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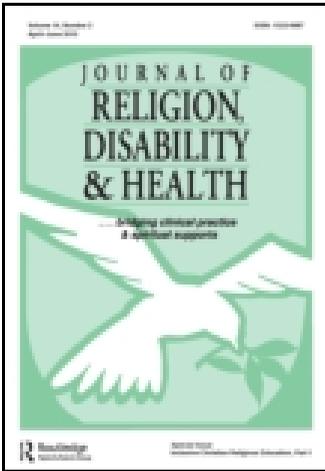
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### From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness

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## **From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness**

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*This article develops a perspective on a practical theology of belonging. It argues that the political rhetoric of inclusion, while possibly necessary, is deeply inadequate to help us understand what disability is and what it really means to be with people who have received this label. We need to shift our thinking from inclusion to belonging and to reframe our practices from politics to love. The article seeks to do three things. Firstly, it highlights that the term disability is a vague and complex concept that, while it might be necessary, requires to be treated with both caution and suspicion. Secondly, the article argues that the idea of including people with disabilities does not go far enough in overcoming the alienation, stigmatization, and exclusion of those whom we choose to name “disabled.” We need to move from ideas of inclusion to the practices of belonging. Finally, the article engages with the theologies of Jean Vanier and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and suggests that the key to such transformation is not in politics but in Jesus. It is only as we learn how to love one another in and through Jesus and to create communities that embody such Christ-like love that we can begin to understand what it means truly to belong.*

**KEYWORDS** *disability, community, inclusion, belonging, Vanier, Bonhoeffer, love*

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The title of this article is from a lecture I delivered at the behest of Andy Calder for the Multifaith Disability Project (Wednesday September 9, 10:30–2:30, Jasper Hotel, 489 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, Australia). The video presentation is available at: <http://blogs.victas.uca.org.au/disabilityinclusion/?p=49> (accessed December 21, 2011). See also Calder's (2010) excellent report.

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Disability is a complex and controversial term.<sup>1</sup> It seems that everybody knows what it is until they are asked to define it. We have learned well the rhetoric of disability. If we believe in putting people first then we talk about *people with disabilities*; if we want to reflect on the radical politics of disability, then we talk about *disabled people*; people who are disabled by society because of their differences. However, while many of us may be cogent in the language of disability, it is not always clear that we are all talking about the same thing. The disability that is the focus of disability studies, is not necessarily the disability that is the focus of disability theology; the *disability* that is the focus of legislation is not necessarily the *disability* that is the focus of faithful Christian community. If we are not sure about what disability actually is exactly, it is inevitable that we are also going to be unsure as to what *inclusion* means. If we are not sure what inclusion means then it is difficult to know how the church can act in ways that both encourage inclusion and remain faithful to its primary calling to love God in all things and at all times.<sup>2</sup>

In this discussion, I want to do three things. Firstly I want to draw to attention the vital fact that the term disability is a vague and complex concept, which, while it might be necessary, requires to be treated with both caution and suspicion. The ways that we use to define disability can simultaneously bring liberation and oppression and sometimes even death. Secondly, I want to argue that the idea of including people with disabilities works on an overly narrow understanding of disability and as such, does not go far enough in overcoming the alienation, stigmatization and exclusion of those whom we choose to name disabled. I will argue that we need to move beyond the narrow politics of inclusion to the practices of belonging.<sup>3</sup> Finally I will engage with the theology of Jean Vanier (1998) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2007) and suggest that the key to such transformation is not to be found in politics (although politics does of course have a place), but in looking to Jesus and the kind of communities that emerge when we look in that direction. It is only as we learn how to love one another in and through Jesus and to create communities that embody such Christ-like love that we can begin to understand what it is that Paul means when he says that, “In Christ: There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female (able bodied nor disabled), for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

## DISABILITY?

The easiest way into the issues surrounding the nature of disability is by asking two questions: Precisely what is it that holds together such diverse human experiences as autism, schizophrenia, paraplegia, Alzheimer’s, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis and

Down's syndrome and makes them all disabilities? What binds together and gives commonality to these radically different, diverse and in many ways unconnected human experiences? The answer, of course, is nothing at all, other than that, for a variety of different reasons, people have chosen to place them together under the general term disability? People might choose to do this for many reasons, some good, some bad. The simple point to bear in mind at this stage is that disability is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. This point is not a new one, but it is nonetheless important to bring to the fore.<sup>4</sup> We use the term disability for a reason and that reason matters theologically and practically. So what types of reason might we have for ascribing the term disability?

