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# **THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH AS MINISTRY TO BLIND PEOPLE**

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of  
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Practical Theology  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Sacred Theology

By  
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May 2008

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## PREFACE

This paper sets forth the unique situation, role, and contribution that blindness has played, does play, and can play in God's church. It does so from a biblical, theological study and, equally as important, from the perspective of the blind culture. The desired outcome of this study is to help the church, its pastors, teachers, and members to view blindness and people who are blind not with eyes of pity but rather as partners and fellow members in the life of the church. It also describes and suggests forms of mission and ministry among people who are blind.

This paper began thirty-nine years ago when I was told that I was blind because of a sin in my life. I had been a Lutheran Christian ever since my infant baptism at Trinity Lutheran Church (Wausau, Wisconsin) and had been taught God's Word at home, at vacation Bible school, and at Sunday school, so I knew that my blindness was not about sin. Jesus had forgiven my sins when he died on the cross. My Lutheran pastors showed sympathy toward me and my blindness but, unfortunately, didn't give any relevant answers.

Later, when I applied to the two seminaries of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, one of them dismissed my inquiries of attending. With no foundation or exploration as to my abilities, resourcefulness, or aptitude, that seminary told me it would be almost impossible to place a blind candidate as a pastor, so I need not apply. Needless to say, I attended the other seminary, which had promised nothing except to work with me and to see what God would do.

While attending Concordia Seminary, a professor publicly opposed my becoming a pastor. He cited the Levitical code, which said that a priest needed to be without blemish or defect. A person who is blind, I was told by him, has a defect and therefore is unfit for the office of the ministry. Though my Lutheran pastors in childhood did not have answers to sin and blindness, they did teach me well in other matters. I knew from my catechism classes that Jesus fulfilled the Levitical laws on our behalf. Jesus was not only the perfect priest but he was also the perfect sacrifice. I also learned that the office of pastor comes more from the office of prophetic proclamation than from priestly sacrificial office. So I spoke to the head of the systematics department, Dr. John Johnson, both about the professor's opposition to a blind pastor and his incorrect scriptural basis. This became an internal issue for the faculty. I later learned that several professors agreed with the one who had publicly opposed me, but that as a whole the faculty did not accept the Levitical code argument he had set forth. Thus they permitted me to continue as a student.

In the midst of discussions with the faculty, someone pointed out to me that the professor who set forth the Levitical code as the reason to bar me from the ministry himself wore very thick glasses and, therefore, would not pass his own standard. The person who told me this thought it was funny, an ironic point. I, however, found it very disturbing.

Some pastors, a president of a seminary, and professors at both seminaries gave opinions and views, both theological and practical, concerning blindness. Most of these opinions were incomplete, inaccurate, or wrong. These were learned men, shepherds of God's flock, and teachers of the church. Their view, which is held by many people, is that sin has caused blindness and, therefore, blindness must be closely related to brokenness and evil. Those with this point of view could not, would not, move past my lack of physical sight to accept me as a whole person. Instead, they saw me only as a blind, broken, and incomplete person. Whether they knew it or not, this identity and stigma affected their assessment of me, a person who is blind.



Yet there were still other pastors, professors, and seminary presidents who viewed blindness in a far different way. Their understanding of the Gospel, that Jesus redeemed the body as well as the soul and spirit, led them to a different understanding. They did not always have answers, but they clearly articulated God's acceptance of all people, even people who are blind.

Their insights encouraged me not to give up, give in, or view myself as broken or incomplete merely because I am physically blind. Rather, the study of God's Word, along with their contributions, have given me a self-identity as a redeemed, whole, contributing member of the body of Christ.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the past nine years, I have interviewed many people who are blind. As they have challenged me with practical issues, I have challenged them with God's Word. Together we have learned.

I want to acknowledge with deep gratitude and respect the Rev. Dr. Rodney Rynearson. His pioneering work with deaf and blind people has helped in forming and shaping not only a theology but also a practice of mission and ministry with, to, and by blind people.

I am indebted to my parents, who always encouraged me and would not let me give up. I owe my being a pastor, along with my knowledge of Greek and my love of that language, to the Rev. Dr. Larry Myers. It was he who encouraged me in college to be a pastor and who taught me Greek. I am grateful for the professors at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, who have studied the Scriptures together with me. I am thankful for the Rev. Larry Burgdorf, my associate pastor, who helped me understand that theology is not empty proofs but that which gives meaning and purpose as it provides structure to faith and understanding. I owe a debt of gratitude for all the people, sighted and blind, who preceded me in this research or participated in it. They are noted in the bibliography. I am thankful to my wife, Debb, for her hours of help as she assisted in crystallizing my thoughts.

Finally, I thank the staff of Lutheran Blind Mission. They have supported volunteers and have served and shared the Gospel with people who are blind.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Thesis

Throughout history, people who are blind have been viewed by those in the sighted culture as limited and broken. This is true both in the church and in society in general. Our ecclesiology, however, should encourage, promote, or utilize blind people and their gifts to serve in the body of Christ. The church can, and should, accept, uplift, and utilize people who are blind and visually impaired as full members with a healthy and whole identity in Christ. To this end, our ecclesiology must not prohibit the ordination of a man who is blind solely on the basis of blindness as has been done in the past.

I wrote this paper with the goal of helping the church realize that blindness is not necessarily a result of sin. Rather, it is a gift of God to be used by the church. I hope to help the church become more sensitive to people who are blind and develop more productive ways of serving and utilizing these people.

#### Status of the Inquiry

Writings on the topic on blindness and on people who are blind are limited both inside and outside the church. Observations, experiences, and anecdotes are common. These are helpful and informative but not formative or authoritative in forming a theology or ministry.

John Hull, a Christian who lost his sight in his mid 30s, has written two books concerning his personal experiences and observations on blindness. To address the relationship of God and people with a disability, Hull wrote *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible* and *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness*. Elizabeth

Browne, a visually impaired professor at Loyola University, also addressed this relationship in her book *The Disabled Disciple*. These works demonstrate God's love and acceptance of people who have a physical disability. They do not explain the role these people can and should play in the church, however, other than to say they should be involved. Also, they do not use a Law/Gospel orientation to address ministry to, with, and by people who have a disability.

In the secular world, much more has been written concerning blindness and the identity of people who are blind. Most of these writings deal with adjusting to no sight, particularly how to adapt to one's environment. When they speak of identity, they do so from a worldly, non-Christian point of view. Secular writings provide perspective and views on how society works with and incorporates people who are blind. This can assist the church as it then turns to ministry, providing ways of evaluation, perspective, and incorporation.

Harvey Lauer, who has been blind from birth and a Lutheran from his infant baptism, was a rehabilitation counselor at a veteran's hospital for many years. Informed and instructed by his church while working in the field of rehabilitating people who are blind, he wrote many articles on this topic. His work personally, along with his involvement in ministry with the people of Lutheran Blind Mission, has helped to adapt advances made in the secular world to the church's ministry with people who are blind. His work and writings are used in several ways in this paper.

The secular world is pushing for a strong role and voice by people who are blind. It is encouraging them to speak up, write down, and be active in the affairs of themselves and of others (witness the Americans with Disabilities Act and the lobbying efforts of the National Federation of the Blind). Within the church, this voice is starting to be heard; yet many pastors and people are still holding to the older views and models of ministry and service.

In this paper, I will look at these and other resources and build upon this work. I will also add the field work of ministry that has been accomplished during the past nine years of my service in full-time work with Lutheran Blind Mission.

### **Statement of Methodology**

To undertake this topic, I first evaluate what is the world view of blindness. In chapter 1, I do this from the point of view of both sighted and blind people. In chapter 2, I use the framework of a theology of glory and a theology of the cross to look at the identity of blind people as it relates to God and the cross. In chapter 3, I develop a proper biblical understanding of the identity of people who are blind. Finally, in chapter 4, I note how the church can do mission work and ministry to and with people who are blind and visually impaired.

Even though this paper brings to light a new identity for people who are blind, it does not propose moving to congregations made up of only blind people. The paper does set forth, however, the concept of ministry and mission work to people who are blind by blind people themselves.

## CHAPTER TWO

### IDENTITY OF A BLIND PERSON: DISABILITY OR AFFLICTION?

#### A First Look at Blindness and the Blind Culture

Most sighted people in the United States are largely unaware of the blind culture, which makes up approximately 4 percent of the total population. Likewise, most of the Christian church is unaware of this culture and the numbers of blind people who are without easy access to the Christian Gospel or the Christian church. The church in our nation thus has a great mission mandate and opportunity among blind people.

To be about this mission, the church would do well to learn more about the culture of blind people. Doing so will help it comprehend how best to frame its ministry to this subculture, which desperately needs the Gospel and its blessings. Sighted people in the church may not accurately or adequately comprehend what blindness means to persons so affected. How do blind people interpret their blindness, and what are their perceptions of sighted people—particularly their perceptions of the attitudes of the sighted toward the blind? How do sighted people generally identify with blind people? And conversely, how or what identity do blind people have of themselves?

With these challenges in mind, let us first investigate just how many blind and visually impaired people are in the United States. For the purpose of this paper, the term *blind* will refer to people who are functionally blind, whether they have some sight or none at all. Those who need Braille as their language because they cannot read large type, or who use a white cane for

mobility, are considered functionally blind. Visual impairment, therefore, describes those people who, even after corrective eyewear, have a significant loss of sight. This loss of sight affects work, relationships, and most aspects of life. People with a visual impairment are not able to drive or read regular print.

### **Numbers of Blind and Visually Impaired**

According to the American Foundation for the Blind, there are approximately 10 million blind and visually impaired persons in North America.<sup>1</sup> Fifty-one percent of these people are over 65 years of age; only 1 percent are under the age of 18. The most striking statistic may be that of the remaining 4.7 million working-age blind and visually impaired adults, only 26 percent are employed.<sup>2</sup> This means that 74 percent are unemployed, a staggering number when compared to the national unemployment rate of 5 percent.

In an Associated Press news story, James M. Tielsch, an associate professor in international health and ophthalmology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, states that the incidence of blindness and visual impairedness will double during the next thirty-five years if the nation doesn't find better ways to arrest eye disease among aging Baby Boomers.<sup>3</sup> The reason for this is that the wave of Baby Boomers is entering the older years, which are the high-risk years for vision loss.

As the population ages, the quality of the average American's vision will decline due to both normal age-related vision problems and an increase in diseased eyes, says Dr. George Bresnick, professor and chairman of the Ophthalmology Department at the University of Rochester Medical Center in Rochester, New York. "As you get a demographic shift to the aged,

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<sup>1</sup> American Foundation for the Blind, "Statistical Snapshots," American Foundation for the Blind, <http://afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=15> [accessed February 22, 2007].

<sup>2</sup> N.A., "Miracle Workers," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 11, 1996, 14.

you're going to get more people with glaucoma, macular degeneration, and diabetic retinopathy.”<sup>4</sup>

Table 1: American Vision Decline with Age

AGE BREAKDOWN OF THE 1.7% OF POPULATION THAT IS TOTALLY BLIND	
Under 18	1%
18 to 44	35%
45 to 64	15%
65+	51%

Source: *American Demographics*, June 1995

Thus, the facts clearly show that a sizeable segment of the population is blind or visually impaired. This addresses one of many attitudes of the sighted culture. Blindness, along with the many ramifications that accompany it, is not an insignificant issue. If it were an anomaly or an occasional situation, it might be dealt with as such. Modern medicine has been able to reduce or even eliminate certain eye diseases, leading people to think there is less blindness today. In fact, modern medicine has eliminated some diseases of the sight but has only slowed down others. Accidents and new environmental issues have led to new ways for people to lose sight. Blindness, and its related situations, remain a continuing issue.

Statistics concerning blindness are ambiguous, making its quantification or definition wide ranging and difficult. According to U.S. governmental definitions, to be classified as blind, a

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<sup>3</sup> N.A., “Blindness May Be on the Rise,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 13, 1995, 2B.



person cannot see anything at all. There are many people, however, who are able to see light or shadows but nothing more. By the government's definition, they are not blind. If people such as these, who have only a very small amount of sight, are included in the count of the blind, then the number of people in the United States who are in need of special services or adaptive materials is 4 percent of the total population.

### **The Place of Blind People in Society**

It wasn't until the 1960s, though, with the passing of the Civil Rights Act, that people started to understand that blind people are capable of being productive contributors to society. For centuries, the only thing blind people were permitted to do was beg (cf. Mark 10:46; Luke 18:35; and John 9:8). Thus a blind person's identity was that of a poor beggar.

It is true that there are some forms of livelihood that are certainly not possible for blind people to do. Driving a car or flying an airplane alone would be examples of this. There are many other jobs, however, that sighted people—and some blind people, as well—do not consider feasible for blind people to do. Thus, blind people are often not even given the opportunity to try them.

History holds only a few exceptions to this generalization prior to the nineteenth century and the invention of Braille. John Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*, was blind in his old age. Nicolas Saunderson (1682–1739), a genius in mathematics, was recommended to the chair of Physics at Cambridge University by none other than Sir Isaac Newton. Saunderson served for twenty-eight years. He is credited with inventing a board on which blind people can do

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Braus, "Vision in an Aging America," *American Demographics* 17, no. 6 (June 1995): 36.

mathematics. This board has an eight-sided hole into which a square pin is placed. Depending on how it is placed in the hole, the pin represents a number or mathematic symbol.<sup>5</sup>

John Stanley (1712–1786) received a Bachelor of Music degree from Oxford at age 17. He was the first conductor to perform Handel’s *Messiah* at the London Philharmonic. He was honored by being appointed as the king’s master of music.

And, of course, there was Louis Braille, the inventor of the raised-dots reading code named after him. Other than that, history records a few well-known individuals who are blind: Helen Keller was both blind and deaf. She was instrumental in helping to establish Braille as the standard reading code and was very active with the promotion of people who are blind in society. Kenneth Jernigan was a strong spokesman for the National Federation of the Blind, helping to move legislation that provided equality in the work force to include people who are blind.

Ray Charles is a well-known example of a person who was blind but who accomplished much, such as a successful music career. Stevie Wonder also has had a great music career. He has also helped fund adaptive technology for a reading machine.

Beyond these few exceptions, however, most people who are blind have been viewed as incapable and dependent. Whether in the church or in the secular world, blind people have been treated as though they were in the way, obstacles to progress, or, at best, objects of pity and service.

Scripture gives a perfect example of this: As Jesus was walking from Jericho, a blind man, Bartimaeus, heard of his approach. He cried out: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mark 10:47). Many in the crowd saw him and his actions as a nuisance, a troublesome interruption.

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<sup>5</sup> Hector Chevigny and Sydell Braverman, *The Adjustment of the Blind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 107.

They rebuked him and told him to be quiet. It is of great comfort to see and hear of Jesus' reaction both to the crowd and to Bartimaeus. "Go, . . . your faith has healed you" (Mark 10:52).

### **Recent Attempts to Address the Issue of Blindness**

The actions and opinions of the church through the centuries have followed those of society. In the twentieth century, there came a change for society and the church. As the use of Braille spread, sighted society—and therefore also the church—recognized it as a way to serve blind children. The action of this service was primarily to provide Braille materials, all of which were prepared, produced, and sent out by sighted people. It was believed and expected that as blind children would read these materials, they would learn and synthesize the knowledge into their life. Little was done for blind adults. Outside the secular schools for the blind, none of this preparation, production, or education was done by blind people themselves. Strangely enough, the goals of educating blind people were accomplished, yet very few efforts were made to assimilate educated blind people into the workforce. This added to the frustration and passivity of the blind culture.

Meanwhile, the church's role was seen as that of a custodian, caretaker, and provider. With a strong clergy leadership of congregations, laypeople were not always utilized. Therefore, blind people were not only idle, but were viewed and valued only as objects to be served, not as assets. This only reinforced the sighted society's identity of blind people as having little worth, as often in the way, and as having no use to God or people.

### **Models of Work with People Who Are Blind**

Church and society have developed working models of relating to people who are blind. Not all of these models acknowledge these people's positive identity in Christ. These are some observable models:

**Medical Model**<sup>6</sup> This model sees blind people as in need of assistance. It views them as broken and attempts to fix them. This is good for a first-line approach toward people who have just lost their sight. But if this is the only model applied, people are left feeling broken, incomplete, and inadequate. Even more important, this model deals only with the physical side of people and does little for their mental, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. If this model is applied to any of these other areas of life, it leaves people feeling even more broken than before.

**Rehab Model**<sup>7</sup> This model works at rehabilitating blind people so they may be reintegrated into society, and especially into employment. It assumes that all people are able to work if given the proper training and the right tools. This model fails in several ways.

First, not all people are capable of employment. This is especially true in the present economic climate, where the bottom line mandates that people reach ever-higher performance levels or be forced to leave.

Second, 74 percent of blind people are unemployed. Getting a job as a blind person is not as simple as being provided with training and tools; it requires dedication by the employer. People who go through training based on this model but then are not employed begin to develop animosity and distrust toward institutions and government. This model often leads blind people

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<sup>6</sup> Based on the author's visits and interviews with Bob Mates, Harvey Lauer, and Donna Stepanovic. Bob Mates was interviewed in a visit to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on 5–10 March 1999, where he was the director of a blind outreach center, and by phone conversations on 23 March 1999, 5 November 1999, and 20 July 2000. Harvey Lauer was interviewed while teaching at the Christian Blind Institute, 20–26 April 2003, St. Louis, Missouri. His career was spent teaching blind people as a rehabilitation counselor for Heinz Veterans Hospital, Chicago, Illinois. Donna Stepanovic was interviewed during a visit to the blind outreach center where she serves in Albuquerque, New Mexico, 15 May 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Based on the author's visits and interviews with Cecilia Lee and Grace McMichael. Cecilia Lee was interviewed on 3–5 March, 2000, in a visit to the blind outreach center in St. Louis, Missouri, where she served as director, and in weekly phone conversations, March–November 2000. Grace McMichael was interviewed on 27–28 October, 2001, in a visit to the blind outreach center in San Antonio, Texas, where she serves as director, and in sporadic phone conversations, October 2001–December 2003.

to believe that rehabilitation will lead to a full and active life. But in and of itself, the rehab model cannot provide this.

**Custodial Model**<sup>8</sup> This model views blind people as incapable and severely limited in employment abilities, life skills, personal care, and, usually, all aspects of life. Because blind people are seen as incapable, sighted people are seen as necessary as caretakers for blind people. The motivation for this model often comes from pity, guilt, and a need to control. Certainly there are blind people who need this model, even as many sighted people do. Unfortunately, many sighted people believe that the majority of blind people fit into this description, when in fact they do not. Most people who are blind and handled with pity know so and dislike it. When Christians treat blind people with pity in the names of God and love, those people who are blind can't help but conclude that all Christianity is like this. This model most often alienates blind people.

**Hero Model**<sup>9</sup> This model views blind people as capable of doing almost anything. This is an extension of the Custodial Model, which believes blind people cannot be independent and need constant care. Sometimes when people with these preconceived notions meet an independent blind person, they can't adjust their previous model, so they hold up the independent blind person as an exception, a hero. This model is unhealthy because it creates a distance due to the awe factor. It doesn't help foster friendships or proper assessments of abilities.

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<sup>8</sup> Based on the author's visits and interviews with Marilyn Baldwin and Harvey Lauer. Marilyn Baldwin was interviewed on 3 February, 2002, in a visit to the blind outreach center in Orlando, Florida, where she serves as director, and in phone conversations, March 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the author's visits and interviews with Rev. Steve Scov and Harvey Lauer. Steve Scov was interviewed on 20–21 August, 2005, in a visit to Emanuel Lutheran Church, Santa Barbara, California, where he serves as pastor.

**Homogeneous Model**<sup>10</sup> This model sees blind people as wanting and needing to be together with other blind people. It creates a separate environment for them. The model suggests that by being together, they will understand one another and their needs and thus be more able to meet them.

This model was used for decades in educating blind children. During the decades preceding 1970, most children who were blind were sent to a residential school for blind children. The campus was designed for blind children, complete with tactile signs and architectural orientation in mind. The textbooks were provided in Braille and large type. The teachers were trained to provide unique skill training and preparation. Even the curriculum was designed with blind children in mind, to give them the best and maximum training and skills in order to bring success in life.

Yet even though great efforts were made to provide separate but equal education, other issues arose. The separateness created isolation. It did not provide for normal socialization. Blind children living in this model developed either inferior or superior attitudes of themselves, both of which made their integration into the sighted world very difficult.

In an attempt to use this model in church life, Christians in South Korea have established four churches for people who are blind. According to one member, Sung Young Kim, the opportunities and activities are limited. Because Korean society is sight oriented, these churches need sighted assistance—but there is none. The churches are for blind people. Rather than being a help, they are depressing.

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<sup>10</sup> Based on the author's visit and interview with Sun Yung Kim at the Christian Blind Institute, 20–26 April, 2003, St. Louis, Missouri. Sun Yung Kim has been blind from birth and has resided all her life in South Korea.

