

Baptism and Profound Disability

By Melissa Florer-Bixler

During the worship service, Joni's high-pitched wail blends in with the voices around her as we make our way through the church's grand old hymns. She bobs and sways during the sermon, occasionally signing to me images that come through her head: cat, Lizzy, cake, priest.

Discussion of the religious experience of people like Joni, people with profound intellectual disabilities, often hinges on the question, "**How much do they understand?**" For churches that practice believers baptism, this question is haunting. We struggle with the **voluntary nature of faith** at the core of our religious identity. It conflicts with our equally strong belief that **the kingdom of God belongs "to such as these."**

Baptism in the Anabaptist tradition highlights this tension. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* emphasizes prerequisites for baptism that depend on rational thought: "repented, received forgiveness, renounced evil, and died to sin." What do these mean when we consider baptism for an adult who does not have the capability to grasp the concepts of sin, evil, and death?

Baptism makes us the people of God

My suspicion is that framing the question around the mental processes of the person with intellectual disability incorrectly defines baptism. In the Bible, baptism transcends all human divisions. **Baptism makes us into the people of God** by compromising all competing allegiances to God's kingdom. The Gospels tell us that rival allegiances include family, nation, wealth, and even capabilities.

The first Anabaptists broke with theological traditions that rejected this basic definition of baptism. Over time, these traditions had begun to associate baptism with political identity rather than the creation of a diverse, multi-ethnic community of redeemed people. Infants were offered for baptism not only because this sacrament was seen as necessary for salvation, but also because baptism assured their citizenship.

Anabaptism too is guilty of allowing culture to sway our baptismal practice. John Howard Yoder reminds us that our church's problem is not establishment of state religion, but modern humanistic individualism. We have defined the human norm to be an individual adult who exercises personal responsibility. This downplays the communal aspects of being human and the human dignity of children (*The Royal Priesthood*, 270), while excluding all who do not match the norm.

Such individualistic thinking in regard to intellectual disabilities has pushed us into allowing cognitive ability to determine our theology and practice of baptism. Yet,

there is hope! We are not chained to previous traditions or ideologies. Instead, we return anew to the cry, "Jesus is Lord," seeking midcourse correction (*The Priestly Kingdom*, 84).

A place to start reevaluating our tradition is with a core verse about the body of Christ. In Galatians 3:2, we read that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. When our first loyalty to Jesus overshadows our differences, we find that our gifts and talents are serving the church and the world.

Unique Gifts

Women and men with profound disabilities bring a unique gift that helps to conform the church more closely to the image of God. Adults with profound disabilities have lived a long time as dependent and vulnerable people. **Dependency and vulnerability are characteristics of God's kingdom** that those of us without disabilities have difficulty embracing. Those of us with average cognitive ability may even find it impossible to fully rely on God's extravagant love because we cannot experience true dependency. People with profound disabilities embody for us the dependency that we without disabilities cannot easily embrace because of our capacity.

Perhaps a good indicator of an adult with disabilities' readiness for baptism is **the church's ability to recognize and utilize that person's gift**, rather than the individual's ability to make a confession of faith. In order to truly become the body of Christ in baptism, it is imperative to recognize that **people with disabilities are central to the function and being of church life.**

Can we be the body of Christ without them?

In the end, in the diverse community of gifts that forms the body of Christ, the question is not whether, or under what circumstances we should baptize people with profound disabilities. The question is, can we be the body of Christ without them? **Can we really be the church without the witness of their brokenness and the presence of their gifts?**

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Resource Suggestions

Yoder, John Howard. *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

———. *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994.

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