### THE POLITICS OF DISABILITY?

One reason might be that we need certain criteria to mark out particular forms of human difference in order to allocate resources and provide benefits and protection to people who need them. In this context the term disability seems to function quite effectively in terms of developing policies that offer a degree of freedom, choice, justice, and equality for those who fall within the criteria that we decide defines the category. However, it can also, and for precisely the same reasons, become a way of marking out people who are undesirable and taking appropriate measures to get rid of them either before they are born or once they are here. The same desire for freedom, choice, justice and equality that can bring liberation for people with disabilities, underpins the reasoning behind the use of prenatal testing for disabilities and the option that parents have to abort a child on the basis of the discovery of such a disability.<sup>5</sup> That being so, a political description of disability can certainly tell us some things about the term, but it is inevitably double-edged bringing with it both blessing and curse.

If disability is a political category then it is flexible and everchanging, which leaves people with disabilities (whatever that might actually mean), vulnerable to the trends of politics, economics, and public opinion. This observation has led Hans Reinders (2001) to surmise that modern liberal societies and the politics that underpin them simply do not have the ability or the moral torque to change in ways that will lead to genuine acceptance and a place of belonging for people with disabilities. Reflecting on the impact of genetic technology on attitudes towards disabilities, Reinders (2001) notes that:

Assuming that disabled people will always be among us, that the proliferation of genetic testing will strengthen the perception that the prevention of disability is a matter of responsible reproductive behavior, and that society is therefore entitled to hold people personally responsible for

having a disabled child, it is not unlikely that political support for the provision of their special needs will erode. . .the question of civic and social hospitality is key, but political liberalism is not ultimately capable of engendering and fostering hospitality towards people with overt, recalcitrant needs. The norms encircling the liberal axis of individual autonomy cannot easily accommodate lives dedicated to the care of perpetually dependent individuals, or admit the intrinsic value of these individuals. (p. 4)

If Reinders (2001) is correct, then defining disability in political terms is highly problematic within modernity. The basic tenets of liberal philosophy and the politics that have emerged from it have neither the practical nor the moral capabilities, nor the desire to protect those whom we name as disabled and to ensure their future. Put slightly differently, the goals, assumptions and politics of modernity form people in ways which mean that the desire to accept and care for people with socially significant differences is limited, if it is there at all. We can develop protective legislation, but unless people's hearts are warmed nothing will really change. If disability is a political category then it is a highly problematical category.

### An Experience of Shared Oppression?

This is one reason why the so called social model of disability in all of its variant forms is both helpful and at the same time deeply inadequate. In the United Kingdom the social model has for many years been the "big idea" (Hasler, 1993, p. 80), which has driven the agenda of disability studies. While currently under challenge from certain quarters,<sup>6</sup> the social model of disability remains a highly influential and formative theoretical perspective on disability. The basic argument will be familiar to many readers. Disability does not have to do with individual impairments. Rather, it relates to a shared experience of oppression and injustice experienced by people who are considered to be different. It is society's negative response to human impairment and difference that holds together the disparate group of experiences that come under the banner of disability. "You may be blind and I might have Down's syndrome, but we are melded together in our shared oppression; to be disabled is to be oppressed."

In the United States the social model's perspective has had a slightly different history and development. Influenced by a similar Marxist analysis as the United Kingdom model<sup>7</sup> combined with a political perspective which mirrors civil and constitutional rights legislation, people with disabilities have come to be likened to an oppressed minority group that requires to be liberated via changes in the political process. It is this shared experience of oppression rather than the particularity of experiences (e.g., autism, paraplegia, schizophrenia, hearing impairment) that forms the category of disability

and binds people with a variety of impairments together as a political movement. Hahn (1997) summarizes this approach thus:

Disabled men and women have been subjected to the same forms of prejudices, discrimination and segregation imposed upon other oppressed groups which are differentiated from the remainder of the population on the basis of characteristics such as race or ethnicity, gender and aging. (p. 174)

This minority group/civil rights approach has borne much important fruit culminating in the development and implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012).

### Beyond Liberation

This way of understanding disability is certainly plausible. Indeed in the development of the theology of disability it has been very influential (Eiesland, 1994, pp. 27–28). There is no question that the people whom we have decided to label as disabled *do* often suffer terrible oppression and injustice inside and outside of the church. Such injustice and oppression *must* be addressed powerfully and forcefully, with seriousness and urgency. The social and minority group model offer us a way of reframing disability in the context of a shared search for justice and equality. However, there is a real danger in suggesting that injustice and oppression are definitive of disability. The problem is twofold. First, if disability is defined by the experience of shared oppression, injustice and exclusion, then why not also include people of color, people with gender differences, women and any other oppressed minority groups? If it is not particular impairments but shared oppression and injustice within society that forms the basis for the category of disability, then the boundaries of the term are endless and we are really no closer to discovering what disability is or what it actually means. The fact that Greece has recently classified pedophilia as a disability should make the case for the looseness and potential dangers inherent within the minority group model of disability (BBC News, 2012).

