DIS/ABLING CHURCH
Imagination, Intellectual Disability, & the Baptist Distinctive of the Priesthood of all Believers

ABSTRACT
The last century saw the birth of theologies that moved away from the center. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, while it did not halt discrimination within churches, brought the experiences of the disabled into public view. In relation to this, many in our churches who are intellectually disabled continue to find themselves marginalized. One possible way forward, within the context of Baptist churches, lies in imaginatively engaging with the Baptist distinctive of the priesthood of all believers as a catalyst for religious educators to begin the process of “dis/abling” church.

THEORIA
Imagination

It could be said that community health is defined by an ability to maintain some semblance of uniformity/homogeneity. Any community that attempts to order itself without some kind of system of shared beliefs and activities faces great difficulty in that, without anything to make a group of people in some way distinct, there would be little to hold them together. Though, it is not as if this uniformity has to be completely rigid. A community can be defined by a set of shared practices and beliefs without those things necessarily manifesting themselves as unbreakable rules, though that is not always the case. Perhaps, then, a balance can be struck. A community that is defined by a set of shared practices and beliefs also wields a certain level of imagination in interpretation and implementation of shared practices and beliefs.

The history of Baptists is one marked by imagination, by a hope to faithfully follow the movement of God in Scripture and community, no matter how out of the norm it may initially appear. It was the first Baptists who, in believing that claiming to be a follower of Jesus was not something that someone can have forced upon them, sought out a baptism by immersion. In that same vein, it was other early Baptists who shunned Creeds because they close off communities where God does not; Scripture and the community’s shared experience of it was sufficient. Later in the 19th century United States it was Baptist of the Triennial Convention who, despite a clear lack of Scriptural declaration against it, made the move to cease allowing slave owners to be sent as missionaries. From their inception as a movement, Baptists have been a people defined by imagination, even driven by it.

Drawing from the example of various Baptist communities, I wish to argue that an imaginative religious community is one that openly embraces difference, especially as it relates to experiences of the world. This does not mean to say that these communities necessarily have the easiest time holding to this vision of imagination - by no means. The ideal which is striven for, open embrace of difference, is one that is an imperative within the Baptist ethos because of the high premium placed on individual experience of the divine as it relates to the rest of the community.

Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes exemplifies this embrace of difference in critiquing the modern West’s desire for “normality,” impressing on those who are most unlike “us,” who are
usually “black, female, unemployed and disabled”¹ that they must be more like “us.” As the world changes and new experiences are had, the Church must engage accordingly. This engagement does not mean answering new questions with old answers, but imaginatively seeking out new answers. This engagement with the “other” and the new experiences that come along with that encounter is accomplished by showing what Baptist theologian Curtis Freeman calls “receptive generosity.”² Just as Christ is encountered as a stranger by the disciples,³ so too today followers of Jesus must be open to encountering the strangeness of Jesus in those whom they interact with. It is to the encounters with the “strangers” that are the intellectually disabled that we must now turn.

**Intellectual Disability**

Turning towards the phenomenon of intellectual disability,⁴ it must initially be admitted that intellectual disability has posed a significant challenge to many of our churches because of both the reality of diverse and not always homogenous experiences, as well as the history of mistreatment within the Christian tradition. As Eric J. Kyle clearly summarizes, there are three common reasons given within the Christian West for disabilities existing: divine punishment for sin, test of faith, and mysterious but beneficial reasons.⁵ All three maintain negative perceptions of those who are disabled, despite the fact that such reasons are extremely culturally-based and more grounded in preconceived notions of humanity and utility than any real thought on the phenomenon of disability.

The reality that those who are differently-abled are not coming to our churches, but are already here, forces Christian communities to dig into the sometimes-difficult questions such a reality brings into focus. How will churches welcome/integrate/include the intellectually disabled? How do people become open to caring/receiving care? These questions, potentially more than anything else, deal with the “heart of what it means to be human and to live in human community.”⁶ The phenomenon of intellectual disability, then, most move beyond the place of being a special perspective and move to the forefront of the enterprises of practical and systematic theology.