**Inclusive Model**<sup>11</sup> This model acknowledges that blind people have abilities and skills that can and should contribute to the whole of the community. It seeks to permit openings, outlets, or areas in which blind people may enter the community and contribute. Other than an acknowledgement of these openings, however, there is very little effort made to involve blind people. Rather, the model expects blind people to be active in plugging into the community. This model falls short in that it only allows limited doors or openings into the community. Activities and functions in the general community are often established and guided by a few people, thereby limiting the flexibility, variety, and availability of activities. The focus is on the community and the community's activities, not the individual and his or her service. The individual is of interest only as far as he or she can serve the community. Often, blind people are able to fit into the designated areas of service, just as sighted people do, but their potential is not often realized because this model does not and cannot take into account the different needs and gifts of the blind individuals.

### **Perceptions Blind People Hold Concerning Their Condition**

Now we turn our attention to how members of the blind community perceive their own condition. This will reveal the common identity, or negative self-image, held by most blind persons. Two specific points should be made. First, the view of most blind people concerning their condition is more often than not developed and fostered by the sighted world. Rather than finding their own identity, most people in the blind community have learned to live down to what is expected of them.

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<sup>11</sup> Based on the author's visits and interviews with Josh Swatosh and Marilyn Baldwin. Josh Swatosh was interviewed on 12 August, 2001, 28 December, 2001, and 10 August, 2002 in a visit to the blind outreach center in Wausau, Wisconsin, where he serves as director.

Second, as times and technology have changed, so have the possibilities for blind people. New ways to process and store information, to catalog experiences and learnings, have been developed. Such things as mechanical brailers, the prevalence of canes and guide dogs, and libraries of materials have raised the mobility and range of activities of blind people. For the decades following World War II, independence was not only possible, but also became commonplace.

This independence has come about not only because of the technology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but also because of a better understanding of what is and is not blindness. It is true that a person who has total blindness cannot physically tell light from dark, but that is not what that person's brain sees. Because vision is in the brain, not the eye, people who are blind learn to visualize in their brain using input from the other senses. Therefore, blindness does not necessarily preclude employment. It simply means that a blind person cannot work in such a way that requires any action based upon a visual view of the world.

Sometimes adult-onset blindness prevents people from continuing to earn a living in the same kind of work that they were doing prior to loss of sight. Yet often jobs can be maintained with the retraining of workers to the use of sound and touch.

### **The Impact of Braille on the Life and Worldview of People Who Are Blind**

For centuries, there was one predominant perception of all blind people. They were viewed as unable to work or contribute positively to family or society. The development of Braille—a code of small, raised dots on paper that can be read by touch—changed the fortunes and perceptions of blind people dramatically.

Braille was invented by Louis Braille in France around 1824. Braille was a cobbler's son who, when four years old, injured his eye while playing with his father's tools. He was working with an awl on a piece of leather. It slipped and poked him in the eye. An infection set in and



spread to the other eye, and his vision was totally lost. At 15, while a student at the National Institute for the Blind in Paris, he developed the raised-dot reading system. Braille used an awl, similar to the tool that had taken his sight, to produce raised dots in paper, an idea that came to him from the dot-dash code punched on cardboard that Captain Charles Barbier used to send messages to his soldiers at night. Braille's reading system was based on a "cell" of six dots. Using the sixty-three possible combinations of the dots, Braille worked out an alphabet, punctuation marks, numerals, and later a system for writing music. All alphabets worldwide use the same dots for the same letter, so that *a* is an *a* in English, German, Spanish, and so on. Certain combinations of dots are assigned to designate whole words and some are used as parts of words.

With the tool of a written language in place, society started to pay attention and give interest to blind people. Braille was viewed as a tool, device, or way to serve blind people. For blind people, however, it was a step forward from a purely oral culture to a written culture. It also helped form the way blind Braille users viewed the world, in the same way that all languages shape their speakers' views. Most sighted people's view of the world had been changed drastically with the invention of the printing press, when "the intellectual life of Western Europe was given added impetus by the invention of printing by movable type. This occurred not far from the middle of the fourteenth century."<sup>12</sup>

Braille was not the only language being promoted in the nineteenth century. It took almost a century for Braille to be viewed as the best and primary language for the blind, surpassing Boston Linotype, New York point, and moon type.<sup>13</sup> It took blind people such as Helen Keller to

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume 1, Beginnings to 1500* (New York: Harper Row, 1975), 606.

<sup>13</sup> See *War of the Dots*, by Robert B. Irwin (New York: American Foundation for the Blind, 1997), for more information on this development.

speaking out for their own language to finally solidify Braille as the standard. By 1930, Braille was firmly established and, for the first time in history, blind people were able to amass knowledge, organize their thoughts on paper, and pursue an advanced education. This brought hope and the promise of a future to blind people.

Yet even with the prevalence of Braille, people who are blind predominantly live, move, and work not in a written culture but in an oral culture. Only 18 percent of people who are blind know Braille.<sup>14</sup> Even those who do know Braille live and function primarily in an oral culture. This is because society does not provide or make allowance for people who are blind by providing Braille on everything. Elevators and ATM machines often have Braille. But microwaves, computers, and televisions with on-screen displays are just a few common things among a world of visuals that do not provide Braille.

### **The Thinking Process of a Person Who Is Blind**

Braille does not take a person out of the oral culture. Instead, Braille provides a bridge into the written culture along with a literate way of thinking. Besides being a bridge into the written, literate world, Braille is a way to reinforce the oral interactions.<sup>15</sup>

Language, both spoken and written, helps form and shape the way a person thinks and processes information. For blind people, that language is Braille. Braille is a concrete language, not abstract. This is because Braille itself is concrete: touchable, tangible, and felt one cell at a time.

Sighted people can actually read and comprehend many printed words at once. The very proficient can take in a line, paragraph, or even a page with one look and know what is being

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<sup>14</sup> American Foundation for the Blind, "Statistical Snapshots," American Foundation for the Blind, <http://afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=15> [accessed February 22, 2007].

<sup>15</sup> The oral culture, along with its cultural values, significance, and activity, is in and of itself a significant study, the likes of which this paper cannot undertake.

communicated. Similarly, sighted people can walk into a church, auditorium, or classroom and within a few seconds orient themselves to the surroundings.

People who are blind, however, cannot view a line of Braille words, an object, or a room with one touch. Rather, just as they read Braille one cell at a time, so also they can touch only one thing at a time. Because their mind takes things in one item at a time and they must focus intently on it, blind people take considerably longer to gather or obtain information.

The majority of blind people do not read Braille but only learn through listening, so the process is similar for them, one word at a time. Because blind people receive information one item at a time, their brains often process everything that same way. This also generally holds true for the output of information: one item at a time, highly focused.

Besides being highly focused, communication by blind people—whether written or spoken—is concrete. For a blind person to understand, things need to be described in ways that are very concrete, tangible, and comparative to other items that might be familiar.

“Can you get me the red box in the storeroom?” Although this question describes color and location, it is still abstract. A concrete example of a similar request might be: “Dave, can you get me the box that held your new shoes from the storeroom? It’s on the first shelf on the left, about shoulder high, next to the picnic basket.”

First, the person is named. Often, blind people do not know if they are being addressed. They lack the eye contact that identifies to whom the question is addressed. Next, the box is made tangible in size and function. (It held Dave’s new shoes.) Last, the specific location was given—not just the room but also which shelf in which room at what height and with a specific marker.

In that Braille brings about much of this phenomenon, blind people learn to think and formulate their life and world in similar ways. Indeed, even blind people who don’t read Braille

take in information in this way—small bit by small bit—because the auditory and tactile process is the same. Because sighted people do not use this language or way of thinking, they often get the impression that blind people are slow of mind, and blind people often feel excluded or different in a negative way:

### **How Sighted People View Blind People**

Even though they have an established written language, greater availability of education, and more aids for independent living, most people in the blind culture remain discouraged, despondent, and depressed. Education and the written language of Braille help a small portion of this population. (Even today, with a high emphasis on literacy, 82 percent of blind and visually impaired people do not read Braille.) Most blind people are unemployed. The perception that blind people are merely helpless recipients is still prevalent. Deborah Sumner, when writing about her own blindness, said it well:

I was puzzled and hurt until I discovered that the visible disability of blindness carries with it a hidden handicap or stigma. People are often ill at ease in the company of a blind person for many and various reasons. At first, I dreaded meeting people, finding it tough to cope with the uneasiness and negative emotion they put forth. Now I am slowly learning to excuse the ignorance and ignore the pity. The word *blind* is a measure. This measure enables a nontangible condition to become tangible. The problem is that most people tend to lump all blind people into one category. That category is helpless.<sup>16</sup>

It was noted earlier that many sighted people view blind people as incapable, dependent, or at best, objects of service. People who are confronted by this attitude day after day often come to believe the opinion and thereby lapse into inactivity and passivity. They think that they can do nothing and therefore allow and then expect people to do everything for them. Deborah Sumner continues:

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<sup>16</sup> Deborah L. Sumner, "What I Discovered as a Blind Person," *Touched by Jesus' Love* (St. Louis: Lutheran Mission with Blind and Visually Impaired Persons, 1998), 21.

“Blind” is a label which has trapped many people. Because we are blind, society won’t let us starve or be homeless. But we aren’t really expected to work or contribute much either. In fact very little is expected of us. Sadly, many of us respond to these low expectations by making little of our lives. It takes faith and strength to overcome such negative expectations.<sup>17</sup>

### **What Is Identity and How Is It Formed?**

Our society associates identity with what a person does or doesn’t do, has or doesn’t have.

This also includes a value or worth either to a few people, a group of people, or to society itself.

One’s identity is formed over a period of years.

Whether or not one’s view is biased by once having been sighted, one must be forced to look upon oneself anew upon losing one’s sight. Dr. Thomas J. Carroll referred to what is known as “body image.”

To this body image the loss of physical integrity, the death of sight, may be a devastating blow. An adult has spent many years in building up some sort of equilibrium which made it possible for him to live with his body image, to accept it and to believe it. Now he must drastically revise that image for his body is a blind and maimed body—a windowless, abnormal body. What happens to his equilibrium, to his whole method of action?<sup>18</sup>

One might take this one step further. When people become blind, they often see their body, soul, and especially self-image as incomplete, imperfect, and broken. They may think they are less of a person because they have one fewer sense. This attitude often is the reaction to the commonly held societal view of blindness.

Dr. John Hull, a professor of theology in Birmingham, England, went blind in his 30s. As a professor, he was trained to study, observe, and then write his findings. He applied this process to his life, the word of God, and society. Here is one of his findings:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas J. Carroll, *Blindness: What It Is, What It Does and How To Live with It* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 15.

The estimate which blind people form of themselves is a mirror image of the view of blindness held in the surrounding society. If you have always consciously or unconsciously thought of blind people as pathetic and incompetent, when you become blind yourself you adopt an image of yourself as pathetic and incompetent. One of the most common reasons for disabled people losing their jobs is the low self-image which is the result of the initial impact of their disability, a low image with which their employer readily concurs.<sup>19</sup>

In 1961, when Thomas J. Carroll wrote his book *Blindness: What It Is, What It Does and How To Live with It*, he observed the following societal trends that were then impacting the self-image of those who went blind:

Two factors in our day have tended to re-emphasize the importance of physical qualities and so have put added stress on the trauma of physical loss.

The first of these is the decreasing influence in our culture of the Judeo/Christian philosophy. With the materialistic philosophy which has replaced it in our literature has come a natural emphasis on human environment—the things that surround us during the human life span: physical health, physical perfection, absence of pain, soundness of body, comfort, etc.

The second factor is advertising, with its careful analyses of human desires for the avowed purpose of exploiting them and its use of mass media to arouse in people all kinds of latent anxieties about themselves, their physical characteristics, and their social acceptability.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, according to Hull, the self-identity formed by a blind person is that he or she is different, abnormal, helpless, and useless to society. More often than not, when an adult loses sight, he or she will also lose a positive body image, employment, and most worldly goods. Therefore, it is easy for a person to soon have a poor self-image.

Most people in the United States who enter the blind culture do so after the age of 18. By then, they have already established the identity attitude that blindness is a bad thing and that blind people are to be served, pitied, or ignored. It takes a great amount of encouragement,

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<sup>19</sup> John M. Hull, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2001), 64.

<sup>20</sup> Carroll, 16–17.

education, relearning, and training to reshape this view. Most people are unable to do this. There are many reasons for this failure to overcome the barrier of this attitude. These will be addressed later.

Even if this perception of doom is changed, there is the backlash problem. It is very difficult for an adjusted blind person not to confuse kindness and compassion with pity and paternalism. As this happens, it exacerbates the situation, causing even deeper isolation.

When we do that, we are likely to refuse needed help from strangers, yet impose upon friends and relatives. Kindness is motivated by love. It's doing what you hope will be done for you if you are in need of it. Pity is based on fear and shame. It's needing to feel superior and wanting to manipulate the object of pity so that you feel better about yourself.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the perceptions of the blind culture about their condition are almost always in reference to the sighted culture. When blind people have adjusted to blindness, their view of themselves is painted with independence, knowledge, and capability. They reject the actions of pity or servitude, along with other negative attitudes expressed by some in sighted society. This leads to isolation for those who are blind as a result of their rejection of and by the sighted culture.

Blind people who do not adjust or compensate for their blindness see themselves primarily as helpless. This results in low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness. Again, isolation occurs because the sighted culture moves on, passing by passive, non-participatory blind people.

### **The Identity of Blind People and Spirituality**

As noted above, those who adjust to their blindness take on a more positive view of themselves, as being independent, knowledgeable, and capable. They reject the actions of pity or servitude, along with other negative attitudes expressed by some in sighted society. Along with

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<sup>21</sup> Harvey Lauer, "The Blind Church Members," *Touched by Jesus' Love* (St. Louis: Lutheran Mission

this rejection comes a distrust of those who have shown pity and paternalism. Quite often, this includes the institutional church.

How do people learn of Jesus, his love and forgiveness? Just as with children, we all learn from the lives of those around us. Actions can speak as loudly as words. St. Augustine has been credited with saying, "Proclaim the Gospel. If necessary, use words." Sadly, the words many blind people hear are not the words of salvation but the words of pity and servitude. Thus, in the same way that many blind people reject sighted society's opinion of them, so they also reject the one true God. Instead, they turn to the god of the here-and-now, as so many in our world do today.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, as a group, the blind culture is much larger than people imagine. The view or opinion of the blind culture in general is not healthy or beneficial. Blind people are seen as inferior, in need of help, and unable to do for themselves. Because of this, people who are blind often have a poor or low self-identity.

In the next chapter, we will explore how earthly identity relates to spiritual identity. We will compare and contrast this to the identity found in a proper theology of the cross

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with *Blind and Visually Impaired Persons*, 1998), 33.



## CHAPTER THREE

### BLINDNESS RECONSIDERED

#### In the Light of a Theology of Affliction

Since the fall into sin by Adam and Eve, the effects of sin have been seen in all people. Physical blindness is just one metaphor for the deeper darkness of the human heart (cf. Matthew 15:12–14; 23:24; John 9:39–41; Revelation 3:17–19). In our darkened minds, we have tried to see the cause, prescribe a cure, and impose ways of how to deal with the situation.

In many cultures, blindness—or any so-called physical defect—is seen as a curse or punishment from the spiritual world. “Other cultures—the Middle Eastern for example—believe that because we cannot see we are less than human, have no souls, are like animals, dogs.”<sup>1</sup>

In most natural religions (such as the animists in Africa), blindness is considered a terrible plight and blind people are shunned by family, tribe, and village. Such thoughts have even invaded modern societies that hold Christian principles in some parts of the world, making this concept that blindness is a curse from God still quite prevalent. Therefore, blind people are still often hidden away because families are ashamed and embarrassed of them and for them.<sup>2</sup>

Isolation of people who are blind occurs through even less overt ways. Often, families, out of good intentions, isolate members who are blind. They want to protect them from physical harm or injury. To the blind person, however, this well-intended protection becomes a stifling dominance and control. Rather than fostering feelings of appreciation and belonging, it creates

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth J. Browne, *The Disabled Disciple*. (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1997), 89–90.

<sup>2</sup> David Andrus, “God So Loved the World,” *Touched by Jesus’ Love* (St. Louis: Lutheran Mission with Blind and Visually Impaired Persons, 1998), 29.

feelings of resentment, inferiority, and inadequacy. These feelings contribute to and lead to the harsh reality of isolation and separation from society, friends, and often even family. These feelings contribute heavily to that person's self-identity, both earthly and spiritually.

There are several references in the Old Testament to blindness and blind people. Leviticus 21:16–23 makes it clear that a blind man cannot be the High Priest. God does not want him to come before him because, as the text says, he has a blemish.

It is only one step removed, then, to state that blindness is a blemish that stands between God and a blind person. Is this blemish sin or punishment? Many conclude that it is sin, for sin is what separates us from God.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, in particular, the conflation of moral impurity and physical disability is a common theme. For example, Leviticus 21:17–23 prohibits anyone “blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes” (vv. 18–20) from the priestly activities of bringing offerings to God or entering the most holy place in the temple. These and similar passages have historically been used to warrant barring persons with disabilities from positions of ecclesiastical visibility and authority.<sup>3</sup>

On a more practical level, how would or could a blind person be in the active service of God?

Such attitudes may seem somewhat primitive, but they are still with us today. This becomes clear when you listen to the stories of blind men and women who have sought ordination in the church. Jane Wallman recorded interviews with half a dozen such people, all of whom were finally ordained as priests in the Church of England. They all tell stories of experiencing the same objection to their ministry. A priest or minister is meant to care for others, but a blind person needs caring for. How can you care for others when you yourself need care? This was the comment made again and again.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Hull, 72.

There are also other troubling Bible passages and themes in the Old Testament. Moses correlates the struggles and difficulties of a blind person to those in the life of a sinner:

The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind. At midday you will grope about like a blind man in the dark. You will be unsuccessful in everything you do; day after day you will be oppressed and robbed, with no one to rescue you. (Deuteronomy 28:28–29)

God is making a spiritual correlation from the physical realities of blindness, in effect, God is stating that just as people who are blind struggle for their safety and security in this sinful world, so it is spiritually for those who reject his ways. They will stumble and then be confused and lost.

It almost goes without saying that there must also have been at least a few people in Bible times who liked to play jokes on blind people, perhaps by putting something in their path in order to make them trip. Otherwise, it would not have been necessary to have a specific law against this:

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:14).

The New Testament also, at first glance, seems to support this theme of a link between sin and disability. Luke 5:18–26, which tells of a paralyzed man whose companions lower him into the house where Jesus was speaking, has often been interpreted as a story of heroic helpers and a crippled sinner. Here, forgiveness of sin and physical healing are represented as being equal: “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk?’” (v. 23).

This idea that physical disabilities are a curse from God was also common when Jesus walked the earth. The apostle John records in his Gospel (9:1–2), “As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”

It is a common human reaction to think that life operates under the rule of cause and effect. People often apply this rule to people who are blind and their situation, leading to the conclusion that in order to have this effect of blindness, someone must have done something to cause God to give it. They may assume correctly that human imperfections and disabilities, including blindness, tell of conditions affecting humanity following the fall into sin. But they may not assume that such disabilities, blindness in this instance, are punishments for sin. Any hint that punishment is a reason for blindness errs, and it is unloving and most often is hurtful to the person who is blind.

The logic that connects blindness with punishment is not applied to those born with red hair or who are six inches taller than the norm or who have poor hand-eye coordination. Here, people are more than willing to let diversity stand as something acceptable and even good. Yet when it comes to one of the human senses being different, people's logic seeks a cause.

But it is not necessarily true that all suffering is a result of sin. It is one thing to say that disobedience to God will cause suffering. It is implying much more to say that all suffering is the result of sin. You cannot always work backwards from the suffering and suppose a specific cause. Nothing works out that simply in this complex life.<sup>5</sup>

### **In the Light of a Theology of the Cross**

All these discussions, approaches, thoughts, and theologies have at their base the concept that God blesses the favored with health and punishes those with whom he disapproves with disability. This theology is wrong for many reasons. First, it ignores the reality that God himself took our sin and punishment on the cross. His death was our death. His brokenness was our brokenness. Those who believe and trust in Jesus are forgiven, accepted, washed clean, and whole in the sight of God.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel J. Simundson, *Where Is God in My Suffering? Biblical Responses to Seven Searching Questions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 14.

When reading John 9, people too often stop at verse 2. In verse 3, Jesus presents a different view of blindness: “Neither this man sinned nor his parents that he was born blind. This happened that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” Jesus himself notes that blindness can be a blessing and is not a curse or punishment. As Christians, we know this because at the heart and center of our religion is the cross. Jesus suffered and died under the weight and force of sin and its accompanying punishment. Those who trust in him are forgiven and free from God’s wrath and punishment.

This is what led Isaiah to write (in 53:3–6) concerning the coming Savior,

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Zephaniah wrote in 3:14–15,

Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.

St. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:24–25,

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

St. Paul underscored the fact that we are not punished for sins here on earth, because Jesus took them for us. He wrote in Galatians 3:13–14,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

It should be clear from God's Word that his pleasure lies with his Son, Jesus. Those who trust in Jesus have his righteousness, his Father's good pleasure. This theology, which has the cross as the center of one's relationship with God, has earthly practical impact. First, one of the biggest problems with the theology of affliction, which connects God's blessing or pleasure with earthly situations, is the negative implications for persons with disabilities.

