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Apologetics and Disability: Reframing Our Response to the Question of Suffering

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Abstract

A prominent question that is asked when people consider God is how to account for suffering if God is good and all-powerful. For Christians, answering this question is a major part of apologetic and evangelistic training. But what if the way we have traditionally approached this question is not good news for everyone? This paper examines the suffering question in light of disabilities and suggests a new way to engage in apologetics that is centered in creation (not fall) and celebrates the gifts and opportunities that come through a diversity of ability.

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Introduction

Apologetics is an important partner to evangelism. Alistair McGrath (2012, pp. 21-22) argues that apologetics is distinct from evangelism because it removes obstacles to and establishes a plausibility for Christian faith which evangelism then invites people to embrace. The distinction, he

says, is between *consent* and *commitment*, between *conversation* and *invitation* (2012, p. 22). While the purposes and the aims of each are both distinct and alike (to the point that McGrath (2022, p. 22) admits the difference between them is both real and “fuzzy”), one of the greatest commonalities between apologetics and evangelism is the biblical theology undergirding their very frameworks. Clearing the ground of obstacles and inviting people to a new way of life both rely on core theological convictions about God, the world, and his mission to redeem it. Central to both, then, is a biblical narrative that spans creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Though I will expound on this in more nuanced detail later, for many evangelicals, this narrative includes the following main points: The world God created was perfect. Human beings messed it up. Jesus’ death and resurrection resolved what we could not. Someday the fullness of God’s kingdom will come and humans in fully perfected bodies will enjoy a fully perfected new heaven and earth. Where evangelism invites people to participate in this grand story, apologetics uses this story to address specific questions and concerns that often prevent people from considering or maintaining Christian faith.

As an evangelical, I embrace this storyline of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. It is a theological foundation for faith and witness, and I believe accurately captures God’s mission and work. However, I do wonder if we have limited (and even distorted) the expanse of God’s story by how we tell it and, in so doing, have created more obstacles to faith for some rather than removing them. To set the stage for the rest of this paper and the main question I want to address, let me share a personal story.

Until I became a mom, I did not really question the basic Christian narrative I inherited. The world was perfect. We messed it up. Through Jesus, God is in the process of fixing it. This narrative served me well until the night I encountered a well-meaning lady from a church. She and I shared a Pentecostal background, and she was coming to me with a strong reservoir of healing faith. However, her question to me was startling. She began the conversation by mentioning how she was recently in a prayer meeting where they prayed for God to heal a child with autism and she was struck by a thought which she voiced to me, “If God healed *your* son, do you think God would also change your son’s physical features?” She asked her question both with innocence and eager faith and yet, I found myself at a loss for words. My head was shouting back, “Healed? From what does my son need to be healed?” My son was born with Down syndrome. The presence of an extra chromosome affects the speed of his cognitive and physical development. And this extra chromosome is also very much central to his identity, personality, and being. There is nothing I would

change about him because to have a “normal” number of chromosomes would be to erase the boy that God created and that I love. I would never want that. Ever. And yet her question haunted me.

When I began teaching my next apologetics class, I found my lens changed. A key question within apologetics is making sense of suffering and evil. By the end of the course, student after student gave the same theological response to this apologetic question.

When God created the world, it was perfect. But when we chose to disobey God, we brought sin into the world which has affected every aspect of the world. Because of our sin, it means that people now do bad things to one another. It means that creation is distorted. It means that sickness and disease and natural disasters came into the world. But this is not how God created us or our world. And the good news is that God came into the world as Jesus and died on the Cross for us. By rising from the dead, he is able to destroy sin and he promises that he is now in the process of creating a new heaven and earth. And when we put our faith in him, one day we will live with him forever. And he promises that in heaven, there will be no sin, no suffering, no sickness, and no death.

