

Down Syndrome, the Image of God, and Personhood

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People with Down syndrome help Christians understand what being made in the image of God truly means. After describing Down syndrome, we will examine the different views of the image of God and how these relate to people with Down syndrome. Another approach will be to define personhood in light of God's image and relate it to Down syndrome. We will use the principles held by the L'Arche community as an exemplar in this discussion to demonstrate that those with Down syndrome encourage us to expand our understanding of the image of God. Consequently, Down's persons allow us to apply the truths and revelations of God's kingdom to discover the true image of God may be found in those with cognitive disabilities.

What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? All of these are valid questions that you and I can ask and answer in our own way but, how do our answers differ from someone with a mental or physical disability? Jane Deland reasons that "theology belongs to the whole person—mind, spirit, body. Therefore, the experience of disability inevitably influences theological perspective."¹

As I have now researched this topic a bit further, I have come to find that when dealing with disabilities as a source of theological reflection, it challenges us as Christians to view and understand God in a different manner as well as forcing us to acknowledge that the distinction amongst 'abled' and 'disabled' people is subjective and debatable. Nathan Goldbloom states that "contemplating the question of what persons with disabilities have to teach the body of Christ has revealed the gap between theology and its application in the local church."² This paper aims to close this gap with a focus more on Down syndrome rather

than the large list of mental and physical disabilities and retardations. I believe that people with Down syndrome serve a unique purpose in helping Christians understand what it means to be made in the image of God. We will start off by defining and briefly describing Down syndrome and following this foundation we will examine the different views of the image of God and how these relate to people with Down syndrome. The next step will be to describe and define personhood and critically analyze a few ideas. Finally we will conclude with an overview of the principles held by the L'Arche community. This paper will show that disabilities, and those with Down syndrome in particular encourage us to expand our understanding of the image of God, and will teach us how to apply the truths and revelations of God's kingdom that have come through persons with cognitive disabilities.

Down Syndrome Explained

Down syndrome also known as trisomy 21, is a genetic disorder caused by

¹ Deland, Jane S. "Images of God through the Lens of Disability".

² Goldbloom, Nathan, "Appropriating the Principles of L'Arche for the Transformation of Church Curricula."

the presence of all or part of a third copy of chromosome 21. It is typically associated with physical growth delays, some distinct physical features, such as a flat-looking face, and also the risk for a number of other health conditions.³ It is the most common chromosomal cause of mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. People with the syndrome are also more likely to be born with heart abnormalities, and they are at increased risk for developing hearing and vision problems, Alzheimer disease, and other conditions. However, with appropriate support and treatment, many people with Down syndrome lead happy, productive lives.⁴

There are various different views held about people with Down syndrome ranging on both sides of the spectrum from positive to negative. Philosophers such as Peter Singer, who is better known for his views on animal rights, and Richard Dawkins, a popular biology educator, are two with very similar views. Richard Dawkins once said in a Twitter rant in reference to a statement about a woman knowingly bearing a Down fetus “Abort it and try again. It would be immoral to bring it into the world if you have the choice.” On the other hand Amy Becker, the mother of a Down’s baby assures in her blog post that after reading the Beatitudes she realizes that being ‘perfectly’ human is not about physique, intelligence, or abilities but, rather meekness, sorrow, longing for God, being complete, and whole.⁵

These two different views show how debatable and subjective things are with respect to Down’s. Thus, the image of God is no longer defined by, nor confined to, one individual perspective, but rather opened up to be understood through various lenses. It is

with this understanding that we now examine what it means to be made in the image of God and their implications of disabilities.

Image of God

Throughout the history of Christian theology, the question of what it means to claim that we have been made in the image of Christ has remained to be a debatable and heavily opinionated topic. From these debates, four positions have emerged: the structural view; the functional view; the relational view; and the dynamic view.