Rather than being a structure for empowerment, the church has more often supported the societal structures and attitudes that have treated people with disabilities as objects of pity and paternalism. For many disabled persons the church has been a "city on a hill"—physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable.<sup>6</sup>

A theology with the cross at the center embraces those with disabilities. It can do this because the relationship with God is founded on an objective source outside of humankind, their actions, or their physical situation. This is not only important but also necessary when one takes in and understands the course of life.

Nonetheless, the experience of disability is an ever-present possibility for all people. A greater than 50 percent chance exists that an individual who is currently able-bodied will be physically disabled, either temporarily or permanently. Thus for the temporarily able-bodied, developing an empathy for people with disabilities means identifying with their own real bodies, bodies of contingency and limits.<sup>7</sup>

Yet it is easy to see that even the bodies of most temporarily able-bodied do not match those of movie stars and super models. Most people never attain the physique and physical attractiveness that popular culture would have us believe is "normal." Yet we still desire "perfect" bodies. Susan Wendell writes:

Idealizing the body prevents everyone, able-bodied and disabled, from identifying with and loving her/his real body. Some people can have the illusion of acceptance that comes from believing that their bodies are "close enough" to the ideal, but this

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<sup>6</sup> Eiesland, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 110.

illusion only draws them deeper into identifying with the ideal and into the endless task of reconciling the reality with it. Sooner or later they must fail.<sup>8</sup>

This is supported by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:4–9:

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Paul even refers to his own situation and experience in 12:7–9:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

A theology that has the cross at the center of the God-human relationship views physical ailments and afflictions in a far different way than that of sin and punishment. This theology acknowledges that suffering is expected and part of life. After all, God himself, our Savior, worked out our salvation in the midst of his suffering.

In the funeral liturgy, we note that by the Lord's resting in the grave, he has sanctified the grave of all saints. Similarly, Christ's suffering has sanctified the suffering of his saints. In fact, he has stated that it is a part of a Christian's life. This is what Peter notes when he exhorts the readers of his first Epistle to rejoice when suffering (1 Peter 1:6; 4:12). Peter also states that this is our way of life: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (2:21). To a Western linear mind, it would better be

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

translated: “You are called to follow Christ’s example of suffering.” Through such a theology of the cross, the Christian church is able to see that, in fact, disabilities like blindness have an important purpose in God’s work.

But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19–21)

In that God’s desire is to save as many people as possible, he uses every opportunity as a way of touching sinners with the saving work of the Gospel. This includes evil, hardships, and physical conditions. This is why St. Paul wrote, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Throughout the Bible, God has used handicapped people, disadvantaged people, and underdogs to accomplish his work. Moses, who was slow of speech, was chosen to lead God’s people out of Egypt (Exodus 4:10–12).

Ehud, a left-handed man, delivered Israel from its oppressors (Judges 3:15–26). Because it was not the norm, many people considered left-handedness as a defect or shortcoming.

It was while Samson was blind that he accomplished God’s desired work. While chained to the pillars of the Philistine temple of Dagon, he destroyed the temple and many of its followers (Judges 16:21–30).

The apostle Paul admitted to having a thorn in his flesh. Many have tried to guess what it was, but Scripture doesn’t tell us. We do know that it was obvious and placed certain limitations on Paul’s abilities (2 Corinthians 12:7). Even with this affliction, Paul accomplished great things by God’s power. He knew that God was the one doing the work and that the weakness made him lean on God more. Paul is considered by many to be the greatest missionary to ever have lived.



Jesus himself did not rid himself of the physical marks brought about by his crucifixion and death. Instead, he kept the nail marks and spear cut to demonstrate that he had died and was now alive. His broken body brings us spiritual wholeness.

### **A Theology of the Cross and Blindness**

People who live by a theology of affliction do not value blindness but instead see it as a hopeless, deficient state of a sinful fallen world. God however, regarding blindness, had some positive things to say:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” (John 9:1–3)

Blindness can be a blessing and certainly is not a curse.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned earlier, the curse was taken by Jesus on the cross. Therefore, what remains is not punishment but is to be used by him.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:6–7)

Why are there hardships and sufferings? God uses these situations to draw us closer to him by purifying our faith through the fires of testing.

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. (1 Peter 2:21)

It is not that struggles and suffering strengthen our faith. Only the means of grace can do this (cf. Romans 1:16; 3:24a; 10:17; Philippians 1:6, 11; 2:13). However, we should expect troubles and hardship as Christians. Look at what Jesus suffered for us! We now are asked to follow him. Our suffering does not work salvation, but it is the tool God uses to turn us to Him

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<sup>9</sup> See chapter 4 for a deeper explanation of how blindness can be a blessing.

so that He might strengthen our faith and bring us into contact with others trying to deal with similar sufferings and how they relate to God.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15)

The main reason we are permitted to go through troubles is so that we might witness to a lost and hurting world, for other people are in the same kind of troubles.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14–16)

When non-Christians see Christians going through hardships with peace and contentment, not giving up or doing wrong, they are led to ask why. This is when our light shines for Jesus. We can tell them about our suffering Savior, who helped us from sin and who helps us cope. This is how witnessing works. It is the witness of a Christian who is blind to another person who is blind that often makes the difference. After all, they share a common experience, blindness, along with all it brings.

### **Life Seen through the Cross**

When people go through loss, suffering, or hardship of any kind, they have many thoughts and feelings about the situation. These thoughts often gel into the questions “Why is this happening?” and “Where is God?”

A theology of affliction goes to the causality of the question “why.” It answers the question why with the conclusion that sin and guilt are at the bottom of suffering. This is often reinforced by the words and actions of people, both intentionally and unintentionally.

A sufferer often feels like an outcast, one whom people avoid and even condemn. A time when a person needs friendship, a comforting word, the warm presence of another human being is often the very time when that seems to be most distant. “No one comes to see me anymore.” “My friends have forgotten about me.” “They seem

nervous when they are here. I almost am relieved when they leave.” “Are they afraid of me?” “They talk as if they blame me for my own trouble.” Sufferers often have bad reactions like this when they have felt let down by even their close friends and relatives. And they ask, “Why do my friends condemn me?”<sup>10</sup>

But a theology that has the cross as its center views life itself in a different way. It answers the question why, not as to its origin but its purpose. The question why is dealt with by responding with the “what now.”

A theology of the cross begins with the understanding that life—real life, lasting life—is knowing Jesus, our Savior.

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. John 17:3

The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. John 6:63

Life is not about earthly circumstances, material possessions, or bodily health. Life as lived by a theology of the cross is connected to God. When a soul is related to or connected to God, the creator of the universe, the redeemer of sinners, the sustainer of faith, then that soul knows that God lifts him or her above earthly, material existence.

Paul refers to this in Romans 8:35–39: For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The soul that is connected to God has the promise of a new life, a better life:

All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (2 Corinthians 4:15–17)

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to

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<sup>10</sup> Simundson, 41.

prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:1–7)

This simple, three-part message sustained the early church amidst trials, hardships, and loss:

1. **Immanuel, God is with us.** “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:22–23).

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:19–20).

2. **Real life is knowing God:** “I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11–13).
3. **God promises eternal life:** “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:3–5).

C. S. Lewis has been credited with saying, “We do not have a soul. We are a soul. We have a body.” We don’t know what our bodies will look like in eternity. We do know that Jesus retained His wounds after the resurrection:

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” (John 20:26–27)

So for us, our glorified body may not necessarily be free of physical “imperfections,”<sup>11</sup> because we will transcend present bodily capabilities and no longer be limited by or confined to normal conditions.

### Conclusions

There are two conclusions that may be drawn from this chapter.

First, when a person lives by a theology of affliction<sup>12</sup>, then that person’s identity is tied to mere earthly existence. When brokenness is recognized or experienced, whether real or imagined, the Law has done its work. Then is the time to present the Gospel, which transforms not only the person but also the brokenness.

Second, when a person by faith lives by a theology of the cross, then that person’s identity is not only connected to Jesus but also remains with Jesus. Blindness, sight, hearing, and deafness are not thought of in relationship to sin or guilt. After all, Jesus took our sin and guilt to the cross when he died. Rather, these and any other such physical characteristics are now viewed as simply part of the human condition. Our identity, when faith in Jesus is present, does not consist in earthly, physical conditions. Nor is the absence of any earthly or physical condition a sign of our separation from God or him from us. Rather, our identity is that we are a child of God, loved, valued, and forgiven. In the next chapter, we will look at how a theology of affliction and a theology of the cross impact directly upon people and their identity before God.

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<sup>11</sup> This presumes that we know of what physical perfection consists. See chapter 4 for more on this discussion.

<sup>12</sup> A theology of affliction is similar to Martin Luther’s theology of glory. For a more detailed description of a theology of glory, see Martin Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation*.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **BLIND PERSONS AND THE CHURCH'S THEOLOGY**

#### **An Ecclesiology Inclusive of Blind Persons**

As we have already noted, the self-identity of people who are blind is often based upon the attitudes of the sighted culture and usually consists of feelings of helplessness and worthlessness.

This identity of brokenness, helplessness, and uselessness more often than not stems from a theology of affliction, rather than a theology of the cross. A theology of affliction views earthly situations as acknowledgement of God's pleasure or displeasure. In other words, "bad" things such as blindness show God's displeasure.

A theology of the cross, however, finds God's pleasure in his Son and his work. Jesus himself entered the physical world and suffered physical pain and brokenness. This removed the curse of sin, so blindness and other disabilities can't be blamed on it. In God, through Jesus' work of justification, we all have a positive identity.

#### **The Church's Role toward Disabilities**

What then is the church's role with and toward a person with a disability such as blindness? The first step is to see and embrace identity as found in Jesus. This understanding and teaching should permeate all the church does and communicates. This will then lead to new ventures of ministry within the blind and sighted community.

#### **The Church's View toward Disabilities from the Reformation to the Twentieth Century**

With the coming of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, teachers in the church began to look at theology anew. The Reformation not only brought a new way of thinking and viewing

the world but also utilized the new technology of printing and distribution, which solidified this very systematic look at life. This new way of thinking amplified the belief that blindness is a result of sin. This teaching goes on to say that sin came into the world at the fall of man. Prior to the fall and the sin of man, the world was perfect. This perfection encompassed everything, including the body. Because blindness is viewed as bad, as bringing about negative situations, and as undesirable, many people conclude that blindness could not be part of the perfect world. It is also taught that sin is not created by God but is foreign to God. Sin and the evil it does are not created by God, but find their source in the devil. Thus, the common belief is that blindness is related to, caused by, and a result of sin and evil. Because of this logic, blindness has been viewed by the church and Christians as bad.

This theology is built on several presuppositions. Certainly the foundation of these presuppositions is sound. The conclusions, however, can be called into question.

Scripture teaches that in the Garden of Eden all creation was exactly as God intended it to be: perfectly and wonderfully good. That was in the beginning. After the fall into sin, all of creation has been left in disarray and brokenness, not because of specific sins but as a result of sin in the world (Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:12, 16; 8:21–23).

This first presupposition, then, says that no part of creation is left untouched by this brokenness. All difficulties in life are related to this brokenness and a result of sin.

It is true, even as Scripture notes, that all creation has been affected by the fall into sin. Yet to merely conclude that because a physical condition seems deficient or negative it therefore has been touched by the fall is not necessarily the correct conclusion. Such a conclusion leads to the false idea that some people are more sinful than others. Rather than the physical body being the sin-affected component, might the sin-affected component be the perception of such physical conditions? How can we sinful humans presume to know what perfection is?

This places the effects of sin on the hearts and attitudes of people rather than the circumstance, situation, or physical condition.

The Reformation brought home the fact that only God's grace can save us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. God's action through the Gospel is necessary because our sinful state is such that we can do no good on our own to effect a change or save ourselves—our guilt covers our entire being. When people who are blind are reminded of their sinful state, they often are led to conclude that this sinfulness is wrapped up in their blindness. The focus becomes blindness rather than the totality of their total being, and in particular their spiritual standing before God. In other words, people who have a physical abnormality often hear and understand the fallen state differently than a person who does not have a physical burden.

Martin Luther noted that when the Law comes crashing down upon a person, it manifests one of three results:

1. Through faith given by the Holy Spirit, the person will turn to God.
2. The person becomes insolent and rejects the gift offered by the Holy Spirit.
3. The person is crushed and destroyed, believing that there is no hope at all.

It is this third response that is so often observed in those who have a physical abnormality such as blindness.

The second presupposition uses logic and reason to infer what perfection looks like, when in fact we do not know. It proposes that physical eyes were created to see and, if they cannot, then it must be because of sin entering the world. This logic, inferred from nature, is extended to deafness, lameness, and all physical deformities, even to back problems, mental illness, sickness, and diseases that cause other conditions.

Those who hold this view of nature then (impose) this supposition onto Scripture. In this way Scripture can be “used” to back this position.



The third presupposition starts with a truth. Scripture states that God made all things perfect (Genesis 1:31), and it was very good. Therefore, the presupposition asserts that if anything is perceived as less than perfect, it is a result of sin, evil, and the fall. God did not, could not have anything to do with it.

The Scriptures affirm that God is not the author of evil. There is no doubt or question on this point. The third presupposition asserts that bad things happen not through God but through other, intermediate causes such as human sin, the devil, and the fallen state of creation. God allows these things to operate. This is according to God's permissive will. This position then points to Scripture verses such as Job 1–2 and 2 Kings 22, where God allows spirits to do evil, and to countless other passages that depict people doing evil to one another, with God permitting this and not intervening.

### **Three Suppositions Lead to an Incomplete Conclusion**

Some people are born with physical challenges that are not a direct result of a sickness, but other people do suffer physical challenges as a direct result of an illness or disease. Regardless, they all point to our broken world after sin entered it. All of these physical infirmities are results of sin and they are part of the suffering of this life lived in a sinful world.

If one follows this understanding—that blindness, debilitating diseases, physical deformities, and sicknesses are a result of sin and evil—then the understanding of Scripture in reference to healing will take on a unique meaning. Biblical scholars and commentaries say that the word *healing* is much more encompassing than just recovery from a sickness. It is also a metaphor for restoration: Christ restores things to the way they were in the Garden before sin entered the world. We will see and experience this restoration, this healing, in heaven in our new glorified bodies.

## **Summary of the Modern Church's Teaching and Work concerning Disabilities**

In short, this thought process follows this logic: It starts with the original creation, which was indeed very good. Then the sin of Adam and Eve plunged the creation into a cursed state of sinfulness and death. This process thus presumes that all of our problems are a result of that human sin. Physical problems, including all illnesses, handicaps, body parts that do not work, and missing body parts are the result of original sin. Some are congenital. Others are caused by accidents. Still others are caused by actual sins (e.g., a reckless driver, a robber with a knife or gun, a molester of children). Regardless of the occurrence, the origin is sin.

This view goes on to note that the Good News is that in Jesus Christ, God has come to save us from our sinful condition. He forgives all our sins now, and he promises to raise us on the Last Day, when our bodies shall become whole, glorious, and incorruptible.

The message is, therefore, that all things were perfect in the original creation. Then came the fall into sin and, with it, all physical variations from perfection. Now we look forward to redemption in Christ and the promise of full restoration on the Last Day.

The message in this context is that all people are to confess their sin, their need for a Savior, and their need for healing and bodily resurrection, and then they are to wait patiently for this restoration until our Lord's return and the Last Day.

### **The Church's View toward Disabilities Re-examined**

As noted earlier, Scripture does provide specific truths. God created the world. Before sin came into the world it was perfect. Now that there is sin in the world, its effects are all around us. Certainly it broke the relationship of man to God. It also corrupted mankind. The question remains however, as to the full effect of sin.

The church was blessed by a very systematic look at life. From this way of thinking however, came some questionable and perhaps improper conclusions in relationship to disabilities.

A strong message that came out of the Reformation was that what is not faith is sin, what is not good is bad, and what is not of God is evil. This message led people to conclude that blindness is bad. Rather, a far better view is that blindness is an aberration or an abnormality that now exists in a fallen world.

### **The Problem with Natural Logic**

Some make the argument that blindness is wrong, that it is of sin or evil because it is only natural or logical that eyes are for seeing. This argument has several problems. First, this argument fails to understand that eyes are only data collectors. It is the brain, in its visual cortex, that actually does the seeing or visualizing. This is why a person can dream at night. This is also how architects design plans, using the ability of visualization in the brain, and then placing the dream onto paper.

A person does not need eyes to experience sight. So long as the visual cortex remains functional and not damaged, impulses introduced into its pathways will be processed as visual data, even if the input is randomly generated or mischanneled from another sense—hearing, smell, taste, touch.<sup>1</sup>

Those who are blind use their other senses to bring information to the brain to make similar pictures. Especially today, in the era of technology, there is virtually nothing a blind person cannot see. With the help of another person, or a computer and scanner, books, papers, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Roberts, *A Sense of the World: How a Blind Man Became History's Greatest Traveler* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2006), 131.

documents are read. With the help of people, mass transit, para-transit, and taxis, blind people can get to any destination.

In short, the natural argument places too much emphasis on the physical eyes. God himself demonstrated this in a humorous way in 2 Kings 6:8–24. God showed that sight is perception with understanding. Perception also does not necessarily come through the physical eyes. The king of Aram's plans were always being thwarted by Elisha, so he sent an army to capture the prophet. Elisha's servant saw the army of Aram and panicked, so Elisha prayed that his servant would see God's army. Then he prayed that the soldiers of Aram would be blind to who he was. Elisha then led them into the fortified capital city of Samaria. Rather than killing them, Elisha ordered they be treated as guests and be released.

Second, the natural argument supposes that data gathering is the only use of physical eyes. This is not true. Physical eyes give a natural appearance to the way a person looks. Certainly, if a person's physical eyes were not present, he or she would stand out as unusually different in appearance. Having physical eyes that do not work, however, permits a person to fit in as part of the human race.

Also, physical eyes serve several other purposes beyond data gathering. The tearing process is important for the sinuses to cleanse themselves. Physical eyes also have light receptors that stimulate the pituitary gland to secrete hormones necessary for health, sleep, and mental fitness.

Last, this natural argument that blindness is wrong or in error concludes that because it is caused by sin, evil, and brokenness, it will be corrected in heaven. The problem here is not with sight being corrected in heaven. Actually, all visual capacity may be rendered irrelevant in heaven. Our present way of thinking simply cannot contain heaven, what it is and what it holds. The problem is, rather, the use of logic to conclude that what seems unnatural on earth will be

fixed to be natural in heaven—as though we earthly beings know what this might be. If a person uses this logic for physical eyes, then it must also be used for other physical differences.

By this logic, any married woman whose womb has not conceived and given birth must be repaired in heaven. This logic would say that every married woman must give birth in heaven to a child. After all, the natural use of a womb is to conceive, nurture, and birth a child.

Concert pianists would also contend that everyone's hands and abilities need to be fixed in heaven so that all may play piano as well as they can. After all, to a concert pianist, hands are for playing piano. All other functions of hands are secondary to performing.

Similar arguments against certain people groups and races have been made throughout history. Based on differences in skin color or other visible body parts, some people have classified others as defective, broken, incomplete, or subhuman. This has led tyrants to persecute, butcher, and kill people who are different than they. This argument was used to enslave people who had black skin during the first eight decades of U.S. history. It was also used by Nazi Germany to all but annihilate the Jewish race in the mid-twentieth century.

The problem with this logic is that it uses the present situation as the standard from which conclusions for the Edenic past or glorified future are drawn. Our present categories simply cannot describe what was or will be.

It also fails because it is an argument made against that which is undesirable and seems negative. It avoids that which is difficult or has pain and hardship. It is true that God promises that in heaven “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

God did not indicate in Scripture, however, to what end human conditions and situations would be changed. A list from the Middle Ages of things not in heaven would be drastically different from one made today, since diseases and conditions that limited or ended life have

changed drastically in the last several centuries. There was a time when those who were left handed were thought to be demonic (cf. Judges 3:15–23, where Ehud was able to carry through with God’s plan only because he was left handed). Today, baseball teams recruit left-handed throwers and we make special tools for lefties.

This argument from nature does not consider or accept variances to levels of sight: 20/20; 20/2400; 20/00. Blindness, after all, is merely at one end of a continuum of sight ability. Because of such continuums, this argument would have to also denounce all physical variances, such as hair color, height, and weight. A perfect person would need to be identified or established. All people then would need to become like that person.

This concept goes against the creative nature of God. He created diversity and variety within nature, at all levels, in all species.

Scripture is clear that God created everything good. With the fall into sin came brokenness. The physical world is not as it was, nor as God first made it. The physical world at all levels experiences decay and death. Humanity as a whole and as individuals is subject to this fallen, broken condition. No one is exempt from its effects and conditions. Therefore, the standards and categories changed when sin entered. They will change again in the new age at Christ’s second coming.

In short, an argument from nature cannot consistently be held and maintained. It is a matter of preference and importance determined by the wielder of the logic.

Blindness is too important of a subject to discuss merely on a logical or natural level. Physical conditions do not determine a person’s value before God or a person’s humanity, regardless the prejudice of some people. The theological level is not only more important, but it is also essential for eternal life for millions of people.

## A New Look at the Church's Views

This teaching that blindness is an abnormality caused by sin was not always held and promoted by the church. The early church fathers did not dwell on earthly circumstances and situations, but rather on the true life that comes from knowing Jesus.