Told this way, the narrative is hopeful for those ravaged by cancer or victims of assault or natural disaster. This world is not what God intended. All the suffering we see is because of sin. Someday, it will all be taken care of and made right. But what about for people like my son? As I graded papers and saw this single narrative repeated over and over in such concrete terms, I did not find this a fully good-news story. As an adoptive mom, I went into motherhood with my eyes open: I freely chose the disability from the beginning. Even so, this has not lessened all of the burdens or challenges of raising a special needs child and it certainly has not lessened the questions I ask and am asked about disability. Is it true that the only reason my son was born with an extra chromosome was because Adam and Eve ate the fruit? How do I reconcile this with the notion that God formed us in the womb (Ps 139:13-18)? If my son’s extra chromosome is a result of sin coming into the world and distorting creation, does this mean new creation requires that extra chromosome be eliminated? Does this mean that the very things that make him *him* are the very things that God will reject in new creation? If not, then why do we keep telling the story as if all disability is a result of sin and must be remedied in heaven?

As I sit with these questions and as I sit with parents asking for the

first or the hundredth time why their child has this or that disability, I cannot help but wonder if our apologetic and evangelistic approaches are based on a biblical narrative that is read solely from an abled perspective. How might a disability perspective refine the ways in which we understand and tell this story? While this question can take us in a myriad of directions and cause us to dive deeply into topics long debated by theologians, I focus this paper specifically on how apologists frame the conversation. To that end, this paper will outline how various apologists answer the question of suffering, overlay these answers with disability perspectives, and then suggest a reframed way of discussing suffering in apologetic and evangelistic encounters.

Accounting for Suffering and Evil if God is Good

Apologists note that one of the most prevalent questions asked by seekers and skeptics is how to make sense of suffering in the world. Even for the Christian, the idea of suffering is problematic (Keller, 2008, p. 27). For some people, the question is existential. If God really existed there would not be suffering and evil in the world in the first place. For others, it is experiential. They have personally encountered suffering in a particular way and cannot reconcile it with a good God (i.e., if God is all-powerful but does not prevent suffering, he is not good; if God is good but cannot prevent suffering, he is not all-powerful). Knowing which concern people are raising requires apologists to ask clarifying questions and to listen well. Even so, both trajectories ultimately lead apologists to address some key issues. (1) How do we account for suffering and evil in the world? (2) Why does God allow suffering and evil? (3) Does suffering have meaning or is it pointless?

In *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller (2008, pp. 223-236) describes the four-part drama of the Bible (creation, fall, redemption, and restoration) as a dance. God found such joy in “mutually self-giving love” (p. 224) that he created human beings in order to share it (p. 228). We were invited into a dance in which God was central. However, we lost the dance when we changed from orbiting our lives around God to “trying to get God to orbit around us” (229). Our self-centeredness disintegrated everything, leading to individual, social, and cosmic consequences (pp. 170-177). Keller (p. 177) argues that because

Human beings are so integral to the fabric of things...when human beings turned from God the entire warp and woof of the world unraveled. Disease, genetic disorders, famine, natural disasters, aging, and death itself are as much the result of sin as are oppression, war,

crime, and violence. We have lost God's shalom--physically, spiritually, socially, psychologically, culturally. Things now fall apart. In Romans 8, Paul says that the entire world is now 'in bondage to decay' and 'subject to futility' and will not be put right until we are put right.

Joshua Chatraw and Mark Allen (2018) similarly note that God "created the universe to be good" (p. 54) with human beings playing an essential role within creation. As "God's image bearers," our duty was "to rule over the earth...to represent him on earth by stewarding his creation and, in some sense, extending his rule over it" (p. 45). Our disobedience, however, has distorted God's good creation and introduced "human suffering, pain, and evil," things we know "are wrong" and not as God intended (p. 54). "Evil," therefore, "is anything that stands against God and his plan for creation (p. 274).

Gregory Boyd, in *Is God to Blame?* (2003), latches onto this idea that evil opposes God and his plan for creation by arguing that the world is in the state of spiritual conflict. Though Adam and Eve exercised their free will and disobeyed, Satan, too, exercised his free will and now rules the present world, seeking to disrupt and destruct God's creative purposes. The suffering we face can be attributed to this Satanic war against God.

