological construction similarly requires a reconceptualization of divine transcendence. God transcends the cosmos in the sense that God is never reducible to the sum total of material entities that currently, previously, or will eventually make up the content of creation. Even still, Christian theology need not maintain that there is a chasm between God and the world.[558] As Reynolds explains, "God's transcendence is paradoxically not far off but near, immanent in the world and engaged dynamically with all things."[559] The glory of God, and what makes God supremely deserving of enjoyment and worship, is that God's care for dependent creatures is universal and unflagging and, through that care, creation consists of an abundance of intrinsically good embodiments and resources for the promotion of flourishing. God's self-communication is thus most primordially "an effulgent welcome that overflows."[560] This insight makes it necessary to assert once again that participation in God does not entail the elevation of human being into some abstractly conceived sphere of divinity, as if human being could outstrip the immanent conditions of creation's materiality.[561] Enjoyment of creation leads human being to be the *imago Dei* with increasing fullness and so also reveal God's glory with increasing luminescence.[562] In the final analysis, there is no enduring distinction between

[558] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 147.

[559] Ibid., 156-57.

[560] Ibid., 159.

[561] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 39.

[562] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 141-42.

when those in Christ minister to one another in love and when they worship or commune with God. "Attending to God's creatures is in fact a mode of attending to God."[563]

Proper knowledge and enjoyment of God remains impossible as long as Christian theology and Christian communities continue to shirk the vocational responsibility of attending to all human creatures and befriending each member of the body of Christ. The great mystery of being-together is the precise means by which all the diverse and dynamic embodiments of human being actually come together in ecclesial and eschatological solidarity. Where being-together with persons with profound cognitive disabilities is concerned, the Christian imagination is currently short on strategies for how church practices ought to change to benefit persons with any sort of cognitive disability because it very rarely considers their lives.[564] Stanley Hauerwas hits upon the root of the church's failure of these persons when he writes, "What has gone wrong is not that we lack good will, but that we simply do not know how to care because we need the challenge of real people who to teach us how to care."[565]

For this reason, the most important resource for reconstructing theological anthropology in light of profound cognitive disability (for theologians and laity alike) is to experience what it is like to receive the presence of a person with such disabilities. As Creamer notes, "Genuine interaction is our best chance of truly connecting with each

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[563] Swinton, "Using Our Bodies Faithfully," 235.

[564] McNair, "The Indispensable Nature of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities to the Church," 328-29. McNair goes on to say that, "in a way analogous to universal design, the structural changes in the church that need to occur in order to include people with disability would benefit all."

[565] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Church and the Mentally Handicapped: A Continuing Challenge to the Imagination," in *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994). 177-86, 179.

other in a world of difference and partialities."[566] If formal doctrine and academic theologies amount to knowledge *about* God, then they can only be a proper reflection of the true knowledge of God when those who draft them are informed by a deep connection to profoundly disabled lives.[567] This statement presents a challenge to myself as well. Beyond my familial ties to Jarrod, I must concur with Reinders that, "I find it much easier to write about people with intellectual disabilities than to spend time with them."[568] Nevertheless, as proves to be the case with any stigma or discomfort concerning a marginalized group, it is through sharing at least part of one's life with a supposed stranger that truths once easily ignored become impossible to deny and that possibilities for edifying change become real.[569] The significance of a profoundly disabled life discloses itself only through that sharing, and what that significance is will often come as a surprise.[570]

Whatever surprises may come, one testimony that the friends and family of these persons consistently provide is that life with them invariably requires individuals who lack cognitive impairments to reorient their patterns of thought and action just to hold space together successfully. In its privileging of cognitive function, Western society also indoctrinates people to esteem efficient use of time and energy, the ability to control

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[566] Creamer, "Toward a Theology That Includes the Human Experience of Disability," 66-7.

[567] John Swinton, "The Importance of Being a Creature: Stanley Hauerwas on Disability," in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, eds. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 512-45, 524.

[568] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 334.

[569] Reinders, "Human Vulnerability," 15.