One of those fathers was Didymus the Blind (313–98). Though Didymus never traveled from his hometown of Alexandria, he was so learned that scholars traveled there to learn from him. “Even the great hermit Antony, on one of his rare trips to Alexandria, attested to the scholar’s spiritual vision. ‘Do not be troubled,’ Rufinus has the saint console Didymus, ‘by the deprivation of your physical eyes.’ Instead, ‘rejoice that you have the eyes which angels have, by which God is seen, and through which a great light of knowledge is being lit in you.’”<sup>2</sup> Heathen philosophers also went to discuss with him and returned astonished at his meekness and wisdom. Jerome referred to him not as “Didymus the blind” but rather as “Didymus the Seer,” thus demonstrating that Didymus had other gifts of reason and senses.

The extensive erudition which astonished his contemporaries found expression in a great number of writings. According to Palladius “he interpreted the Old and the New Testament word by word, and such attention did he pay to the doctrine, setting out his exposition of it subtly yet surely, that he surpassed all the ancients in knowledge.” This fits exactly St. Jerome’s report; he calls his works *plura et nobilia*.<sup>3</sup>

Many have noted that Didymus’ defense and systematic unfolding of the Trinity was profound. “In fact, he is in full agreement with Athanasius in his defense of the consubstantiality

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<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Layton, quoting from Rufinus, h.e. 11.7 in *Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 3, *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature* (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics, Inc., 1992), 86.

of the three divine persons. He rejects any subordinationism and at the end answers the objections raised by the Arians and Macedonians.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1941, the discovery of sixth- and seventh-century papyrus codices in Tura, Egypt, brought to light works of Origen and Didymus written in Latin. They contain Didymus’ commentaries on Job, Zechariah, Genesis, Ecclesiastes, and Psalms 20–46.

Didymus’ commentary on Job provides a fourth-century understanding of good and evil, as well as what the Christian response to evil might be. Didymus’ treatment of the soul within the same commentary is a fourth-century biblical case study for the twenty-first century question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” “Even allowing for Job’s stoic comportment, Didymus knows we are still left with the question of theodicy. Why do good people suffer?”<sup>5</sup>

Didymus argues that God did not create evil. He goes on to note that afflictions in this life are correctives, with the implication being that such chastening is with a view toward our eventual restoration. This restoration is the perfection of the soul, which is not experienced until we reach heaven. Here, Didymus already provides a completely different answer to physical conditions than that they are merely a result or consequence to sin, actual or general, rather than an origin to the question of why Didymus looked to its outcome.

Another strength of Didymus’ teaching is that he does not force us to make the choice between “on the one hand a powerful God, or on the other, a loving God. Origen and Didymus’ deity is both all-powerful and loving. Nothing happens in this world without God’s permission. Even the evil that befalls us is part of an overall, mostly inscrutable process of salvation.”

Didymus’ commentary on Job makes very clear this concept of God’s power and love both being in control. The evil, suffering, and hardship that come to Job are under God’s control in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Duffy, “The Tura Papyrus of Didymus the Blind’s Commentary on Job: An Original Translation with



order to work out salvation. This harmonizes with our Lutheran understanding. The Law shows us our sin and drives us to God. The Law is not evil, bad, or wrong. It is God who brings the Law to bear to show our sin and draw us to himself.

The Lutheran Confessions refer to this in the Smalcald Articles:

However, the chief function or power of the law is to make original sin manifest and show man to what utter depths his nature has fallen and how corrupt it has become. So the law must tell him that he neither has nor cares for God or that he worships strange gods—something that he would not have believed before without knowledge of the law. Thus he is terror-stricken and humbled, becomes despondent and despairing, anxiously desires help but does not know where to find it, and begins to be alienated from God, to murmur, etc.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Theological Evaluation of Blindness**

When a person who is blind asks, “Why am I blind?” he or she is usually not just seeking information. Rather, this is either a question of despair and a cry for help or it is looking for the present outcome or purpose.

When a person first loses his or her sight, the question “why” is most often expressed as a lament, a cry of sadness. This is a person's first reaction when situations or conditions are deemed bad or have not turned out as desired or expected. Luther referred to this cry of lament when speaking of the book of Psalms:

“The entire Psalter may be treated in a fivefold fashion, that is, we may divide it into five groups. First, some psalms prophesy. They speak, for example, of Christ and the church or what will happen to the saints. This class includes all the psalms that contain promises and warnings—promises for the godly and warnings for the ungodly. Second, there are psalms of instruction, which teach us what we should do and what we should avoid, in accordance with the law of God. This class includes all the psalms that condemn human doctrines and praise the Word of God. Third, there are psalms of comfort, which strengthen and comfort the saints in their troubles and sorrows but rebuke and terrify the tyrants. This class includes all the psalms that comfort, exhort, stimulate endurance, or rebuke the tyrants. Fourth are the psalms of prayer, in which we call on God, praying in all kinds of distress. To this class belong

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Introduction and Commentary” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Foundation, 2000), 8.

<sup>6</sup> SA III II 4.

all the psalms that lament or mourn or cry out against our foes. Fifth, are the psalms of thanks, in which God is praised and glorified for all his blessings and help. This class includes all the psalms that praise God for his works. These are the psalms of the first rank, and for their sake the Psalter was created; therefore it is called in Hebrew *Sefer Tehillim*, that is, a praise book or book of thanksgiving.<sup>7</sup>

The blind person's identity (as noted in chapter 1), is usually that, because of the worldview, he or she feels broken, incomplete, and lacking. This is a world view given to people when they become blind or visually impaired. It is usually devised from a present-day societal point of view. What is often done with material items when they are broken? In our modern times, they are most often thrown away. *Broken* is often equated with *useless*.

Therefore, when most blind people consider their blindness, they conclude that they are broken and useless. This means that not only do people who are blind or going blind have an issue of identity but they also feel as though they have lost their purpose. In their suffering, they think and feel as though God is hidden:

We may teach that God is always present, but in the reality of the trauma of pain or grief, the sufferer cannot find God, and it is no help to such a person to stifle the lament and treat the problem as if it were a doctrinal formulation that must be corrected.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, to such a person, the question why is focused on purpose or present outcome: what now?

If the church responds to the question "Why am I blind?" with an answer of origin, that it is a result of sin or evil, then the questioner has no choice but to conclude that the same is true spiritually. The person would have a self-image of being broken before God, useless to him and to the church. Answering such a Law-oriented question without the Gospel, but with a Law-based answer, is destructive and crushing.

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<sup>7</sup> *Psalms with Introductions by Martin Luther*, trans. B. A. Cameron (St. Louis: Concordia, 1993), 6–7.

<sup>8</sup> Simundson, 25.

When a person goes through loss, suffering, or hardship of any kind, many thoughts and feelings go through his or her mind. All these thoughts come back to “Why and where is God?” These thoughts and feelings in a theology of affliction go to the belief that sin and guilt are at the bottom of suffering. This is often reinforced by people in their words and actions.

A sufferer often feels like an outcast, one whom people avoid and even condemn. A time when a person needs friendship, a comforting word, the warm presence of another human being is often the very time when that seems to be most distant. “No one comes to see me anymore.” “My friends have forgotten about me.” “They seem nervous when they are here. I almost am relieved when they leave.” “Are they afraid of me?” “They talk as if they blame me for my own trouble.” Sufferers often have bad reactions like this when they have felt let down by even their close friends and relatives. And they ask, “Why do my friends condemn me?”<sup>9</sup>

Job had similar experiences with the friends who came to see him. The friends stayed with him for a week. They cried with him. They sat with him. They were just present, for a whole week. Their mere presence gave him comfort. But then they spoke.

Eliphaz tried to be gentle with Job. He gave some reasons for Job’s troubles. Certainly, God was fair, he argued, and therefore it falls to the fact that Job must have done something to deserve this. Job must have committed some sin that needed to be confessed and forgiven. Even good people like Job were guilty of sin, but God would bring Job through this, and he would be a better, stronger person for it, Eliphaz promised. “Happy is the man whom God reproves” (Job 5:17a).

Rather than being comforted, Job found these words of the Law harsh and condemning. He knew the suffering he was going through was not about guilt, sin, fault, or punishment. Yet that is all Eliphaz’s words held.

In a subtle way, Job’s counselors began to condemn Job in order to protect their ideas about God’s justice at work in the world. It is too scary to give up that sense of order

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 41.

and coherence. Better to change our view of Job than to abandon a way of understanding suffering that has been around for a long, long time.<sup>10</sup>

In discussing affliction of any kind, some people note that it is a consequence of a fallen world. This may be true, but it is not helpful. It is a Law-oriented answer given to a person who by circumstance is already crushed by the Law. It is a general answer given to a person who, because of his or her affliction or physical condition, is not able to hear the generalization, but only the specifics. Thus, it becomes his or her identity: an afflicted person.

Martin Luther speaks to this issue, that when the Law is applied, more Law is not good:

But where the law exercises its office alone, without the addition of the Gospel, there is only death and hell, and man must despair like Saul and Judas.

As St. Paul says, the law slays through sin. Moreover, the Gospel offers consolation and forgiveness in more ways than one, for with God there is plenteous redemption (as Ps. 130:7 puts it) from the dreadful captivity to sin, and this comes to us through the Word, the sacraments, and the like, as we shall hear.<sup>11</sup>

More often than not, the experience of sight loss and blindness is a devastating, crushing experience. It is life itself applying the Law. Most people conclude that when seemingly bad things occur to them, then their life is not good, wholesome, uplifting, or positive. They instinctively know that they and their life situations are not right. This is the Law at work.

Thus, the question “Why am I blind?” is usually motivated from the effects of the Law. It is apparent to the questioner that blindness seems to limit life. People usually relate this reaction back to God—his presence, protection, and involvement in the world—because blindness is most often the result of no one human action. Just as our old nature is always trying to justify itself before God through our own action, so also it uses a Law orientation to conclude that blindness is a result of one’s deeds. If not this, then it immediately sees God as the one taking the action

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>11</sup> SA III 7–8.

specifically against the blind person as a punishment. (It might ask, for example, “Why didn’t God protect me from the disease that took my sight?”)

### **The Proper Response of the Church**

Often, when the church tries to give a Gospel-based answer to a person who has been broken by the Law, it merely notes that God loves the person and that he showed this by sending Jesus to die on the cross. This is true, but is not relevant to the issue because it is not set in the context of the brokenness of the person. If a blind person has shown contrition for a sin, then to know that Jesus died for his or her sin—for that sin—is relevant to that question.

The question “Why am I blind?” usually has in it several other components. This question reveals that the questioner sees his or her identity as helpless, needy, and broken. It is this identity that brings hopelessness, despair, and meaninglessness. These things cannot be overlooked or ignored.

The church’s response to blind people should have three important parts. First, it must be a Gospel response. Second, it needs to demonstrate God’s acceptance of people in their present condition. Third, it must empower blind people with purpose, just as it does and should for all Christians. This will bring the proper identity, an identity that comes from and goes to God himself.

### **The Gospel Message Applied**

In that blind people so often view themselves as rejected by society (they feel they are “broken” because of their sight loss), the message needs to start there. The Gospel never changes—it is Jesus crucified for sinners. It is on account of Jesus that we are accepted by God the Father. Yet the Gospel takes on different facets. God the Father accepts those who sin because Jesus, his Son who knew no sin, identified with sinners as a sinner in his death on the cross. Jesus also identifies with people who are, or seemingly are, physically broken because he,

too, was broken. He was blindfolded, beaten, and taunted. Jesus was also crucified and physically killed.

The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him.

They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophecy! Who hit you?" (Luke 22:63–64)

Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him. (Mark 14:65)

### **God's Acceptance**

Even when Jesus rose from the dead and showed himself as victorious, he kept the marks of brokenness.

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. (Luke 24:37–40)

Those who are physically broken may identify and find comfort in a Savior who kept the marks of brokenness and accepts them just as they are. Those who are forgiven by his blood are seen by him as his children. That is now their Christian identity. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:22–24)

### **Empowered with Purpose**

When a person loses sight, he or she experiences other losses at the same time. Some of these losses are recovered, others are not. Often, people who are blind assume that their functions, activities, or actions as related to God are also affected and limited. People wrongly conclude that a person who is blind can do nothing for God.

A Gospel response to any situation starts with God himself. He has noted throughout Scripture that he works in and through his people as they read, hear, use, and live out his Word.

God has never been limited by human circumstances. For example, though the apostle Paul was imprisoned many times, the Gospel was not limited.

For which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. (2 Timothy 2:9)

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. (2 Corinthians 12:7-9)

When a person loses sight, his or her life is different. There are adjustments that need to be made. Daily tasks must be learned and relearned. Certainly, life is different, but it is not over. In the same way, the person must learn and relearn spiritual tasks. There are adjustments that need to be made. Life, spiritual life, church life, is not over. It is different, new, and meaningful.

### **Addressing the Issue of Blindness**

If the pastor or counselor is in a long-term relationship with a blind person and that person asks, "Why am I blind?" then the pastor or counselor may be able to discern if this is a lament or cry of despair, an information-seeking question, or a question of "What now?" In such a long-term relationship, where it is clear that the person who is blind knows that his or her identity is found in Jesus, the question is most likely truly an information-seeking question. It is then possible to discuss the person's physical condition as it exists in a fallen world. But this topic is not able to be accepted and discussed early on in a person's spiritual walk as a blind person.

### **Scripture on Affliction Seen in the Light of the Cross**

The early church father Didymus saw many reasons for difficulties, suffering, and hardship in life. In his commentary on Job, he speaks of these. One of the dominant metaphors in his thought was that life's journey, with all its hardships and sufferings, was for testing the Christian's faith, with the express purpose or result that it be strengthened.

Indeed, that human freedom to choose the road leading to God is sometimes in both Didymus and Origen's work set over against the counterpoint of less salutary "pathways" that are also available to us, as temptation. And the choice between the two can be another example of the moral "wrestling" or "athleticism" of the Christian.<sup>12</sup>

In his commentary, Didymus always refers to Job as "the blessed one."

Within the opening pages of his work, Didymus begins to show what that blessedness consists in. Job, for Didymus, is a kind of "athlete" who "wrestles" with the adversary devil. By his patient endurance, he overcomes the devil. . . . Now, the topos of "wrestling" with the evil one is used also by Paul. Among the Fathers, because of the experience of persecution, it becomes a commonplace."<sup>13</sup>

Origen, the teacher of Didymus, also makes reference to Job as an "athlete" in his treatise on prayer:

The devil was conquered by the athlete of virtue . . . Job wrestled and conquered twice, but he did not enter such a struggle a third time. For it was necessary for three wrestlings to be kept for the Savior.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, affliction was seen not as a result of sin, a fallen world, or even of punishment.

Rather, it was viewed in the first centuries as a way to align one's life with the Savior.

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. (1 Peter 2:21)

Jesus' sufferings won our victory over sin, death, and devil. Now we, like an athlete, run the race, knowing it is difficult, with the prize of eternal life awaiting us.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

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<sup>12</sup> Duffy, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>14</sup> *De Oratione*, [XXX] 2, quoted in Duffy, 26.



Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12–13)

Suffering and affliction are integral to the understanding of the early church fathers' entire conception of good and evil and the struggle to remain faithful within life's afflictions. By overcoming temptation and affliction, the moral athlete gives glory to God. But he or she also is shaped by the contest, by the wrestling, into someone more pure and holy in faith. Affliction is the purifying fire that God brings to his people (see 1 Peter 1:6–7).

Origen had a strong opinion about this. Duffy recounts it in his doctoral thesis (editorial brackets by Duffy):

[With Origen] temptation not only tests what we are, it is also a providential process by which we are fashioned into what we should be. God is a divine goldsmith who hammers us into an object of beauty suitable for His grandeur.<sup>15</sup>

Again we hear the words of Didymus in his commentary on Job 4:1–5:

The afflictions which come upon anyone, occur without question for many reasons. They come either for chastening, or so that one might bear it as a great soul. Also he refers to it as so that a person might receive affliction for strength and courage. Lastly he also notes that as a person stands up under affliction they will receive a great crown of life in eternity.

God is the loving teacher who instructs us through “tests,” just as certain schools of pedagogy continue to use the quiz and test, not so much as a means of measurement, but as an actual instructional tool. Here the disciple is shaped and formed, like precious metal in the fire.<sup>16</sup>

Let us go back to the story of Job. God finally did speak to Job out of the whirlwind.

But God did not directly answer Job's questions; they were side-stepped. Instead, God said, “A human being can never know the answer to such mysteries as why humans suffer. It is impertinent to think that you should find answers. You must trust me to take care of those things that are beyond your powers of comprehension.”

Job had thought that he wanted intellectual answers that would finally make sense out of his suffering. That was his hope for what would come out of an encounter with

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<sup>15</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Op. Cit.*, 21; in Duffy, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Duffy, 31.

God. Instead, what Job received was the assurance that God loved him and had been listening to him and feeling with him all along. Now Job was certain that God cared, and this was enough to sustain him. Now he could even bear his suffering, because he knew that God would be with him.<sup>17</sup>

### **One More Reason for Blindness**

There is at least one more answer to the question of blindness. Though this answer may not be for everyone, it should not be discarded as for no one. This answer is that blindness is given by God specifically and is, therefore, one of his many gifts.

Thus far, we have discussed several options to the issue of blindness. Certainly, the first answer of the church needs to be the Gospel applied to each person's situation. Our God identifies with us and, for his Son's sake, accepts us. Jesus, God's Son, in His body suffered and was broken. We find in Jesus a Savior who understands.

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil. . . For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Hebrews 2:14, 17–18)

When a person recognizes God's acceptance and is able to move on to deeper concepts, then discipline, testing for purification, and opportunities for witnessing can be mentioned.

How can blindness be a gift from God? In Exodus, God himself takes ownership and responsibility for blindness:

Moses said to the Lord, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." The Lord said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." (4:10–12)

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<sup>17</sup> Simundson, 76–77.

Scholars have had a difficult time in interpreting this verse, primarily because they do not want to think of God as responsible for something they don't like or think is bad. Could it be that God is willing to be responsible and does not view blindness as wrong or broken but rather as a gift to be either given or taken away?

In the First Article of the Apostles' Creed, we confess,

I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean?

Answer: I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil. All this he does out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For all of this I am bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him. This is most certainly true.<sup>18</sup>

There can be no doubt that God is the giver of all things. We also know that God gives more things to some and less to others. This is not only true with earthly possessions, but also with physical abilities. Thus, we are not to put down or minimize others for their gifts, but give thanks for God's generosity to them.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. . . . "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:1,15)

Paul also notes that God designed each person differently. This is how and why the body of Christ works, with different gifts.

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. (Romans 12:4-6)

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<sup>18</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 15.

Paul cautions against challenging God and his eternal designs:

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Romans 9:20–21)

The Lutheran Confessions also note that even after the fall, God takes responsibility for forming and shaping us:

God not only created the body and soul of Adam and Eve before the Fall, but also our bodies and souls after the Fall, even though they are corrupted, and God still acknowledges them as his handiwork, as it is written, “Thy hands fashioned and made me, all that I am round about” (Job 10:8). (FC Ep I 4)

In its discussion of civil government, the Augsburg Confession speaks against forsaking certain items. This is usually in reference to activities, noting that these activities can also be of God. In a similar way, it holds to the physical body. It is not the style, shape, ability, or limitation of the physical body that matters to God. Rather, God is interested in whether the soul has faith in Christ Jesus.

Also condemned are those who teach that Christian perfection requires the forsaking of house and home, wife and child, and the renunciation of such activities as are mentioned above. Actually, true perfection consists alone of proper fear of God and real faith in God, for the Gospel does not teach an outward and temporal but an inward and eternal mode of existence and righteousness of the heart. (AC XVI 4)

### **How Can Blindness Be a Gift?**

Earlier in this paper, we quoted Dr. John Hull, who lost his sight in his mid 30s. Having studied the Scriptures and the early church fathers, and undergoing deep reflection on his own, Dr. Hull was at complete peace with his condition and with God. After becoming blind, someone invited him to attend a healing service. He wrote a letter in response:

However, I do not interpret my blindness as an affliction, but as a strange, dark and mysterious gift from God. Indeed, in many ways it is a gift that I would rather not have been given and one that I would not wish my friends or children to have. Nevertheless, it is a kind of gift. I have learnt that since I have passed beyond light and darkness, the image of God rests upon my blindness. No sighted person can say that he or she is beyond light and darkness and yet we are told in Psalm 139, v. 12

that God is beyond light and darkness. So in that respect it seems to me that it is blind people who are in the image of God rather than sighted people. Because of their dependence upon outward appearance and their confidence of being superior, it is often sighted people who are needy and many of them could do with a good dose of blindness, like Tobit or St Paul in the Bible, to bring them a kind of humility and insight which has not come to them through sight.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, there are many reasons God would give the gift of blindness. The first reason is so obvious it is often overlooked.

Without blind people, the religious experience of sighted people is not complete. The struggles of Job in his illness and the sublime meditation of Psalm 139 represent two ways of looking at blindness. Each is the inversion of the other. Even blind people who have faith in God will oscillate between one perspective and the other.<sup>20</sup>

On a more practical level, people who are blind help the church in many ways. People who are blind help the church learn how to serve. This is not a service that makes the server feel good—that is pity or paternalism. Rather, where there are people who are blind, there are others who learn to slow down and assist properly. If Christians are to witness and serve the world, from whom better to learn how do this than the very gifts given them in the Christian community?