Secondly, theologically the danger with this approach is that it in fact constructs an exclusive model of disability. A good example of this is Nancy Eiesland's (1994) work on the disabled God. Eiesland draws upon the minority group model to make a case that the church functions to oppress and inhibit people with disabilities. Her general thrust is that people with disabilities are an oppressed minority group within the church and that their inclusion involves not only making churches physically accessible but also re-symbolizing the tradition in ways that make even the image of God accessible to people with physical disabilities She calls for people with disabilities

to take control of their theological and social futures and pushes them towards self-representation, empowerment, freedom, choice, and justice.

At one level, Eiesland's (1994) perspective has functioned well in raising people's consciousness to key issues of oppression and injustice within church and society and the ways in which traditional interpretation and symbolization of Christianity have proved to be deeply negative for people deemed to be disabled. It is however, no small thing that Eiesland strongly states that her theology is purely for people with physical disabilities (Eiesland, 1994, pp. 27–28). As I have previously noted:

If autonomy, liberation, civil rights, self-representation and equal access to the political and ecclesiological systems are the goals of such approaches, then how are we to understand and make sense of those people whose impairments prevent them from ever being able to achieve or participate in such goals? People with advanced Alzheimer's disease or those with profound intellectual disabilities i.e. people who are losing or do not have the very things that the [minority group approach] seeks after, are necessarily excluded from the process. What if we are weak, dependent, vulnerable and helpless?<sup>8</sup> How could we participate in such a process or find a place in such a model of disability? Which God are we to worship then? The problem with the social model and minority group approaches to disability is that they assume they are addressing people who are autonomous, cognitively able and have the ability to desire autonomy, freedom and access to the political or ecclesial system. This is no small issue as Frances Young has noted; people with profound intellectual disabilities are the minority group that people with other forms of disability dread. (Swinton, 2011; Young, 1986)

The problem is that inherent within the minority group approach as it is worked out within a theological context is the assumption that the goals of modernity somehow fit with the goals of theology. That assumption may work quite well for cognitively able people, but the hypercognition (Post, 1995, p. 3) that seems central to the goals of modernity serves to exclude important groups of disabled people. If we then take that into a theological context, we have problems. There is a strange irony in the fact that a theological model of disability designed to overcome exclusiveness should end up being exclusive of certain people with disabilities.

### DISABILITY AS DIFFERENCE

It could be said that the one thing we can be sure of is that the term disability is an indicator of some form of difference, normally, as is properly highlighted by the social and minority group approach, some negativized form of human difference. Surely, one might assume, at least that is

indisputable. However, if we look more closely we will quickly see that difference in itself does not hold as much explanatory power as it at first seems to do. The idea of difference, assumes some perspective on what is normal. However, one only has to look at any group of human beings to see just how unclear the idea of a “normal” human being actually is. I would suspect that few of the readers of this article would consider themselves to be the paradigm of normality! If you do, your friends will soon tell you that this is not the case. If it is unclear what a so called *normal* person might look like, it is inevitably and equally as unclear what an *abnormal* human being might look like. Other than the fact that we may prefer certain looks and feel more comfortable with certain body shapes or ways of thinking, there seems to be no real *norm* for being human. Other than some rather obvious statistical observations that note that most people have two arms, two legs, two eyes, and so forth, what is normal for humans is at least open to serious debate. Comparative observations between human beings at a certain level offers a numerical norm, but it does not really tell us very much about what disability (if disability is difference) is other than that it is some kind of deviation from the way that most people are or what most people like. Is a person disabled when she has only one eye? Is he disabled if he has less hair than the average person? Presumably most would say yes to the first and no to the second. But why? Why are eyes more important than hair? In response one might say something like: “To lose an eye would have an effect on a person’s quality of life in a way that losing one’s hair does not.” At one level the logic of such an argument seems clear. However, the problem with such a response is obvious: If losing an eye lowers a person’s quality of life, precisely what does this say about perceptions of the lives of people with visual impairments? It is not difficult to see the way in which statistical norms quickly and easily begin to register negatively on the moral scale. This is why the social model remains an important, if inadequate critical hermeneutic.

