
Ministry to People With Disabilities

A Biblical Perspective

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Pentecostal evangelicals, believing that miracles still happen today, sometimes have difficulty dealing with people with permanent disabilities and with those who are not healed after much prayer. But does our theology include, along with our belief in supernatural miracles today, a biblical explanation for those who are not immediately healed or made whole? We accept death by old age, and even by accident; but constant reminders of many with mental and physical disabilities, who are not restored to full health and activity, seem to suggest that our belief or our faith is faulty.

Our theology makes place for pain and suffering, because we have hope for healing and an end to pain. But how does our theology, our faith, and our practice handle the person who may never walk again or the mentally challenged child who may never participate in normal social interaction? A proper understanding of the gospel must boldly proclaim, even though we do not have all the answers, that the God who created the universe and all human life in it is aware of the tension His children feel. He expects us to be people of compassion as well as people of power.

God Still Heals and Works Miracles

We affirm that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8¹). He heals today. His miracles confirm His deity, omnipotence, and faithfulness to His promises. We preach the biblical truth of His healing power, even though divine power does not respond immediately to every human plea and desire. Though His ways are beyond our understanding (Romans 11:33), we trust His decisions in response to *all* our prayers.

The New Testament records many miracles and healings wrought by Jesus. Yet not every disease and infirmity in His immediate proximity was removed. Scripture records that upon returning to His hometown, “he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith” (Matthew 13:58). In John 5, Jesus healed only one of many gathered at the pool of Bethesda for a superstitious expectation of physical healing. So if prayer for healing is not immediately answered, we do not change our theology to say God no longer heals. We continue to trust Him in anticipation of the day when the infirmities of earthly existence drop away in the perfect light of His eternal presence.²

Biblical Attitude Toward Disabilities³

Some speculate that God does not value persons with physical or mental defects or disabilities, and He particularly does not want such persons in spiritual leadership. This erroneous interpretation of God’s impartial love and compassion is drawn by some from Leviticus 21:17-23: “For the generations to come none of your descendants [Aaron’s] who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come

¹ Scripture references are from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

² For a biblically based affirmation of the Assemblies of God belief in divine healing and miracles today, see position paper, “Divine Healing: an Integral Part of the Gospel.”

³ The term *disability* is sometimes used interchangeably with *handicap*. Both words refer to something that hampers, hinders, or prevents one’s ability to perform a task because of mental or physical impairment through natural deterioration, chronic disease, birth defect, or traumatic injury.

near to present the offerings made to the Lord by fire. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God. He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food; yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the Lord, who makes them holy.”

The Aaronic priesthood as a group anticipated the perfect, sinless High Priest. “Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (Hebrews 7:24-27).

Now that the perfect High Priest has come to die for us, there is no longer need for physically perfect priests who foreshadowed the coming of the great High Priest. Yet even apart from the restriction on impaired priests participating in ceremonies that looked toward the future, the priests with disabilities were still priests whose every need was taken care of by divine command: “He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food” (Leviticus 21:22).

After Moses met with God at the burning bush, the call to leadership followed immediately: “So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:10). Moses, after giving several reasons why he was not the man for the job, complained, “O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue” (Exodus 4:10).

Stephen, the New Testament martyr, referred to Moses as being “powerful in speech” (Acts 7:22). So Moses was either unaware of his strength of speech, or he was downplaying his abilities. Through a series of questions, God reminded Moses that He determines human abilities and disabilities. Was Moses’ claim to be “slow of speech and tongue” a disability or a lack of confidence in his God-given ability? Either way, God had the answer: “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11).

Some say that God is responsible for sin in the world and for the physical defects and disabilities humans have. But the suffering Job spoke truth, “Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong” (Job 34:10). God neither creates evil nor sends it on anyone. When He has to punish, it is loving correction (Hebrews 12:5,6). God was saying to Moses, “As Creator of all life, even in a fallen world of sin and disabilities, I take loving responsibility for everyone. So, Moses, if you have a disability, I can take care of that too.”

