

# Changing the Culture of Disability

Response Paper – Module III: Overview of Disability

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Western Civilization's treatment of people and families affected by disabilities over the last two centuries has been a history saturated by horrific treatment and abuses until the late part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The comments of Edouard Seguin given in 1851 at the first school for the "education of idiots" reveal a glimmer of hope that the attitudes of society might soften toward the standard harsh treatment of the disabled "idiots" of the day. According to excerpt brought to our attention by Dr. Jeff McNair's lectures at the Christian institute on Disability, Seguin remarked:

*"God has scattered among us...the idiot, the blind, the deaf-mute, in order to bind the rich to the needy, the talented to the incapable, all men to each other, by a tie of indissoluble solidarity. The old bonds are dissolving; man is already unwilling to continue to contribute money or palaces for the support of the indolent nobility, but he is every day more ready to build palaces and give annuities for the indigent or infirm, the chosen friends of our Lord Jesus. See that cornerstone-the token of a new alliance between humanity and a class hitherto neglected-that, ladies and gentlemen, your pride, it is the greatest joy of my life: for I, too, have labored for the poor idiot."*

Sadly, that attitude proved to be a minority opinion. Remember that much of the nation did not consider "Negros" to be fully human at the time. But our society is still characterized by views that diminish and devalue the lives of people affected by disabilities. The history of the horrible atrocities imposed on people in our nation through official policies influenced by the Eugenics movement in the early part of the twentieth century demonstrates how devaluing people for their race or because they are affected by disabilities endangers their very existence. Many people with disabilities were incarcerated, abused, mutilated, used for cruel experiments and even exterminated because they were seen as pre-, post-, or sub-human. Even today, people and families affected by disabilities are frequently treated like the lepers of Jesus' day, considered deviate and social outcasts. Churches and religious communities tend to be either indifferent to this evil or participants in it. I am surprised to learn that only one in ten churches have any sort of ministry to people and families affected by disabilities and many of those churches were not intentional in reaching out to disabled people. Even the best of these ministries seem to ostracize this people-group seeing their ministries to them as options and segregating them from the body-life of the church. I was surprised that the church Joni and Friends interns visited as an example of good disability ministries, did not allow people who might make strange noises or exhibit distractive behaviors worship with more normal types in their large sanctuary. They sequestered adults with cognitive deficits in a remote area of the building complex used to store equipment and soiled table linen bins from a dining area across the hallway. Placement spoke volumes to me about the way the rest of the church views (or ignores) this ministry. Despite these obviously flawed attitudes, I still rejoice that this church is sharing the Gospel to with people affected by disabilities.

I am surprised and saddened that even those churches with ministries to disabled people do not understand that disability ministry was the main focus of the life Jesus lived among us. No church that disregards the plain teaching of Jesus in Luke 14:12ff can pretend to understand what it means to continue Christ's ministry in this world. Churches, pastors, church planters and seminaries do the Lord a grave disservice to ignore this most needy and neglected people group.

In this regard, the lectures and PCF document recommended in the course notes "Thinking about ministry..." by Joe Osburn at the website [http://www.srvip.org/overview\\_SRV\\_Osburn.pdf](http://www.srvip.org/overview_SRV_Osburn.pdf) entitled *An Overview of Social Role Valorization Theory*, were most helpful to me as I consider how to implement our vision at A Restoration Church, Pittsburgh. We see the role of the Church of Jesus Christ, among other things, as God's major player on this earth in the Role Valorization of people and families affected by disabilities. Osburn's article (June 2006, page 5) explains the sad consequences of social devaluation:

*Devalued individuals, groups, and classes are far more likely than other members of society to be treated badly, and to be subjected to a systematic -- and possibly lifelong -- pattern of such negative experiences as the following.*

1. *Being perceived and interpreted as "deviant," due to their negatively-valued differentness. The latter could consist of physical or functional impairments, low competence, a particular ethnic identity, certain behaviors or associations, skin color, and many others.*
2. *Being rejected by community, society, and even family and services.*
3. *Being cast into negative social roles, some of which can be severely negative, such as "subhuman," "menace," and "burden on society."*
4. *Being put and kept at a social or physical distance, the latter most commonly by segregation.*
5. *Having negative images (including language) attached to them.*
6. *Being the object of abuse, violence, and brutalization, and even being made dead.*

Unless churches and society change their valuation of the lives of people affected by disabilities, not only those affected by disabilities are at risk, but so are our churches and our society. One of the reasons I believe that churches and believers are themselves devalued in the minds of much of society is that churches and believers are considered irrelevant to real issues of living life. They see churches as glorified book clubs for little old ladies that only study one book. Only as churches become real agents of change in broken lives in ways that reflect the way people are valued by their Creator and Lord, will the perceived relevance of the church improve. Until the world sees the church becoming the true extension of Jesus' heart and earthly ministry, few will listen to its sermons and few will see the Gospel as relevant to the present world. But the greater danger is found in the words of Jesus: "Why call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I say?" (Luke 6:46) and "In as much as you have done it (or not done it) unto the least of these, you have done it (or not done it) to me." (Matthew 25:40+45).