The problem with suggesting that disability is a deviation from a norm is that norms tend to be consensual as well as statistical. It is not simply a straightforward matter wherein if most people have a particular trait they are considered normal and if they do not have it they are considered to be abnormal. It is much more consensual than statistics might tempt us to think. For example, if you have blond hair and everyone else has brown hair, this blond hair can be perceived as attractive, normal, novel, and a positive asset, even though you are clearly statistically different. However, if you have red hair and everyone else has brown hair and they then decide that red hair is not attractive, you become disabled and disadvantaged by your difference, not because of the statistical variance but because of group consensus and preference. Such a difference is statistical, but it is also consensual, that is, the product of what the majority decide is attractive or unattractive. Why are certain deviations from the norm considered beautiful and others marked out and given the name: disability? Because those who define the criteria of the

so-called norm decide that to be the case. Bearing in mind the unfortunate history of eugenics in the United States and Europe over the past 50 years, being at the whim of the majority is a dangerous place for those who sit out with the accepted norm to be.<sup>9</sup>

### Difference is the Norm

It is a simple and easily verified fact that there is no such thing as a normal human being. Even at the level of the human genome, difference is the norm. As Shakespeare and Watson (2001) point out:

... the Human Genome Project has shown that every individual's genome contains mutations: as well as predispositions to late onset diseases such as cancer, heart disease and dementia, these include four or five recessive conditions which might cause impairment in offspring, if the other parent also carried a matching recessive allele.

We might, for a variety of reasons, agree to choose to mark out some people as normal and others as abnormal. However, the truth is that the only real norm for human beings, even at a genetic level, is difference. Disability cannot be defined by difference in and of itself. When Paul (Gal 3:28) tells us that there are Jews, Greeks, barbarians, males, females, he is indicating a fundamental fact about the way the world is: We are inherently different. The only question is why we choose to treat some forms of difference differently.

### THICK AND THIN UNDERSTANDINGS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

One of the problems with terms such as disability and people with disabilities is that they are *thin* terms that lead to *thin* forms of inclusion. The types of definitions and understanding that we have explored thus far based as they are on such things as politics, justice, equality, choice, and difference, may serve certain political, legal, economic, or social functions, but they do not tell us very much about the individuals who bear such descriptions. At least part of Hans Reinders's (2001) concern about the inability of modernity to accommodate for people with disabilities is the fact that the basic tenets of the philosophy of modernity are too thin to capture and value the richness of the experience that human disability brings to our attention. They simply provide us with too narrow a range of possibilities.

## Thick and Thin People

Regarding thick and thin people,<sup>10</sup> the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, pp. 3–30) draws a distinction between thick and thin descriptions of phenomena. A thick description of a situation focuses not simply on the bare bones of the phenomenon under observation, but also its context and the deep and meaningful activities that participants engage in. So, for example, if I wink at someone, at one level I am simply closing my right eye. However, the meaning behind this gesture and the cultural context from which it emerges and into which it speaks, means that the simple gesture of quickly opening and closing my eye has a whole range of meanings and indicates a range of emotions and social possibilities: amusement, deceit, friendliness, farewell, and so on.<sup>11</sup> Thick descriptions strive to see the whole of a thing. Thin descriptions, in contrast, look only at the bare bones of a phenomenon. A thin description does not get beyond the fact that I closed and opened my right eye.

You can see this thick and thin phenomenon at work for example when we talk about “the starving millions in Africa.” Such a thin description allows us to avoid the fact that these starving millions have names, hopes, families, and possible futures. The term disability can easily function in the same way. One of the problems with the term disability, is not only that it is a moving target;<sup>12</sup> it is also a thin description that tempts us to develop thin understandings of the lives of those people we choose to call disabled. It is a thin description that creates thin people. The moment we catch ourselves using language such as schizophrenics, Alzheimer’s victims, paraplegics, Down’s kids, the disabled, or any other term that tries to sum up a particular form of human difference without reference to unique individuals, we should start to become concerned that our thinking may be suffering from conceptual weight loss of the most serious kind.

## Thin Models of Inclusion

Thin definitions of disability and thin understandings of disabled people lead to thin forms of inclusion. Take Kevin’s story for example. In a study I conducted with Elaine Powrie (Swinton & Powrie, 2004), we highlighted a not untypical situation:

One group of carers spoke about their experiences with Kevin, a young man who has profound intellectual disabilities. After much debate the staff group decided to take Kevin to a local faith community. They viewed this purely as a social opportunity as they did not feel justified taking him on religious grounds. Nevertheless, they recognized this as an important dimension of Kevin’s life and were keen to help him explore it. During the three months he attended, not one person spoke to him. One person patted him

on the head in passing but that was it! The staff wondered if people were scared of Kevin, or embarrassed, or uncertain how to approach him. Either way the experience was not a good one, and they decided there was little point in Kevin continuing to attend. One member of staff said: Kevin gets a more positive response in the local coffee shop. Kevin has not been involved in any faith community since.

Kevin was perceived by the church as disabled—a thin person; someone (it seems to have been presumed) without a personality or the longings and desires that so called normal people take for granted. He was a stranger, a member of that odd group of people we call the disabled. Kevin was *included*, but he did not *belong*.