While sharing the sentiment that the world, once "unstained by sin or suffering or death" (McLaughlin, 2019, 205) is now fallen and not as God intended, Alister McGrath (2012) and Rebecca McLaughlin (2019) add additional nuances to the discussion. For McLaughlin (2019, p. 203), "sin and suffering are clearly connected in a universal sense;" however, we should not equate suffering with (punishment for) sin. "The amount of suffering a person endures," she says, "is not proportional to his or her sin" (p. 203). For McGrath (2012, p. 165-166), human actions of selfishness have brought significant consequences to our personal, social, and cosmic existence. However, not every natural event is the result of Adam and Eve's sin. Sometimes "suffering arises from the way this world is" and McGrath (2012, p. 166) argues, "We have no reason to believe there could be a 'better' world." Tectonic plates, for example, are necessary for life on earth. While the result of such shifting plates can be earthquakes and tsunamis, these are not "*evil...they're just natural*" (p. 165). Though these are not intended to cause suffering, they do, and this is just "part of the price we pay for living in a world in which life is possible" (p. 165).

In accounting for evil and suffering in the world, all of our apologists see the world God created as good and blame sin for changing the world into something God did not intend. Though McGrath leaves open the possibility that the natural working of the world could have produced

suffering prior to the fall, he and the others all attribute disorder, discord, disease, and death to our disobedience. God created a good world, but we messed it up. Boyd alone emphasizes the enormous role that Satan has in continued suffering and evil.

If we conclude that a good God exists and that he created a good world, why is it that God permits evil and suffering to continue? After all, “the loving, omnipotent God of our imagination would move swiftly from creation to new creation, from the Garden of Eden of Genesis to the heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation” (McLaughlin, 2019, p. 204). Why didn’t he? Paul Gould (2019) proposes two trajectories of inquiry. One trajectory suggests that “God has a morally justified reason for evil” that we do not always know (Gould, 2019, 188). Just because we cannot find a reason for suffering does not mean that there is not one (Keller 2008, p. 23). Though “we can’t plumb the depths on the meaning of suffering,” Keller (2008, pp. 24-25) says that many attest to how it brought good into their lives. In the midst of the suffering, we cannot see clearly, but “with time and perspective most of us can see good reasons for at least some of the tragedy and pain that occurs in life” (Keller 2008, p. 25). If we can see the good for some suffering, is it not possible that God might see good for all of it (Keller 2008, 2 p. 5, cf. Gould, 2019, p. 188)? McGrath (2012, p. 163) agrees, finding the atheistic argument of Richard Dawkins, that “suffering is pointless and meaningless—and is exactly what we should expect in a universe that itself has no purpose” to be “deeply [dissatisfying].”

This leads us to the second trajectory of inquiry: can we discern some of those reasons why God allows suffering? For many theologians and apologists, theodicies provide us with a way forward. The most popular theodicies include “the free will theodicy (God wants us to be self-determiners of our character and actions, and when we misuse our free will, evil results), the soul-making theodicy (God uses pain and suffering to grow our character), and the greater-goods theodicy (God brings about greater goods as a result of evil)” (Gould, 2019, p. 188). This resonates with Chatraw and Allen (2018, p. 53) who argue that suffering has a variety of reasons ranging from negative to positive: a result of our own sin and disobedience, due to others’ sin, for greater divine good, for insight into God, because of obedience, for sharing in Christ’s suffering, as a means of discipline, for spiritual growth, and to prove faith.

McLaughlin (2019, p. 206) nuances this question in a way that suggests suffering has a more integral role in bringing us to “earth-shattering intimacy with God.” Though God did not will Adam and Eve to sin, neither did he draw a “much shorter, straighter line...between the beginning and the end” (p. 206). We may not be able to understand why

God allowed suffering, but only with suffering can we “truly bond” and know Jesus “far more intimately: as Savior, Lover, Husband, Head, Brother, Fellow Sufferer, and [our] Resurrection and [our] Life” (p. 206). McLaughlin (2006) believes that to say, “humanity was very good,” was to also say, “it was not the best. The best, from a biblical perspective, was yet to come. And the way to get there would be through suffering.” The ultimate promise, she says, is for every tear to be wiped away and death to be no more (Rev 21:4), not that “God will not allow us to cry in the first place. What end could possibly be worth all this pain? Jesus says he is” (p. 206).

Though Gould, Keller, McGrath, Chatraw and Allen, and McLaughlin argue that our own sin brought suffering and evil into the world, none suggest that we have been left to wallow in our consequences. Our own finitude prevents us from knowing all the reasons why God allows suffering to continue; however, it does not mean there are not reasons. But even where this may not give us comfort, we can find assurance in God’s understanding (he suffered for us), God’s care (he can bring good out of the most impossible situations), God’s justice (he will judge sin), and God’s rescuing power (he is making and will ultimately make all things right).