[570] Hauerwas, "The Politics of Gentleness," 89.

distracting impulses, thrift, economic success, self-reliance, and mastery of language.[571] Yet persons with profound cognitive disabilities, precisely because these modes of self-promotion and self-discipline are unavailable to them, appear to enjoy more regularly and more naturally the peace that comes from being free to be oneself. The peace that attends the immediacy of this simply being present is the peace that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7). Reinders comments that the embodied way of life persons with profound cognitive disabilities demonstrate is foremost a lesson about what it is to live in God's time, rather than scarce and partitioned time, and what it means to exhibit trust when personal dependency places control over one's own life in the hands of another.[572] A community with the patience to dwell with these persons comes to accept that "time is not a zero-sum game," and time is not lost like a wasted commodity if a meal or a church service runs long.[573] This continuation of Jesus's own story of being for others functions as a counter-narrative for humankind in general.[574]

Persons with purposive agency demonstrate the humanizing use of that capacity whenever they do their part to bring attention to how the life of God reveals itself through disability.[575] This includes promoting the flourishing of the profoundly disabled in the performance of dependency work. Through caring gestures and attitudes, purposive

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[571] Post, "Drawing Closer," 28.

[572] Reinders, "Watch the Lilies of the Field," 167.

[573] Stanley Hauerwas, "Finding God in Strange Places: Why L'Arche Needs the Church," in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, by Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 43-58, 47.

[574] Greig, "Shalom Made Strange," 37.

[575] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 334.

agents assist these neighbors in the fashion of a midwife, facilitating their personal manifestations of human being and experiencing with them the ecstasy that comes with companionship.[576] Christian thought also needs to rebuke the tendency to portray these engagements as a unilateral movement of self-sacrifice by the able-minded party. While the caregiver certainly does have a special responsibility to employ thought and practice toward a dependent's well-being, the enhancement of human life is always necessarily mutual.

The performance of dependency work is, of course, easier said than done. Jean Vanier admits that, even after forty-plus years living in intentional community with persons with cognitive disabilities, he does not understand all there is to know about these persons or how to communicate with each of them.[577] There is a both precarious and extemporaneous character to these relationships that requires patience to work in conjunction with vigilance and flexibility. There is no regular formula for being-together here. Vanier further remarks:

> Some people with disabilities call for the tenderness in me; others call forth anguish, fear, and anger. In a world of constant, and often quite intense, relationships, you quickly sense your inner limits, fears, and blockages...In times of difficulty, it was hard to be open, welcoming, and patient. I have often come head-to-head with my own handicaps, limits, and inner poverty. I did not always find it easy, especially when my failure was evident to others...I am gradually learning to accept my own shadow areas and to work with them in order to diminish their power over me.[578]

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[576] Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 129-30. Vanier notes that the word "companion" comes from the Latin for "with bread" (*cum pane).* Companionship is thus more immediately evident in breaking bread together than in the conscious correlation of agential activities.

[577] Vanier, "The Fragility of L'Arche and the Friendship of God," 32.

[578] Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 100-01.

With his talk of shadow areas, Vanier brings attention back to the kinds of anxiety that the encounter with profound cognitive disability can evoke. When face-to-face with a child of God whose mere presence exposes the cracks and fissures in the "normal" order of things, the precariousness of one's own material existence within that idolatrous economy is also implicated. The temptation in response to that perceived threat is to reduce the problematic Thou to an It, to exploit the harmful potential of relationality by placing this atypically vulnerable other on the receiving end of my self-serving objective functionings.[579] Hiding personal vulnerability behind protective walls may preserve my sense of autonomy and security for a time, but it does so by disengaging all parties from "the very processes that have the power to bring wholeness."[580] When this abuse defines the society in which a person with profound cognitive disabilities lives (as it did during the prevalence of institutionalization in the United States), he or she may truly never have the opportunity for mutually enriching relationships.[581] This amounts to nothing less than dehumanization.

The acceptance of one's own vulnerabilities alongside the profound dependency of another, however, leads to a further epiphany. As the engrafting work of the Spirit draws both of them deeper and deeper into their common interdependence, persons with purposive agency do not merely care *for* persons with profound cognitive disabilities,

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[579] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 112. Haslam gives the example of an adult who regards a child strictly as an object for the fulfillment of his or her individual needs.

[580] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 13.