The *structural view* proposes that the image of God is grounded in our moral and rational natures and creates a distinction between “image of God” and the “likeness of God.”⁶ From this standpoint, the image of God is described “as our rationality, moral freedom, and responsibility, which we retain despite human sinfulness. The divine likeness, in contrast, is the ‘robe of sanctity’ which the Holy Spirit had bestowed on Adam.”⁷ This likeness of God was lost during the fall of man, but is being restored in and through Christ⁸. This view poses serious issues for the person with a disability. If in fact the image of God is rooted in rational thought, morality, and responsibility, the person with Down syndrome is then excluded from possessing the image of God. Moreover, this view advocates for the apparent discrimination and marginalization of people with Down’s even with regard to the image of God.⁹

Second, the *functional view* interprets the image of God as a role in the created order, where humankind is a king or ruler over all creation and Earth. It is based on Genesis 1:26, in which God commands humanity to have dominion and

³ CDC. (2011). *Facts about Down syndrome*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Becker, A. J. (2011). My Perfect Child. *Christianity Today*, 55(12), 38-41.

⁶ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* 169.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

responsibility over all creation. This dominion mirrors God's own sovereignty. In this way, humanity is endowed with God's image in the functional sense. We thus demonstrate and live out the image of God as we participate in that dominion and responsibility.¹⁰ This view, however, is biased against people with Down's because often times they are much less physically and intellectually capable than able-bodied people. Also because this view is centered on humanity's responsibility, it implies that people with severe intellectual disabilities are denied the right to be made in the image of God.¹¹ If, however, "we understand the gift (and responsibility) of God that empowers human dominion less as power to rule over and more as the power to rule with others, then that opens up space for us to see people with disabilities as manifesting the divine image precisely in their solidarity with others who are more engaged in dominion over the world."¹² Therefore, how we interpret God's command to have dominion over the earth determines whether we attribute the image of God to people with disabilities or not.

Next, the *relational view* argues that one must be in relationship with God in order to possess the 'image of God.' This view shifts the focus from anthropology to Christology, making Christ the ultimate "bearer and restorer of the divine image."¹³ As a result, it is our ability to establish and maintain complex and intricate relationships with others that make us like God.¹⁴ This perspective provides the space for people with disabilities to possess the image of God. Since it consists in an individual's relationship with God and others, people with disabilities can be seen as possessing

the image of God in their dependent relational nature.¹⁵ The emphasis is removed from human structure or functions and thus focuses on who we are in Christ. Who we are in relation to God and others, and because other creatures do not culminate such spiritual relationships, theologians such as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner see this ability as uniquely representing the 'image of God' in humans.

Lastly the *dynamic view* shifts the focus to the future. This view essentially entails the idea that the image is not to be found in the structure of human personality or in our functions or relationships, but rather is a goal or destiny to which redeemed humanity is moving. Thus, this view is rooted not in anthropology or Christology, but in eschatology.¹⁶ It is in the resurrection and new creation that humans will bear the image of God.¹⁷ Within this perspective, disabilities are not placed in a hierarchy of brokenness as being worse than any other challenge. Instead, all humanity is working towards the goal of the image of God; people with disabilities perhaps face greater challenges in this process, but all humanity is essentially in the same boat working towards the same goal. In light of this view, people with disabilities are not denied the image of God, but are also given the promise of future inclusion in the Kingdom of God. Viewed this way, disabilities are now a part of what it means to be human, and "are no longer something to conquer in search for perfection or something that is endured as a punishment for sinfulness."¹⁸

Personhood

Considering these ideas and views about what it means for someone to be made

¹⁰ Yong, A. (2007). p. 172.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Op. cit. ref. 10 p. 173.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Creamer, D. (2009).

in the image of God, we wonder what makes a human individual a person? A general definition is a person is an intelligent being living in a rational world. This statement is accurate because it is our reasoning and rational nature that separates us from things such as chairs or animals such as dogs but connects us to people with Down's or other disabilities. Personhood examines our everyday questions of who are we, and what truly exists. Although thought to be a foundational concept in ethics, the defining criteria have been elusive. The personhood argument reasons that if a fetus whether Down's or not, is in fact an immature person, then there is no reason that we should deny it the right to live. Just because a fetus does not resemble or reflect that of the very subjective 'normal human' does not negate the fact that it is human. Mary Ann Warren, in reference to abortion stated five criteria for personhood in response to whether a human being can be said to be a person.

