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Justice, The Gospel, and People with Disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this essay is on biblical justice in relation to persons with disabilities. The World Health Organization (2012) estimates that 15% of the world's population includes people with disabilities. This staggering percentage means that there are over 47 million Americans with disabilities today and over one billion worldwide. As an outgrowth of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the situation for some people with disabilities in the United States has continued to improve since the 1970s. However, in much of the world, individuals and families affected by disability continue to face injustice in the from of segregation, overt discrimination, exploitation, lack of education, and limited access to services, the combined result of which is "forced" poverty (Anderson, 2004).

My career in special education began at a time when significant changes were on the horizon in the United States as a result of Supreme Court decisions, case law, and federal mandates related to educational provisions for students with disabilities. These rulings were based on equal rights arguments drawn from the guarantee of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution that a person cannot be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, nor denied equal protection of the law. Part of my responsibility was to help school administrators and both general and special education teachers understand how these rulings altered the school's approach to students with special needs by both limiting and directing educational procedures.

Starting in the late 1990s, I began to teach and consult on issues of disability in Africa, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. Learning how people with disabilities are viewed and treated in other parts of the world helped me to see the problem as not simply a "rights" issue, but a matter of justice. In much of the world, individuals and families affected by disability continue to face injustice in the form of inequality (such as lack of access to health care, education, and employment), violations of dignity (such as violence, abuse, or exploitation), and denial of autonomy, including being unable or unwelcome to participate in the community. People with disabilities are often among the most alienated and marginalized, viewed as second-class citizens or even non-humans.

Many in the non-Western world view disability through the lens of cultural and religious tradition. Sometimes, faulty theology is involved, such as an inability to reconcile suffering with biblical teaching about the sovereignty of God, wrongly connecting disability with sin and punishment, and confusing physical cure with spiritual health and God's blessing. To some extent, these issues are present in much of the Western world. These barriers, coupled with limited or incorrect understanding of disability, lead to unjust treatment of individuals and families affected by disability. It also does injustice to God whose love and grace are not limited by a person's disability, but are offered freely to all.

FEEDING THE INJUSTICE

Physical barriers can limit access and opportunities but attitudinal and theological barriers are more significant hindrances to the development and freedom of individuals with physical or intellectual impairments. These injustices can be related to the language of "lumping," the language of tragedy, the language of normalization and equality, and the tyranny of normalcy.

The Language of "Lumping" — Categorization

Not recognizing or respecting the individual person is injustice. People with physical or mental impairments are often lumped into a collective category: "the disabled." Characteristics observed in one person may be generalized to others, even though their impairment differs. People speak in a raised voice so that someone who is blind can hear what is being said. Wheelchair users are not addressed directly, but spoken to "through" an able-bodied relative or attendant. According to some able-bodied people, "well-adjusted" persons with disabilities are those who display courage in the face of their trials, cheerfulness despite their circumstances, and gratefulness for the help they receive. On the other hand, acting "out of character" by appearing demanding or assertive may lead to their being criticized or rejected (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). This parallels the way ethnic minorities were viewed prior to the Civil Rights era.

People with disabilities are sometimes regarded as perpetual children or victims of fate and assumed unable to contribute to their own or their family's well-being. They may be thought evil, accursed, or punished by God because of personal, parental, or ancestral sin. In some cultures, a father may assume an infant born with an obvious disability is a mistake and return the infant to the "gods" by abandoning the child beside a river or in a wooded area, or by burying the infant alive. In Western nations, doctors may encourage aborting a fetus thought to carry a defective gene or to shows signs of a disability. They might suggest withholding nourishment from an infant with significant mental impairment or argue that the quality of life for the child will be limited. Actually, it may be the parents' desired quality of life that may be impacted by raising a child with a severe or profound disability. The right of the parents not to be burdened by such a child is thought to outweigh any rights of the fetus, who is not regarded a human being before birth. Sadly, a cognitively impaired infant may be described as "sub-human" because of an assumed inability to reason, and thought undeserving of the gift of life.

The Language of Tragedy

The presence of people with disabilities often threatens the security of the able-bodied because it reminds them of their own vulnerability to accident, illness, or violence, and of their mortality—even aging increases the risk of becoming disabled. This "fear" of disability contributes to viewing disability as tragic, promoting an attitude of charity or pity, an attitude which often masks feelings of superiority and the assumption that persons who are disabled have little to offer, other than making those who provide assistance feel good about themselves. Certainly, some degree of limitation is usually present, but people who are disabled do not always see themselves as victims or their disability as a tragedy. We who are able-bodied are sometimes amazed at what a person is able to do despite having a disability. However, for that person, what he or she does is "normal."

