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## The ICCTE Journal

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# Christian Special Educators Responding to the Call to Serve: The Perception of Disability with a Christian Worldview Lens

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### Abstract

Most Christian special education teachers respond to a call to teach children with disabilities and are inspired to share the plan, purpose, and perspective of Christ; in other words to have the mind of Christ (Tucker, 1996, p. 29). This paper examines how the Old and New Testament traditions permeate the way people with disabilities are perceived in Western culture. An examination of the Old Testament shows a perception of disability as connected with sin, a manifestation of God's punishment and exclusion of people with disability from the temple (Winzer, 1993, p. 17). The New Testament provides narratives of compassion and inclusion of people with disabilities in the covenant of Christ. Christian special education teachers need to recognize their true calling as one of hope and compassion. Christian institutes of higher education are charged to ensure special education teacher candidates examine their own perceptions of disability with a Christian worldview lens in order to enable full participation of children with disabilities.

### Introduction

Christian faculty in the special education department are charged with the task of integrating their faith into their own teaching practices. Most faculty in the special education department have a rich experience in public or private education serving children with disabilities in different roles. Part of the process of understanding Christian perspectives within the discipline of special education is to examine how these perspectives have changed over time by studying the Old and New Testaments. Special education teacher candidates have the opportunity to examine their own personal Christian journey as part of the special education teacher development process. Therefore, Christian teacher preparation programs need to enable special education teacher candidates to become aware of their own perceptions of

students with disabilities. Teacher candidates empowered with the mind of Christ will carry out a paradigm shift to embrace the diversity of God's creation. This paper is a result of the author's examination of perceptions of people with disability over time and teacher candidates' responses to a call to serve in the field of special education informed by teachings from the Bible.

### Having the "Mind of Christ"

In 1 Corinthians 2:16, Paul quoted Isaiah 40:13 and explained that all believers "have the mind of Christ". Christians believe that one who has the mind of Christ shares a similar Christian purpose and perspective. Special education teacher credentialing programs in Christian Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) are charged to ensure teacher candidates show mastery of the discipline's knowledge-base and state standards of teaching, provide candidates an opportunity to understand God's plan for the world, and provide a framework for candidates to examine how the discipline integrates with their Christian faith (Anderson, 2006, p. 4; School of Education Conceptual Framework, 2012). The outstanding feature between a Christian and a secular teacher education program is a Christian teacher education program commits to understand and apply a Christian worldview (Wilkens, Shrier, & Martin, 2005). This Christian worldview is integrated into the special education discipline in order to promote transformation toward Christlikeness (Anderson, 2006), and to take "captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). According to the Apostle Paul, understanding of spiritual thinking means thinking and understanding the world as God's creation and truth (1 Corinthians 2:16). To have the mind of Christ is to share His views regarding the world and our discipline. The goal of a Christian teacher education program is to send into the world Christian teacher practitioners

with the “mind of Christ” which is the core of the meaning to be a Christian (Holmes, 1985, p. 11).

Teacher candidates in Christian IHE credentialing programs share a common goal in the pursuit of a special education teaching credential, in which they respond to the call to serve children with disabilities. Most of the teacher candidates who apply for the special education credential program report in their course assignment reflections that they feel called to serve children with disabilities. In order to empower special education practitioners to successfully integrate faith into their discipline, a critical examination of the Old Testament perceptions of disabilities and how these perceptions permeated Western culture is necessary. In addition, exploring Christian special educators’ cultural perspectives on disabilities from the Christian worldview lens, acknowledged from the New Testament, will identify Western cultural tension between inclusion and exclusion in public and private education (Skrtic, 1991).

The purpose of a Christian special education teacher program is to prepare and empower teachers as agents of change in today’s classroom. As creations in God’s image, we are all (including people with disabilities) valued and as Christians we all possess spiritual gifts. In order to understand spiritual thinking and to have the mind of Christ, the diversity of God’s creation, including disabilities, should be embraced and celebrated.

### **Responding to the Call to Serve Children with Disabilities**

The concept of calling to serve from a Christian perspective includes three general elements found in many religious traditions. For example, Palmer (2009) explained that a calling is rooted in who we are intended to be. In other words, a calling can also be described as a vocation, and does not mean a goal or intention that one sets out to pursue. A vocation means a calling that one hears and responds to. The most significant and frequently recurring verb (164 times) in the Old Testament is “to call” or “to give a vocation to” (Bauer, 1981). In the New Testament the word “call” or “calling” has to do with invitations to Christ and summons to follow Him. Palmer (2009) described it this way: “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. The question is who is calling us to serve” (p. 5)? In our faith, we believe it is God who is calling us. Buber

(1957) described this as a “power like wind or fusion or faith” and that “we cannot see the force, but we can see what it does. Primarily this force announces the need for change, and the response for which it calls is an awakening of some kind.” And finally, a calling is described as the “place where our deep gladness and the world’s hunger meet” (Buechner, 2006, p. 36; Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner 2006).