[581] For a history of the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities in the United States of America, see *The Story of Intellectual Disability: An Evolution of Meaning, Understanding, and Public Perceptions*, ed. Michael L. Wehmeyer (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2013).

they care *with* them.[582] When the church hears the vocational call to assist the persons with disabilities solely as a commission to do good to them, they reduce the neighbor to an object, albeit an object of charity.[583] A similar danger is (what David Pailin) calls the contributory view of disability. On this view, the life of a profoundly impaired individual has worth because their dependency provides "an opportunity for the personal development of those who care for them."[584] In other words, they have instrumental value because their presence challenges a "normal" person to become more ethical. To the contrary, as responsive participants in the church's communal embodiment of the *imago Dei*, the community must recognize and receive the gifts that persons with profound cognitive disabilities actively provide for the edification of the body of Christ.[585] For the church, this will mean coming to see the presence of the Spirit of Christ in bodies and behaviors that standard convention would label as disruptive, inconvenient, or insignificant.

Having spent considerable time in sanctuaries with Jarrod when we were children, I am intimately familiar with the sorts of distracting behaviors that may come from the body of a person with his impairments. When active, Jarrod is liable to unleash any number of unconventional noises, including grunts, hums, chirps of laughter, and those unvoiced linguolabial trills more commonly known as "blowing raspberries." In

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[582] Swinton, "Known by God," 151.

[583] Hans S. Reinders, "Being with the Disabled: Jean Vanier's Theological Realism," in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, eds. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 467-511, 480.

[584] David L. Pailin, *A Gentle Touch: From a Theology of Handicap to a Theology of Human Being* (London: SPCK, 1992), 80-81.

[585] Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image," 147.

conjunction with his cerebral palsy, his excitement also takes the form of grinding teeth, spastic movements in his arms and hands, and the unpredictable extension of his knees or hips. He is also prone to chew on his shirt, a bib, or (most often) his own fingers. Adding to the potential stigma of how these behaviors may be received, the trills and the chewing always involve drool or expectoration. These sounds and gestures still define him today but, now a man in his mid-thirties, they are rarely as exuberant as they were when he was a boy.

It is not difficult to imagine how the average congregant would find Jarrod's presence in a worship service less than ideal, if not entirely unacceptable. But this is not the only interpretation available even though it is likely the most common one. A concept of human being that embraces the entire creature requires a corresponding understanding of spirituality. What is to prevent the church from perceiving the unconventional performances of Jarrod's body as acts of worship or praise, evidence that the Spirit of Christ is active in the midst of God's people? David Coulter argues that spirituality is present even where consciousness is limited or absent.[586] It is a property of the whole person, and not a property of the brain as consciousness is.[587] While reflecting on the case of Mary, a member of a Quaker community mentioned in Chapter 4, Swinton challenges Christians to consider her physical interactions with others "as holy places where God is revealed."[588] Not only does being-together with Mary allow her to know God, but

[586] Coulter, "Recognition of Spirituality in Health Care," 1.

[587] Ibid., 2.

[588] Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, "Whose Story Am I?," 16.

"accepting Mary's smiles, her touch, her sensitivity, her love is a way of receiving God's love."[589] Truly getting to the heart of the matter, Staley asks:

> What if, instead of hearing the speech of a person with an intellectual disability in church as disrupting a time of silent prayer or competing with the sermon, we could take seriously the possibility that these are moments of grace bestowed on the congregation? Could hearing sounds when we expect silence, two voices when we expect one, or syllables when we expect sentences tell us something about God, about human beings, about the life of the church?[590]

As I contemplate these questions myself, a bittersweet memory comes to mind. If one were to watch the video recording of our father's funeral, the excited vocalizations of an eleven-year-old Jarrod are audible throughout the service. Hauerwas posits that, as a regular source of such unexpected occurrences, persons with cognitive disabilities are a reminder that the God the church worships is not easily domesticated.[591] In this light, I think there is sufficient cause to view Jarrod's presence at that funeral as material evidence that, even amidst the solemnity and mourning that come in the wake of death, the joy and energy of eternal life remain active and available. The foolishness of God may even take the form of blowing raspberries during a eulogy. This lesson can certainly travel well beyond the walls of the sanctuary to serve as a hermeneutical key for catching unexpected glimpses of God in any number of earthly contexts.

For these reasons, the content of Christian hope ought to include the expectation that persons with profound cognitive disabilities will be present in whatever heaven

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[589] Ibid.

[590] Staley, "Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing," 399. Clearly, Staley is describing persons with cognitive disabilities who are still capable of speech rather than persons with more profound impairments. Nevertheless, I am convinced her point applies to all examples of these perceived disruptions.