The Church’s attempt to make amends for the mistreatment of the intellectually disabled means shifting frames of references regarding disability away from conflating sin and disability, testing, and disability as a form of mysterious, beneficial suffering. It is going to mean moving the intellectually disabled from the margins of vision and thought, to the center; the norm for theory and practice must include the experiences of the intellectually disabled. To disregard these experiences will, as Nancy Eiesland writes, “squander the considerable theological and practical

---

² Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 44.
³ Luke 24.13-32. NRSV (All Scripture quotations will come from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted).
⁴ For the sake of brevity, the phrase “intellectual disability” will be used throughout this paper. Alternatively, phrases such as “differently-abled,” “other-abled,” and “temporarily-abled” will be used for the sake of causing cognitive dissonance for the reader in an attempt to bring attention to the importance of language within disability discourse.
energies of persons with disabilities who, like other minority groups, call the church to repentance and transformation.”

From the outset, a primary issue facing Christian communities is that of how both individuals and communities relate to and interact with the intellectually disabled. A common phenomenon is for churches to organize special classes in an attempt to “include.” The glaring issue facing such attempts at “inclusion” lies in the reality that these attempts to welcome and include, in fact, work to further ostracize people who may already find themselves extremely marginalized in the public sphere. The various facets of Church life (pastoral ministry, worship, missions, religious education) must be rethought if the local church is going to be able to move beyond thin attempts to “include,” and instead begin to fully integrate all members of the community into one body.

Moving forward, it seems that the healthiest course of actions for religious communities in general, and Baptist communities in particular, is to begin to be open to imagining and reimagining new ways of doing religious education in light of the often diverse experiences of those with intellectual disabilities. Relying heavily on this idea of integration instead of inclusion, it would seem that while Baptist churches will necessarily have religious educational programs in place, they must be open to modifying and even replacing curriculum and programming for the benefit of all the members of the body. The theoretical groundwork for such a proposition lies in the Baptist distinctive of the priesthood of all believers.

Priesthood of all Believers

Historically, much of the literature concerning the Baptist distinctive of the priesthood of all believers has been primarily tied to the concept of soul competence and religious liberty. Priesthood of all believers, then, is firstly a theological concept pertaining to access to the divine, and then a description of the church’s social practices. For many, this idea begins with one’s orientation to Scripture. The Bible is to be interpreted both individually and corporately, the two holding one another in a dialectical tension. Individual and communal interpretations work to temper one another.

While Baptists, like every Christian group, have been complicit with the oppression of the intellectually disabled, there also runs throughout Baptist history a strain of thought and praxis oriented towards the fight for justice. In 1947, Baptist minister Carlyle Marney wrote that, while Baptists themselves have faced significant oppression by the establishment in the past, it is now their turn to fight for the rights of those who find themselves under the “yoke of oppression.” Marney was writing in explicit reference to race relations in the United States at the time, but his admonition to fight for the oppressed is easily applicable to the intellectually disabled.

Furthermore, Marney’s insistence on the priority of the priesthood of all believers moved beyond the call for racial justice to a conception of the ministry of the Church that placed it right in the midst of the laity. For Marney, the people in the pews were not an extension of the paid

---

8 “Priesthood of all Believers” may alternatively be referred to as “universal priesthood” for the sake of brevity.
staff of a church, but the very “ministry of the Church in the world.”\textsuperscript{11} Marney’s vision for a lay-involved ministry included all facets of Church life, but most importantly for our current discussion, education.

Bearing in mind how this distinctive relates to how individual members of a Baptist church relate to one another, the concept of a universal priesthood opens up the various ministries of the church, especially the educational ministry, to all members of the body. While there are definitely some who are called to some facet of pastoral ministry within Baptist churches, this particular calling does not preclude others from functioning in a variety of pastoral and ministerial modes. Historically for Baptists, the emphasis here is that there is no formal or informal hierarchy when it comes to ministry; all Christians are considered co-ministers and function within the Church as a radical democracy.