Many Christian universities have a strong commitment to include faith integration in the coursework and offer faculty development opportunities to assist with the integration of the Christian faith (Office of the Provost, 2012). As a result of the Christian university’s institutional practices, faculty in the special education programs are required to include faith integration activities and assignments as part of the coursework. For example, teacher candidates in the special education programs are required to complete a series of reflective journals for faith integration based on a specific theme connected to the coursework. In addition, candidates are required to participate in classroom discussions based on biblical passages and connections to situations with children with disabilities in the special education classroom. The department has collected and examined reflective journal reflection responses from each cohort in the master’s degree capstone courses and found a trend. Themes, which emerged from the discussions, identified the candidates’ purpose and goals to serve as servant leaders in the field of special education. Candidates often reflected in their journals why they wanted to serve and teach children with disabilities. The importance of recognizing the reason for Christian teacher candidates to be attracted to the field of education is due to the underlying connection to faith integration and believing they are doing God’s work and that a decision to pursue a special education teaching career is a vocation, a calling to serve, rather than a job. While teacher candidates admitted into the Christian IHE graduate school are not required to be Christians, they are included in the school’s faith based discourse with faith integrating activities and assignments.

Many special education teacher practitioners believe their calling or vocation is to save the special needs students from social injustices and to provide support to assist the students to access

learning opportunities. A sense of advocacy, caregiving, and service is often ascribed to special education teacher practitioners (Peters, 2003 p. 5).

### **How Perceptions of Disability in the Old and New Testaments Permeated Western Culture**

In order to ensure Christian special education teacher candidates mature as Christian practitioners, they must develop critical thinking about the notion of disability in a professional context. One important issue is to grasp how people with a disability are perceived in Western society. Teachers teach what they believe (Sleeter, 1986), and as a result of acculturation, many of the perceptions regarding disability transfer over into the classroom practices. The Western culture influences how professionals view a person with a disability, instilling the belief that such persons are people who are defective or possess a diminished capacity and require compassion (Davis, 1997, p. xiv; Skrtic, 1991). Understanding when and where teacher candidates develop their beliefs about a disability, as well as what these beliefs are and why, is strongly linked to their decision to teach children with disability. Therefore, Christian teacher credential programs must examine the significance of references to disabilities in the Old Testament in order to ensure Christian teachers recognize that their role is to empower and educate people with disabilities rather than perpetuate the notion of the deficit model (Valle & Conner, 2011). The Old and New Testaments seem to offer different perspectives on disabilities. Both perspectives have informed the Western cultural perception of people with disabilities.

### **The Old Testament**

Eiesland (1994) identified three theological topics, which present challenges for people with a disability (pp. 73-74). The Old Testament viewed a disability as a result of sin; the disability was a punishment. People with disabilities were excluded from active participant roles in the temple. For example, anybody with a deformity was disqualified from priesthood (Leviticus 21:17-21) and in Leviticus 21: 16-23, God told Moses:

None of your descendants throughout their generations shall draw near a blind or lame man, or he that hath a mutilated face or a limb too long, or man that has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback or

dwarf or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be with scurvy, or scabbed. (Leviticus 21: 16-23)

Deuteronomy reminds people to be charitable, yet compares a disability to a curse from the Lord to sinners: “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11).

Or consider:

If you do not carefully follow His commands and decrees . . . all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: the Lord will affect you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind. At midday, you will grope around like a blind man in the dark. (Deuteronomy 28:15, 28-29)

The Old Testament connects virtue and physical wellness when referring to people with disabilities and reminds us that He is the creator of all, including people with disabilities. “Then the Lord said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11). He also warns us to protect people with disabilities: “You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:14).

The powerful narratives in the Old Testament continue to resonate with modern culture in many aspects. Three important lessons appear in the Old Testament regarding God and disabilities. The first one is that God intentionally created people with a disability (Exodus 4:11). He appointed some of His people to protect people with a disability (Proverbs 31:8), and that even though the blind cannot see or a deaf person cannot hear, if you abuse a disabled person, God will repay all wrongs done to people with a disability (Leviticus 19:14; Deuteronomy 32:35; Hebrew 10:30-31).

Biblical and theological descriptions of people with disabilities describe biased and unfair treatment, rather than perspectives of an inclusive approach in society (Winzer, 1993, p. 19). As a result of perceptions that people with disabilities are not treated fairly, many Christian teacher candidates report that they feel called to serve children with

disabilities. These Christian candidates are immersed in God's word and aware of the biblical descriptions and perceptions, especially if they feel connections with people with disabilities. Christian teacher candidates' views regarding people with disabilities are shaped based on their interpretation of the scriptures. In addition, their perceptions of people with disabilities may be framed in a deficit model rather than celebration of their differences. Hence, the Christian teacher-training program's role is to re-direct the candidate's focus to the good news delivered by Jesus our Savior who brought the new covenant for humanity and to emphasize the person's strengths rather than deficits.

### **The New Testament**

The New Testament sees people with disabilities as persons in need of compassion whom God accepted and included, a point of view radically different from that of the current age. The New Testament reveals attitudes about disabilities and in the Gospel Mark records Jesus' healing of a blind man (Mark 8:22-26). Mark and Matthew also described Jesus' healing of a man with paralysis (Mark 8:22-26; Matthew 8:5-13). In addition, the New Testament relates stories of people with leprosy, epilepsy, mental illness, deafness, and blindness being healed by Jesus. An example of the cultural context of the times regarding perceptions of disabilities as a result of sin occurs when Jesus is asked if the blind man He had healed had sinned or his parents had sinned. Jesus responded that it was neither, but it was a way for "God to be revealed in Him" (John 9:3). The fact that the disciples assumed that blindness was caused by sin is an indicator of the culture and perceptions of connecting blindness to sin. The messages in the New Testament invite people to be generous and compassionate with people with disabilities and to remember that everybody is invited to take part in the gift of salvation. The Gospels generally show that people with disabilities were part of Jesus' healing ministry (Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52).

It is also important to examine the negative images of people with disabilities depicted in the Gospels. For example, in the Gospel of John, symbols of truth are represented with sight and light, while symbols of sin and unbelief are represented with blindness and darkness. The Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14) further defines the place for people with disabilities in the Kingdom of God. The

parable describes how a wealthy man prepared a huge banquet and invited his friends, all of which were also wealthy. However, the friends excused themselves and did not attend the banquet. The wealthy man was enraged and sent his servants to invite the poor and the lame. In Luke 14:21, Jesus said: "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." Jesus responded to the Pharisees when He was invited to celebrate the Sabbath accordingly:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives, or rich neighbors, if you do they also 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. (Luke 14: 12-14)

The parable of the banquet clearly shows a shift regarding how people with disabilities are viewed. "The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them" (Matthew 21:14). In Mark 16:15, Jesus said: "Go you into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." This includes people with disabilities and appears to be a paradigm shift from exclusion to restoration of people with disabilities to take part in the promise and the Body of Christ. Hence the narratives in the New Testament give a message of inclusion rather than discrimination as Christ's mission described in Mathew 11:2-5 and Luke 4: 18-19 described an inclusive attitude towards people with a disability. Matthew 11: 3-5 describes how Jesus responded to the question: "Are you he who is to come or do we look for another?" Jesus responded referring to the prophecies of Isaiah 29:18-19:

Go back and report to John what you hear and see; the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. (Oteino, 2009)

The New Testament also reveals how friends and family passionately advocate for individuals with disabilities, Mark 2: 1-5 tells the story of the paralytic and his four friends:

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large

numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

In the New Testament, Matthew 15:30 describes how great crowds came to Jesus bringing with them various disabilities: "Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them." The New Testament also reveals how Jesus spent time with people with disabilities who were on the fringe of society.

The view of disabled people as objects of assistance and compassion is also found in the New Testament. Jesus focused on people with disabilities as he cured and included them in the miracles and proverbs. Covey (2004) explains, "An Old Testament tradition viewed a disability as the result of sin. This tradition punished, separated, and restricted people with disabilities. It barred them from full participation in the Church and its rituals." However, as Christianity developed, a second tradition emerged that saw people with disabilities as needing compassion and that God accepted everyone. Another tradition saw people with disabilities as being representative of opportunities for the faithful to become generous and altruistic. Christianity triggered the shift from excluding and ignoring the needs of people with disabilities to charity movements that provided assistance to people with disabilities whom society had previously cast out (Covey, 2004; Winzer, 1993).

### **Western Culture: Paradigm Shift from Medical to Social Model**

The Old and New Testaments continue to impact Western culture and how disabled people are perceived in modern society especially in public education. Historically, compulsory schooling emerged during the early twentieth century and public schools became the means by which to preserve the values of the dominant culture (Valle & Conner, 2011). Major political shifts included industrial revolution, scientific management of

factories and subsequently, a scientific study of human beings (Ayala, 1999). World Wars I and II also increased attention on physical and mental ability. By the turn of the century, intelligence testing provided the scientific technology for classifying children per their native ability. As a result, these classifications provided the basis for differentiated curriculum ranging from accelerated to atypical.