God imparts *ability*, and He knows about *disability* because He at least allows it. God could have said to Moses what He later said to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

We find additional confirmation in other Scripture passages. The Israelites were admonished to show kindness to those who were deaf and blind (Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 27:18). Those who minister to the weak and helpless are blessed (Psalm 41:1). Jesus welcomed people with all manner of disabilities into the kingdom of God, even though they would have been excluded from service under the Old Testament (Matthew 4:23ff; 15:30). He instructed how to treat people with disabilities: “Then Jesus said to his host, ‘When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, *invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.* Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14, italics added). Countless healings in the Old and New Testaments provide proof of the compassionate nature of God, in spite of the fact that not all illnesses, diseases, or disabilities were removed.

Mental Disabilities

Secular society has found ways to accommodate those with physical disabilities better than those who are mentally impaired. The church of Jesus Christ, the earthly representative of spiritual reality, should be the leader in providing opportunity for all people to connect with the Spirit of God. We do not fully

understand the age of accountability and its application to persons with mental disabilities. We do not understand how a person with a mental disability relates to God. But we must give opportunity for the Spirit of God to speak to such a person at his or her level of comprehension.

Recent special education approaches indicate that individuals with moderate levels of mental disabilities can be mainstreamed in traditional schools and can participate in emotional and social experiences with their peers. Some demonstrate an unusual level of creativity in artistic expression. Many grasp spiritual realities and participate in worship and other church activities, especially in smaller groups. The church should provide such activities for those who can be introduced to genuine encounters with God's presence.⁴

The primary key to understanding and working with people with mental disabilities is building relationships with them. Developing friendship and trust encourages them to open up to the love of God. Such ministry fulfills the words of Jesus: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25:35,36). He could well have added, "I was different, yet you loved me."

Call to a Compassionate Church

Ministry to people with disabilities. The biblical command to "serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13) includes everyone. To view people with disabilities as flawed and defective, and possibly a divine mistake, is wrong for a church with Christlike compassion. People with disabilities are platforms for the demonstration of His power to heal or His power to use weakness to display His strength. The church often ministers well to persons with acute illnesses and injuries, where the natural healing process and/or the miracle of divine healing seems a possibility. But in situations where disability is long term or permanent, faith is challenged. Our faith and practice must include a compassionate hand extended to those with disabilities.

The challenges to church leadership are: (1) affirming and ministering to those with disabilities, while (2) encouraging congregational acceptance of them into church life and activity. If we are to fulfill the Great Commission to preach the gospel to "every creature" (Mark 16:15, NKJV), we cannot overlook this segment of society.

Ministry to people with disabilities is challenging. Volunteers grow weary when there are limited positive responses. Medication, therapy, pain, and slow deterioration may persist. Yet, we must remember that God's love for us persists even though *our* failures and disobedience keep recurring. When His love consumes and motivates us, our ministry to people with disabilities is ministry as to Christ himself.

The church's compassion may cost money to modify physical facilities. Federal, state, and local governments have standards that allow the physically handicapped access to public facilities. Such requirements should be considered minimal. Our responsibility, as representatives of the kingdom of God, is to include those with disabilities in church functions and worship. Reserving easily accessible pews or aisle seats for people with physical limitations will say, "We want you to worship with us." Ushers trained to show kindness to worshipers with physical and mental disabilities and to their caregivers demonstrates the seriousness of the church's concern.

Though salvation is the greatest need of every person, the Great Commission includes more than evangelizing. Discipling and equipping people with disabilities to use their gifts to build up the body of Christ is also a response to the church's commission..

Ministry of caregiving. Caregivers need our thanks. Sometimes those they care for don't have the ability to say thank you. It is easy to become weary serving a family member who has a terminal illness or a permanent disability. Knowing that God is all-powerful, caregivers may be tempted to blame the One

⁴ For further assistance in conducting ministry to people with mental and physical disabilities, contact Special Touch Ministry, Inc., P.O. Box 25, Waupaca, Wisconsin 54981. For assistance in ministry to the blind, contact the Assemblies of God National Center for the Blind, 1445 N. Boonville, Springfield, MO 65802.

who can make that person well, but doesn't. Yet until He answers, they must trust the God who compassionately loves both the caregiver and the one with a disability.