The language of loss and tragedy needs to be replaced with more constructive, liberating language that enables people with disabilities to be proud of their lives and contributions to humanity (Fritzen, 2004). This requires both an altered understanding and expectation of those who are disabled, and the availability of appropriate environmental and programmatic supports and services. To some extent, a sociological, rather than a medical, analysis attempts to address this issue by suggesting that "disability" is often the result of society's lack of provision or accommodation for people with non-conventional bodies or minds. Disability becomes a social-cultural category that is understood on a continuum—a matter of more or less rather than yes or no. Conceptually, it does not refer to the individual's physical or mental condition alone but includes the contribution of the environmental and cultural milieu (World Health Organization, 2011). While not denying that a physical or cognitive impairment results in some functional limitations, disability is attributed more to an environment that favors able-bodied persons. The environment (including services that are or are not available to the person) creates disability, not the actual impairment (Peter, 2011).

The Language of Normalization and Equality

The principle of normalization holds that people with disabilities should experience life in conditions as close as possible to the cultural norm. This principle was influential in dismantling large residential institutions and in providing education in the least restrictive setting during the 1970s and 1980s. The thought beneath normalization is equality and sameness. Arguments for inclusion are often couched in the language of equality, leading to the assumption that to be treated equally is to be treated justly. However, the language of equality can merely reduce people to a common denominator, which can be both disrespectful and repressive: "No one wants to pay the price of being treated equally if that means they must reject who they are" (Hauerwas, 2004, p. 39, *sic*). While this recognizes that all people, regardless of ability or disability, are human beings and have the same entitlements, such as access to education and the community, there may be an insistence that students with disabilities conform to a specific mode of behavior so they can "fit" into the general education classroom or community. The result may be denial of individuality in an attempt to force the person to be like the non-disabled majority (Fritzen, 2004).

The Tyranny of Normalcy

Disability presents a challenge to what is perceived as "normal," but the concept of normalcy has been overplayed. People tend to equate normal with natural and abnormal with unnatural. This significantly influences their thinking when they encounter someone who is "different." However, normal simply means "average" or "expected," making people who are not of average height, weight, age, or intelligence "not normal." Both the Bible and the created world itself suggest that uniformity was not God's intent. Rather, the created world is a display of God's imagination and artistry. Diversity *is* normal; each person is "a unique bearer and reflector of the glory of God" (Plantinga, 2002, p. 40).

The problem is not with those who have a disability, but with the idea of normalcy, an unhealthy notion that contributes to discrimination towards people with disabilities and the rejection of people's God-given uniqueness (Wink, 1995). Since people are each distinctly and differently created by God, the concept of normal is meaningless. Speaking of people as "normal" or as "abnormal" is inconsistent with Christian teaching and disregards the essential uniqueness of every individual (Harrison, 1995). People do not deviate from normal; difference is normal. The pressure to be "normalized" may come at the expense of the needs and desires of the individual who has a disability (Swain, French, & Cameron, 2003). Since there is no "normal" way for humans to be, Fritzen (2004) suggested that disability, being common to human experience, may actually add something to a person's life and provide for a more diverse and richer world.

Does Inclusion Promote Justice?

The rights of people with disabilities are officially acknowledged in the U.S. and supported by laws such as *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA) and *The Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA). However, programs and expectations for people with disabilities may still reflect an element of injustice. The cost of emphasizing individual rights is often a reduction of personal care and social relationships (Pohl, 1999), such as characterizes many classrooms where inclusion, though acknowledged as a "right" to which students are entitled, is viewed with skepticism or resistance. Overemphasizing the rights of students with disabilities may reinforce separation by highlighting differences. Terms like "exceptional" and "special" can set students apart by suggesting weakness or inability rather than acknowledging that individuals with non-conventional bodies or minds are worthy of the same honor, dignity, and respect accorded able-bodied students. It has even been suggested that special education as presently conceived fosters a culture of dependency (Swain et al., 2003), particularly for students with severe or multiple impairments. Inclusive practices may deny a student's individuality by disregarding needs or abilities that traditional assessment and instruction may overlook. Injustice may also be at play. People with power (teachers, psychologists, administrators) may disregard the wishes or preferences of the student and the parents when they choose special education programming and placement. Furthermore, there is an implicit assumption that people with a disability need or want to be normal.

Biblical Justice

Changes in American social and educational policy have influenced practice, but have not necessarily led to inclusive attitudes on the part of teachers, administrators, or non-disabled peers. Merely creating space in the classroom does not necessarily open people to being inclusive. Students with disabling conditions may be physically present in the classroom but remain isolated, even though surrounded by others. Legal mandates for inclusion argued that the basis of equal rights alone cannot guarantee the kind of human connection and rootedness that provide a safe and meaning-filled place (Pohl, 1999). Understanding inclusion from the perspective of biblical justice and reconciliation, not simply as a legal or philosophical matter, can both open doors and space in the classroom and open hearts to include all persons, resulting in appropriate recognition and celebration of differences (Anderson, 2010, 2012). Such inclusiveness is an issue of justice fundamental to the Gospel (Senior, 1995).