When asked about perceptions of disabilities and how one responds to such a question depends largely on the discourse in which the question is framed. Using the traditional model, in many cultures around the world, people with disabilities are portrayed in films and described in literature as an unfortunate person who has been influenced by demons or who has been cursed or punished by God for sins by themselves or their parents (British Film Industry, n.d.; Hunt, 1991). The traditional model has strong correlations with the notions of disabilities found in the Old Testament.

Another lens used to view people with a disability is the medical model, which sees a disability as abnormality and is based on the deficit model (Skrtic, 1991). The medical model expects disabled people to adapt to fit into the world as it is. The assumptions include that disabilities are pathological conditions; differential diagnosis is objective and useful, especially for bureaucratic purposes (Davis, 1997). Special Education is a rationally conceived system of services, which benefits diagnosed students. The medical model's emphasis is on dependence, backed up by the stereotypes of disability that trigger discomfort for those without disabilities in addition to patronizing attitudes (Sleeter, 1992). The special education field is aligned to the medical model. It applies the paradigm in the discipline's practices and seems to operate based on a diagnosis, intervention, and treatment where the contextualization of disability is one of human difference from what is accepted as normal. People with disabilities may surrender their self-determination and choices for services to educational professionals who then will make educational decisions on behalf of the person with disability.

Recently, increases in organizations of people with disabilities, disability scholars and parent groups have emerged advocating to distinguish impairment from disability. This movement is the result of the

social model, which advocates a different way of looking at disability. The social model proposes inclusion of all adults and children with disabilities and values them in their local community (Goodley, 2001). The social model makes a distinction between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ and defines them as very different things:

Impairment is the loss or limitation of physical, mental or sensory function on a long-term or permanent basis. Disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers. (Disabled People’s International, 1981, p. 210)

The social model aligns with the New Testament and serves as a platform for Christian teacher training programs to prepare teacher candidates who are agents of change and will successfully negotiate their beliefs and perceptions of disabilities and their faith integration in the process of teaching children with disabilities in the classroom. These special education teachers will ensure that all children with disabilities achieve their academic potential and experience episodes of success in their lives as a result of having high expectations and understanding that they too are included and required to make significant contributions to society.

Perceptions of disability are socially constructed and institutionalized throughout many aspects of society. Several generations ago, interaction with people with disabilities was minimal in public settings especially in public and private schools. People with disability appeared in popular psyche as deficient and not normal and this perception was reinforced with the emergence of the normal curve of distribution, quartile divisions for ranking human traits as average, inferior, or superior, and implementation of intelligence testing with the purpose of identifying students in need of educational assistance (Hanson, 1997). Science, as a discipline, has also heavily influenced Western culture’s socially constructed ideas about disability (Valle & Conner, 2011). As a result of federal laws such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004 (IDEA 2004), that governs how states and public agencies provide special education and early intervention; children with disabilities may access a free and appropriate public education in the least

restrictive environment. Even though the spirit of the law for IDEA 2004 gives students access to an education, it is still problematic in terms of issues of inclusion and mainstreaming the students with disabilities with students without disabilities. Typically, only children with mild to moderate disabilities are mainstreamed in general education setting and participate in the traditional core curriculum (Erwin, 1993). Public education’s emphasis on testing and accountability may have a negative impact as it complicates logistics of differentiated instruction, even though the purpose of high-stakes testing is to improve student achievement. Benefits for students with disabilities include access to general education curriculum. However, Cortiella (2011) explained that the most significant risk posed by high-stakes tests for students with disabilities include increased grade retention, increased possibility of students with disabilities dropping out of school, and inability of obtaining a high school diploma (p. 2).

### **Conclusions**

In order to apply a Christian worldview to the special education discipline and to have a mind of Christ, Christian special education teachers need to be aware of their own perceptions of people with disabilities. Christian special education teachers need to examine themselves as reflective practitioners to see if they are influenced by the traditional model where disabilities are associated with sin, the medical model, based on a deficit model, or the social model in which there is a distinction between impairment and disability and strong resonance with the New Testament’s message of validation and inclusion. Therefore, it is essential for Christian special education teachers to understand what their true mission is about. As agents of change, they must value and empower their students the way Jesus modeled in the New Testament. They are to motivate and teach the students about self-worth and how to tap into God given gifts and strengths. Christian special education teachers must also instill in the students that they are not helpless, but have funds of knowledge. As a result of hard work, they too can make contributions to our society.

Ultimately, part of the Christian special education teacher’s mission can be viewed as a ministry of hope and includes advocating for their students in order for them to have access to all of the

educational opportunities available to every student (abled or dis-abled) at the school setting. These Christian special education teachers are also agents of change and serve as catalysis at their school sites as they collaborate and teach other colleagues the value of including all students in the educational process. Most importantly, Christian special education teachers must serve in a ministry of compassion exemplified in the words, “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,” (James 5:11) especially for the students’ parents, embracing the Christian worldview lessons from the New Testament.

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