Similarly this abstract from a conversation with Elaine, an elderly woman with intellectual disabilities, draws out the importance of the thinness of certain forms of inclusion:

Interviewer: Where do you feel you belong?

Elaine: Well I sort of feel I'm trying to help in the community. I'm participating.

Interviewer: You're trying to help within this community.

Elaine: Well this area here: I'm trying to build up a friendship.

Interviewer: You're trying to build up friendship. Where is that happening?

Elaine: At the church.

Interviewer: At the church, and how are you getting on there?

Elaine: OK.

Interviewer: Is that by meeting people or by them inviting you into their homes, . . . or?

Elaine: By meeting people at the church and in the home.

Interviewer: And how do you find that? Do you find it easy or difficult?

Elaine: Easy.

Interviewer: Quite easy. So do you go to meetings during the week or do you go to people's houses or do you just see them at mass?

Elaine: Just see them at mass. (Swinton & Powrie, 2004. p. 32)

At one level Elaine's quest for friendship and a sense of belonging has been fruitful. Within the boundaries of the religious service of worship she seems to have found acceptance and, a certain level of friendship. However, that acceptance and friendship appears to stop at the door of the chapel. She has never been invited into the homes of her religious friends, although clearly she desires this. She has a series of friendships that last for 90 minutes on a Sunday morning. *She is included, but she does not belong to the fellowship.* She is a thin person whom others perceive as disabled, and although they are willing to *include* her in their worship, they have no real desire to thicken their understanding of her or to invite her to *belong* with them and too them. Thin people might be happy with friendships that last

90 minutes on a Sunday morning, but thick people long for more. Explicitly or implicitly naming someone disabled seems to baptize that so-named person as a certain kind of person and that kind of person is often not one that many of us desire to be with.

#### INCLUSION IS NOT ENOUGH

These observations are important for our thinking about the idea of inclusion. It is true as we have seen, that both the United Kingdom and the United States have important legislation to protect people with disabilities from oppression and discrimination. The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012) and the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act in the United Kingdom have offered structural and systemic changes designed to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities. Such political changes are clearly important. As societies we are, apparently, keen on the *inclusion* of people with disabilities. However, as we have seen, legislation does not really tell us what disability is or offer quite as much protection as is often claimed. It simply lays down criteria intended to protect from exploitation and injustice those people with particular forms of difference that society (we) have *chosen* to view negatively. If society decides (we decide) to change the criteria and withdraw our legal support for that protection, then all sorts of unpleasant things can happen. The law is important and can be central to the process of inclusion. However, while law can change structures it simply cannot change hearts. *The law can legislate for inclusion, but it cannot help people to belong.*

Hall (2005, p. 16) in her reflections on prenatal testing makes an interesting point: the task of persuading parents to eschew in-vitro genetic diagnosis and embryo disposal, or to refuse ante-natal testing and selective termination, may require at least as much a gesticulation as an argument. But what kind of gesticulation might we require to help us develop theological understandings of disability that help all of us practice faithfully? The politics of inclusion are a first step. A practical theology of belonging may be a way of moving towards the type of transformative gesticulation that Hall (2005) points us towards.

#### FROM INCLUSION TO BELONGING: BEYOND RIGHTS; TOWARDS LOVE

I want to suggest that when we are thinking about those experiences that, for whatever reason, we decide to call disabilities, we need to move our thinking away from the idea of *inclusion* towards the experience of *belonging*. Kevin and Elaine whose stories we looked at earlier were included, but they clearly did not belong. They are not alone. The difference between inclusion and

belonging is important theologically and practically. In the book, *Becoming Human* Jean Vanier (1998) says this:

My vision is that belonging should be at the heart of a fundamental discovery: that we all belong to a common humanity, the human race. We may be rooted in a specific family and culture but we come to this earth to open up to others, to serve them and receive the gifts they bring to us, as well as to all of humanity. (p. 36)

For Vanier we are marked by our similarities and our differences but made one in our humanness. We belong to the same species and share in a common humanity. We are held together in all of our disparateness by our (he argues, God given) desire or at least ability to come together to serve one another and to receive the gifts that we have in and for one another. It is as we share and receive the gifts that we bring to one another that we become one body: a place where we know that we belong. It is not enough that human beings are included within communities, they need to belong.