People tend to think of justice propositionally, as a "thing" to which they are entitled. People and often heard to say "I demand justice!" or "We need to get justice for this person"—ideas which generally link justice with punishment or revenge. The focus may actually be on securing justice for oneself, even at the expense of others. Viewed this way, justice is understood as a noun, some "thing" that resides outside of oneself. Human rights then become something people can grant or withhold based on their perception of others and what they do or can do. This can lead to viewing an unborn child, a severely disabled individual, or someone in a persistent vegetative state as less that human, making human rights no longer an issue and "justifying" euthanasia. From a biblical perspective, however, the presence of disability or a comatose state does not bring into question the humanity of an individual or the person's creation in the image of God. Even the unborn child is fully human.

Contemporary usage of the word *justice* limits people's understanding of its biblical meaning and masks its use in the Bible as a synonym for *righteousness* (Roberts, 2002). The standard which defines just behavior is a moral and ethical one derived from God's character, expressed in the commands of the law, and revealed by the prophets as God's expectation that His people relate lovingly to others (Richards, 1991; Sanders, 1997). Rather than a thing external to our being, biblical justice is better understood as a verb— an action to be practiced. It is something people do, not simply a philosophical or legal term. Biblical justice is an interpersonal concept. Rather that focusing on how we are treated by others, it has to do with how we treat one another (Richards, 1991) calls Christians to love and concern for others, regardless of who they are or what they can or cannot do.

The connection between justice and loving kindness is clear from Micah 6:8, which reveals God's instruction to "do justice" and "love kindness." The verse also warns against a hierarchical, judgmental view of others by calling for humility before God. Not limited to granting others their rights, justice includes establishing and promoting the rights of others, particularly the vulnerable, who may be oppressed by those who hold power in society. This draws attention to the barrier often erected by able-bodied people to separate themselves (physically, emotionally, or spiritually) from persons who have a disability—a barrier that necessitates reconciliation so that justice can prevail (Anderson, 2003). To establish and to live out ("do") justice requires removing anything that hinders healthy relationships between people so that peace and harmony are established (Zorrilla, 1988).

Micah 6:8, along with its parallel in Hosea 12:6 ("hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God"), suggest that justice is a lifestyle evidenced by interacting with others in a manner that establishes and maintains a just relationship. The focus is not on self, other than to require "walking humbly" and "waiting" upon God, by which Christians put into practice justice and loving kindness to others (Prior, 1998). Just as God's justice (righteousness) is grounded in his nature, that same justice (right behavior) is to be exhibited by Christians as Christ's representatives. This is especially true when they speak for those who have little or no voice. Biblical justice is not a private, abstract issue. It differs from justice in the social or legal realm. In doing justice, Christians participate in the compassionate acts of God (Zorrilla, 1988). People give justice a human form both by responding to those in need and by addressing those who keep people in need.

Biblical Justice And Fairness

Justice is sometimes used as a synonym for fairness, but often God's justice does not equal what is fair but what is right (Ryken, Wilhoit, & Longman, 1998, p. 474). For some, justice means equal treatment. This is typically the view held by teachers and seems to be what federal education law emphasizes. However, equal treatment means the same. Though seemingly pragmatic, this denies individuality, disregarding diversity in order to promote uniformity. For others, justice means everyone receives what he or she has earned. This assumes that some people are inferior because they lack characteristics or abilities needed to earn rewards. It reflects a Darwinistic, survival-of-the-fittest idea (Smart, 2001, p. 129).

A higher view understands justice to mean everyone receives what he or she needs. This involves a shift from an abstract, principle-based ethic, to a value-based ethic of care, in which individual and community relationships are important (Murdick, Gartin, & Crabtree, 2002). Beneficence assumes a greater role as individual differences, and the needs of others are duly considered. In this view, justice remains linked with equal outcomes but acknowledges that different people have different needs and require different services or supports to achieve similar ends. Everyone gains the same rewards of society, at the same basic standards, but with differing accommodations (Smart, 2001). This perspective corresponds with the Bible's declaration of God's impartiality (Deuteronomy 19:17, Job 34:19, Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11)—meaning not that all people are treated alike, but that with God there is no favoritism: all receive what is needed.

CONCLUSION

Principles of biblical justice provide a more solid basis for inclusive education, inclusive communities, and inclusive churches. Inclusive practices based on principles of biblical justice will help educators (especially Christians) recognize that each student should receive what is needed, appropriately considering each one's strengths and weaknesses while avoiding the negativity that can result from focusing on limitations or differences. Biblical justice establishes a situation in which shalom and community are possible. This justice recognizes that all people have strengths and weaknesses and asserts their interdependence with one another (Anderson, 2006).

Just as Jesus broke through barriers of gender, religion, ethnicity, and disability, Christians today must challenge practices and ideologies that lead to the exclusion of others. The principle of doing what is right and demonstrating loving kindness to others, and of living humbly, in obedience to God, is a blueprint for creating classrooms and communities that are truly inclusive, truly just, classrooms or communities in which educators can enact grace on behalf of others, rather than merely preach the existence of grace (Edmonds, 2011). To be grounded in Jesus, Christians must follow His model of breaking down barriers that separate able-bodied individuals from those with disabilities. Christians must "Speak for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed . . . speak for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice" (Proverbs 31:8–9, NLT).

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