

# THE DISABLED GOD

BY BURTON COOPER

*“Our tendency is to think of divine power in the same terms as our power, except to extend God’s power unlimitedly. That is, there are limits to our power; there are no limits to God’s power. If we can do some things, God is able to do anything. Thus, human ‘ableness’ provides us with the image to think about God’s power. In this context, the image of a disabled God is not simply a shocker but also a theological reminder that we are not to think of God’s powers or abilities as simply an unlimited extension of our powers or abilities.”*

I propose that we imagine God as disabled. I need to say at once that I am not a disabled person nor the parent of a disabled person nor one who works to any great extent with disabled persons. But I have learned some things from listening to Christians with disabilities, and I am persuaded that by thinking of God as disabled—metaphorically, of course—we can deepen our understanding of the nature of God’s creative and redemptive love. This requires biblical grounding and coherent arguments. All that in good time, for I wish to move to the image of a disabled God not by direct argument but through a discussion of three theological issues that are especially troubling for disabled Christians:

(1) *The meaning and function of perfection language in biblical faith.* What are we to make of Matthew’s language that we are to be perfect as our “father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48)? What are we to make of Levitical language that declares eligible for priestly acts only those who are “unblemished” (Leviticus 21:16–23)? Is there a way, once and for all, to put a theological halt to any notion of diminishing value or stigma that attaches itself to a disabled person because of these commands for perfection?

(2) *The theodicy issue,* the question of how God could cause or allow the kind of suffering and anguish that accompanies the life of disabled people and those who love and care for them. Does our faith allow us to say something more than that the answer lies in the compassion

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evoked in others by the disabled or in the unfathomable mystery of God's love?

(3) *The theological issue of hope and salvation.* What does our faith urge those of us who are disabled to hope for, in this temporal life and in eternal life? By virtue of her or his disability, does the content of a disabled Christian's hope differ from that of other Christians?

## I

The first issue concerns the nature of language about God and the meaning of perfection. When we speak about God, we use language whose original referent is to some aspect of creaturely existence. Thus, we talk about God's arm or God's hand or even the back of God. The Apostles' Creed states that Jesus sits "on the right hand of God." The Bible refers to God as walking and singing, and we picture God as having eyes to see and ears to hear. We think of God as having a human face, and quite often we imagine God to be a powerful, though old, white man, bearded, sometimes sternly visaged, sometimes gentle. Think of Michelangelo's famous painting of God creating Adam, or medieval paintings and wood carvings of the Trinity.

Of course, when we reflect upon all this, we see that we have been using language metaphorically, not literally. We have been imagining God in our own terms and from our own experiences. We know that God does not literally have eyes that see images or ears that hear sounds or a mouth and tongue that speak words. These are all metaphors used to affirm God's capacity to know and to act upon, or affect, all events. There is nothing wrong with using metaphors to allow us to speak about God. Quite the opposite: It is important to speak about God and, therefore, we must use metaphors. Problems arise only when we forget: (1) that our language about God is metaphorical language and (2) that there is a relation between the particularity of the "me," who creates the metaphors and images of God, and the character of those metaphors and images.

Feminists remind us that it was male religious leaders and male theologians in a patriarchal culture who were responsible for the dominance of male language and imagery in regard to God. The point is well-taken. The form of the argument has special relevance to disabled Christians. As feminists argue, despite all the male images of God, men do not, by virtue of their maleness, more closely represent the image of God than do women. So it is true that the able-bodied do not, by virtue of their able-bodiedness, more closely represent the image of God than do the disabled. God does not see with eyes nor hear with ears nor move with legs, and so forth. Those of us who suffer from physically impaired hearing or physically impaired vision or who lack the use of their limbs are not, by virtue of those impairments, in violation of God's commandment to be perfect. We are commanded to be perfect, as the God of the Bible is perfect. We need to ask how the Bible understands God's perfections.

In the history of Christian thought, there have been two large ways that theologians have answered this question. The first is to define perfection in terms of independence and completeness and then to interpret divine perfection as the absolute case of completeness and independence of being. Thus, in this view, God's perfect knowledge means that God's knowledge is complete from eternity. There is nothing that God does not know out of God's own being. God is not dependent upon events occurring in "time" in order to know them.

Similarly, in this way of thinking, perfect power means that there is nothing God cannot do. The power of creaturely beings places no limits on God's activity. It follows that the perfection of God lies precisely in independence of being. God needs nothing, is dependent upon nothing, and is limited by nothing. God simply *is*, and if there are other beings, it is because God has freely created them out of gratuitous love and not out of any inner drive rooted in the divine nature. If God created out of need or inner drive, or if God was in any way limited by or dependent upon created beings, then that would be a sign of imperfection.