### To Belong You Need to be Missed

In outlining the human vocation and the significance of the power of loving one another and sharing gifts that overcome difference and exclusion, Vanier (1998) echoes both Jesus command to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34–35) and the general ethos of the doctrine of creation. It is helpful to place Vanier’s (1998) thinking on belonging within the wider context of creation. Human beings are not simply *included* within creation; they *belong* to God’s creation, a place that God has deemed to be very good (Gen 1:31). Creation would be a completely different place if there were no human beings within it or if God chose to relate primarily to trees or rocks instead of humans. We cannot imagine a world without people; such a world would be radically different from the world that we know. God could not imagine creation without people. Human beings *belong* to the creator and to the very fabric of creation. As such, everything that they have is gift and promise. This theological framework makes Vanier’s (1998) point quite sharply—*To belong you need to be missed*. People need to be concerned when you are not there; your communities need to feel empty when you are not there. The world needs to be perceived as radically different when you are not there. Only when your absence stimulates feelings of emptiness will you know that you truly belong. Only when your gifts are longed for can community truly be community. When we belong people long for our presence in the same way as the prodigal son’s father longed for the presence of his wayward son (Luke 15:11–32) and in the same way that God longs for us to be present with God. It is in precisely these ways that we are called to long for one another in the midst of all of our differences. Such longing is not discovered through politics or argument, but only through the gesticulations of God’s

love towards human beings as they are embodied within the lives of those who have come to know and love God and who long for the love of God to become the pivot point for the redemption of the world. To be included you often have to conform or have your context conformed to some kind of relational, social or legal norm. To belong you simply have to be noticed as yourself. *To be included you just need to be present. To belong you need to be missed.* That is the fundamental principle, which lies behind authentic Christian community for *all* people.

### BELONGING MEANS COMING TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER THROUGH JESUS

Vanier's vision of belonging offers us a powerful reflection on the human condition and the brotherhood and sisterhood of all human beings. In a very real sense we belong to one another; I am because we are.<sup>13</sup> However, the apostle Paul's words in Galatians 3:28 take us a step further forward: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Belonging is not a human action aimed at inclusion. Belonging is not a matter of human beings striving to overcome difference through their own strength, be that personal or political. Neither is belonging a matter of choice, freedom, individuality, justice or equality. Such things are consequences of belonging, not movements towards it. We need to belong before we can understand the true meaning of such things as autonomy, freedom, and self-representation. When we belong to the Christian community the true meaning of these terms becomes clear: in Jesus there is no autonomy, freedom or self-representation. We are slaves to Jesus (Cor 7:22). Autonomy is a cultural illusion; personhood emerges from gift and relationship; creation and friendship; freedom comes from enslavement to Jesus and self-representation emerges as we learn what it means to live out and live within the image of God: Jesus. It is as we learn what it means to give up or at least to reframe these culturally important social goods, that we learn what it means truly to be human and to create the types of community wherein humanness can be actualized. Communities of belonging are not the outcome of political processes, which is why thin ideas of political inclusion cannot be successful.<sup>14</sup> Politics can bring about a degree of justice and inclusion, but we need another dimension before we can belong. Paul informs us that that dimension is love; that dimension is Jesus.

That being so, belonging is a gift of the Spirit of Jesus that is experienced within the community that Jesus gathers to himself through himself, and which seeks to model God's continuing redemption of creation in and through Christ. In this article, I have spoken quite a lot about difference and how we need to see difference differently. Loving difference and living well with difference is not always easy. We are naturally drawn to some people, to particular body-shapes, to types of personalities and levels of intellect.

Left to us, it will always be difficult to deal differently with difference. Perhaps this is why politics remains necessary if inadequate. In a fallen world it may be that law remains necessary for Grace to abound.<sup>15</sup> Our beginning point then for dealing lovingly with difference is not to look at one another (although it does of course involve such a movement), but rather to begin by looking at Jesus: “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation . . .” (Col 1:15). Modernity tempts us to look to ourselves in order to find ourselves. The way we look at ourselves determines the politics that emerge from our looking. This issue is the primary problem with Eiesland’s (1994) idea of the disabled God and the liberatory politics that emerge from her way of looking. Eiesland looks to herself for her image of God and in looking to herself she sees a new vision of God. It is in this sense that her model of God is contextual. However, by looking primarily at herself and the individual selves of people with physical disabilities she not only excludes people with other forms of disability, she also misses the point that Paul and, as we shall see, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2007) want to hammer home. *In order to find ourselves we need to look away from ourselves*. Looking at ourselves through the politics of modernity keeps our perspectives on inclusion thin and narrow. Looking to Jesus offers us a thick description of who God is and what it means to be a human being. Such a way of looking of looking at one another through Jesus offers us a thick description of what it means to sit with the marginalized, to befriend the stranger, to offer hospitality to those who are radically different from one’s self. Jesus offers a very different politics and a different mode of Kingdom embodying friendship and community;<sup>16</sup> a mode of friendship which is shaped by the principle of Grace rather than the principle of likeness<sup>1</sup> (Swinton 2000a, pp. 89–105) and which reveals the deep meanings of belonging, even unto death (John 15:13). In order to look at Jesus and to see that we are all one in Christ, we do not have to argue that Jesus is disabled, blind (Hull, 2001), crippled (Lewis, 1982), or that God has bipolar disease (Helsel, 2009). Such descriptions are evocative, but really too thin to do all of the work that we often require them to do and, as we have seen, such imaging can actually serve to limit God and exclude people with disabilities who do not share these images. Jesus is none of these things and yet, Jesus is all of these things. I will return to this point in the following text.