First of these is *consciousness*. This includes the consciousness of objects around us and events that are external or internal to that person or at least the capacity to feel pain. Next is *reasoning or autonomy* which is the capacity to consciously make sense of things, apply logic, establish and verify facts, and modify or mitigate practices. Another way to define reason is the capacity to react to and solve new and relatively complex problems. Following this is *self-motivated activity*; activity which is relatively independent of either genetic or direct external control. Fourth is the *capacity to communicate*, by whatever means, messages of an indefinite assortment of types on indefinitely many potential topics. Last is the presence of *self-awareness and self-concepts* of one's individuality, race or both. Individuality is the key characteristic under this criterion which separates us from animals, and also

one which we may use as a necessary attribute to attain personhood.

For a person with Down's, Warren's list of criteria for gaining personhood does not put any constraints on their capacity to be identified as a person. She stated that at least some of these are necessary, if not sufficient, criteria for personhood (which is necessary and sufficient for moral standing). Down's individuals meet Warren's requirements. Conversely, she argues that fetuses do not meet these criteria; therefore, they cannot be persons, and cannot have moral standing, and so abortion is acceptable.

After volunteering this fall at Disability Resources Incorporated (DRI) pumpkin patch in Abilene I realized that these five criteria can easily be found in forty-two-year-old Kay who has Down's. She was completely conscious of the fact that it was really cold outside on a fall night and able to reason and go grab a jacket. She definitely exhibited self-motivated activity when she stated numerous times that she would have rather been in her room packing to go home for the weekend instead of helping manage the pumpkin patch. She communicated on a level much deeper than what I assumed was possible when she started to actively engage in a discussion about my major and why I chose the career path I did. Lastly, although Kay was completely aware of her disability, instead of using it as an excuse, she did not see herself as different from myself and I never heard her say "I'm pretty for someone with Down's" but rather "I'm pretty."

Outside of her five criteria, Warren also interjects that acknowledging someone as a person grants said person the right to be treated as a member of the moral community. This means that simply claiming that in and of ourselves we are persons, does not in fact, ensure personhood but rather that personhood is endowed upon

us by those around us who are in relationship with us and those who value us. In Kay's case, the workers at DRI and myself endowed personhood upon Kay simply by our treatment and relationship with her.

L'Arche and Personhood

Being members of the Body of Christ, people with disabilities share an identical eternal destiny with all other members of the Kingdom of God. But for them this radiant hope excites an additional sense of anticipation. Those with Down's and other disabilities seem to elude an aura that captivates people in wanting to help and get to know them. Keeping this in mind, the L'Arche community encourages disabled people to come forward and be themselves.

L'Arche communities were founded by Jean Vanier in France in 1964. This is a place where individuals can come when they get older to live. This puts those with disabilities in a community where they can build relationships with people; these people are other individuals with disabilities and those who are not disabled. Vanier believes that personhood rests not in our achievements, in our legacy, or admiration, but in rests in God alone. She believes as persons we are vulnerable. To embrace our personhood and individuality, we have to admit our limitations, accept that we are not God. This means letting go of the world's idea of success so that we may embrace our vulnerability. The L'Arche community is built on the presence of being fragile and being able to welcome the vulnerable. This community demonstrates a new way of the

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¹⁹Arcaro, T. & C. Brown. 1999.

looking at the word 'image' or 'likeness.' Here in this place being different is part of the norm and allows one to grow and understand their own value.

To be human does not mean one is impeccable. In fact, Miles Richardson, an anthropologist, claims there is nothing more universal than the individual; we are humans because of our differences.¹⁹ Therefore, if diversity is the foundation of humanity, why is it that certain types of diversity result in inferior status? Disability does not eliminate human rights. An individual with Down syndrome is still a person. It may take them longer to acquire knowledge because their IQ is not as high as others, but then the value of a human being and the right to personhood is not built on intellectual sharpness. The misunderstanding that individuals with disabilities are incapable of contributing to society, and thus not valuable, is to view them as less than human.

Conclusion

My personal experience, and overall willingness to understand and appreciate people with disabilities and their work, has proven that people with disabilities are capable, and do in fact, contribute to society in a variety of ways. We belong to God, created in the 'image of God' to reflect God's perfect love. All people, regardless their race, creed, ability or lack thereof, belong to a common humanity. Our value and personhood are found in God. The uniting characteristic for all human beings is our identity as God's beloved children. Nothing takes away our value.

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