Word to caregivers. Be proud to be seen in public and in a worship service with your family member or friend with a disability. Scripture commands us, "Carry each other's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). You do that when you give love and compassionate care to one who cannot return the kindness. Others may not be quick to help you bear your burden of caring for one of God's special people, but our Heavenly Father, who shows compassion for them, understands and will bless your ministry.

Word to People with Disabilities

If you comprehend what has happened to you, you probably have asked, "Why me, Lord?" Students of the Scriptures have searched the Bible for the answer to that question. And since the Bible does not give a final answer, neither can we. Some have tried to penetrate the mystery of suffering, but in doing so have gone beyond God's Word. There are examples in Scripture of people suffering because of sin in their lives. But righteous people suffer too. Others have suggested that God has a special love for those with long-term pain and suffering, knowing they can handle what others could not. But the love of God to every person is beyond comprehension or deserving.

A mother with disabilities, whose children are serving God, said, "My greatest desire of seeing my entire family following Jesus has been answered, even though my prayer for physical healing has not yet been answered. It may be that their commitment has in some way been linked with my suffering and how I have handled it. God has given me the first desire of my heart."

The answer the Bible gives concerning your pain and suffering is that we all live in a fallen, sin-cursed world. God did not make it that way. We have made it that way, from Adam and Eve to the present, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The bigger question is, "Why do we not all suffer more than we do?"

God calls you to come to Him with your disability, just as He invites everyone to come to Him. He says to each of us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28,29). His first concern for every person is the soul: Is it right with God in preparation for eternal wholeness in His presence? A lifetime with a disability followed by an eternity with God is to be preferred to a lifetime with health and wealth followed by an eternity separated from God. Seek to know God intimately until He speaks peace to your heart. As you seek God, invest your time, talents, and energies in serving others. Jesus said, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8).

Conclusion

People with disabilities are essential to the wholeness of the Christian community. In a culture that worships physical perfection, devalues human life, and takes pride in disposability, the church must protect the helpless, vulnerable, disenfranchised, including people with disabilities. They are people created in God's image, possessing dignity, value, and purpose.

The church must extend open arms of invitation and fellowship. Those with mental disabilities can respond to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul reported the answer he received when he asked that his thorn in the flesh be removed: "[The Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:9). We can trust God to reveal His power through the weakness of those with disabilities.

Frequently Asked Questions About Ministry to People With Disabilities

1. What is a disability?

A disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual. Disabling conditions come in countless forms and have many causes. Those causes include, but are not restricted to: birth, sickness and disease, the violence of others, accidents, sin

and satanic activity, and the infirmities of advancing age. Disability is distinct from sickness and disease. Sickness and disease can often result in disabilities, but not all disabilities are caused by sickness and disease.

2. How did disability originate?

God established His authority over Adam and the rest of the human family by giving Adam one restriction: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). Imperfection, pain, sorrow, and suffering came when Adam and Eve became subject to death (Genesis 3:7-24).

Prior to the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God had declared His entire creation to be very good—exceedingly suitable (Genesis 1:31). That divine declaration not only described the status of His creation, but serves also as an indicator of His benevolent intent for His children. It was never God’s original purpose to fill the days of His children with difficult circumstances, including disabilities.

3. Why does God allow suffering?

Pain, suffering, and death are more than simply penalty for the sinful acts of Adam and Eve. The presence of suffering in the world is a witness to the integrity and holiness of God. He is indeed not a man that He should lie (Numbers 23:19). Suffering is essential so we may understand that the world we live in is not the same one that God declared to be perfect in Genesis 1:31. It has been violated and violently altered as a result of the sin of humankind (Genesis 3:17-19). The healthiest human being lives in a marred body. The healthiest human being is still appointed once to die (Hebrews 9:27). Death is the ultimate universal disability, and its presence in the world points us to the Cross. Living in marred bodies in a marred creation declares sinful humankind’s need for God’s plan of redemption through Jesus Christ (Romans 8:20-22). The good news is that God promises us that earthly suffering is temporary (2 Corinthians 4:17,18; Romans 8:18).

