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Tammy Bachrach

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*OPEN THE DOOR OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION TO ALL STUDENTS:
A CALL FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOOL REFORM
BY TAMMY BACHRACH*

Abstract

Does biblical justice include people with disabilities? Like the orphan and widow of Christ's day, people with disability have historically been marginalized, frequently experiencing poverty and isolation. A biblical worldview of disability and a Christian community, which seeks to have the mind of Christ, ought to challenge the exclusion and injustices people with disability experience in our communities. This article will interweave the author's personal experience as a Christian member of the disability community, disability studies scholarship, and a biblical worldview of disability to examine the current practice of excluding people with disabilities from Christian school education. The goal is to examine our societal biases and practices and respond to people with disabilities in a manner that is pleasing to Christ Jesus and to work toward reform within Christian schools in order to actively include people with disabilities.

Keywords: biblical justice, children with disabilities, Christian schools, medical model, social model, inclusion

“Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals” (Martin Luther King, Jr.).

Defining Biblical Justice

Metzger (2010) defined biblical justice in terms of making individuals and communities whole by upholding goodness and impartiality and reminded us of James 1:27 that says, “the kind of religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Does biblical justice include people with disabilities? Like the orphan and widow of Christ’s day, people with disability have historically been marginalized, frequently experiencing poverty and isolation. I would propose that a biblical worldview of disability and a Christian community seeking to have the mind of Christ ought to challenge the exclusion and injustices people with disability experience in our communities. This paper will interweave my personal experience as a Christian member of the disability community, disability studies scholarship, and a biblical worldview of disability to examine the current practice of excluding people with disabilities from Christian education.

Underlying much of disability studies scholarship is a critical pedagogical perspective. Critical pedagogy as described in Paulo Freire’s work brings attention to conditions of inequality in our society and encourages us to crucially consider the social conditions of the oppressed and to “imagine transformative ways of engaging in the world” (Monzo, in press, para. 5). As Christians, we know true transformation comes from actively engaging our faith in action as we follow God’s commandments. I encourage us to examine our biases and practices, to respond to people with disability in a manner that is pleasing to Christ Jesus, and to call for school reform within Christian schools that would actively include people with disabilities – not based on a societal or legal mandate but in accord with the mind of Christ.

Personal Reflection on the Two Models of Disability

I find my home in two communities; the Christian community and the disability community. Since childhood, I have held a strong belief in a personal and loving God and as a Christian, hold to the tenant that the Bible is the primary source of God’s revelation to man. As a child my home church was a small but welcoming church and I had the privilege of attending Christian schools kindergarten through college; receiving my bachelor’s degree at Biola University.

I also grew up comfortably within the disability community. Every member of my immediate family has a disability. My parents met in Washington State at the Goodwill Industries’ vocational training program for young adults with disabilities. My dad has a learning disability and my mother and only sibling, Tim, have an intellectual disability. As a result of my exposure to what others term *disability*, I hold a more unusual view of disability. The world sees

disability has an immense tragedy and throughout history has sought to eliminate or exclude people with disabilities through eugenics, euthanasia, and abandonment. Society's discomfort with disability continues today and is called the medical model of disability.

The Medical Model of Disability

The medical model of disability focuses on the flaws and deficits that are exhibited within the individual when compared to the "norm", or standard behavior, rate and style of learning. Even when professionals seek not to harm the person, the focus of their efforts are to "fix" or rehabilitate the individual so they can fit in and then be included in mainstream society; work, school, community, and church. The medical model fails to understand individuals apart from their diagnosis and frequently falls short of delivering an improved quality of life for the individual they are attempting to fix.

In the book of Matthew, Christ calls us to "become as a child" (Matthew 18:3). As a child, I never saw my parents' inability to read or Tim's difficulty with language as a tragedy; it was simply a fact. The most important aspect of family to a child is relational. The relationships I have with my family are rich, mutually rewarding, and mostly typical. My parents were very loving, sacrificial and hardworking. I feel fortunate to have been born into the family that God chose for me.

It was not until I matured, became socialized and exposed to the mainstream view of disability, that I even saw a difference. It was only then that I felt the sting of stigmatization. Not until I was much older did I see how much the members of my immediate family had suffered, not as a result of their impairments, but as a result of people's biases and discrimination. This part of my life experience is reflected in an alternative view of disability, which emphasizes the discriminatory nature of disability.

The Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability views disability through the lens of the social oppression rather than as an individual deficit. The social model "breaks the 'impairment-disability' causal link and turns attention to the sociopolitical, structural and economic minoritisation and exclusion of people with impairments" (Goodley, 2011, p. 14). People with impairments are disabled by society's propensity to exclude people with impairment from education, work, and all aspects of typical life. Shakespeare (2013) stated that within the social model, "the problem of disability is relocated from the individual, to barriers and attitudes which disable her" (p. 217).

Discrimination has peppered my family's life experience. While I continued to live with my parents, they lost legal custody of my brother and me. The general public does not believe that people with disabilities can be good parents and all the way through 1977 laws existed allowing

the forced sterilization of young adults with disabilities solely based only on their IQ. Over 60,000 young women were forcefully sterilized in our country (Stern, 2005). Anderson (2006) asserts that individuals with disabilities have been ghettoized by those in a position of power by assigning a socially constructed stigma to people with disabilities.

Not until 1974 with the passing of the *Education for all Handicapped Children Act* were children with disabilities even assured the right to attend public schools. At the time, Tim was eight years old. I am thankful that most of Tim's education was post-public law 94-142, now modified and re-ratified as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This legislation guaranteed him an education and allowed him to leave the segregated institutional school where he made no progress and to attend his local public junior high school. While I am grateful for the legal mandate that allowed Tim to attend a typical school, junior high was a difficult time for such a transition and did not come without pain. I distinctly remember the hurt we both felt when he came home and asked me what "retard" meant.

In contrast, while Tim struggled to make sense of the world's cruelty and harsh view of disability in his public school, I learned about God's love and biblical worldview by nurturing teachers at a local Christian high school. As Christians we are called to have the mind of Christ (I Corinthians 2:16). What is God's view of disability and how might the biblical worldview of disability differ from the world's view?

Biblical Worldview and Disability

From a disability perspective, the Holy Scriptures present various ideas about disability, some troublesome and some comforting. Thorsos (2014) posited that the Old and New Testaments offer different perspectives on disability. Disability studies scholar Eisland (1994) pointed out that some principles particular to the Old Testament and Levitical law present disability as a result of sin or as a punishment. Conversely, God intentionally created some people to have disability (Exodus 4:11). People with disabilities were excluded from the temple (Leviticus 21:16-23). However, the Old Testament also provides very strong admonition to protect people with disabilities (Leviticus 19:14).

The New Testament, however, presents a more restorative view of disability. Horne's (1998) analysis of the Leviticus position asserted that Paul, in his New Testament letters, reversed the Leviticus tradition in his statement that "inabilities are the place where God's power is made complete and that inabilities are the place where Christ's power comes to abide" (p. 95).

In John 9, the sin-disability correlation is directly addressed. Jesus and His disciples encounter a man who was blind from birth. Jesus' disciples directly inquire about the sin-impairment conflation by asking, "Rabbi, who sinned? Was this man born blind because he sinned? Or did his parents sin?" (John 9:2). Jesus answered: "It isn't because this man sinned.

It isn't because his parents sinned. It happened so that God's work could be shown in his life" (John 9:3). In Christ's reply, we see the severing of the assumed causal relationship between sin and impairment, at least in this particular instance (Kelley, 2007). In addition, Swinton (2011) reminds us of Romans 2:23 which states, "All people have sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard" and as such, human variation, disabled or able-bodiedness, are aspects of our created universe and neither can be attributed to sin nor claimed as a representation of the image of God.

Grant (1998) and Black (2006) both speak of Jesus' inclusive action to reach across the societal boundaries and the purity laws by touching people who were ill or disabled, providing healing and reconciling the person back to the community. Christ specifically teaches that his followers have a special responsibility and mission to marginalized people who are unable to provide for themselves (Eiesland, 1994). This is not intended to make people with disabilities solely the recipient of care. Anderson (2012) warned against this tendency, stating, "rather than seeing a person who has a disability, many see a person who has (or is) a need" (p. 153), which can lead to the assumption that a person's primary need is for our assistance, with no thought to the possibility that the disabled individual has something to offer to those who are not disabled.

Anderson (2012), Mitchell (2013), and Reynolds (2008) pointed to I Corinthians 12:22-26 as encouraging and inclusive verses which speak of the body of Christ as the Christian community, giving every member a place of value. The passage stresses how all members are parts of the body. Even those who appear to be weaker are highly valued and play a vital role in the functioning of the church. Anderson also points to the principle espoused in this scripture as a means to support inclusive classrooms, especially in Christian schools.

Christian Schools' Exclusion of Students with Disabilities

If God sees disability as a normal part of life in a fallen world, the work of disability is reconciliatory and in fact people with disabilities have a vital role within the body of Christ.