It is here that Boyd’s perspective stands out. Boyd challenges the notion that God somehow wills or allows evil to persist. To suggest that God has morally justified reasons for evil and suffering (Gould’s first trajectory) is tantamount to saying God wills evil. And to say God wills evil is to attribute evil to God, which contradicts everything Scripture tells us about God’s nature. Boyd argues, instead, that the evil and suffering we see in the world is a direct result of spiritual conflict, between God’s good creative purposes and Satan’s attempts to challenge them. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God is coming on Earth as it is in Heaven, and one day Jesus’s reign will be fully established for all eternity. Until that day, Boyd recognizes a lot of ambiguity and mystery related to God’s providence and sovereignty seen alongside the destructive purposes of Satan. While Boyd’s perspective shifts somewhat from that of our other apologists, he ends up taking the conversation further in terms of disability. Keller directly attributes disability (disease, genetic disorders, etc.) to sin and Gould, McGrath, Chatraw and Allen, and McLaughlin indirectly do so as well. We chose to sin and the entrance of it somehow broke the perfectly working systems in the world including nature. Boyd suggests that because Satan tampers with God’s good plan, God has no part in disabilities. God does not will “which *individuals* will be born mute or deaf. He simply asserts that he is Creator of the kind of world in which some people become disabled” (Boyd, 2003, p. 188). For Boyd (188), Scripture is “clear...infirmities such as muteness or blindness originate from Satan” and God’s role is “to empower

human mediators to free people from these afflictions.” All of our apologists come to the same endpoint: new creation will end affliction. For those (particularly Boyd and Keller) that equate disability with affliction, new creation will necessarily end disability as well. To understand why this may not ring as “good news” for all people, we turn now to a brief look at what we mean by disability and how disability perspectives might challenge our beliefs about suffering.

Understanding Disability and Disability Perspectives

It is challenging to define disability in one sense because the concept covers a range of issues that can be temporary or permanent, inherited or acquired, and affect a person physically or mentally. Where people fall on this spectrum often affects their outlook and the kinds of questions they ponder. To navigate through these complexities, we will consider three models of disability.

The *medical model* locates disability within individual bodies and defines disability as any deviation from the assumed norms of how we think a body or mind should work. This model emphasizes people’s limitations and often reduces people to the function of their disabilities (Reynolds 2008, p. 25). Since it is “assumed that disability indicates a deficient or flawed human condition...which holds a person back from participating in society,” disability necessarily needs to be treated, “fixed, made better, or overcome” (Reynolds 2008, p. 25). For this reason, the “principle of normalization” exists at its core, “attempting to modify, repair, or relocate individuals with disabilities until they are congruent with societal expectations of normalcy and acceptability” (Creamer 2009, p. 24).

The *social model* of disability moves the focus to the socially constructed environments and attitudes that bar people from full participation. Where the medical model assumes that people with key functional deviations (e.g., deaf, paraplegic, developmental delays) *are* disabled, the social model says people *become* disabled “insofar as they experience prejudice and exclusion” (Creamer 2009, p. 25). Individual diagnoses are no longer problematized; rather, physical spaces, social attitudes, systems, and points of access are brought under the microscope.

The *cultural model* of disability embraces and celebrates disability as a marker of group identity and a contribution to human diversity (Berger 2013, p. 29). Within this model, socially constructed ideas of normalcy are challenged by the belief that disability is simply one way “of being embodied in the world” (Berger 2013, p. 29). The cultural model critiques the medical model’s assumption that bodies need to be fixed. The cultural model also critiques some aspects of social models for “still presuming a

‘normal’ way of being embodied ... [that] emphasize the sameness, rather than the diversity of bodies” (Bennett and Volpe 2018, p. 123). Cultural and social location matter for disability and the cultural model not only suggests that disability is an “intertwinement of modes of thought depending on particular situations and circumstances” but also highlights “the potential of disability as a state of being” (Devlieger 2005, p. 8).