Also, when people who are blind are encouraged to give in ways they are capable, richness occurs. Because blind people conceptualize their world through their other senses, their view of the world is slightly different. Just as an orchestra is fuller because of how the bass and cello harmonize with the viola and violin, so too the gift of blindness provides the church with many rich insights and blessings that harmonize with one another.

Another way people who are blind are able to help the church is through their witness. They are able to witness about a loving God to others who are marginalized by society. This type of witness comes directly from the context of being disadvantaged and isolated. This witness is

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<sup>19</sup> Hull, 48.

potent to a hearer who is marginalized, for it is spoken by one who is similarly discarded by society.

When we stop to consider the condition God found us in, we must also stop to reconsider how we view the world. We were all spiritually dead and enemies of God. Jesus delivered us from sin and death. Therefore, as we live in this physical life, everything we experience is a tool in the hands of God to help us spiritually grow. We are not born in Baptism as a spiritual adult. Therefore, every situation, earthly experience, and handicap can be a stepping stone to personal growth in our spiritual development. These stepping stones are not necessarily good or bad in and of themselves. Rather, they are the tools or shapers that God uses to help us spiritually grow.

Lucille Koppelman of St. Louis, whose husband did full-time work in foreign missions, was something of a home missionary herself, having played mother to a dozen homeless children. Rev. and Mrs. Koppelman adopted a blind boy, Billy, when he was 10 months old. As Billy grew up, Mrs. Koppelman watched, observed, and learned a great deal about the blind culture. She summarized her observations:

There will always be many questions that we cannot answer, but this we should know, that more important than a handicap is our attitude toward it.

If our Christianity means anything, we must realize, in true humility, that we are all made of the same common clay. A superior attitude toward the handicapped is as unchristian as it is destructive. Christ's philosophy teaches that the type of body we have is not nearly as important as the spirit and soul that dwell in it.<sup>21</sup>

One more living example of how blindness can be a gift of God is found in Fred Graepp, a major figure in the growth of LCMS mission work in the 1930s–50s (see Appendix 1.) Prior to being blind, he could not succeed at anything; he was an aimless, unsuccessful individual.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Lucille Koppelman, "My Boy Bill," *This Day* (September 1956), 9–11, 45–46.

Although he was a faithful church member, Graepp was not very social. He always left immediately after services were over.

His pastor, Edward Rudnick, helped him get a summer job at the local post office.

In the basement of the post office, there were low pipes. There was a sign warning of this, but Graepp didn't pay attention. He hit his head so hard he fell unconscious. The blow caused nerve damage, resulting in blindness.

It is almost as though the blow to the head not only made him blind but changed him completely. He gained initiative as well as an outgoing, confident personality. He developed connections with blind readers. When Graepp was blinded, he was denied entry into the ministry, but now, as a blind person he had a purpose and ministry.<sup>22</sup>

Graepp said more than once, "The best thing that happened to me was to become blind."<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusions

We live in a world that has sin and is affected by it. Sin is involved with most of the world's hardships. Yet, it is incorrect to conclude that every hardship, all suffering, and even conditions we do not like are the direct result of sin. In our attempts to understand sin and its effects, we humans set up categories to quantify and define it. In doing so, we set up boundaries and then expect the world and God's activities against sin to fit them. We do this because we live in a sinful world and do not know what wholeness without sin is really like. All we know for sure it is that God entered the world to redeem humanity from sin, death, and the devil.

Sin has placed us under barriers and limitations. Some are brought by sin, others are self-imposed. We are not limitless—only the triune God is. When we look at these limitations in this world affected by sin, we are unclear where these limitations were, are, or will be. Therefore, we should be cautious in their use. Rather than seeking a cause for the effects sin brings, we should ask where faith in a risen Christ takes us.

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Rudnick, *Foot against the Stones* (self-published family history, 1994), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Rev. Milton Rudnick (who grew up and interacted with Frederick Graepp in the same congregation in Fresno

In the next chapter, we will provide ways this identity—found in Jesus, not in physical conditions—may be used by the church in mission and ministry.

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California), interview by author, Albertville, MN, November 3, 2005, and August, 2006.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### BLIND PERSONS AND THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY

#### **The Church's Proper Response to Suffering**

What is the church's proper response to blindness? How can we help people who are asking the questions of why? First, because we are people of faith, we know that God is always with us, no matter what happens. This was the assertion of Paul in Romans 8:31–32, 38–39:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? . . . For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The answer to the question why cannot always be explained:

Finally, we are relieved even from the necessity of finding fault, assigning blame. Perhaps there is no one to blame. After we have looked at all of the possibilities, we may conclude that none of them explains our own suffering. It is no one's fault; it makes no sense. If we truly trust in God, we can live even without an answer to our question, "Whose fault is it?" We can even give up on the question and live with the mystery, knowing that God has promised to be with us and to take care of that which we cannot yet fully understand. All of our questions fade into proper perspective in the knowledge and presence of a God like that.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, when we try to give answers to those who are going through suffering, most of us slide into the world's way of thinking, which is usually a theology of affliction. A theology of the cross always looks to and speaks out of faith. Therefore, our thoughts, words, and actions should all come from and go to the cross. This means we speak not of Law and condemnation

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<sup>1</sup> Simundson, 68.

but rather of forgiveness, acceptance, wholeness and purpose—found in Jesus. This makes the church a place for the mutual consolation of sufferers.

Though we cannot promise that a person will have suffering removed, we should be able to promise that a person will have the support of fellow Christians. And by demonstrating that human beings love and support the sufferer.<sup>2</sup>

### **Moving from Theology to Ministry**

As noted in chapter 1, in the past three decades, the church has developed working models of relating to blind people. Unfortunately, not all of these acknowledge these people's positive identity in Christ. These are some observable models:

1. Medical Model
2. Rehab Model
3. Custodial Model
4. Hero Model
5. Homogeneous Model
6. Inclusive Model

With the exception of the inclusive model, all of these models focus on the disability. They view the person who is blind as not able to conduct life in the “normal” sighted way. This immediately forces the issue of identity as blind, and all the negativities that accompany it.

There is another possible model, set forth by God himself: Holistic or Empowering Model.<sup>3</sup>

With this model, blind people find acceptance with God because of the forgiveness won by Jesus on the cross. They find acceptance before God not because of anything they have done but because of what Jesus has done (cf. Ephesians 2:8–9). They find acceptance before God not because of who they are but because of who Jesus is. Therefore, physical conditions such as sight

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the author's visits and interviews with Adrian Duncan and Mary Clattenhoff. Adrian Duncan was interviewed on 15–17 September, 2001, in a visit to the blind outreach center in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he serves as director, and at the Christian Blind Institute, 20–26 June, 2002. Mary Clattenhoff was interviewed on 3 October, 2001, in a visit to the blind outreach center in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she serves as director, and in phone conversations, April and June, 2002.

or hearing have no bearing or effect on their standing with God. Their identity is that of a child of God.

Dr. John Hull said it this way:

These passages are sufficient to show us that in the Kingdom of God not only are there neither male nor female, slaves and free (Gal. 3.28), but there are also neither blind nor sighted. There is a God of blind people and there is a God of sighted people, but beyond and above there is the God above the gods, who transcends both blindness and sight and is the God of everyone.<sup>4</sup>

Each child of God is gifted and blessed by God for service:

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

### **The Third Article: Sanctification**

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

What does this mean?

*Answer:* I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers, and on the last day he will raise me and all the dead and will grant eternal life to me and to all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true.<sup>5</sup>

When a person views himself as broken, and then understands that God became flesh and was willingly broken for him, then the identifying process begins. God is no longer viewed as the angry Almighty. Rather, he is embraced as the Savior from sin. The Gospel message that brings forgiveness also provides acceptance, even with physical disabilities. The same Gospel then empowers that child of God for ministry. Earthly circumstances, no matter what they are or how

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<sup>4</sup> Hull, 134.

<sup>5</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 13–14.

limiting they may seem, do not stop this child from serving the Lord actively. In this way, the Gospel not only brings forgiveness and identity but also purpose.

This model sees all people, regardless of physical conditions, as important members of the kingdom or church of God. It uses all the previous models and more in order to help people who happen to also be blind to be who God has gifted them to be. The goal of this model is to help the individual find his or her gifts and works and then determine how to use them among and through the local congregation. The premise of this model is that when people are contributing, they feel a part of the group and also experience purpose to their life.

This model offers some challenges:

1. There must be an understanding that church is not only or merely worship in a public setting. Church is the body of Christ at work in the world (Romans 12:1–2).
2. There must be a leader who is willing to share power, control, and authority.
3. The leader or leaders must have as their purpose to delegate to others.
4. People must be willing and interested in learning and identifying gifts, talents, and abilities in others so that they may be utilized.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.

If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.

And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. . . .

On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:14–16, 22–27)

## **Understanding the Culture for Effective Ministry**

In order to explore the practical principles for the church to minister with people who are blind and visually impaired in local Christian congregations, we first must look at the barriers that exist for people who are blind with respect to church life.

### **External Barriers and Possible Solutions**

There are several external barriers that make it difficult for people who are blind or visually impaired to be involved in a congregation.

**Visual Communication.** The first barrier is ink-print materials. If the desire is to involve, incorporate, and utilize blind and visually impaired people, whether in corporate worship, in Bible studies, or in other activities, then thought, consideration and effort needs to be given to the forms of information dissemination. If the congregation relies on ink print or visual screens as its primary forms of communication, then blind and visually impaired people will feel isolated and separated. They will not be able to participate and follow along without provisions for Braille or large-type materials.

Louis Braille's raised-dot language has helped to reduce this barrier. But because Braille is hard to produce and must be ordered in advance, and because some people cannot learn to read Braille because of physical or educational limitations, this barrier is still in place for many people who are blind. Large-type materials hold similar limitations. Enlarging print on copy machines does not necessarily make it acceptable, readable large type. Large-type materials need to be block letters, single-spaced, in a simple font, and formatted with a lot of white space to fit on a page.

Lutheran Blind Mission offers resources to assist the church in this area. It produces many Christian books, magazines, devotionals, Bible studies, catechisms, hymnals, and other materials in Braille, large type, and audiocassette for the use of God's people. This independent mission

society partners with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to reach out and help blind and visually impaired people. (See Appendix 2 for a listing of current resources and contact information.)

**Transportation.** The second external barrier is transportation. In our fast-paced, mobile society, where most people own a car or have access to one, sighted people seldom think twice about travel. But for someone who cannot drive, this barrier is enormous. Even people who live in cities with good mass-transit systems cannot always easily come or go to church or homes for congregational activities.

Even the best public-transportation services do not always go by local church buildings; most also have reduced hours on Sundays. Also, some people who are blind are not capable, trained, or equipped to travel independently.

When public transportation is not an option, the barrier of transportation can only be overcome by friends, family, or sighted volunteers. This is where a word of encouragement by the pastor to parishioners can be helpful. Every congregation has some sighted people who are looking for something they can do for the Lord to be involved in the life of the church and its people. Because the pastor knows his people and their gifts and needs, he can often link up sighted drivers with blind people. A simple phone call, a linking together of God's people, is all that may have to be done.

**Attitudes.** The third external barrier is probably the biggest and hardest to overcome. It is the attitudes that people have and hold toward or against blindness. Ultimately, it is the attitudes of people over and against blindness that handicaps a person, not blindness itself.

The definition of a handicap often dictates this negative attitude. Most people define a physical difference as a handicap because they see it as providing only limitations. This is not only negative and demeaning, but also exclusive, rather than inclusive. No one is limitless. This

is the definition of God, and longing for it was Adam's first sin. Every human being is on a continuum of limitation. Some are simply farther one way or the other.

I would like to suggest that a handicap can be defined as the inability to do something in a given situation in the manner that is considered the norm.

In this definition of handicap, sighted people would be considered handicapped when in a dark room, whereas blind people would not. This distinction is important so that people who are blind are not viewed as unable, deficient, or incapable. Certainly, there are activities and events people who are blind cannot do, but it is important not to widen the scope to include more than it really is.

### **Personal and Social Barriers**

We noted earlier that when people lose their sight, they shift to conceptualizing the world through touch. Another change they go through is their means of social interaction. Pastor Wayman Still, who recently lost his sight at age 61 due to a stroke on his optic nerve, has noted five distinctions of the blind culture as he has adapted to it.<sup>6</sup> Although the examples given in this outline are specific to Still's life, they are applicable to the life of most people who go through sight loss.

First, Still has found social settings in a sighted world difficult at best. This is because the noise of a big group can be disconcerting and disorienting and also because much of social interaction is conducted with and through sight. Hand gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, and lip reading are all things sighted people use in their interactions without even realizing it. This is especially true when there are ten or more people in a room attempting to communicate.

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<sup>6</sup> The Rev. Wayman Still, interview by author, Sarasota, FL, March 24, 2006.

The second distinction Still has noted is the difficulty associated with having to accept a loss of independence. He cannot just hop into a car and go anymore. Now he is dependent on someone to take him wherever he wants to go.<sup>7</sup> This left him with the constant feeling of being trapped. The feeling of being trapped then brought about feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Third, because of the lack of independence, Still feels as if he is not in control of his life. The only time he feels in control is when he is at home at his kitchen table.

Fourth, Still has noted that his marriage partnership has undergone major changes. He no longer can do the things for his wife that he used to do. He has had to give up things like grocery shopping and taking care of the finances. He feels that, rather than caring for his wife, he is a burden to her.

The fifth thing Still has noted is that being in a social setting is very tiring for a person who is blind. It takes lots of energy for a person to keep aware of all that is going on around him or her when relying almost exclusively on hearing. The person often shuns social settings to avoid this great expenditure of energy.

Still had enjoyed and cherished his role of pastor, but after losing his sight, he found it difficult to join in congregational life. The social issues that accompany blindness change a person's perceptions and abilities, especially when in a sighted group. The cacophony of noise, lack of independence, perceived lack of control, changes to the foundational relationships and high demand of energy and concentration all make it extremely difficult to participate in corporate worship and Bible study. Feelings of being trapped or out of control cannot always be changed by a pastor or congregation. It is important to be aware of these issues and discuss them with people who are blind so that, together, all can work toward solutions.

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<sup>7</sup> Independence is a value promoted by our American culture. But love and interdependence are the chief Christian virtues.



## **Faith Barriers and Its Moorings**

Throughout the centuries, the church has learned that when it tries to impose its cultural values upon people, it is unable to spread the Gospel effectively. The message of the Gospel becomes tied into a church's culture, and when this is superimposed upon another culture, not only is the imposing church's culture rejected, but so also is the Gospel. Thus we see people reject Christianity in order to retain their own culture. However, the Gospel can be free of all cultural identities. Therefore, the church's responsibility is to work at helping indigenous people speak the Gospel clearly to their own culture.

A pastor working with a deaf person in China came face-to-face with this deaf culture, a subculture within the Chinese culture. While working to communicate with the deaf person through a writing pad, the pastor became convinced that it was not possible to easily communicate the Gospel message.

Initially, I imagined the impairment of my student would not become a problem if only I spent a lot of time with her, helping her and exploring her ways of thinking, but I was wrong. The difficulties of communication do not lie in the lack of a common language but in the lack of common experience. Because the reality on which I base my judgments differs radically from her silent reality, I will never be able to understand her life, her ways of solving problems or imagine her experiences in society. Nor do I know if in her quiet prayer, she has the written characters for God in her mind, or perhaps the romanized form of the word or the sign language equivalent? Simplistic views and superficial understanding are not sufficient for building bridges between the "voiced" and "voiceless" worlds.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jing Tian, "Does God Understand Sign Language?" Amity News Service, August 2006, [amitynewsservice.org](http://amitynewsservice.org) [accessed June 2007].

Similarly, people who do not have sight will not only view the world in a different way but will also conceptualize faith itself differently. This is the hardest adjustment for those who lose their sight as an adult. Consider how they learned of God. They read in a book called the Bible. They sang from a book called the hymnal. They viewed stained-glass windows. They read and saw pictures in Sunday school and vacation Bible school leaflets. These visual cues are now all gone. The pictures, windows, words, and books are removed from their world.<sup>9</sup> Add to this that the interactions and role dynamics of past and present relationships have also changed. Nothing is the same. For many people, this calls into question the existence of God and faith. Their objects of faith must be relearned.

### **Barriers to Faith and Its Development**

The concept of object permanence is something that babies need to learn and which we fall back on throughout our lives. When a parent plays peek-a-boo with an infant, there's a moment of fear when the parent's face is hidden. At first, the infant thinks the parent has gone away, because he can't see the parent's face. When the hands are moved away, the baby is flooded with relief and joy to discover that the parent is still there. As the baby grows, he must be able to trust that his parents will always reappear in time to meet his need. Otherwise, he'd never be able to sleep in his own bed, explore the next room, or go to preschool.

When a person loses his or her sight, the learning process begins again. The world is conceptualized no longer through sight. Touch, smell, sound, and taste now shape the world. Therefore, object permanence in relationship to God and faith through these senses must be learned and reinforced.

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<sup>9</sup> The Early Church lived and worked in an oral culture as it worked to spread the faith. We would do well today to undertake an investigative study of this practice and adapt it for use in modern churches, especially with respect to ministry with the visually impaired.

Whether as an infant playing peek-a-boo with a parent or as an adult newly blinded, the most important lesson that needs to be learned in object permanence is trust. Infants must learn to trust that the parent is there even when not seen. Persons who become blind must learn that God is there even when not seen. Because so much of education and training for Christian adults is based on visuals, this means that not only are they physically blind but also spiritually unable to see God.

This becomes compounded when one realizes that people who are blind find themselves in considerably more situations that require trust than do sighted people. It's a very conscious part of everyday life. But when your sighted guide walks you into the doorpost, a part of the accumulated trust is lost. When the funding for a program is suddenly cut off so that services are no longer available, more trust is shattered.

How can we explain God's omnipresence? his omnipotence? his steadfast love? If there is nothing in our world that is trustworthy, how can we believe that God is superbly faithful? He is more alert than the best sighted guide, more dependable than the most punctual driver. Learning about God's quality of object permanence takes a long time, because there may not be any tangible evidence that our physical senses can perceive to reassure ourselves of His nearness.

### **A Wholesome Identity through the Holistic or Empowering Model**

Throughout the past, people have had very limited views about people who are blind. In turn, people who are blind have usually accepted this identity given them. This, however, is neither healthy nor correct.

As noted earlier, the models of viewing people who are blind are not necessarily wrong. It is only when the church identifies blind people by only one of the first five models that it does a disservice. This seventh model is based on a person's assets, not limitations. Its goal is to identify the assets, abilities, skills, or gifts of a person in order to empower the person for action.

This, in turn, will reduce, if not eliminate, many of the barriers mentioned. Congregations, the body of Christ, should want all of their members to use the gifts God has given them so that the body may be built up.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11–13)

The saying is old, but true: "Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a day. Teach him to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime." This could be adapted to the blind culture: "Do for a person who is blind and you will help him for a day. Teach him how to do, and you will help him for a lifetime."

In chapter 3, we identified that asking "Why?" is the improper question. Here, we see that in a ministry with people who are blind, it is better to focus on asking "What now?" Our example of this is Job:

Then Job answered and said: "No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these? . . . With God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding. . . . As for you, you whitewash with lies; worthless physicians are you all. Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom! Hear now my argument and listen to the pleadings of my lips. Will you speak falsely for God and speak deceitfully for him? (Job 12:1–3, 13; 13:4–7)

### **Practical Principles of Ministry in a Local Congregation**

There are three types or kinds of ministry that can and should be done by the church. This holds true, no matter which model or models are used. We will explore all three of these forms of ministry as they relate to people who are blind. The first type of ministry is found in the context of a congregation through incorporation. The second type of ministry is in the context of the blind culture as an evangelistic, mission outreach. The third type of ministry is done in the context of advocacy.

## **Ministry in the Context of a Congregation through Incorporation**

There are several simple and specific things congregations can and should do if they are intentionally incorporating people who are blind and visually impaired into their community. Congregations can train and provide friends or partners to verbalize nonverbal actions to blind or visually impaired people so they do not feel left out of large-group settings or so they can ask questions when uncertain.

Generally, it is easier for people who are blind or visually impaired to worship with a more traditional form of worship that includes repetition and familiarity. For people who cannot read large type or Braille, the weekly repetition aids in memorization. For readers, Braille and large-type copies of hymnals can be obtained through Lutheran Blind Mission. This saves the church office staff from the constant, tiring work of making large-type and Braille copies of the worship service that changes weekly.

As they write their sermons, pastors should keep in mind that narrative, anecdotes, stories, and concrete, tangible examples help those who are blind or visually impaired to follow, feel, and grasp the message more easily.

Congregational members can be instructed to become more friendly to people who are blind. This makes church attendance easier not only for the first person who is blind but also for any others who may attend.<sup>10</sup>

## **Ministry in the Context of a Blind Culture**

A second form of ministry is that which is done in the context of a blind culture. This type of ministry acknowledges that there are some practical, evangelical, and missional ways blind

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 3 for simple, effective ways of relating to people who are blind.

and visually impaired people can affect and impact their local community and especially other blind people.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) began mission and ministry work to people who are blind in the early 1920s by providing Christian Braille materials. Then the church looked to what else might be done in service and ministry to and with people who are blind. It noticed that state schools for the blind (during the middle of the twentieth century) were year-round residential schools, so it urged congregations to get families involved by inviting children from the schools to attend Sunday School and worship services and then to spend an afternoon at family's home. These hands-on experiences helped form in the blind children a view of a loving, caring, forgiving God, found in Jesus. (See Appendix 1.)