Ironically, my brother Tim was never allowed the experience of attending a biblically oriented, Christ-centered school. While public schools are forced through legal mandate to include students like Tim into their school, Christian schools retain the freedom to exclude. Christian schools then and now often exclude Christian children with disabilities from attending their schools. Despite the admonition to "not be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Roman 12:2), few Christian schools offer services to children with even mild learning disabilities (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2010). Ramirez and Stymeist in their informal observations of schools accredited by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) found that most Christian schools claimed

that they could not accept or retain students with disabilities due to a lack of financial and professional resources. Current review of the schools published on the ACSI website shows that 95% of the accredited “Christ-centered” schools in California still do not accept children with disabilities.

Many people with disabilities do not find a loving, inclusive welcome within the doors of the church but instead find the doors of Christian schools historically bolted shut by applications designed to accept only those students deemed to be of appropriate academic and social standing. In fact, many Christian schools exhibit an elitist entrance criterion. For example, one local Christian school stipulated that only students who were at or above grade level and who had no “needs improvements” in citizenship and work habits were *acceptable*.

Thorsos (2014) reminds us that to have the mind of Christ (i.e., to be transformed toward Christ-likeness) involves thinking and understanding the truth about the world as God’s creation. Ramirez and Stymeist (2010) hold that it is unjust to withhold the precious gift of a Christian education from the population of students with special needs, reporting that when administrators from seven Christian schools were challenged by parents regarding their school’s lack of special education services, the principals could not articulate from a biblical principle why they did not service the disability community. So what do Christian school administrators report are the barriers for providing a Christian education to all children?

Barriers to Inclusion Within Christian Schools

The research literature (Anderson, 2010; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2010; Pudlas, 2004) and my personal communication with local school administrators cite financial barriers (i.e., the increased cost of providing the appropriate services to children with disabilities) and the lack of qualified personnel as the two primary reasons for this exclusion. Other barriers include the lack of space and fear that providing these services will compromise the standards of excellence for the children without disabilities or will be objected to by parents of typical children.

The fear of compromising the educational standards of the nondisabled students will be addressed first. Christian schools focus on providing rigorous education and fear “gaining a reputation of being a school that specializes in special education rather than an academically excellent institution” (Shaywitz, 2003, p. 297 cited in Ramirez & Stymeist, 2010; Pudlas, 2004). Cookson and Smith (2011) and Anderson (2012) also found that teachers and parents of general education students feared that providing accommodations to some children would take too much of the teacher’s time and compromise the education of the majority of the class. This objection is not reserved to Christian schools and arose in public schools following the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* and the *Civil Rights Act*, mandating equal educational rights for Black

Americans, and after the adoption of IDEA and the subsequent inclusion movement designed to make our classrooms more diverse.

Addressing the Barriers

Freytag (2008) questioned whether Christians should adopt the world's definitions of excellence. Freytag pointed to the perpetuated view of excellence in education today which emphasizes the process of climbing and scaling to get ahead, striving for personal achievement at the expense of others. Should success or failure for Christian children be defined in such narrow terms as the mastery of a prescribed curriculum? Freytag challenged Christians to rethink the meaning of excellence in education beyond simple academic achievement as defined by the current culture. Many excellent secular schools exist to provide an academically rich and rigorous education designed to prepare the child to get into highly competitive colleges and to "make it" in our capitalistic society. However, most Christian parents enroll their children into faith-based schools to learn how to lead a distinctively Christian life in addition to receiving a quality education. Do not all children, particularly those who are most vulnerable to the influences of the world, benefit from this form of education? In addition, will not those with disabilities provide a valuable means for teaching all of our Christian children the value of diversity as well as the immensity of God's unconditional love and mercy for all his children?

The question may still remain, however, whether the academic progress of nondisability children will be hampered by inclusion. Many studies have examined this issue and the research concludes that this fear is unfounded (Dessemonet & Bliss, 2013; Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007). The literature review in Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, and Kaplan evaluated multiple studies that examined the impact of including children with disabilities into general education classroom on students without disabilities. The literature review summarized the outcome of each study and found that of the 12 studies, eight showed neutral outcomes and four showed positive outcomes for children without disabilities when children with disabilities were educated alongside them. No study showed negative outcomes for nondisabled children as a result of inclusive practices. These results were also consistent with a study conducted by Dessemonet and Bliss who found that the "progress of primary students without disability, regardless of their level of academic achievement, seems not to be compromised by the inclusion of a child with mild or moderate ID in their classroom" (p. 28).

Since the research does not support that the inclusion of children with disabilities into the classroom is detrimental to the education of nondisabled children, we are left with the responsibility to change our misunderstanding and attitudes toward people with disabilities, to examine the true purpose of Christian education, and to improve the Christ-honoring purposes of our school cultures. Following their study on ACSI-accredited Christian schools, Ramirez and

Stymeist (2010) concluded that the primary barrier within the leadership of the schools was an undeveloped heart for children with special needs. What about those who have a heart to include all children in Christian education but worry about the financial commitment to do so?

It is true that there are additional expenses required to provide the additional services and supports that a child with unique learning may require (Cookson & Smith, 2011). Best practices in education today, however, do not advocate for special and separate classes for children with disabilities but rather for all children to be taught in an inclusive classroom with differential instruction provided to every child. Some schools that serve the disabled population have created a shared network of supports whereby inclusion specialists, behavioral therapists, or other specially trained experts are paid for and shared by multiple Christian schools (Van Dyk, 2010) decreasing the financial burden. IDEA requires public school districts to provide psycho-educational testing and speech therapy even if the child attends a private school or is home-schooled. Other school districts access public school funds and pass the additional, unfunded educational cost to the parents of the child who needs extra support (Cookson & Smith, 2011).

However one addresses the economics of providing services to children with disabilities, the argument against educating children with disabilities in Christian schools due to limited financial resources strikes me as ironic. You see, in all my years of Christian school attendance I was taught that God's plan could not be thwarted (Job 42:2), that God is powerful and mighty (Psalms 147:5), and that God provides for his people (Philippians 4:19). As a child I recall spiritual emphasis and missions' weeks filled with testimonies about how God miraculously provided the money for his work. One of the many names for God found in the Old Testament is *Jehovah-Jireh*, the Lord will provide. It seems ironic to me that the very teachers and administrators who taught me to put my faith in God's mighty hand and trust God with my stewardship seem to develop faltering faith when it comes to meeting God's call to provide services to all children.

Christian Faith in Action

Could the financial argument be a matter of "You receive not because you ask not"? (James 4:2). John 15:16 reminds us that we have been chosen and appointed by God and that we would "go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you." How might the exclusion of children with disabilities within some Christian schools be changed if teachers, principals, and school boards developed the heart and vision for special education services and repeatedly presented this request before God in prayer?

Cookson & Smith (2011) researched Christian schools that have answered God's call to provide services to all children including those with severe disabilities within integrated

environments and examined the results. Christ teaches in Matthew 7:13-14 that the way to salvation is hard, and we see in the Bible examples of godly men who followed God's call, resulting in personal sacrifice and difficulty but receiving great reward.

Cookson & Smith (2011), Van Dyk (2010), and Buursma (2010) all attest to the positive changes in the climate and Christian maturity of their staff and students as a result of following God's call to admit students with disabilities into their Christian school community. Many times the person with a disability is seen primarily in terms of their limitations or need for compassionate care. Within this view the caregiver cannot envision that the individual with the disability has something to offer those who are not disabled (Anderson, 2010). In my professional capacity, I have had the privilege to both assist and be assisted by hundreds of people with various disabilities. I can attest to the mutual benefit of relationship with many considered disadvantaged. Cookson and Smith (2011) interviewed principals and change agents who reformed their respective schools to include individuals with severe disabilities. They reported increased joy in their labors, spiritual growth, change in school culture, and change in the student body to be more caring and sensitive to the needs of others. One teacher spoke of her experience as having "broadened my horizons as a teacher, as a person, and as a Christian" (Cookson & Smith, 2011, p. 243). Stegink (2010) contended that people with disabilities can serve as the catalyst to develop a biblical worldview. By seeing people with disabilities not as pitiable, burdensome, or defective, but as beneficial and needed members of the Christian community, our Christian schools will positively change.

Conclusion and Call for Action

It is time to "not conform to this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12:2). Some of our Christian schools still need to grow in this area, and I believe it is time to reject the negative view of disability which leads to exclusion and to be transformed by the biblical view of disability as people created in God's image, specifically purposed to do His will, and to be included as a valued member of the body of Christ. I believe the time has come to:

- Pray specifically for a changed heart within our Christian community.
- Speak out against the injustice of exclusion.
- Educate our educators, administrators, and governing boards about the benefits of including children with disabilities and how to partner with others to provide services to all children.
- Evaluate the accrediting agencies for Christian school and encourage examination of disabilities exclusion.

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