I believe that well-intended Christians and pastors have been blind to what Jesus actually taught as the focus of his calling, anointing, and ministry. He declared it in Luke 4 when he opened the scroll of Isaiah to chapter 61 in the synagogue in Nazareth and read:

<sup>18</sup> *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.*

(The Greek word is πτωχός pto-kos, meaning **continuously destitute**—used in James 2:2, but the Hebrew word Jesus actually read from Isaiah 61:1 is עָנִי `an-awv, meaning **poor, weak** and **afflicted**. Isaiah 61:1 added the following statement not quoted in Luke 4: **“He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.”** The Hebrew word has nothing to do with the heart. What Jesus read here is שָׁבַר shaw-bar', meaning: **to be broken, be maimed, be crippled, or to be wrecked**).

*He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

<sup>20</sup> Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,<sup>21</sup> and he began by saying to them, *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”<sup>1</sup>*

Jesus mission was to do what Isaiah 61:1-2a said. Jesus came to preach good news to broken people, especially people affected by disabilities. Disability ministry is not an optional implication of the Gospel. It is the Gospel applied. Since the fall in Genesis 3, no one works as God designed us; we are all broken in every area of our existence to some degree. We pompously label only more obvious physical or mental brokenness disabilities. Jesus makes it clear that spiritual blindness is more disabling than physical blindness. One swollen with condescending pride is more seriously broken than someone swollen with “dropsy.” We exhibit our brokenness differently but all of us are damaged goods. Unless theologians, churches and pastors begin to understand that the central purpose of the work of Jesus is to undo the tragic effects of the fall in more ways than just the spiritual, the work Jesus came to do through the Gospel will languish in the world.

I am puzzled as to why the church has not understood the Gospel in terms of helping to restore the lives of broken people. Why have we tended to spiritualize completely the prophesy of Isaiah 61 when it clearly is about all forms of brokenness? Why have we ignored the commands of Luke 14:12ff and the example of Jesus own earthly ministry as the patterns for our own ministries and our churches ministries? Why do we consider the ways we exhibit brokenness in sickness, character flaws, wrong relationships, words and actions to be no cause for debasing our value, dignity or social standing, yet we devalue, ignore and ostracize people affected by what we call disabilities? Why are we still significant and people with “disabilities” insignificant? Why are people with socially acceptable forms of brokenness invited to be full participants in the life and ministries of churches while we consider people affected by disabilities as having nothing to teach us or contribute to the life of our churches? Why hasn’t the church understood that 1 Corinthians 12 is about how indispensable members of the body are who are affected by disabilities? Why are we so smug as to think someone with Down syndrome can’t teach us unconditional love (John 13:34), or how to rejoice in all things

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (electronic ed.) (Lk 4:18-21). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

(Philippians 4:4), or how to be content in any and all situations (Philippians 4:12)? Why do we think church should have only carefully orchestrated sounds and movements of “normal” people? Why can’t church include and show loving deference to people who make occasional involuntary noises and movements? Why can’t we rejoice in prayers by someone with a low IQ or whose speech is difficult to understand? After all, preachers use multisyllabic words that are equally difficult to understand. Sometimes they speak in Greek, Latin and Hebrew words that are equally incomprehensible to other worshipers.

At A Restoration Church we are planting a church to help restore broken lives through the Gospel by deliberately reaching out to people and families affected by disabilities. We are just gathering a core group at this time in the South Hills of Pittsburgh but already we have an intern with a low IQ, who is commuting an hour’s drive every other weekend to participate in the ministry. We are ministering to a family that attends who’s mid-twenties son passed out drunk on a railroad track and a train amputated both his legs above the knees. These are spiritually hungry young men who want Jesus to make a difference in their own lives and who want their lives to go in a new direction serving others. We also have as part of our small fellowship a Japanese mother of teen-age daughters who is blind in one eye and experiencing other difficulties as a result of her Oriental MS(DeVick’s MNO), and we have a lady who has lost her ability to walk unassisted due to a genetic disorder that causes deterioration of the cerebellum. More than one-fourth of our small church plant core group served as STMs (short term missionaries) at Joni & Friends Family Retreats this summer ministering to families affected by disabilities. A family that adopted two teenage sons from South America now worships with us. The eldest son has a delayed auditory processing response that partially masks a brilliant mind. As we continue to reach out to such people and families, we are being enriched and blessed in a way that many Christians never experience in their churches. We are seeing the Gospel bringing the restoring power of God into these lives and God is changing the rest of us in the process. Our desire is that we will be the catalyst that assists more churches to understand and implement the commands of Christ in Luke 14:12ff as a core value and priority in the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ.