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A THEOLOGY OF
belonging

'...all one in Christ Jesus'

*Your church is a community without
division where everyone belongs*

“...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience... and over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together.”

Colossians 3: 12-14, Holy Bible (NIV)



“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:26-28, Holy Bible (NIV)

Why do we need a theology of belonging?

Theology interprets our faith by reflection on our experience to create an understanding about God. A church's theology influences the ways people living with disability are perceived, welcomed, included, valued, provided with equal opportunities, and incorporated into the life of the church. It affects how they 'belong'. Christians look to the life and teaching of Jesus to obtain their direction. We also learn from the biblical example we have in the early church.

YOUR CHURCH IS A COMMUNITY WITHOUT DIVISION WHERE EVERYONE BELONGS

The culture when Jesus was on earth was marked by divisions along lines such as gender, social status, culture and wealth. The cultural assumption of that time was that human beings were not equal. Into that world came Jesus and his gospel, which offered a radical alternate vision of personhood. One where every person was seen as valuable, equal and included into God's family.

For the Christian community in Jesus' time, personhood and value were no longer defined by culture, social status or gender, but by inclusion in Christ. This is true for followers of Jesus today. This is to be visible in our lives too, as followers of Christ we must continue to keep to that example and show kindness, generosity, respect and belonging to all.

BEING 'IN CHRIST' TRANSFORMS US

We are 'in Christ' when we accept him into our life and take up his invitation to live in his ways and follow his instruction. We leave our 'old self' behind and put on a 'new self' where Christ lives in us "...since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

Colossians 3:5-14, Holy Bible (NIV)

In the verses preceding this passage the apostle Paul wrote that the Colossians, as followers of Jesus, were being transformed from the destructive behaviours of a world that created harmful divisions amongst people (our 'old self'), into a new way of Christ-like living (our 'new self'). This transformation is evident in our relationships with people. We are to embrace graceful and loving behaviour that shows welcome and belonging to all. We should no longer see people different from ourselves as 'other', rather we should see them as 'us'. We are no longer defined along lines that divide us, because being in Christ unites everyone into one body.

This new way of relating to every person in love is to bind us in unity, not open new lines of division between people who

A THEOLOGY OF *belonging*

We embrace each person's humanity as one who bears the image of God. Every person has intrinsic value because they are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

PROACTIVE COMMUNITIES

The values of the 'old self' are inherently self-seeking, but the values of the 'new self in Christ' are oriented toward the good of others. Our communities are not to be places where we merely share space, but they are to be places where we proactively work for one another's welfare.

This community approach echoes the approach of Jesus described in the Bible. Jesus understood his ministry as bringing the arrival of God's kingdom to earth as it was forecast by the Old Testament prophets. It was a time when people were liberated from exclusion, oppression and exploitation, and were welcomed into God's community of grace, love, compassion and justice. The Old Testament prophets named the gathering of the 'lame', the 'blind' and the 'mute' as part of this new inclusive community (Jeremiah 31:8-9; Micah 4:6-7; Isaiah 28:19; 35:5-6).

This becomes a key dimension of how the kingdom of God becomes a reality on earth in Jesus (Luke 4:18-19; Matthew 11:3-5).

There are important implications for the Christian community today when we respond to people living with disabilities. Personhood is defined by the fact that human beings are made, loved and valued by God. Inclusion into our church communities is based on our union in Christ as his body - the church. Therefore, fully including people living with disabilities into the life of our church communities is imperative to our message as Christ's followers, and our wellbeing as a church.

Sue is a valued member of Rostrevor Baptist. Sue lives with Cerebral Palsy. With an assistive communication device Sue shares with us her experience of church.

"I've been coming to church for 30 years. I enjoy coming because I love God and want to worship him, praise him, pray, and hear what he's saying to me through the speakers. I enjoy the songs, my favourite is 'It is Well with my Soul'.

I also like to see my friends. They help me when we have a meal, and with Communion. They listen to me, especially when I am sad and in pain. They laugh with me which makes me happy, especially when the Crows win! Pastor Dan teases me about the Crows because he goes for Carlton. They also help drive my wheel chair.

I help others by being a friend. I invited my very good friend, Lynne here years ago. I would like to help others learn how to meditate. This is



something God spoke to me about. I help people understand how it is to be disabled, that I can still live a very full life.

I feel included when others talk to me, especially when they learn how to listen to me through my communication system. I like it when others introduce me to people and include me in their conversations. I'm included when I hold a Biggest Morning Tea each year to remember my friend, Elizabeth, who

died of cancer. I like to share food and a drink with everyone and I like Communion.

I feel excluded when people don't realise how much I understand. When they do not talk to me, or talk to me as though I am a child. I'm pleased they talk to me, but it would be even better if they could talk to me as an adult."

Sue

EACH PERSON HAS A PART TO PLAY

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. ¹⁵Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Holy Bible (NIV)

This may be a familiar passage with the image of the church as a body, but there is an important point to note from this passage that is often passed over.

In verse 22-23 we see what humans consider weakness is no obstacle for God. He will work powerfully for good within and through a person living with illness or disability in the same way he works through those who seem healthy. In God's eyes we are all equal, and as one body we need each other! In fact every person living with a disability is "indispensable" to the life of the whole body!

RESOURCES

There are more resources at www.baptistcaresa.org.au/Connections with links to relevant websites.

A few favourites include:

- 'On Earth' (free) from Baptist Care SA www.baptistcaresa.org.au/resources/on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven



130 Rose Terrace
Wayville SA 5034

08 8273 7100
baptistcaresa.org.au

Michaela quips "...being blind I know how to put my faith in an unseen God! My blindness has given me great listening skills and good discernment. I am very aware of people because I can't see them! I am able to minister well in the pastoral care team."

Michaela

MICHAELA'S TIPS TO PUT A THEOLOGY OF BELONGING INTO PRACTICE

Living with a disability enables Michaela to share her tips for a theology of belonging:

- As Christ's followers create a community with no divisions. Enable me to serve equally and facilitate the opportunities for my equal participation.
- See everyone, including me, through the biblical lens of personhood and welcome me and others with disabilities with grace, love, kindness and generosity.
- Recognise I have gifts, strengths and passions. Please enable me to use those gifts by removing barriers and facilitating opportunities.
- Value and enable my **equal** contribution. I am equally gifted by the Holy Spirit to contribute and strengthen our church and I'd love the opportunity to fully participate.
- Consider ways I may be unintentionally excluded from our church and my local community. Find ways to rectify this. E.g. I catch a bus to church. Just aligning church start time with a public transport timetable can make things so much easier for me.
- Just remember to keep the focus on my ability not my disability. I would value joining in a 'Disability Sunday' where the service focused on this topic.
- Things I do may not always be perfect, but see the image of God shine in me and in you, and then we can shine together!

- CBM - Christian Blind Mission, Luke 14 resources, <https://www.cbm.org.au/>
- Livability UK, <https://livability.org.uk/>
- Through the Roof, <https://www.throughtheroof.org/>
- Churches for All, <http://churchesforall.org.uk/>

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