To navigate the space between these models, defining terms becomes paramount. *Impairment* highlights the biological/physiological loss. *Disability* explains when an impairment disables one from performing certain tasks due to physical and social barriers (cf. Yong 2011, pp. 8-12; Creamer 2009, p. 27; Berger 2013, p. 6). Though these definitions suggest distinct boundaries of experience, reality reveals the complication that many with disabilities embody because they can experience a range of difficulties in tandem with, apart from, or solely due to social limitations.

This brief overview of disability is very instructive to our question of how apologists answer the suffering question. First, it becomes easy to see that many people in the church embrace a medical model of disability. It is clear from Keller and Boyd, in particular, that disability is located within individual bodies that are judged to be broken (whether due to disease, genetics, or accident). With such clear evidence of sin being manifest in biological and physiological ways, it is not surprising that they and the other apologists we have examined, embrace “the modern Christian expectation that Jesus’s healing is simply about curing malfunctions in individuals’ bodies” (Brock, 2021, p. 26). Though theologian Brian Brock explicitly says this “is a truncated gospel” (p. 26), Christians often assume Jesus healed every person he met and, thus, a healed, whole body is desirable and best (p. 45). Boyd (2003, p. 187) is most explicit on this point arguing that “Jesus and the Gospel authors uniformly diagnosed muteness, deafness, blindness, and other infirmities as directly or indirectly coming from the devil...Jesus demonstrated God’s will for people by removing these infirmities.” Such an abled reading overlooks how Jesus heals (neither intrusively nor forcefully), when or if Jesus heals, and the many ways in which Jesus enacts social and spiritual restoration over physical healing (see Brock, 2021, p. 44, cf. Fox, 2019).

Second, the medical model of disability highlights the ways that apologists uncritically equate disability with suffering and affliction. Because the non-disabled are beholden to normative assumptions (perspectives “presumed to be adequate for measuring the experiences of all people, which then invalidates the points of view of those who don’t see or hear similarly, who do things differently, or who simply are different” [Yong, 2011, p. 11]), the non-disabled often “impute suffering” to the

disabled (Yong, 2011, p. 12). We often take our own experience as the frame of reference for evaluating the burden of a given disability and, in so doing, can ascribe more pain or suffering to the other person than the actual experience. For example, Boyd (2003, p. 188) unequivocally calls deafness an affliction (from Satan) and in need of God's restoration. Many in the Deaf community would vehemently rebut this, believing that Deaf culture has "particular languages, and important contributions for society" (Bennett and Volpe, 2018, p. 122). The medical model fails to recognize the ways in which "a medical 'good' may result in the loss of other, perhaps less tangible goods" (Bennett and Volpe, 2018, p. 122). In the same way, when our theology is solely informed by a medical model of disability, we often fail to recognize the ways in which a "theological good" (i.e., healing) may result in the loss of other, perhaps less tangible goods (i.e., the needed gifts, perspectives, and corrections that come to us through the disabled experience and the lives of people with disabilities). I must explicitly state here that I do not mean that people with disabilities are here solely to be an object lesson for the non-disabled. I mean, rather, that people with disabilities have their own gifts and perspectives that the body of Christ needs for it to be whole and functional (see Scheuermann, 2022). When our apologetic narratives attribute all disability to sin, Satan, and suffering, it becomes harder to celebrate the many good things that disability adds to the world and the church.

Third, while all of our apologists suggest there have been massive social and cosmic ramifications to Adam and Eve's sin and Satan's continued campaign to disrupt God's good world, by solely understanding disability through the medical model, these apologists do not address the role of social and physical environments in creating and perpetuating disability. For the disabled, these apologists can only offer the hope of healed bodies in the eschaton. What this fails to consider is how ability or disability may not be the real issue. If God's new kingdom does overcome the social and cosmic results of sin (which all of our apologists argue will happen), then many of the prejudicial attitudes and social barriers that turn impairments into disabilities will be eradicated in the eschaton, eliminating the need for everyone to be "healed" by making full space for the flourishing of people with diverse levels of ability.