[591] Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front*, 185.

providence might have in store for those who know God. Like the risen Christ himself, they will experience impairment without disability, and no transformation according to ableist ideals of health and beauty will be required. What such a person's precise place should currently be among the many members of Christ's body still needs to be worked out, but this is true of any person, irrespective of mental or physical ability.[592] By adopting a concept of human being that is dynamic, relational, and open-ended, Christian theology ensures that mystery and uncertainty will continue to permeate even the most intelligible and determinate conception of the *imago Dei*. In practice, therefore, this doctrine may prove to be "as much a source of consternation as of celebration."[593] Bringing profound cognitive disability to the center of theological reflection does not exacerbate this consternation; it amplifies the cause for celebration. A relational conceptualization of the *imago Dei* informed by a limits perspective discloses that the final end of human being may be realized in the absence of an exhaustive and unassailable account of what it means to be human before God.

The measure of a theological anthropology is how well it employs the conditional goods of reason and imagination to capture the embodied and embedded realities of being-together in Christ. Borrowing again from Vanier, I suggest that "maybe what our world needs more than anything is communities where we celebrate life together and become a sign of hope for our world."[594] With regard to persons with profound cognitive

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[592] McFarland, *The Divine Image*, 166.

[593] Ibid., 167.

[594] Jean Vanier, "The Vision of Jesus: Living Peaceably in a Wounded World," in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, by Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 59-76, 75.

disabilities, Christian theology's greatest service to humankind is to draw attention to these signs and provide the theoretical justification for placing them at the center of both thought and practice. In doing this, it declares a truth of love that the world rarely, if ever, receives. Accordingly, I conclude with concise definitions of human being and human flourishing that I intend to serve precisely that purpose.

Conclusion

Human being is a mode of relational existence in which the interdependent members of a community recognize the dignity of others and themselves through embodied practices of care and welcome. *Human flourishing*, then, is a state of well-being in which one belongs to a radically interdependent community that is increasingly adept at honoring the vulnerabilities and varying personal abilities of all of its members. These concepts constitute an inherently theological anthropology insofar as any affirmation of the underlying unity of the human family and, even more importantly, the basic goodness of life's dynamic advance are confessions of faith in the face of the empirical world's ambivalence toward humankind.[595] Consistent with its biblical definition (Hebrews 11:1), Christian faith involves a commitment to the eschatological vision that living a life for others according to the example of the incarnate Christ will indeed lead to flourishing instead of the destructive exploitation of a community's collective vulnerability.

The church is ever and always an inbreaking of an eternal life faith longs to see fully realized because, to the degree it is authentically the body of Christ, it images God

[595] Reynolds states, "'God is not another term for false optimism and a sense of controlled security, but rather a way of naming the element of trustworthiness in the fragility of things, a way of persistently living out the affirmation that 'it is good.'" See *Vulnerable Communion*, 170.

and makes the encounter with God more widely available. As the community that becomes itself through practicing an economy of grace, its being-together is the material sign of what human being in all its manifestations ought to be. Christ's church is the concrete proof that human flourishing is a genuine, earthly possibility and not merely a regulative ideal. A community that lives according to these anthropological assumptions is the one whose members can turn to Jarrod, Mary, Chan, and Sesha—or to any person with profound cognitive disabilities—and say:

"It is good that you exist. It is good that you are in this world. Not only are you 'one of us.' It is only together we are."

Coda

As an epilogue to this study, I wish to revisit the anecdote I shared in Chapter 2 about my mother Debra. Her refrain ("Are we all just stupid and worthless?") deserves a direct response. If I could draw upon the conclusion made above and place words in the mouth of the younger self that sat before her in her moments of agitation, I would have him say this:

> No, mother, we are not stupid; not if the knowledge that matters most is the knowledge of God that comes through being present with one another in our uncertainty and vulnerability.
>
> No, mother, we are not worthless; not when our dignity comes from the God whose love is boundless and unceasing.
>
> We might sometimes appear stupid, and we might sometimes seem worthless because of the fragility and misunderstanding that colors our lives in the world. But, as long we love one another within the limits of our flourishing, we will be all we need to be.

Whether her mind grasped the intellectual content of these words would have been far less important than whether she experienced the love that moved her child to speak them.

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