J. L. Dagg, a nineteenth-century Southern Baptist theologian, wrote of the idea of the priesthood of all believers as being a doctrine that declared all within the Church to be the body of Christ.\textsuperscript{12} The Church, then, is not a means of access to the Divine, but a place where participation with God takes place. Understanding universal priesthood, as such, means maintaining that all voices within the Church are equal. Through the movement of the Holy Spirit within the community of believers, the multiple and sometimes differing voices are held in harmony as they submit to and are open to one another.

I want to develop an image of the priesthood of all believers being a praxis that focuses on ministry being to/alongside/from all. This radically egalitarian and democratic form of Church life carries with it an insistence that God’s movement and direction flows into the Church, via the Holy Spirit, and penetrates all it’s members. There are none who have privileged access to God and therefore none who have a more important role when it comes to the teaching ministry of the Church. As this relates to intellectual disability, this conception of the priesthood of all believers opens up to the radical notion that, not only will those with various intellectual disabilities be ministered to, but they will also act as ministers and co-ministers.

Extending the task of the teaching ministry of the Church to all within it’s walls will quite likely mean re-imagining what religious education looks like. As men and women are incorporated into the body of Christ, their functions as parts of the body are realized, which contributes to the “overall health and accomplishment of the Church as the body of Christ.”\textsuperscript{13} St. Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth is especially informative here. In chapter 12, Paul writes both of the nature of spiritual gifts\textsuperscript{14} and the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ.\textsuperscript{15} In reference to the latter, Paul writes that a body is made up of many members, all of whom are integral and have their purpose in the work of the whole. Furthermore, he states that it is especially important that each member must be able to act on his or her particular calling, or else the whole will not be able to function properly. Finally, it is in fact the “weaker” members of the body who are most important and deserving of the highest honor. It is to the practical integration of these “weaker” members into the Church’s teaching ministry that we now turn.

\textsuperscript{11} Carlyle Marney, \textit{Priests to Each Other} (Valley Forge: Judson, 1974), 13.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{14} 1 Corinthians 12.4-11.
\textsuperscript{15} 1 Corinthians 12.12-31.
Moving beyond theoretical, conceptual analysis of intellectual disability to a praxis-oriented vision for religious education proves difficult because of the fact that much of disability literature relies heavily on the perspectives of observers and caretakers. Disability theory, though linked to liberation thought, finds itself having to seek out new ways to conceive of the task of liberation because so much of that movement relies heavily on a kind of self-definition and self-knowledge that may be unintelligible within the experiences of the intellectually disabled.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, while proponents of more radical forms of pedagogy may maintain that self-knowledge and self-actualization lay at the center of the educational endeavor, there must nonetheless be room for the intellectually disabled.

Synthesizing these three concepts of imagination, intellectual disability, and universal priesthood will mean that each individual community must seek out what these concepts will look like within their own community. Rural and urban churches will practically engage with intellectual disability in religious education in different ways—the same can be said for different ethnic, economic, and generations in communities. While there should definitely be certain norms in place, hopefully informed by many of the aforementioned perspectives, the Baptist distinctive of universal priesthood dictates that the local experiences should be an utmost priority.

**Diagnosing and Critiquing Ableism in Religious Education**

Pertaining to the subconscious ableism frequently encountered in Baptist churches, it frequently manifests itself via language and programming. People with intellectual disabilities are often passively included within narratives concerning diseases that need to be “cured” or shuffled to the margin of the church community in special classes. As Jason Reimer Greig so clearly puts it, “People with cognitive impairments thus reside in a liminal space, vulnerable to patronizing platitudes at best, congregational neglect and disappearance at worst.”\textsuperscript{17}

Marney is again helpful here in offering a Baptist perspective on countering forces of oppression in the local church. Much of the ableism in the Church can be tied to an individualism that does not see one’s connection to others in the community. Issues of access and integration are not addressed because “they” are not “my problem.” For Marney, this individualism that denies interdependence is not a “virtue to be celebrated, but a vice to be overcome.”\textsuperscript{18} Many religious educational endeavors in local Baptist churches manifest themselves in curriculum that is primarily taught and read by participants. Ableism is blatantly apparent in that, a) not every member of the body processes information in the same way, and b) the potential of frequent disruptions by other-abled members frequently precludes them from involvement at all.