By the 1970s, fewer children had sight issues and the educational systems of residential schools for the blind were, for the most part, discontinued. Congregations continued to welcome people who were blind or visually impaired, often in the manner of the inclusive model (see chapter 1). Congregations provided Braille or large-type materials for these people whenever possible so that they might join in the activities of the congregation. Congregations expected people to conform to what and how things were being done. The church did not acknowledge people who are blind as in or from a different culture. For this reason, most blind people did not feel as though they belonged to the church and usually drifted away.

**Another Look, Another Way.** The LCMS Board for Mission Services makes it its business to understand different cultures and works to help indigenous people carry on mission work. For many years, the Board had part-time counselors for the blind. Sensing that there was more work to be done in this area, the Board called Pastor David Andrus to be the full-time director of Lutheran Blind Mission (LBM) in 1998. (See Appendix 1 for more history of LCMS work with blind people.) Andrus, himself blind, encouraged, trained, and supported blind and visually

impaired people to do the work of ministry and outreach. Andrus believed that people who were blind best knew where other blind people were and how best to reach people who are blind.

Andrus also taught congregations that those who are blind do live in a different culture of sorts.

Working together with other members of the blind culture, LBM began opening outreach centers around the country. Outreach centers are based in congregations. They acknowledge and embrace the fact that people who are blind or visually impaired see the world through tactile and auditory means. Through simple acts of kindness and compassion at outreach centers, congregations show a clear picture of God and his love to people whose eyes do not see.

**The Church's Ministry with a New Culture.** There is no question or doubt that when people go blind, they learn to visualize and interact differently with the rest of the world. Before being blind, sight was the primary conduit of information to the brain. When sight is lost, people must learn to adapt. Through the use of touch as a new primary conduit, supported by hearing, people can not only adapt, but can also thrive and excel.

It is good to let a blind or visually impaired person do a task, event, or activity, even if poorly. This allows the person to maintain personal dignity and develop self-confidence, experiences, and skills, things that most blind people do not have. The majority of people who are blind in the United States were sighted at one time and therefore probably hold the false but common belief that blindness is bad and debilitating. When given the opportunity to continue in their normal tasks, blind persons will usually improve in efficiency and accuracy. Even if they don't, they will probably feel a sense of belonging.

Consider how infants learn to walk. If adults always ran after them and stopped them from trying to walk so they won't fall, they would never learn to use their legs. It is in the trying, falling, and trying again that children begin to be ambulatory. First, they stand next to furniture. Then they cruise around the furniture, excited to be moving on their legs. Finally, they venture

forth, letting go of the stabilizing object. And they usually fall, and quickly. With repeated effort and encouragement from their parents, however, children move from cruising to toddling to walking and finally to running.

A similar scenario occurs when people lose their sight. If they are not permitted to venture forth, try, fail, and try again, they will never be able to function independently. Coddling newly blinded people reinforces society's belief that a person who is blind or disabled in any physical way is broken, useless, and in the way.

The point here is not that the church needs necessarily to change and become like a blind person. Rather, the church, as it interacts, needs to understand that those who are blind move into a different culture or subculture. Then the church needs to permit this culture to remain and not change to be like it.

**Ministry in a Blind Culture.** When a congregation seeks to conduct a ministry in the context of the blind culture, there are several things it can do to assist those who are blind or visually impaired. It is important to acknowledge that the identity of most blind and visually impaired people is that of being broken and separated from God. For this reason, 95 percent of all blind and visually impaired people in the United States are unchurched. The best way to help people in this situation is to work at developing a trust relationship on a human level. This is best done by people in similar situations, such as by other blind or visually impaired church members.

This ministry of the church in the context of a blind culture will do well to keep in mind all the elements and barriers mentioned above concerning the blind culture. All that is said and done should be relationship based, more personal in orientation. Therefore the acts of service and kindness are done to build trust. Once a trust relationship is established, people who are blind feel safe in asking the deeper spiritual issues that life has brought their way.



Also, when a small group of blind and visually impaired people express a desire for worship, an alternative style or form of worship can be introduced. This option follows the homogeneous model (see chapter 1). Not only will materials be provided in large type and Braille, but the worship service or Bible study would also be simpler, less formal, and more interactive. It would be simpler by avoiding large amounts of reading by worshipers. It would be less formal so there would be less of the nonverbal communication required in larger settings. It would be more interactive so that all may feel involved, thus reducing the feeling of no control.

For such a worship or study time to be effective, it is important to pay attention to the number of people involved. More than six participants are necessary to experience a healthy group dynamic, but in order to minimize sound and disorientation, the group should not exceed forty people. The room itself should be evaluated for its sound absorption ability, for this is a major factor.

Lutheran Blind Mission has established its outreach centers according to these guidelines. Outreach centers seek to introduce blind people to a loving and caring God and help that relationship grow. Most of the outreach centers have a monthly gathering followed by a short worship service. The people are gathered. They feel a bond of unity. The sighted volunteers are trained and have an understanding of the blind culture. It becomes a natural flow of time, service, interaction, and, finally, worship.

**The Learning Style Changes.** People who are blind are not only tactile but also auditory. They learn and obtain information by listening. Our society, however, has become very dependent on vision because of television, movies, on-screen displays, sight-based computers, and self-driven transportation.

This auditory aspect bears itself out when a blind person interacts with other people. The many questions and inappropriate vocal comments are often seen as socially unacceptable. And

yet, to an oral culture, this is not only normal but acceptable. How the group responds may make or destroy the person's relationship with the organized church and possibly with God.

The Chinese pastor referred to earlier in this chapter, who worked with the deaf girl, spoke of this concern in this way:

As for the disabled, they become very early accustomed to other people's ignorance and partiality, regardless of their hopes of being accepted and understood. I am inclined to think that before asking her question, the catechumen had reasoned out an affirmative answer but her hesitation with regard to God's impartial treatment of human beings was a reflection of people's discrimination and of her position at the margin of society.

How do the churches treat the disabled? Do the congregations respond to them in the same way as the rest of the society, or are they merely taken as targets to imbue with the idea of Christianity?"<sup>11</sup>

**The Church As It Ministers in the Twenty-first Century.** The church serves best, and is best served, when it involves its members in the reaching out with the Gospel. This is best seen in the holistic model (defined earlier in this chapter). This model can and should include people who are blind or visually impaired. Such involvement moves the theories, postulates, and abstract concepts and principles into reality. When people have a purpose and experience the reality and truth of lives being changed, they feel that their faith is active and alive. They feel verified in their faith, God, and all that is taught: object permanence.

There are several things blind and visually impaired people can do to impact their community with the Gospel. Blind people come in contact with other blind people more frequently than do sighted people, if not in person, then through other venues (e.g., email, telephone). They not only connect with others through the subculture, daily activities, and interest groups, but they also understand life without sight.

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<sup>11</sup> Tian, "Does God Understand Sign Language?"

The apostle Peter encouraged the first-century Christians who struggled with their own hardships:

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15)

People who are aware of this connection and prepare to share their faith are able to do so to others in similar situations.

No minister can save anyone. He can only offer himself as a guide to fearful people. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely in this guidance that the first signs of hope become visible. This is so because a shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing, when understood as a way to liberation. When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope.<sup>12</sup>

### **Ministry in the Context of Advocacy**

The church can also be an advocate for blind and visually impaired people. These people often do not have other people standing by their side to encourage them or to speak up for them. Advocacy will not only help bring social rights to a group of marginalized people but will also serve as a living example. When discouraged people are encouraged, they then in turn can do similar acts of kindness for others.

One such advocacy episode took place on July 17, 2006, when another significant step and presence was made in the Anderson, Indiana, community by the blind outreach center. The pastor went with blind people to a city meeting about public bus service. It was helpful for the city to see a pastor, and not just blind people, coming and talking about the lack of bus service.

It is this type of ministry that Henri J. M. Nouwen referenced when he wrote:

A Christian community is therefore a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision. Mutual confession then becomes a mutual deepening of

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<sup>12</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 93.

hope, and sharing weakness becomes a reminder to one and all of the coming strength.<sup>13</sup>

People who are blind can open up many other doors of ministry for the church at large. In that most blind people rely on mass transit for travel, interact with many different government agencies and offices, and are involved in different community activities, they can be door openers to another whole section of society.

It is an obvious fact that congregations serve their community through the connections of their members. Often, the connectors of blind and visually impaired people are overlooked and ignored. Utilizing these gifts of God will let the Gospel reach, touch, and bless new and different people. In turn, the church will need to evaluate how and why it does what it does: worship, Bible studies, and fellowship groups. Recognizing the many ways of viewing the world, relating to the world, and interacting with the world will not only make the message more vivid and meaningful but will also give it form and flesh.

### **Conclusions**

In this chapter, we presented a seventh model of ministry: the Holistic or Empowering Model. This model of ministry emphasizes a person's gifts, rather than limitations. Next we described the culture of blindness in order to identify distinct marks and issues which can become the touchpoints of ministry. We also have described three ways the church can do ministry. It can be done in the context of incorporation into the existing congregation. It can be done in the context of the blind culture. This is both an outreach ministry and a style of worship keeping fully in mind the uniqueness of the culture and the ways it works. Ministry can also be done in the context of advocacy. In that those who have a disability carry an identity of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 94.

brokenness and a lack of self confidence, advocates within the greater community are needed. This not only helps in earthly situations but provides opportunities for sharing the Gospel.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have shown characteristics of the negative identity associated with blind people in the United States. It was noted that 99 percent of people who are blind become so after the age of 18 years old. Thus, most people enter the blind culture as adults. They also carry into the blind culture the sighted culture's views and beliefs. By and large, these views are that people who are blind have a defect or problem and are broken and incomplete. Blind people who hold these views soon begin to think of themselves as broken in every way and useless to society. This view influences the thoughts of blind people as they consider a relationship with God.

When a person asks the eternal question of why, it is usually not to seek information but is, rather, a cry for help. Informational answers given on a spiritual level are usually heard as Law. When Law is given to a broken, hurting sinner, it merely crushes the person and confirms his or her belief that God is angry and therefore meting out punishment with this condition.

As noted by the apostle Paul and our Lutheran Confessions, when the Law has accomplished its action of showing sin, then the Gospel needs to be applied. The Gospel message to a hurting, broken, and seemingly useless person starts, as always, with Jesus on the cross. Jesus, the innocent, sinless Son of God, identified with humanity by dying a sinner's death on the cross for the sins of the world. Jesus was blindfolded, beaten, and broken; he experienced the hurts and pains of the physical body. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

Because of what Jesus did, anyone who feels broken, abandoned, and useless can now identify with him. He understands and knows. Jesus also accepts us broken as we are and promises to use us. Many people suffer with the sin of pride; that is, they love themselves too much. Fewer people suffer with the sin of self-hatred, of thinking they have no value. This is as equally damning and destructive as the sin of pride. To Jesus, we are all special, no matter what our earthly condition. For, in fact, earthly conditions and circumstances are just that—earthly conditions. True life is knowing him and believing that he is with us. In this way, he lifts us above our circumstances and uses or blesses those circumstances to benefit him and his Kingdom.

This paper also showed that physical conditions do not reflect God's pleasure or displeasure (a theology of affliction). Rather, God uses earthly conditions and circumstances to train up, discipline, and test his children (a theology of the cross). Also, for some people, physical blindness is not the removal of something but is viewed as a gift.

As the church understands this theology of the cross, it begins to form and shape its ministry in different ways. A view of the church as the body of Christ, in which all members are important and play a role, is the church's proper and welcoming way, especially for blind people. As part of the body of Christ, a person who is blind has gifts and skills to offer.

One such gift is the perceived patience in the midst of suffering. This witness will assist others in the body as they struggle. Also, in that blind people connect to, relate with, and know other people in society who have visual impairments, their witness is an evangelistic effort on behalf of the church. Their intentional act of service, connected to their Gospel witness, is mission work to a hidden people group. This is shown through the outreach centers of Lutheran Blind Mission.

### Areas That Deserve Further Study

In the course of this study, there have arisen several concerns that are beyond the purpose or focus of this paper.

First, an exhaustive look at the biblical texts that make reference to blindness and people who are blind would be very helpful. Some preliminary thoughts are found in Appendix 4. Another topic that came from this study and deserves investigation is an exegetical study focusing on the word  $\sigma\omega\zeta\omega$ . One of the documents used in the research for this paper uncovered a reference that noted that the word for *heal* in Scripture is never used in connection with people who are blind.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the Greek texts note that sight and blindness are gifts given by God (e.g., John 9). This would seem to imply that God did not view blindness as an illness or medical matter. Such teaching would lift the burden of “illness” and “incompleteness” from people who are blind.

Second, study and research on a practical level of a proper application of Law and Gospel would be helpful for pastors and other Christians. This would enable them to know how to explicitly speak the Law to people who are blind in a way that will gently engage them to recognize their need for the Gospel. Certainly, there is more to ministry as it relates to people who are blind than simply being more compassionate and understanding.

All humans are infected with sins such as pride, envy, and lust that contaminate even those who may be humbled by their physical condition.

This thesis had many pragmatic suggestions on how to connect with people who are blind, but not so much on their struggles with sin. An example of such a struggle is when people who are deaf from childhood observe hearing people pray and assume that those people audibly hear

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney Rynearson, “Some Comments about Blindness,” *Touched By Jesus’ Love* (St. Louis: Lutheran Mission with Blind and Visually Impaired Person, 1998), 11.



God speaking back to them. Those deaf people conclude that God must not care for them as much because he does not speak to them.

Certainly, there are similar assumptions like this brought about through blindness. These would be helpful for pastors to know.

### **Distinct Contributions of This Paper**

The distinct contributions of this paper are several. First, it demonstrates that commonly held views can wrongly influence the world view. Before the time of Columbus, the commonly held view was that the world was flat. Therefore, sailors never wanted to venture too far from shore. The commonly held world view of our present society is that blind people are broken and incomplete. As such, they are often valued as useless to society and so they become a burden. God's view, however, is that he has forgiven all broken people and accepts them through his broken Son, Jesus. In general, the sighted culture views people who become blind as broken, incomplete, and generally incapable and in need of being served. In that society identifies them this way, blind people more often than not take this as their identity.

A second contribution of this paper is that as God identified with sinners when he assumed our sin in the innocent suffering and death of Jesus, so he also identifies with our brokenness. This provides a view of a kind, understanding, and accepting God. This broken God-man is someone with whom broken people can find a new identity. In fact, as God's child, Jesus not only forgives us but wants to work through us to reach, touch, share, and show his love to a lost world. God chooses and uses seemingly broken people for his own.

A third contribution closely follows on the second. Because it is faith that saves, and because it is faith that matters to God, and because a life lived out from this faith is God's desire, human conditions and situations become nothing. Life is knowing Jesus.

A fourth contribution again closely follows. The world contends that a physical variation from the norm is a disability and a result of a sinful world only. It defines it such because the physical variation presents limitations, is undesirable, and is unwanted. This paper demonstrated that physical variations are not disabilities but rather are assets to God. Every human being has limitations, whether young or old, rich or poor, no matter what the person's physical condition might be. God is only limited by unwilling unfaithful people. When physical variations are understood as assets from God, then these can also be viewed as gifts from God.

A fifth contribution of this paper is the identifying, critiquing, and combining of models of ministry. In this paper we have identified seven models of ministry.

1. Medical Model
2. Rehab Model
3. Custodial Model
4. Hero Model
5. Homogeneous Model
6. Inclusive Model
7. Holistic or Empowering Model

Certainly, all of these have a place in the church. Yet, in the end, the model that overrides them all and serves God's kingdom the most is the holistic or empowering model, that of 1 Corinthians 12: The body of Christ. This model holds every member as the same: precious to God because of Jesus' blood and gifted by God by the Holy Spirit.

A sixth contribution of this paper is the identity of a blind person, that of a valued, important useful, contributing member of the body of Christ. This identity is not based on what a person physically is, has, owns, or does. Rather, the identity is found in Jesus. Nothing can change or take this away, even as it is part and parcel to our inheritance.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, 5who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3–5)

The last contribution of this paper is the three-fold type of ministry as the church relates to people who are blind. This can be a ministry in the contexts of congregation, a blind culture, or as advocacy.

The contributions of this paper are designed to assist the church as it seeks to minister to people who are blind. Certainly the contributions of this paper have grown out of ministry and are intended to support ministry and encourage others to do more ministry.

## APPENDIX ONE

### A HISTORY OF WORK BY AND WITH BLIND PEOPLE

#### The Early Beginnings

It was not until 1920 that any formal consideration or effort was given to blind people in the Lutheran Church. Pastor E. J. Friedrich became acquainted with Mr. L. L. Watts, a Christian who had lost his sight in a construction accident. Reverend Friedrich pursued the matter at great length. At the Synod convention in Fort Wayne in 1923, he presented an overture urging the convention to do something for blind people. The result was that the convention instructed the Board of Missions for the Deaf to initiate a program for work among blind people without delay. It was not an ideal arrangement, but it was a step in the right direction.

By 1926, Luther's Small Catechism was being produced in Braille. Within the next two years, three periodicals were produced: *The Lutheran Messenger for the Blind* in Braille, *The Lutheran Herald* in Moon type,<sup>1</sup> which is now discontinued, and *Der Bote*, in German Braille.

With the publication of *The Lutheran Messenger for the Blind* in December 1926, blind people became more aware of the interest our church had in serving them. More requests for the magazines and other materials were received than the board had ever anticipated. This convinced the board of the need to have a special "missionary to blind people," and in the following year it called the Rev. A. H. Kuntz, who, as chairman of the Board, was most directly involved in this work. The major task during Rev. Kuntz's service was that of providing magazines, such as *The Lutheran Messenger for the Blind* and *The Lutheran Herald*, and offering for cost books such as the Small Catechism, a Bible history, and a hymnbook.

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<sup>1</sup> "The characters [of Moon type] are large, mostly modified and simplified Roman letters, with a few other very simple signs." ("A Page from History," part 5; *The Bulletin*, 22:1 [February 1982]).

It was reported in 1935 that Braille magazines were mailed to about 1,800 addresses, to readers in almost every state and in many foreign countries. One letter written upon the receipt of *The Lutheran Messenger for the Blind* was from Helen Keller. She wrote: “I wonder if you realize what your friendship means to the blind. . . . I wish there were new and beautiful words to thank you for the impetus you are giving to the cause.”<sup>2</sup>

Shortly thereafter, however, the Depression affected the mission work. At the 1935 Synod convention, funding to the board was cut in half. The result was a cutback in the production of Braille books and magazines. After one pastor in Southern California shared this news in a letter to several ladies aid groups, funds flowed in. These were used to set up a fund to provide free Braille books. “Another ray of sunshine came when one of our blind readers, Miss Augusta Bloedorn, a fine Christian lady and active missionary for the *Messenger*, willed her property, a good lot and house in Kewanee, Illinois, to the Mission for the Blind. This is the second legacy bequeathed to our Blind Mission.”<sup>3</sup> It was clear that God’s people saw the need and responded.

### **God Provides an Advocate**

When one looks at history, it is clear to see when events move beyond human effort and are strongly directed by God. At these points, God often provides an individual who impacts the times and culture in a unique way.

One such person was Mr. Frederick Graepp. He was a student at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis during the early 1930s. He so very much wanted to serve his Lord and spread the Gospel. As a student, however, he struggled. While working in a post office during a summer break, Graepp was blinded through an accident and his seminary training came to an abrupt end. At first, he was devastated; now how would he serve the Lord?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Dr. Walter A. Maier, a professor at the seminary and the speaker of *The Lutheran Hour*, encouraged his former student to learn Braille and use his skills to serve the Lord. So Frederick Graepp studied Braille, and the following year he offered his services to Dr. Maier as a contact for any blind person who would write in to *The Lutheran Hour*.<sup>4</sup>

This was just the beginning. Mr. Graepp may have struggled as a student, but he excelled in his service to the Lord. Through his blindness, he not only found purpose and opportunities to serve the Lord, but he also truly found himself and his identity. The Lord worked through him to advance the work with blind people.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Beginnings of Lutheran Braille Workers**

Frederick Graepp was interested in the German language, but he found that most Bibles written in German Braille had been destroyed in Germany during World War II. He also knew that there were many German-speaking Lutherans in the United States, so he placed a notice in *The Lutheran Witness* appealing for volunteers to help transcribe the German Bible into Braille. He realized that because of the war, there were blind pastors and laypeople in Germany who needed to have German Braille Bibles, and he dedicated his life to providing them. Many people responded to his call for help. Graepp had learned Braille at the Fresno Salvation Army School; now he was busy teaching Braille by correspondence. Helene Loewe (later Koehler) was one of the volunteers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "A Page from History," part 6; *The Bulletin*, 22:2 (June 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Edward Heineke, Report before the Board for Missions, LCMS (St. Louis, MO, 11 March, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Milton Rudnick (who grew up and interacted with Frederick Graepp in the same congregation in Fresno California), interview by author, Albertville, MN, November 3, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Helene Loewe Koehler, Norman Loeber, and Sally Loeber, *Hold High the Cross: The History of the Lutheran Braille Workers, Inc.*, 2nd ed. (Yucaipa, CA: Lutheran Braille Workers, 1986, 1999), 1.