This traditional way of understanding God's perfection is, of course, familiar to all of us. I do not find it convincing, but this is an intelligently conceived belief, and there is much to be said for it. Still, when we consider it in the context of the command to be perfect as God is perfect, then it is clear that the command functions simply to condemn us. For all of us are, in part, dependent beings. All of us are limited in everything we do. Unfortunately, for those of us who are disabled the notion that dependence and limitation are *per se* marks of imperfection can and does suggest that disabled people, merely by virtue of their disability, are farther from the divine perfection than are those who are not disabled.

The second way of interpreting perfection takes its clue from christology. Christ-centeredness leads us to a very different story of the nature of God's life and a very different understanding of perfection, dependence, and limitation. It holds that we find the meaning of divine perfection through the life and teaching of Jesus and that we move to perfection in our own lives through Christ and by relating to others as he did. Perfection, here, is not first of all, or ever, a matter of independence or completeness. It means valuing others and attending to others simply because God values them and not because of their achievement or station in life or because of the group to which they belong. It means living out the tension, with all its inner anguish, of judging others by standards of justice and forgiving others by standards of compassionate love. It means respecting the freedom of others as much as possible and avoiding the use of coercion and violence in human relations as much as possible. It means having a sure concern and respect precisely for those of us whom society marginalizes and seeks to ignore.

When we think of the meaning of perfection through this christolog-

ical vision, then God's perfection becomes the integrity of steadfast love, especially to the weak and scorned. There is no wavering in God's intent to love us, no matter what. For the faithfulness of love is the perfection of God's nature. Insofar as we are created in the divine image, love is our nature. That means that we flourish most when we love and are loved. That should come as no surprise to us. It also means that the command to be perfect as God is perfect does not come to us from a reality whose being is totally alien to ours. For when we love and live in a community where love counts, we are at once ourselves and like God.

There is another consequence of this interpretation of perfection that is significant for our discussion. The sufferings of Christ, including his death on the cross, are not unrelated to his life lived for others. It is precisely Christ's willingness to go to the cross that shows that he meant what he taught. I do not mean by this to endorse all suffering as an expression of love or even as a reminder of Christ's love. Perhaps I need to stress that point to avoid any misunderstanding regarding the relation of suffering to love. Most human suffering serves as neither an expression nor a reminder of Christ's suffering for us. Most human suffering arises out of human selfishness or ignorance or indifference or the fragile finitude of the human body and psyche. But in the life of Christ, we can see that God's love finds its perfect expression in suffering love. Again, I am not saying that all suffering is suffering-love, but that a life formed by love for others inevitably leads to one's own suffering, and this is true in Jesus' life and in the history of God.

Jürgen Moltmann uses the image of the "crucified God" to express this christological suffering-love of God. But the same reasoning also leads to the image of the "disabled God." Jesus on the cross is God disabled, made weak and vulnerable to worldly powers because of the perfection of divine love.<sup>1</sup> There are some religious verses written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer that powerfully express the vulnerability of divine love. Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis in 1945 for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler, wrote this poem from a prison cell:

People go to God when [God] is sore bestead, find [God] poor and scorned, without shelter or bread, whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead; Christians stand by God in God's hour of grieving. God goes to everyone when sore bestead, feeds body and spirit with [God's] bread; for Christians, pagans alike, [God] hangs dead, and both alike forgiving.

The image of a disabled God reminds us that, in Bonhoeffer's words, the God we know through Christ "is sore bestead . . . poor and scorned." It reminds us that, from a christological perspective, God's perfection, God's goodness, God's identity are so far from transcending the suffering of the world that they participate deeply and unavoidably in that very suffering. More needs to be said on the

<sup>1</sup>See Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.'"

meaning of the metaphor “disabled” as applied to God. But we can come to that further analysis through a discussion of the two remaining issues before us, theodicy and salvation. Let us turn, then, to a discussion of theodicy as it relates to disabled persons.

## II

At a recent church conference on the disabled, a blind man in his late thirties voiced his dilemma to the main speaker, “I don’t know why I was born blind. I used to pray for sight but then accepted my blindness, and I have had some peace on that score. But now, these last few years, I am losing my hearing and other aspects of my general health are not good.” He stopped for a moment groping for his question. He finally said, “I can’t understand why things are getting worse.”

As if the pathos in this situation were not sufficient, one other element needs to be added: the stigma that attaches to the disabled person. Bernard Ikeler, a disabled person, writes:

Even in this science-oriented day, many people secretly believe that disabled individuals, their parents and siblings are somehow evil, hence avoid contact with them. . . . Members of the disabled person’s family cannot but yield to the general consensus that they are evil.<sup>2</sup>

The sense of evil attached to a birth disability lies deep in the human mind. The Gospel of John takes note of this primordial sensibility and seeks to transform it by the messianic presence and power:

As he passed by, Jesus saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him” (John 9:1–3).