Finally, the cultural model of disability reveals the ways in which our apologists see disability as something that happens *to* someone and is separate from the core of their identity. For Keller (2008, p. 177), disability is a consequence of sin disrupting the world's natural order. For McGrath (2012, p. 165), some occurrences in nature are just part of being in a living world. For Chatraw and Allen (2018, p. 53), suffering is either a byproduct

of sin or the means to a better (i.e., more godly, more satisfied, more glorious) end. For McLaughlin (2019, p. 206) the raw story in the middle between the Bible's happy introduction and conclusion is what makes new creation (with its lack of tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain) worth it. For Boyd (2003, p. 188), God does not will who is afflicted with disability, but does will that all disability be healed. If, indeed, disability is something that happens *to* people, removing or healing the disability makes sense in every circumstance. But for many people with disabilities, the disability is a core part of how they know and experience the world and of how they know and experience themselves. Removing the disability would fundamentally change their identity. People without disabilities are surprised to learn that, when identity is on the line, many disabled, especially those with congenital disabilities, do not want healing.

When we bring disability studies into conversation with apologetics, we are able to consider the certainty we have about the eschaton more circumspectly. We can be confident that in the new heaven and earth there will be “no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Rev. 21:4) and “nothing impure will ever enter it” (Rev. 21:27). We can be confident that resurrected bodies will be imperishable, immortal, raised in glory and power, and changed (1 Cor 15:42-58). But does this necessitate the “healing” of every aspect of disability?

Those who follow the elimination theory would say yes. This theory works from the premise that because sin marred the perfection of God's creation, heaven is the great reversal where God will restore all things to “what they were meant to be” (Gould, 2016, p. 317). J.B. Gould (2016, p. 318) argues passionately for this view, suggesting that when people cannot function according to “a design that is typical of their species,” their disability inhibits “normal abilities [which] enable people to perform major life activities—and thereby to experience the important aspects of flourishing God created us for.” Among the requirements for flourishing, according to Gould (2017, p. 100), are “a bundle of goods such as personal relationships, productive activity (career and leisure pursuits), and individual autonomy.” Believing that “intellectual competence is a precondition of relational life,” and that “human beings are teleological beings made for the supernatural end of love and union with God,” Gould (2016, p. 330) argues that without healing, people with cognitive disabilities would be unable to experience eternal joy. Eliminationists, then, thread the needle between creation and fall by suggesting that disability “does not exclude the person being *imago Dei* or impair one's human dignity” but rather is “a privation of what naturally ‘should’ be present” (Ehrman, 2015, p. 732). While the disabled are good creations

who can contribute meaningfully to the world, they experience deficiencies and limitations that “are contrary to God’s will and plan” (Gould, 2016, p. 321). For this reason, Gould posits that in heaven “if disability is not healed, then evil is not finally eliminated” (p. 324). But as evil has been conquered through Jesus, the elimination view assumes that “disability is not retained in any capacity in the future kingdom” (Gosbell, 2021, p. 6). Jennifer Anne Cox (2017, p. 48) points to the scars of the resurrected Jesus as proof that disability is healed and, thus, “those who believe in Jesus will not experience disability in their resurrected state either.”

Those who follow the retention view would argue that some aspects of disability will be present in the eschaton, especially when “some impairments are so identity-constitutive that their removal would involve the obliteration of the person as well” (Yong, 2011, p. 121). Retentionists agree that there will be transformation of bodies in the resurrection but disagree that this necessarily *requires* bodies to “be free of the marks of our present impairments” (2011, p. 122) or without “continuity between the present and the future body” (p. 123). Of equal concern for retentionists is how heaven transforms “the world’s scale of values as a whole” (p. 122). Where eliminationists believe disability prevents human flourishing (defined as productivity, relationality, and possessing self-determination—see Gould, 2016 and 2017), retentionists argue that the preservation of Jesus’ scars in his resurrected body challenge “conceptions about the nature of bodily perfection” (Gosbell, 2021, p. 4, cf. Eiesland 1994) and “our underlying assumptions about what it means to be human and what human flourishing entails” (Whitaker, 2019a, p. 4). Yong (2011, p. 135) argues that redeemed, rather than eliminated, disabilities are the means through which “divine power, wisdom, and glory are...most clearly and finally magnified,” a “‘transvaluation’ of disability in the resurrection body [that] is not unique to Jesus’ resurrection” (Gosbell, 2021, p. 3). Whitaker (2019b) clarifies that only the person with a disability can truly determine how defining impairments are to his or her identity and wonders whether “some persons may retain their disabilities” while “others might not.” She is confident, however, that “in the case of our own resurrection, we will not be in doubt as to our identity or existence when the time comes.”