Graepp taught many people German Braille by correspondence. Thus it was that sighted people who learned Braille from a blind man helped to transcribe the Holy Scripture in German Braille for the newly blinded German war veterans and civilians!

When the requests increased to the point where there was too much work for him to carry on alone, Graepp asked Helene Loewe, one of his transcribers, to take over the work for him. This eventually led to the organization of Lutheran Braille Workers, which later became an independent corporation of Lutherans working out of California. This group presently produces Bibles in twenty-three different languages in Braille and nineteen different languages in large type.

### **The Beginnings of the Lutheran Library for the Blind**

Through his correspondence with blind people through *The Lutheran Messenger for the Blind*, Graepp got the idea to start a Christian library for the blind. Many sighted people offered to copy materials to be placed into such a library. Dr. Maier, in 1939, obtained the use of a spare room in the library at the St. Louis Seminary and the library made a modest beginning. In 1941, the Lutheran Library for the Blind was officially made a part of Synod's program for blind people. Later, it was moved to Chicago, where it was housed in an attic in a home on the south side of the city. Dr. O. C. Schroeder, missionary to the Deaf and Blind, was the librarian.<sup>7</sup>

The work increased as the library grew; today there are still some one hundred workers transcribing for it. Most of the early volunteers offered their services as a result of a notice that appeared in *The Walther League Messenger*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Heineke report.

<sup>8</sup> "A Page from History," part 7; *The Bulletin*, 22:5 (October 1982).

The work producing magazines and books continued. The Lutheran Library for the Blind was expanded, and in 1952, the library added talking books to its collection.<sup>9</sup> (Talking books contained information recorded on hard vinyl disks.)<sup>10</sup>

The addition of talking books was an enormous boost to the work. When children lost their sight, their education immediately switched to learning through the use of Braille. This took place at the schools for the blind located in every state. Yet thousands lost their sight as adults and did not have the opportunity to learn Braille. Talking books was something they could use. Thus it was reported in *The Lutheran Witness*: “Synod’s Library for the Blind serves 7,000 readers, of whom more use talking books than Braille.”<sup>11</sup>

The Library continued to grow and outgrew several locations. From 1987 to 2002, the Library for the Blind was housed at Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis. It then moved into larger quarters at 7550 Watson Road in St. Louis County, where it presently exists. The library contains well over 4,800 volumes of Christian literature. It is operated much as any public library except that, since the readers live all over the country, books are mailed to them under the U.S. government’s free postal mailing privileges.

### **The Beginnings of the Board for Missions to the Blind**

As noted earlier, the work to blind people was done by Synod under the auspices of the Board of Missions to the Deaf. The Rev. A. H. Kuntz directed the work from its beginning until his retirement in July 1939, when the Rev. O. C. Schroeder, who was already working with

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<sup>9</sup> “A Page from History,” part 10; *The Bulletin*, 24:2 (June 1984).

<sup>10</sup> The first talking book was Rev. H. W. Gockel’s *What Jesus Means to Me* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1948). Soon to follow were these books on records: *Living for Christ* (Four Sermons), by William A. Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1952); *Heaven*, by Rev. George Beiderwieden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1942); *This Is the Life*, by Rev. H. W. Gockel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1952); and *Happiness Can Be Yours*, by William A. Kramer (Lutheran Television Productions—LCMS, 1952).

<sup>11</sup> “With Their Finger Tips the Blind Read the Word,” *The Lutheran Witness*, 78:4 (February 24, 1959), 13.



Kuntz, was appointed by the board to take over the work.<sup>12</sup> It was the constant vigilance and advocacy of blind layman Frederick Graepp that moved the work to a new level. First, he proposed to Synod to have a separate board for this work. It was approved in 1947.<sup>13</sup> Once formed, several years went by before the new board was able to appoint board members. One of the first actions of the new Board for Missions to the Blind was to call an executive secretary. The call was extended to the Rev. Walter Storm of Cleveland, Ohio. He accepted the call to this part-time position. Under Storm's direction, the work involved more and more volunteers. In 1953, the Braille Transcription Committee was organized to oversee all the work. Mrs. Mabel Warnke was appointed the Committee's first chairman. Warnke oversaw the work of hundreds of volunteers and organized the production of Braille for many years.

Now, with the backing of a board, the work to reach blind people with the Gospel added a third dimension.

The first dimension had been the use of Braille magazines. Since 1926, when the Synod's Braille magazines had first been published, many people had read the Gospel message through them. In order to maximize the mission's connection with blind children at the residential state schools for the blind, *Teen Time* was started in 1951.<sup>14</sup> This Braille magazine had inspirational stories, gave sports scores from the schools for the blind, and also had a column called "Pen Pals," which gave blind teens around the country the opportunity to connect with one another, thereby breaking the isolation they often felt.

*Teen Time* was so popular that the board decided to publish it also in large type. " 'Teen Time' is also printed in so-called 'sight saving' type for children who suffer from greatly

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<sup>12</sup> "A Page from History," part 7; *The Bulletin*, 22:5 (October 1982).

<sup>13</sup> "A Page from History," part 9; *The Bulletin*, 23:2 [June 1983].

<sup>14</sup> Kansas District Supplement to *The Lutheran Witness*, 74:25 (December 6, 1955), 2.

impaired vision. This type of printing is very costly, but as an experiment 'Teen Time' is also being published in this large type. It is the only religious or secular magazine which has entered this field."<sup>15</sup>

By 1959, the large-type edition of *Teen Time* was being sent to 400 children; an additional 400 children received the Braille edition. These children were primarily in the residential state schools for the blind. "The board publishes three magazines for the blind: *The Lutheran Messenger* in Braille, *The Lutheran Messenger* in Moon type, and *Teen Time* in Braille and Large Type. And few magazines can match the claim on this third publication. One out of five high school students enrolled in residential schools for the blind is a reader!"<sup>16</sup>

In 1956, the daily devotional *Portals of Prayer*, which was produced in print by Concordia Publishing House, was first produced and distributed in Braille. This quickly became the most popular magazine in Braille. Just ten years later, it was noted that 850 copies were being distributed to blind people around the country every quarter.<sup>17</sup>

According to the 13 January, 1959, *Lutheran Witness*, *The Lutheran Messenger for the Blind* was going strong: "Each month this Braille publication reaches 1,300 blind and deaf-blind in America and in 27 foreign countries."<sup>18</sup>

The second dimension of Synod's work to reach blind people had been the Lutheran Library for the Blind. Its primary purpose was to strengthen faith by providing Christian wholesome materials in Braille. Certainly it could be said that even today it not only serves to strengthen faith but also stands as a testimony of love, care, and concern. Each of the thousands

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<sup>15</sup> "The Blind See," *Mission Call*, 1:3 (Special Mission Issue, 1953), 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Know Your Synod*, Spring 1962, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *CPH Commentator*, June 1965, 6.

<sup>18</sup> *The Lutheran Witness*, January 13, 1959.

of volumes produced receives the painstaking care of volunteers to ensure that the transcription is accurate and correct.

Now, in the twenty-first century, the Lutheran Library for the Blind is also the reference library for the Christian Blind Institute, a training school that requires a vast resource of materials from which to pull. We will speak more of the Christian Blind Institute later.

The third dimension of Synod's work with the blind was a type of outreach done through congregations around the United States. The title of the program manual sums up the work: *Share Your Home with a Child Away from Home*.<sup>19</sup>

During the 1950s, congregations were encouraged to contact the state-run schools for the blind in their community. The congregations invited children to attend worship services and Sunday school and to visit the homes of families. Sunday school materials were produced in Braille and sent to these churches so that the blind children might participate with the sighted classes.<sup>20</sup>

This was an effective mission outreach, as the state-run schools for the blind were residential schools full of blind children. Not only did Christian families provide Christian social skills to these children, but they also taught these children during their formative years about Jesus and His love. This program continued until the 1970s, when the residential schools were phased out in favor of mainstreaming.

### **The Work to the Present**

In 1964, all the various boards for mission work in the LCMS were consolidated into a unified Board for Mission Services. The work previously spearheaded by the Board for Blind Missions was taken over by the Transcription Committee. This committee not only represented

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<sup>19</sup> "A Page from History," part 14; *The Bulletin*, 26:1 (February 1986).

all aspects of the work, but it was also under and reported to the Board for Mission Services. Rev. Edward Heinicke, a parish pastor in western Iowa, served as its chairman. All aspects of this work were often referred to as that of LCMS Blind Missions. During the 1960s, the Transcription Committee produced a steady supply of Sunday School materials in Braille. Hundreds of trained Brailleists served as missionaries through their volunteer service. Their work was then sent to one of three work centers, where the Braille was packaged and sent to individual children. The dedication of the Brailleists and the volunteers at the three centers was astounding.

Lola Cloeter began to transcribe Braille around 1950 while a member at St. John Lutheran Church, Ottertail, Minnesota. She continued in the work and became a work center leader. Her husband, Rev. Arnold Cloeter, received a call to Immanuel Lutheran Church in Parkers Prairie, Minnesota. He informed that congregation that he would accept the call if, and only if, they would be willing and supportive of also receiving the work center headed up by his wife. They agreed. Once established, women from neighboring churches helped on the monthly mailing of Braille materials to children.<sup>21</sup>

By the mid 1980s, the demand for Braille materials for children was declining. There were two primary reasons for this: First, children were being mainstreamed in their local schools rather than being sent to residential schools for the blind. Second, advances in medical treatment and pharmaceuticals greatly reduced childhood blindness.

During the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, the emphasis of the Transcription Committee was on developing and distributing Christian materials. In 1972, audiocassettes began to phase out Talking Books, opening the door for many more sighted volunteers to participate. Volunteers recorded books on tape from their home. The Lutheran Library for the Blind then sent these out

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "A Page from History," part 14; *The Bulletin*, 26:1 (February 1986).

to be listened to by blind people in their home. In 1983, the mission received a grant from the Lutheran Women Missionary League to purchase a recording booth. This permitted high quality recordings of books and magazines. This recording studio is still in use today.

In 1980, the Transcription Committee began to produce large-type materials for visually impaired people. At first, this large-type production was done on manual large-type typewriters. As with Braille, this meant that all of the Christian large-type material was produced piece by piece by single volunteers.

### **A New Era**

There are two people who were fundamental in reforming the mission during this period.

Harvey Lauer, himself blind, worked at Hines Veterans Hospital in Chicago as a vocational rehabilitation teacher. He trained people who had lost their sight in midlife. Being a lifelong Lutheran, he also volunteered his time to LCMS Blind Missions. When personal computers entered the work force, Lauer began researching and developing ways this technology could be adapted for use by blind people. Lauer assisted in the development of speech output, as well as Braille embossers driven by a computer. In 1984, Lauer introduced the use of computers to the work of the Braille Transcription Committee.

In 1987, Rev. Rodney Rynearson was called to serve as Counselor to LCMS Blind Missions. Like Lauer, he saw the value and opportunity of computer production in all aspects of the work. Rynearson trained volunteers to use personal computers to produce Braille and large-type material. He moved the printing of large type from typewriters to high-speed duplicators, which used one computer-produced master to print multiple copies.

In 1992, the mission used a grant from the Lutheran Women Missionary League to purchase a plate embossing device (PED). More will be said about this device in the next section. Use of the PED moved Braille production from the hands of dozens of specialized, trained

transcribers to hundreds of sighted volunteers. This also permitted the mission to expand its offerings of magazines to 15, covering all ages and many different interests. These magazines were produced by volunteers in over forty work centers scattered around the U.S.

### **Braille Production**

The production of Braille has improved during the past 150 years. It started in the same way Louis Braille had invented it, by the use of an awl, punching one dot at a time. Today, there are computer-driven printers that can produce Braille but, because these printers are cost-prohibitive, most Braille is produced by volunteers who squeeze paper between zinc plates. Long zinc plates are first embossed with reverse “interpointed” Braille by a computer-driven machine called a plate-embossing device (PED). The Braille is called “interpointed” because the dots going up do not touch the dots coming down but fall in between one another, thus doubling the amount of reading matter on a single sheet. The long sheet of zinc is then folded in half. To make Braille, a sheet of blank Braille paper, which is heavier than typing paper but lighter than tag board, is placed inside the folded zinc and then into a rubber-coated aluminum jacket. This “sandwich” is then run through a roller press, causing Braille dots to be impressed on both sides of the paper.<sup>22</sup> In this way, large volumes of Braille are produced by thousands of faithful volunteers and sent all over this country and the world.

This form of duplication is necessary to meet the growing demand and opportunities God is setting before the church. It is through the use of Christian Braille that many people are connected with the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus on the cross.

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<sup>22</sup> Koehler, 9.

## **Thermoform Pictures**

Another useful tool that was developed and utilized in the 1960s was thermoform, in which a sheet of plastic is heated and then placed over Braille. A vacuum process is then applied, conforming the plastic to the Braille on the paper while cooling it at the same time. This plastic can also be placed over shapes created from cardboard, sandpaper, pipe cleaners, and other items to form raised, tactile pictures for blind people. “At the Peoria center, items needed in quantity (tracts, devotions, Christian calendars, and greeting cards which sighted persons may send to blind friends) are mass-produced in a plastic material on thermoform duplicators from hand-brailled master copies.”<sup>23</sup>

Lutheran Blind Mission still uses this system to produce its popular Scripture-text Braille calendars. These calendars have the days of the month set in columns in the same way as print calendars. Holidays are noted in Braille, and a related Bible verse and picture are included. These calendars not only help blind people schedule their days, but they have also become an evangelistic tool. Those who receive one are encouraged to share it with other blind people. In this way, Lutheran Blind Mission comes in contact with many more blind people each year.

## **Braille as an Evangelistic Tool**

Braille is the primary source of information, growth, and development for many of its users. Because it is so hard to come by, and is so expensive to produce and distribute, Braille is cherished and passed on to other users. The challenge of the 1980s and '90s was how to connect to this often hidden, isolated culture. Because of a restructuring of governmental funding, most blind children were now mainstreamed. The schools for the blind, therefore, refocused their work to serve those with multiple handicaps. Because blind people were no longer culled out of the

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<sup>23</sup> “Special Ministries,” *The Lutheran Witness*, 83:15 (July 21, 1964), 9.

community, but instead mainstreamed into the local schools, it was harder to locate them and provide them with Christian materials. The effort of mission and ministry was further complicated by the fact that fewer and fewer blind people were being taught Braille. There was a contingent of educators who felt that blind people could learn just as well through auditory means and that learning the language of Braille was therefore not necessary. The result of this has been a generation of illiterate blind people. Studies have shown that for blind people, learning to read Braille is necessary for optimum brain function and development, in the same way sighted people's brains develop when they learn to read print.<sup>24</sup> Thus the emphasis of the work became to find blind recipients of materials, not participants of the Gospel. Blind people still perceived their identity as helpless and useless.

### **God Provides Another Advocate**

In 1990, the Rev. Ed Heineke, editor of *The Lutheran Messenger for the Blind* and the chairman of the Transcription Committee, was called to his glory in heaven. Rev. David Andrus, blind since age 11, was then asked to serve as editor of *The Lutheran Messenger*. Pastor Andrus had graduated from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1985 and had been called as a pastor to Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Overland, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. Besides his parish work, he had been involved as a member of the Standing Committee for the Blind, which helped to plan the Synod's work with the blind. With his appointment as editor in 1990 and then his appointment six years later as Associate Counselor for Blind People, the Lutheran Mission with Blind Persons (as the ministry was now called) moved into a new area of allowing blind people to become active participants in the work of the church. This work really took off in 1998 when

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<sup>24</sup> E.g., Harold Burton, Abraham Z. Snyder, and Marcus E. Raichle, "Default Brain Functionality in Blind People," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 101:43 (October 26, 2004), 15500–15505.



Andrus was called to serve full-time as the Director of Blind Missions for the Board for Mission Services of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

### **The Formulation of a Mission Society**

With a few exceptions, blind people had always been viewed as recipients of ministry work. Andrus changed this. Not only was he the first blind pastor to lead the mission, but he also was an advocate of blind people as participants of ministry. This all came together in the formulation of the Lutheran Blind Mission Society in 1994. The Society was developed to help blind people to be missionaries. The purpose of the society, then and now, was and is to encourage, train, and support blind people to be missionaries for Jesus, particularly to others who are blind and visually impaired.

At its conception, the society had three goals:

To tell stories about blind and visually impaired people from around the world and how they walk with and witness for Jesus.

To pray and thank God for these brothers and sisters and their witness opportunities.

To channel gifts and offerings to blind and visually impaired people to help cover expenses that are beyond their means so that they may share the news of Jesus with others who are blind and visually impaired. (This is not payment for their work.)<sup>25</sup>

### **Blind Outreach Centers Begin**

With this encouragement to participate and make the mission their own, many blind people stepped forward to provide ideas and insights. One person in particular was Bob Mates. Mates grew up Jewish, but was transformed by the Gospel. Being blind, he went to Leader Dogs for the Blind in August 1990 to be assigned a guide dog. While in the classes there, he observed that, as

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<sup>25</sup> See "Me, a Missionary?" *Lutheran Messenger for the Blind*. May 1995.

a Christian, he was in the minority. “There were traditional Christians; an avowed atheist; a Jehovah’s Witness; a lady who worshiped Zeus, Jupiter, and the other Greek gods; and who knows what else. It convinced me that the blind community in this country is one big harvest field for Jesus.”<sup>26</sup>

It troubled Mates’s heart that there were many blind people who didn’t know Jesus. He came up with the idea of a reading resource room where blind people could come to ask questions and obtain information about Christianity and how to better cope with their blindness. Upon returning home to Pittsburgh, Mates proposed this idea to first one pastor, then another, but they were unwilling to help. Yet because Mates knew of many blind people in Pittsburgh who were not attending church, he persisted. When Pastor Douglas Spittel was called serve the congregation of First Trinity Lutheran Church, Mates again proposed his idea. Spittel was willing to follow Mates’s vision. This resource room quickly evolved into what is known today as an outreach center. “That’s when we came up with the idea of the monthly meal, which would be held on the last Saturday of the month. We figured that, since Supplemental Security Income (SSI) checks would be running out, people could probably use a good hot meal. Also, it would be a chance to socialize.”<sup>27</sup>

Mates and Spittel thought it best to do a careful study of the real and felt needs of the people they wanted to reach, so they contacted David Andrus of Lutheran Blind Mission Society. The study showed that most blind people had been told that they were blind because of sin, either theirs or their parents. It also showed that most blind people felt as though sighted people did not keep their promises. They felt that churches paid them attention only if they were prospects of membership. It further showed that regardless of whether membership did or did not work out,

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<sup>26</sup> Bob Mates, *History of the Pittsburgh Center* (unpublished manuscript, July 20, 2006), n.p.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

sighted people eventually stopped the support and care for blind people in order to turn their energy toward the next hot prospect of membership. The study showed that this created a culture of isolated, discouraged, and depressed blind people. They believed they had no value or worth, either to God or to people. Their self-identity was formed by what people said of them and how people treated them.

Taking this study to heart, Mates and Spittel opened the first outreach center from a room at First Trinity, Pittsburgh, on 16 March, 1999. Pastor Spittel guided the sighted volunteers to not speak about Sunday worship. Instead, they showed kindness and compassion and worked at doing so consistently month after month. “For that reason, we instructed our volunteers never to actively try to get people to come to our church. That way, whenever someone would accuse us of being pushy, we could name friends of theirs who’d come to the meals, and point out that no one had pushed them into anything, except, perhaps, a second helping of food.”<sup>28</sup>

Along with this monthly gathering, the outreach center also tried to meet the daily needs of people. Braille classes, computer training with the use of Braille and speech output, classes on depression, and many more activities were given to help people. Through the gatherings, classes, and training, Mates helped develop the concept and working framework for blind outreach centers; as of May 2008, there are fifty sponsored by Lutheran Blind Mission. “God does the work; you’re just the guy on duty. All you do is let people know about it, and love them to death when they get there.”<sup>29</sup>

### **The Christian Blind Institute**

On the heels of the development of the outreach centers came something known as the Christian Blind Institute. Pastor Andrus knew the importance of educating and training people

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

for leadership. If a missionary effort was to be sustained within the blind community, then it would need leaders from among the blind community to do so.

As a whole, blind people lack an educated and experienced core. Yet, at the same time, many blind and visually impaired people are rejecting the passivity that our culture expects of them and are becoming active in society. They want to play an active role in the mission of the church. There are only a few blind or visually impaired pastors and even fewer trained and skilled leaders from within the culture.

In July 1999, Lutheran Blind Mission launched the Christian Blind Institute. Seven blind leaders—people who had experience to lead, teach, and inspire—helped form the first classes. Using the vast resources of the Lutheran Library for the Blind, the classes utilize its available textbooks. The classes are taught either through correspondence or in a conference. The correspondence courses focus on knowledge. The conference courses focus on skill and attitude. The correspondence classes provide lectures on audiocassette along with the textbook.