### FINDING COMMUNITY IN JESUS

Bonhoeffer (2007) picks up on the ethos of Paul’s thinking in Galatians and makes an important statement about Christian community:

Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this . . . We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. (p. 31)

Jesus is that space within creation that God has gifted to us, within which there is no difference between us. Jesus is the centre point where all of our differences collapse into a peaceful core of love. We learn what it means to belong to one another as we look to Jesus. Bonhoeffer lays out two different aspects of love: spiritual love and self-centered love. “Self-centered love constructs its own image of other persons, about what they are and what they should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands” (Bonhoeffer, 2007, p. 44).

Self-centered love is thin love. Self-centered love can only include people on its own terms. Both Kevin and Elaine were victims of this kind of self-centered love. It constructs people with disabilities in ways that suits its own purposes. Self-centered love stays silent in the face of the death of children whom we have chosen to ascribe the label Down syndrome. Self-centered love refuses to speak with those whom it names as disabled even if that refusal takes place in the house of the God. Self-centered love turns people down in job interviews “for their own good,” because as “disabled people,” they would not be able to cope with the pressures of the job or the banter of their colleagues. Self-centered love refuses to visit the person with advanced dementia because they would “rather remember them the way they were.” Self-centered love makes up disabled people and then pushes them to the side on the basis of the difference that the label names.

Spiritual love, Bonhoeffer (2007) says, has a radically different dynamic:

Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person as seen from the perspective of Jesus Christ. It is the image Jesus Christ has formed and wants to form in all people. (Bonhoeffer, 2007, p. 44)

Spiritual love helps us to look properly; to look into, at, past and through difference and towards Jesus; the one who lives within each human person.<sup>17</sup> It is as we look to Jesus and as we learn to look at one another as Jesus looks at us, that we learn what it means to love one another in (and not necessarily in spite of), all of our differences.

### BEYOND POLITICS?

Not to look at people in such ways is profoundly dangerous. As Bonhoeffer (2007) puts it:

The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from everyday Christian life in community . . . may actually mean the exclusion of Christ; for in the poor sister or brother, Christ is knocking at the door. We must therefore be very careful on this point. (p. 45)

Bonhoeffer here of course picks up on Matthew 25 and the suggestion that Jesus resides within “the least of these” (Matt 25:40), a point that is fundamental to many theologies that seek to enable the weak and the vulnerable to rise up and take control of their situation. In describing God as disabled, such theologies ground themselves in a revised image of God and allow the politics of liberation to explore how God who is in the poor can rise up and liberate the poor through engagement with oppressive liberal political systems.

At first glance it might look as though Bonhoeffer (2007) is doing something similar. However, it is important to notice that Bonhoeffer’s point is not a political one. He is not calling for a politics of liberation. Bonhoeffer is well aware of the dangers and weaknesses of politics and their inability to enable the church to act faithfully.<sup>18</sup> In drawing attention to the social location of Jesus in “the poor,” he is calling not for radical political change, but for radical faithfulness within the church community. In Bonhoeffer’s eyes, the task of the Christian community is not to be on the winning side. The task of the church is to be faithful. To be faithful is to learn to see where Jesus is and to act accordingly. Acting accordingly is what Hall (2005) means when she talks about Christians being called to gesticulation as well as argument. The task of the church is not world transformation but signaling the Kingdom through small gestures. Bonhoeffer’s (2007) point is not that if the weak and the vulnerable are excluded from community we have to rise up and make laws to ensure that they are included. His experience with German anti-Semitism taught him well the double-edged nature of the law. His point is that if the weak and the vulnerable are excluded from Christian community there is no community. It may look and feel like community but it is no community at all because people are not looking to Jesus. In other words, no one can belong unless we all belong. The politics of belonging is for and requires *all* people. It is in this sense that Jesus both disabled and able bodied.

The challenge then is one of love, not simply of politics. The “solution” to exclusion is found in looking properly and seeing one another faithfully in Jesus. Politics may remain significant so long as we bear in mind its fragility and limits and its proper telos: to help us to look more clearly at the love of Jesus.