The elimination and retention views present seemingly opposed proposals that attempt to make sense of disability. Yet both are shaped by modernity and its elevation of the individual person (Gosbell, 2021, p. 8). Perhaps this is where our contemporary apologetic perspectives also fall short. We tell the cosmic story of God in a way that can easily put the individual person in the center. And when we do, we cannot help but see

disability as a travesty for individual people. It is here that Brian Brock (2019) challenges us to reconsider our theological center and through his proposal, provides us a pathway for a new apologetic approach as well.

Brock (2019) argues that the ways we usually talk about disability are anthropocentric and centered in the fall. This is clearly seen in our apologists who foreground the body as the locus of disability and ground their entire suffering apologetic in the fall. Regardless of whether the apologist then moves toward a retentionist or eliminationist view, this leads apologists toward “an anthropologically oriented definition of healing and redemption” that reads “the resurrected body through a view of the created body” (p. 182). By positioning human identity within the individual body, Brock says we fail to take seriously the “epistemic and ecclesial implications of eschatology” which center on the reminder that “human redemption is into a redeemed *community*” (2019, p. 183). For Brock, this shifts the focus from future speculation about the state of individually resurrected bodies to the present, starting our eschatological understanding from the same place that the New Testament begins, “the new social order that is *already* being established” (p. 184). The New Testament is not generally concerned with the resurrected state of individuals, offering few hints about what healing looks like in the eschaton. Rather, New Testament eschatology “[resituates] our sensate relation to God, world, and the neighbor” by fostering “*an embodied expectation that Jesus’ heavenly kingdom of peace will arrive here and now*” (p. 185). Ultimately, “anthropologically ordered eschatological speculations are...not a solution to the pains of this life” (p. 192). Focusing so intently on perfection of bodies in creation and new creation leaves the present unaddressed and, in this sense, unredeemed. A holistic, New Testament eschatology foregrounds the interconnectedness of people with God and each other, which consequently backgrounds bodies. Brock (p. 192) says,

Put in technical terms, an eschatology oriented by notions of past and future or by a strong interest in anthropological definition is less illuminative of the theologically crucial aspects of life together than an eschatology oriented by conceptions of sociality, vocation, and the real and effected transformation of perception.

In the *redeemed* community, people with disabilities participate in the edification of the church (and by extension the world). And in the *redeemed* community, life in the local church “challenges the individualized and medicalized account of [the lives of people with

disability] that assumes [their] most important need is for therapies that will solve [their] (individual) problems and deficiencies” (p. 193). This does not negate the reality that sin does break things in the world and Brock acknowledges that disability “does expose the sin of the world” (p. 194). However, he is careful to not locate the sin within the individual body or say that “sin and brokenness of the created order...define [the disabled person’s] being and life as a whole” (p. 194). The disabled body is “a *vector* of the divine annunciation of mercy to the world” revealing the myriad of ways that each person is broken (p. 194). It is through eschatological ecclesiology, then, that Brock (p. 194), reflecting on his own son, can

...remain agnostic about the causality of Adam’s biological condition. I can affirm that his twenty-first chromosome probably would not have become conjoined in an unfallen world. But I can also affirm that the fact that every cell of his body has been impacted by this biological “fault” says very little about who he has been created to be. I can affirm both that he will be redeemed from pain in the resurrection, and that God has given him to his family, his church, and his nation just as he is. There is no other, better, or different Adam who was not affected by his genetic palette. Having been given him by God establishes my vocation as parent, engaging me in an extended work of responsibility and receipt. I have been presented with a limit I can love. With it comes divine confrontation and judgement of my habits as well as the habits of the world that live in me.