The fundamental philosophy of the Institute is that blind and visually impaired people generally learn best orally. The modern form of education, which is linear in thought, and emphasizes knowledge, does not fit the oral learning pattern of storytelling. The storytelling pattern of learning makes learning not only fun, but also possible and relevant to the way most blind people think, work, and live.

The Christian Blind Institute has trained, equipped, and sent out many students. Four of the students who have completed the classes, Rick Grove, Martha Moser, Bob Mates, and Lisa Watts, have not only applied their learning at the outreach centers they are involved in, but have also served as teachers during the conference courses. Now, as each new blind outreach center is developed, its blind director is enrolled in this training school.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

## **History at a Glance**

During the twentieth century, work with and to blind people made remarkable strides forward. Technology moved the process of production of Braille from using an awl to punch one dot at a time to computer-controlled embossers, which can be used to produce multiple copies by sighted people who do not know Braille. It saw the church reach out to blind people, not only with materials but with a helpful hand of friendship. This century saw the establishment of the largest religious lending library in the world. All this was accomplished by willing, interested, and trained volunteers. Yet God wanted to do more to spread His Gospel. The people being reached had as yet been an untapped resource in the effort of the Gospel.

But, also during this century, there was a change and shift by God's people and the local congregations as pertaining to ministry to people who are blind. The introduction of Braille helped establish a bridge from an oral culture to the written culture. Braille also became the first step of ministry to people who were blind. Braille was seen as the tool to share the Gospel with people. Thus the production of Braille was emphasized and practiced. Without realizing it, however, this also raised the prospects, opportunities, and abilities of people who are blind to do ministry themselves. In effect, it provided the transition of ministry from viewing blind people as the end of ministry to the means of ministry and mission work.

## APPENDIX TWO

### LUTHERAN BLIND MISSION: A RESOURCE FOR THE CHURCH

#### The Mission

Lutheran Blind Mission (LBM) provides materials and leadership for

1. communities among blind people to be developed,
2. leaders to be equipped and
3. believers to be strengthened, so that
4. blind and visually impaired people may read, hear, and share the light of salvation seen through the cross of Jesus!

LBM provides Braille, large type, and audiocassette materials at no cost to people who are blind or visually impaired.

These materials are prepared by over 1,000 volunteers at over 50 work centers.

#### Available Materials and Services for Those Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired

##### The Lutheran Library for the Blind

**Books.** There are over 3,500 titles in the lending library in Braille, large type, and audiocassette formats. The books are Christian or wholesome fiction in nature. Printed catalogs are available on request. Catalogs can also be viewed on the internet at [www.blindmission.org/catalog](http://www.blindmission.org/catalog).

Categories of books: Arch Books, autobiographies, Bible studies, biographies, Christian life, church history, devotions, fiction, poetry, preschool, preteen (grades 5–8), primary (grades 1–4), young adult, and young adult fiction.

**To Borrow Books.** This lending library sends books within the United States by “Free Matter for the Blind.” Subscribers do not need to be Lutheran to use these services.

Application forms to become a Library user are available upon request in Braille and large type.

**Magazines.** Magazines and devotional materials are available in Braille, large type, and audiocassette at no cost to the users so that their faith walk with Jesus may grow stronger.

*Higher Things:* This magazine is written for youth. It addresses personal and theological issues that youth encounter. It is produced in Braille and on audiocassette quarterly.

*In His Hands:* This newsletter brings readers the stories and activities of Lutheran Blind Mission. This is one of many ways LBM helps encourage, train, and support people to share Jesus with others who have sight loss. It is produced quarterly in all formats, Braille, large type, audiocassette, and regular print.

*Lutheran Digest:* This magazine is filled with timely stories for adult Christians. These thoughtful stories make for light, enjoyable reading. It is produced quarterly in Braille, large type, and on audiocassette.

*Lutheran Layman:* This magazine tells the wonderful stories and encouraging events of the Lutheran Laymen's League, also known as Lutheran Hour Ministries. It is a bi-monthly magazine produced only on audiocassette.

*Lutheran Messenger:* This magazine is designed and produced by and only for this mission. The inspirational and challenging stories are written and chosen with a special theme for each month. Articles written by readers are highlighted. This monthly magazine has been in circulation since 1926. It is produced in Braille and on audiocassette.

*Lutheran Witness:* This is the publication for all laypeople of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It tells the story of the church, its work, and upcoming activities. It is a monthly publication produced in Braille, large type, and audiocassette.

*LWML Quarterly:* The women of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League are very active and informative. Through this publication, they share the importance of the mission of the church and how specifically they are working to accomplish it. The *Quarterly* also has many good Bible studies in each issue. This quarterly magazine is available in all three formats, Braille, large type, and audiocassette.

*My Devotions:* This simple-to-read daily devotion provides God's comforting Word through Bible verse and short explanation. Though it is designed for those 8–12 years old, adults can relate to it and be strengthened as well. It is produced monthly in Braille and in large type.

*Portals of Prayer:* Even as we eat and drink food daily to keep our bodies going, so too the soul needs nourishment. This devotional provides a portion of God's Word for

each day along with a short thought based on that soul food. This devotional is produced quarterly in Braille and monthly on audiocassette.

*Strength for the Day:* This small publication has several short meditations for daily life in each issue. Although this is a small publication, it helps faith grow strong. It is produced monthly in Braille and large type.

*Today's Light:* This booklet is designed to help a person read through the Bible in two years. After assigning a section of the Bible to read, it provides insightful thoughts and comments to explain the culture and context of that section of Scripture. This monthly magazine is produced in Braille and large type.

### **Congregational Resources**

LBM provides hymnals, catechisms, and certain Bible studies in order to assist people who are blind or visually impaired be active in an LCMS congregation. Unfortunately, not everything is available. Please contact the LBM office for specific offerings.

### **Scripture Text Calendars**

Dates, holidays, and church festivals are important to note and observe. These bring structure and purpose to life. LBM is the sole producer of these calendars, which provide not just dates but also a Bible verse and picture for each month. The calendar is available in Braille and in large type.

### **Lutheran Blind Mission Society**

This Mission Society helps blind and visually impaired people be missionaries for Jesus.

Much of this work is done in and through outreach centers. These are Christian communities hosted by local congregations. They are led by and for people who are blind or visually impaired.

The newsletter "In His Hands" tells stories about the activity of blind and visually impaired Christians around the U.S. This is one of many ways the society encourages, trains, and supports people to share Jesus with others who have sight loss.



## **The Christian Blind Institute**

The Christian Blind Institute was established to train and equip blind and visually impaired people to be Christian leaders within their church and local community, and especially toward training them to lead others who are blind or visually impaired. Half of the course work is done through the mail; the other half is done in a retreat setting. Upon completion of the class work, the person is certified for church work by the Lutheran Blind Mission Society.

## **Brochures and Videos Available for All People**

**Dinner in the Dark.** This outlines a special opportunity for sighted people to taste what it is like to be blind. Often hosted by the youth of a congregation, participants must eat a meal while blindfolded and then discuss the experience. Those who attend sign a registration card and give a \$10 gift to go to Lutheran Blind Mission. Lutheran Blind Mission provides the manual to run this dinner, along with a video shown at the end of the meal when blindfolds are removed. This experience notes the challenges of newly blind people and the role Lutheran Blind Mission plays to assist people in this time of transition.

**Open Hands, Open Doors.** What is an outreach center and why is it necessary? This brochure and accompanying video answer these questions and more.

**Open Hands.** This brochure gives simple suggestions of guiding and working with a blind person.

**Open Doors.** This brochure gives a basic plan of how to start an outreach center.

**Helping Blind People See Jesus.** This brochure is a description of materials and opportunities provided by Lutheran Blind Mission.

**What Is Braille?** This brochure gives the history of Braille and tells how it is made and used today.

**Lutheran Blind Mission Society.** In the U.S., there are 11 million blind and visually impaired people, 95 percent of whom are unchurched. This brochure sets forth the goals, objectives, and means that you, through Lutheran Blind Mission, can help blind people see Jesus.

**A Day in the Life of a Blind Person video.** When people think of losing eyesight, they are often filled with fear and thoughts of helplessness. They may even think that life is over. Yet, with encouragement from God's Word, God's people and Lutheran Blind Mission, along with the right skill training and adaptive aids, it isn't nearly as bad as one thinks. This video gives a glimpse of life through the eyes of a blind person.

### **Becoming a Missionary to the Blind**

The mission field is located around the world and at home. Have you ever thought or dreamed of serving your Lord in this way? People around the world need encouragement, and you might be the person to do it.

In order to learn more about the society or to receive the "In His Hands" newsletter, please write or call.

Lutheran Blind Mission  
7550 Watson Road  
St. Louis, MO 63119  
Toll-free: 1-888-215-2455  
e-mail: [blind.mission@blindmission.org](mailto:blind.mission@blindmission.org)  
Website: [www.blindmission.org](http://www.blindmission.org)

## APPENDIX THREE

### PROPER ETIQUETTE WHEN MEETING A PERSON WHO IS BLIND

1. Speak to the person in a natural voice, not loud or soft, fast or slow. The person can probably hear you just fine. Tell the person your name and try to use his or her name. Using names helps blind people know to whom you are speaking.
2. Feel free to use words and phrases that refer to vision. Words such as *look*, *see*, and *watching* are part of everyday communication used by everyone, even blind people.
3. When sitting with a blind person, try to observe what is only seen and not heard. Tell the person what you see. You do not need to say what is heard, as he or she will probably hear this just fine.
4. Tell a blind person when you are leaving so he or she will not assume you are still there and keep talking with you.
5. When helping a blind person, do not assume you know what that person wants or where the person should go. Instead, ask, "May I help you?" If the person responds with a "no," quietly watch and observe but do not grasp him or her.
6. When describing a location to a blind person, always indicate whose left or right you are referring to. For example, "The table is to your right;" or "The doorway is to my left."
7. When leading a blind person to a chair to sit down, approach the chair from the side or back, if possible. Place one of the blind person's hands on the top of the back of the chair. As you do so, mention his or her orientation to it. For example, "You are at the side of the chair."
8. When leading a blind person, offer your arm to him or her. The person will hold your arm just above the elbow. Sometimes the person will simply place a hand on your shoulder. As you walk, you will then be one step in front of the blind person. This means you are leading and not pushing, propelling, or grabbing.
9. If you will be leading a blind person with a dog, ask the person for the best way to proceed. Some may still want to hold your arm, while others may just want you to speak the directions so they can repeat them to their dog.
10. Do not leave a blind person standing alone in the middle of a room. Lead him or her to a wall or chair, preferably near other people. But after guiding the person to the chair, don't leave right away. Introduce the person to the others in the area or ask them to introduce themselves so the blind person can associate voices with names.
11. Stairs are not a problem for blind people unless they also have a walking disability. Simply pause at the top or bottom of a set of stairs and say, "Stairs going up/down."

When going through a doorway, do not look back to see if the person has made it through. Also do not speed up or slow down. Simply go through the door while saying, "Going through a doorway; the door is on your right/left."

12. When assisting a blind person at a meal, orient the person to the food on the plate by comparison to a clock: "Your chicken is at four o'clock. Your peas are at eight o'clock." Ask if the person needs other assistance such as help with cutting the food. If going through a buffet line, describe the various foods to the person, who will hold your arm through the line.
13. If the blind person has a guide dog, do not pet or talk to the animal without the permission of its owner. Guide dogs in harness are working and should not be distracted.

### **Proper Etiquette at Church**

1. Do not usher a blind person in and then leave. Either sit with or ask someone to sit with the person.
2. Ask if the person wants the church service described. Describe what is visually happening. Remember, you do not need to say what is heard.
3. As an usher, touch the shoulder of a blind person to gain his or her attention and then tell what is happening: "Here is the offering plate." "It is time for communion. Do you wish to go up?"
4. As a pastor, do not only gesture with your hands to indicate that the congregation should stand or sit; verbalize as well. Announce the hymn and its number. Try to select your Bible studies several months in advance and also obtain them in Braille or large type. Lutheran Blind Mission produces most Bible studies in Braille and large type. With advance notice, Bible studies can be prepared for you.
5. Provide bulletins or other handouts in Braille or large type. Braille hymnals are available from Lutheran Blind Mission.
6. Try to involve the blind person in congregational activities, boards or committees. Do not assume that because someone is blind, he or she does not or cannot be involved. Remember, isolation and inactivity are the biggest problems blind and visually impaired people face.
7. Those who are totally blind do not live in a world of total darkness; they do not "see" just darkness. Some blind people speak of experiencing forms and shapes as a result of other sensory input. (Remember: sight is in the brain, not the eyes.)
8. Those who have partial sight fall into a wide range of vision loss:
  - a. Some have peripheral vision.
  - b. Some have central vision.

- c. Some have clouded vision.
  - d. Some have multiple vision.
  - e. Some have a combination of many types of vision.
9. People who are blind or visually impaired do not have extraordinary smell, hearing, taste, or touch. They simply have learned to pay more attention to these other senses and have practiced doing so. This sensitivity does not automatically develop when vision fades, but it needs to be developed.

Blind and visually impaired people will vary in their skills and abilities to travel and move about. Some people are very good navigators, while others are comfortable only in the familiar surroundings where they live, work, and play.

## APPENDIX FOUR

### PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: BIBLICAL LANGUAGE AND MISSION WORK

#### The General Issue

Language is one of the ways people communicate concepts and messages. Therefore, the use of words is not only important but essential for Christians as they teach, witness, and share their faith in Jesus.

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. Galatians 6:9–10

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Ephesians 5:15–16

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. Colossians 4:6

In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us. Titus 2:7–8

We have come to learn that certain language is detrimental and demeaning to some groups of people and, therefore, out of Christian love should not be used. For example, racial slurs and prejudicial phrases are avoided because they evoke anger and hatred. Such words are usually spoken in order to claim superiority over another person, group, or race. As Christians, we recognize that this behavior is improper. In the sight of God, all people are of equal value.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:3–5

Since certain words and phrases are not helpful but are derogatory and demeaning, their use should be avoided. This is not only politically correct, but also God-pleasing. As Christians seeking to serve people and not belittle them, the use of politically correct language should also be exercised with respect to people who have a physical disability such as blindness, deafness, developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, and mobility challenges.

The proper use of language is no small issue, because 30 percent of the United States' population falls into these disability groups. Sadly, our churches do not reflect the population. In fact, it is estimated that 95 percent of people with a disability are unchurched. One of the reasons for this statistic is the use of archaic, demeaning, and ill-informed words, concepts, and language as they relate to disabilities. Certainly, the use of such language is not deliberate but is done unintentionally as a thoughtless oversight.

### **The Specific Issues**

The lack of sensitivity when using language with respect to people who have a disability is not only politically incorrect but also creates difficulties with evangelistic efforts and mission work. Therefore, we recommend the following:

#### **Use “People First” Language**

“People first” language uses phrases that affirm the person, not the handicap. This method also uses words and phrases that make the person more than the handicap.

*Preferred:*

A man who is blind  
People who are blind  
A man who is deaf  
People who are deaf  
A man who cannot walk  
A person who is not mobile  
A man who has learning disabilities

*Not Preferred:*

A blind man  
The blind  
A deaf mute  
The deaf  
A cripple  
An invalid  
A dumb or stupid man

A man who has developmental disabilities      A mentally retarded man

### **Avoid the Medical Model of Ministry**

In the culture of the United States, an over-emphasis is often placed upon the body and its health. This is because of a strong medical system and the media's often misdirected push of the physical body's beauty and health. For these reasons, people with disabilities are always confronted with the medical model.

As noted in chapter 1, the medical model sees people who have a disability as in need of assistance. It views them as broken and attempts to fix them. This is good for a first-line approach toward people who have just faced a physical loss. But if this is the only model applied, people are left feeling broken, incomplete, and inadequate. Even more important, this model only deals with the physical side of people and does little for their mental, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. If this model is applied to any of these other areas of life, it leaves people feeling even more broken than before.

Talking in terms of Jesus' power of healing builds false hope. Whether spoken or not, these words—coupled with our culture's strong emphasis upon health—imply that Jesus fixes the physically broken. When that hope is not realized (which is the majority of the time especially with people who are disabled), people with a disability fall away from the faith.

Therefore, when teaching about these miracles or applying them to modern situations, it is not necessarily wrong to use the word *heal*. It simply is not a helpful word, and it can be a hurtful one. Luke the physician and writer of the Gospel never used the words *heal*, *make whole*, or *cure* when referring to people who were blind and given sight or deaf and given hearing. Rather, Luke wrote of our Lord "giving" or "restoring" (e.g., Luke 4:18; 7:21; 7:22; 18:35–43). It is recommended to refrain from using the word *heal* when referring to the miracles involving



people who are given sight and hearing. It is not in the text and is confusing to both the sighted and blind, hearing and deaf.<sup>1</sup>

The emphasis of these miracles is threefold:

1. Jesus, as God, has the power to perform mighty miracles. Jesus did these miracles to demonstrate his deity (cf Matthew 12:23; John 20:30–31).
2. As a human, Jesus lovingly went out of his way to help those whom society pushed away (cf Luke 18:39-40). This is something that, in love, we can also do. We show love by providing the help that we are able to give: offer a ride, learn Braille or American Sign Language, or take time to be a friend.
3. Biblical accounts of blindness and the giving of physical sight—or deafness and the giving of physical hearing—underscore the greater biblical theme of spiritual blindness and deafness: not seeing or hearing God, his love, or Jesus as Savior (cf Matthew 23:16; 23:17; 23:19;23:24; 23:26; Mark 2:17; 4:9; 4:12; 8:17-18; John 9:39-41).

### **Understand That a Disability Is a Physical Condition**

It is better to speak of physical disabilities as physical conditions rather than illnesses or sicknesses.

1. People who have physical disabilities already deal with a lot of earthly brokenness and pain. We do not want to needlessly add to their hardships.
2. People with a disability often feel the application of the Law heavily in their lives through their physical condition. It is therefore important that other Christians—people of the Gospel—share, show, and teach the Gospel prominently with people so affected.
3. Jesus himself was physically broken. He accepts people who have disabilities. A person who has physical disabilities can identify with and find his or her identity in the broken Physician (cf 1 Peter 2:24).
4. Overemphasizing physical conditions or situations becomes a theology of affliction or glory. In contrast, our theology is one of the cross. A theology of the cross emphasizes a faith that clings to Jesus, not earthly conditions. Therefore, the spiritual condition of faith is to be the emphasis. (Cf John 9:3; Romans 14:17–18; Galatians 5:5–6.)

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<sup>1</sup> Blind: Matthew 9:27–30; 11:5; 20:30–34; Mark 8:22–25; Luke 18:35–43; John 9:1–7.  
Deaf: Mark 7:32–37; 9:20–27.

## Use Biblical Language

Use the wording of the biblical texts when applying it to people with a disability (or anytime, for that matter). This is especially important when applying the word *heal* to a person with a disability. Notice that the Gospels speak in general terms when telling of how Jesus worked with the crowds of people who were ill or who had various conditions or disabilities (e.g., Matthew 15:30–31; 21:14). When the text speaks of Jesus helping an individual who is blind or deaf, however, the word *heal* is not usually used. Instead, Jesus gave or restored sight, or Jesus touched the person.

The word *heal* is used only in two specific verses as it relates to individual people who are blind and given sight: Matthew 12:22–24; Mark 10:46–52. Note, however, that in Matthew 12:22–24, the primary demonstration of power is the casting out of a demon, even as noted by the people. In other words, the casting out of the demon is the actual healing, not the restoring of sight.

Our Lutheran understanding teaches that faith is what God gives a person to cling to the gift of salvation. The purpose of faith, therefore, is to focus on Jesus and salvation. In Mark 10:46–52, it cannot be faith that restores physical sight. It is Jesus who gives physical sight; he clearly demonstrates that he is God by giving the man his physical sight. The reference to the man's faith is in respect to his spiritual condition. Faith is the confession that Jesus is the Son of God, and His blessing in response to that faith is the physical wellness that he gives. In faith, believers confess that Jesus is the Son of God. In view of this faith, physical wholeness was the blessing that Jesus gave on account of his mercy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Another interpretation of Mk 10:46–52 is that the man sees clearly spiritually and, therefore, is whole or saved spiritually. The restoration of sight is a secondary miracle to the primary miracle of salvation. This is parallel to Jesus' words to the one man who returned to give thanks for being cleansed of leprosy (Luke 17:11–19). The other

When working with these texts, be clear in denoting the physical and spiritual aspects. Though physical sight and hearing are not promised, Jesus does promise to provide spiritual sight and hearing to all who believe in Him.

People who are physically blind or deaf often conclude that spiritually, Jesus does not forgive them or accept them. They equate physical blindness or sight, deafness or hearing, with spiritual blindness or sight, spiritual deafness or hearing.

Because the physical blindness or deafness remains, however, they conclude that they are broken, unforgiven, and not accepted by God spiritually. They are given the impression that if they were accepted spiritually, they would physically see or hear.

### **Connecting the Text to Today**

Using appropriate wording is a challenge for our ministry today, especially in relating to people with physical disabilities. People unknowingly teach and talk in ways that can be offensive and not inviting to others. It is not that the language used is necessarily wrong, it is just not helpful. Sensitivity and effort toward this goal are needed to minister effectively.

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.  
(Galatians 6:2)

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nine were also physically cleansed. There is no doubt of this. Jesus' words, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well," are in reference to the man's spiritual wholeness.

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