Thomas Reynolds writes of how quite often, attempts at inclusion are often hinged on some concept of “sameness,” which usually in turn means disregarding difference. Instead of an attempt to include, Reynolds suggests shifting towards a kind of “deep access” for all those involved. This “deep access” can also be understood as the full integration of all those involved.

\textsuperscript{18} Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 199.
Integration, then, “…is not so much a matter of welcoming so you can be a part of us on our terms, but rather so you can be with and augment us differently, on your terms as well.”

Full integration within the Church hinges on a commitment to mutual submission within the body of believers. Ideas of hierarchy must be abandoned if all members of the Church are able to fully integrate. The goal is that all parties involved are able to fully embrace the “other” in the other, knowing one another. The shift from independence to interdependence that is essential to seeing this idea of integration actualized finds much support in the Baptist distinctive of a universal priesthood. In opening up to one another and being willing to learn from the experiences of others, we act as servant priests to each other. The burden is on all in that “Each of us is to serve and be served, love and be loved, teach and be taught.”

The localized praxis of religious education must be a central aspect of a church in the process of dis/abling. There cannot be a “one size fits all” approach, because individual experiences are novel to each community, a reality that is especially true for those with intellectual disabilities and their families. In an attempt to begin this process, Paulo Freire’s “culture circles” can be an informative image. Freire describes these circles as such: “Instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants; instead of alienating syllabi, compact programs that were ‘broken down’ and ‘codified’ into learning units.”

Religious Education and the Dis/abled Baptist Church

Practically applying this desire for integration will by necessity look different in every individual Church community. As it relates to religious education, it is important to note the importance of active as well as passive education that operates for/from/alongside those with intellectual disabilities. The active educational endeavors are initially self-apparent – integration into Christian education activities such as classes, vacation Bible schools, retreats, etc. are incredibly important. More passive modes of religious education, particularly actions and language can be just as, if not more important, than more active ones. The two ordinances of Baptist faith and practice, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, are two integral places where education happens.

How this relates to Baptism will have to be worked out corporately within Baptist communities because of the significance Baptists place on Baptism as an act which “believers” participate in. What constitutes belief? Is the “belief” which is required for believer’s Baptism one grounded in a cognitive ascent to a proposition, or something else? While many Baptists require Baptism to be withheld until after an “age of accountability,” perhaps this concept must, too, be critiqued, disabled, and replaced with something more holistic and hospitable to members of the community whose brains do not function like others. A theology, which is no longer dependent on modern notions of rationality, may be the only way forward.

The Lord’s Supper, while not something usually withheld from individuals in Baptist life, remains a formative act that must remain open to all. The dis/abled Baptist Church, one that is moving away from ableism and towards Reynold’s “deep access,” will seek out ways to

---

21 Prevost, 55.
23 Freeman, Contesting Catholicity, 87.
24 Alternatively and interchangeably known as the Eucharist or Communion.
include the intellectually disabled in the serving and receiving of the Lord’s Supper. Eiesland writes of how including the disabled in the regular administration of the Lord’s Supper acts as a “bodily mediation of justice,”25 a way for the movement and presence of God to be experienced in all the members of the community.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Freeman, Curtis W. “All the Sons of the Earth: Carlyle Marney and the Fight Against Prejudice.” Baptist History and Heritage 44, no. 2 (2009): 71-84.
______. Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014.

25 Eiesland, 112.