4. How does God view people with disabilities?

God determines both ability and disability. Exodus 4:11 states: “The Lord said to him, ‘Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?’” The word picture of God as a potter and man as the workmanship of His hands is used in both the Old and New Testaments. It implies personal involvement and attention to detail, deliberate intent, and the specific design and purpose of the potter for each individual vessel. The potter forms the clay in a way that pleases Him. People with disabilities are not damaged goods. God takes full responsibility for their existence.

5. What is the purpose of suffering and trials?

Trials keep us dependent on God. They drive us to pray and cause us to seek His face and His help (Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 Peter 5:6,7). Trials help our faith develop endurance and patience (James 1:2,3), and they allow God to establish a track record of His faithfulness in our lives (Psalm 37:25). They remind us that the love of Christ is constant and far greater than any problem or pain: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

6. What part does sin in a person’s life or lack of faith play in the healing process?

John 9 indicates there are times when God allows a person to have a disability so the power of God can be displayed at some point. In John 9 and Acts 3 that power came in the form of divine healing. There are other Scripture passages where God chose to display His power *through* a person’s weaknesses (1 Corinthians 1:27-29; 2 Corinthians 12:9). The individual with the disability is the best judge of his own spiritual condition, because he is the one the Holy Spirit will convict, if need be (John 16:8).

7. Why doesn’t God heal everyone?

Ultimately, every Christian will experience a permanent release from all sickness, pain, and disability (1 Corinthians 15:43,54). Because of this certainty of ultimate healing, every Christian who suffers can live with hope. We know God does heal today. We serve a God who does things “in the fullness of times” (Exodus 2:23-25; Galatians 4:4) and in perfect season (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Psalm 30:5). The timing of an individual’s healing and the means of that healing are subject to God. Healing is not at the whim of individual believers. The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians about Epaphroditus who nearly died before he was healed (Philippians 2:27). Paul wrote to Timothy about taking a little wine medicinally for his stomach and other chronic ailments (1 Timothy 5:23). The apostle Paul could not heal people at will. The Old and New Testaments show that the timing of divine healing rests with God and usually occurs as people of His choosing can be impacted for His glory, or when He deems that the purpose for the affliction or disability is fulfilled. Therefore, it is best to view healing as a divine appointment with the divine Physician.

8. What if a person is prayed for but doesn’t get healed?

The physical or spiritual condition of people with disabilities should not be judged only on what our physical eyes observe. It is imperative that spiritual leaders exercise discernment when praying for people with disabilities, and not simply assume that their most pressing need is for physical healing. Likewise, those who pray should not judge the results of their prayer by what they see. They can never know, without asking, how a person has been ministered to by the Spirit of God. Remember, people with disabilities often have internal physical disorders and dysfunction. People with disabilities often experience the healing power of God, without being healed of their physical disability. For example, a young man with cerebral palsy was hit by a bus and was close to death. God healed his injuries, but not his disability. The Holy Spirit may heal spiritual or emotional problems rather than physical ones.

9. What is the most critical need in the life of a person with a disability?

Salvation from sin is the greatest need every person has. Some people with disabilities become consumed with regaining what they have lost. They equate attaining physical and mental wholeness with attaining peace and contentment. Jesus understood that soul salvation was a higher priority than physical healing or wholeness. Moments before healing a paralytic, Jesus said, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:2).

10. What is the biblical model for reaching people with disabilities?

Christ provided an example of servanthood that took ministry beyond miracles. People with disabilities are painfully aware that their condition and circumstances are often distasteful to others, and that their lifestyle and behavior are sometimes interpreted as being weird, abnormal, or bizarre. They are also painfully aware that, as a result, people around them are often uncomfortable. Christ’s example of humility, empathy, and servanthood teaches us that the compassion of the Body must be greater than its need for comfort. Jesus took the dirt-encrusted feet of His disciples in His holy hands and washed them. The best analogy in the Bible for reaching out and touching the lives of people with disabilities is washing feet. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:13-17).