## CONCLUSION

I am still not clear what the term disability actually means. Perhaps it does not mean anything, or maybe it means many different things depending on context and intention. It could well be that we need such a term in order to allocate services and appropriate help and care for those in need. But does the church really need the term disability? I am not sure. If it does it is going

to have to do some serious work to try to tease out what it means and why it might want to use such a term. What I do know however is that in the midst of our differences there is a constant, and that constant is Jesus. At the heart of that constant is a place of belonging for all people. The only norm that matters is love. To be include you just need to be there; to belong you need to be missed; to miss one another we need to learn what it means to love with the passion of Jesus. And perhaps that is as good a definition of the calling of the church that we can get? It could be that in wrestling with the meaning of the term disability we actually discover the meaning of love. In discovering the meaning of love, we will learn what it means to encounter the God who is love (John 4:8) and to live within that relational space of belonging that is opened up and offered to us in Jesus. Within that space disability might continue to exist, but it will not be negativized. The love of Jesus overcomes all difference.

## NOTES

1. Awareness of the original context of this study may be helpful for readers—this article emerged from a kind invitation by Jeff Keuss to present the Palmer Lecture for 2012 at Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, WA. The Palmer Lecture is a public lecture, and, as such, was intended to reach a wide range of people: people with disabilities, carers and support workers, families who live with people who have disabilities, professionals working within a variety of health and social care situations and diverse academicians from across the theological and psychological disciplines. The lecture was therefore *inter alia*, intended as an introduction to some of the important issues being addressed in relation to disability and theology within academia, with a view to making these ideas accessible and facilitating a conversation that includes but stretches beyond the academy. While I have significantly revised the lecture for journal publication, awareness of its origin and intention is necessary in order to understand the style, content, and approach of the piece. I have tried to retain something of the spontaneity and thrust of a public lecture, although the argument has been deepened and significantly rethought in parts.

2. Matthew asked, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt 22:36–40:36). It is important that the reader reflects on the implications of this passage from the outset. The task of disability theology may include the search for justice, equality, and fairness, but its primary focus is to enable all people to love God, neighbor, and self. Every other goal is secondary and deeply connected to this primary relational dynamic.

3. I use the term *practices* here as a way of stressing the embodiedness of Christian theology. The gospel is proclaimed not only in words, but in the gestures and gesticulations that make up the life of the Kingdom as it works itself out on earth as in heaven. The practice of belonging is an embodied theology that embraces the excluded and offers hopeful modes of living to all human beings. What this embodied theology actually looks like will become clear as the discussion moves on.

4. For a useful perspective on the transient and complex nature of disability, see Wendell (1996).

5. For a helpful overview of this point in relation to prenatal testing, see Asch (2003). For a theological perspective on some of the key issues, see Swinton and Brock (2007).

6. See Shakespeare’s (2006) important critique of the social model of disability.

7. For the Marxist roots of the social model of disability, see Oliver (1990).

8. This point, of course, is an issue that is central to Reynolds’ (2008) excellent study on vulnerability.

9. For an overview of the history of eugenics within Europe and the United States, see Kerr and Shakespeare (2002).

10. The idea of *thick and thin people* has also been used by Hacking (2009) in his work on autism.
11. The illustration of winking comes from Geertz (1973, p. 6).
12. The idea of illnesses and conditions shifting and changing over time (i.e., becoming moving targets) is explored in depth in relation to mental health in Hacking (2007).
13. This idea is from Ubuntu philosophy and theology: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1990, p. 108).
14. That is not to suggest that politics has no place. It is simply to indicate for reasons stated previously that the basic ideas that comprise modernity's perspective on inclusion are simply too thin to achieve their own goals.
15. Nevertheless, if the argument of this study is correct, politics can never succeed or achieve its given goals.
16. It is interesting to reflect on the incarnation as a radical reframing of our responses to difference. That which is profoundly different (Jesus-who-is-God) enters into deep friendships with human beings who are radically different from God, with a view to creating a community of genuine belonging. Readers interested in a Christological development of this perspective in relation to Christian friendship and the development of Christ-like community in the context of severe mental health problems should see Swinton (2000a, 2000b). For a perspective on theology and friendship in relation to intellectual disability, readers should see Reinders (2003). Both of these perspectives in different ways open up the key question of what it means to know and encounter God in friendship and community.
17. Such a suggestion resonates closely with John 1:4: "The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone." Here John seems to suggest that something of God is present in all human beings. If this is so, then all human encounters are in principle holy encounters wherein we meet God in the other. While, as we will see, encounter with the weak and the vulnerable might be a special instance of encountering God in the other, this passage strongly indicates that recognizing Jesus in human relationships is foundational to the creaturely life. The only question is whether we look properly and recognize Jesus in one another.
18. His death at the hands of the Nazis as well as the deep implication of the German church in the politics of fascism bears ample witness to this fact.

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