Gosbell (2021, p. 9) reminds us that since the fall “corrupted every aspect of human existence” this includes our ability “to measure the value of ourselves and others, to recognize true identity, to embrace diversity, [and] to understand limitations.” We see through a glass darkly (1 Cor 13:12) and, thus, cannot ultimately know what the future looks like. However, we live in the present, and it is here that we are called to attend. Calling Paul’s 1 Cor 12 Body of Christ metaphor a “blueprint for how believers are to live today,” Gosbell (2021, p. 11) urges us to value and accept “all members of the Body, not for who they might become in the future kingdom, but for who they are now as valuable and contributing members of Christ’s body.” We are not autonomous or independent creatures, but rather “wholly dependent on God and designed to live in community as both providers and recipients of each other’s gifts” (Gosbell, 2021, p. 11). And it is this communal vision that gives us a new apologetic.

A New Apologetic

One of the problems with our apologetic starting point is the assumption that, with regard to disabilities, “the real questions are about the *origins* of disabling conditions” (Brock 2021, p. 96). Much more salient to people with disabilities and their families is less a matter of *cause* and more a concern with discovering “a theological account of the *goodness* of people’s lives *as they are*” (96). Such a shift does not diminish the role of sin in the world—sin really does mess things up—rather it keeps it in its place by not allowing it to undermine the “‘it was good’ of God’s decree over what God has created” (p. 106). A “Christian account of creation, sin, and disability” acknowledges (1) that the limitations and bodily forms God made us with are good, (2) that sin can damage bodies in irreparable ways, and (3) that everyone’s body will eventually present problems (106). A Christian account of creation also acknowledges that every human is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27), with the ability to “image Christ to one another” through “life-giving relationships across difference.” Such “bodily difference and uniqueness” become “part of each person’s vocation” (p. 109) and service within community.

Human beings were not created “to be *simply* bodies” but rather intricately interwoven with God and each other in loving relationships (Brock 2019, p. 159). Humans were created with boundaries and limitations (p. 157), and they experience shalom when they learn “to live as creatures...[taking] their satisfaction from God and not from their material surroundings” (p. 154). “To confess the Christian God as Creator,” Brock subsequently argues, means “concretely, to be liberated not to *transcend* creation, [the sin of Adam and Eve] but to *receive one’s true being in Christ*...by learning what it means to be a creature, that is, to recognize and freely embrace loving relations with other persons as and where they are, with all their brokenness and angularity” (p. 160). Since “human beings were created to be conformed to Christ, and to be resurrected in this conformity to Christ,” new creation is less about retaining an “ideal self” and more about retaining those marks that “indicate the role of [a] particular person in their own place, time, and body in God’s redemptive story with the world” (p. 184).

This affirmation that *everyone* is a good creation and that *everyone* has a vocational calling dependent on their bodily differences, limitations, and giftings opens “a door to another world” (McGrath 2012, p. 22) for those struggling to understand disability as it relates to themselves and others. A truly Christian account of disability incorporates difference into the church as a “communal treasure” (Brock, 2019, p. 193) and honors the

roles that people with disabilities “play in God’s own story of his people, as commemorated by and enacted in the worshipping community” (p. 195). This kind of redeemed community, offered through Christ by the working of the Spirit, challenges and displaces “the politics of liberal democracies, with their rooting in individual autonomy and agnostic struggle to secure one’s own interests” (p. 197). Because the Gospel story is more of a communal story than an individual one, it is able to make place for interdependence and difference in ways that the world cannot.

By shifting our apologetic response to suffering and disability from an anthropologically centered view of the fall to an ecclesiological and eschatological view of creation, we move from tragedy to opportunity, from limitation as individual loss to limitation as gifts of difference within community. By reframing our eschatological hope from the future healing of broken bodies to the present inbreaking of a new community wherein the Spirit enables everyone to give and receive gifts, we offer a place in the now for people with disabilities and a hope for the future that true suffering will end without the erasing of differences altogether. When we can truly offer the witness of a redeemed community, we can offer people a place where difference is valued and where people “see the beauty in all kinds of people’s bodies. Not because they are just looking at bodies but because they have learned to cherish the gifts that God has given through each person” (Brock 2021, p. 132).

For my son, the starting place of understanding his life is not “he exists because sin messed up creation.” The starting place is truly “God created his every cell, and this is good.” And when this shift is made, the response to his disability changes too. One woman saw my son’s disability as a result of sin and assumed he needed healing. However, a different woman at a different church about a year later saw my son’s disability through the eyes of ecclesiological eschatology and exclaimed, “I can’t wait to see what gifts God has for the church through your son.” This is good news.

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