This gospel story challenges the widely-held assumption that the origin of all human suffering lies in human sin. It rebukes that troublesome and inadequate notion by asserting God’s wider purpose for the man’s blindness and by having Jesus restore the man’s sight. But in doing this, it inadvertently bolsters the three basic elements in the theodicy that became dominant in the later teachings of the church, elements which themselves are now becoming problematic:

- (1) God’s power lies behind all events;
- (2) God’s power can override all other causal powers; and
- (3) God’s good, albeit, often mysterious, purpose explicates all human suffering.

This theological explanation of human suffering, this theodicy, lies not only in our head but in our blood. Even those who do not believe in the reality of God accept it as an appropriate statement of the idea of

<sup>2</sup>Bernard Ikeler, unpublished address to The Kentucky Psychological Association, October 20, 1989.

God. The story of the Johannine blind man who receives his sight and witnesses to Jesus is a theodic paradigm verified by a happy outcome. But the power of this theodicy is that it is also verified by unhappy outcomes. The blind man at the disability conference whose health is failing remains caught in the safety net of God's good, though, in this case, mysterious, purposes. No matter how much his health continues to fail, no matter what catastrophe occurs to him or those he cares for, he can remain comforted. He need have no fear that his life has fallen out of God's providential hands—as long as he continues to accept the explanation of mystery to account for apparently senseless and destructive developments.

Often we assume that the rejection of the dominant theodicy's explanation of human suffering means a rejection of a biblical view of God or even a loss of faith in God's reality. When we do either of these, we are confusing the rejection of one particular theory or idea of God with the rejection of the reality of God. We need to remember that biblical narratives are suggestive of more than one way of understanding the nature of God's power and its relation to the evil and suffering in human life and in the creation as a whole.

I want to look now at one of these biblically grounded alternatives that is being increasingly voiced today. In this alternative understanding, God is not conceived as the one causal power before and behind all events but as the universally present power and vision ahead of events. God is not so much the cause of things as the lure for things. God lures a world of relatively free creatures toward increasing love and creativity. The creatures' relative freedom or self-determination is affirmed so that the causal factors in any particular event are understood as multiple. God is a necessary dimension of reality—by sustaining the world's order and by driving the creation towards increasing complexity, meaning, and value—but not a controlling dimension.

Any given event or series of events in the world—a Beethoven symphony; the overthrow of long-established repressive governments in eastern Europe; the church bus crash in Carrollton County, Kentucky, killing thirty-seven children; the governmentally-sanctioned disappearance, torture, and killing of hundreds of Argentinean citizens during the 1970s; the birth of "crack" babies and babies born with AIDS or other horrible maladies—is seen not as lying under or within God's controlling power and will, but as emerging from a multiplicity of factors. God is one determining factor, even a necessary determining factor, but not the controlling, determining factor. There is a world because there is God, but every event in that world arises out of the mutually creative activities of God and the creatures. In this sense, though strictly in this sense, God and the world are co-creators of each event. God draws the world into being and draws individual creatures toward particular, relevant responses on the basis of God's aims of love, justice, and richness of experience. But creatures respond not

only to God's aim but out of their own history, environment, and perspective. That response can vary from radical rejection of God's will to mild qualification. Thus, in this view, Hitler's murderous policy toward European Jews or the recent Philippine earthquake or the AIDS epidemic or deafness or blindness or paralysis of limbs would never simply be attributed to God. Rather, God would be seen as responding to these kinds of events as God responds to all kinds of events: by seeking to draw or lure from them consequences that are compassionate, creative, and redemptive.

Without compassion toward a suffering other, we neither communicate love nor become a vehicle of redemptive power toward the sufferer. In the view of God I am outlining, this is as true for God as it is for us. Whitehead calls God "the suffering companion who understands," meaning, among other things, that even (or especially) divine understanding presupposes suffering with the other. God could not be God without suffering because those who do not experience the suffering of the other do not understand the reality of the other. The converse is also true: Those who suffer the suffering of the other confirm the reality of the world of the other.

Oliver Sachs, the psychiatrist who wrote *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, discovered that those suffering from bizarre neurological difficulties want to be written about because such writings give their world a reality that otherwise it seems to lack. I cannot, of course, speak for disabled people, but perhaps what underlies the intensity in the fight for public facilities for the disabled—wider parking spots, access ramps, specially fitted public buses—is not simply their practical use but also their metaphysical or spiritual use. Providing public facilities for the disabled is the way the wider culture publicly recognizes the reality of the world of the disabled.

In a similar but deeper way, when God suffers with the disabled person, God gives reality to the world of that disabled person. In this way, we approach once again the image of the disabled God. God is disabled in the sense that the reality of the disabled enters into God. God feels the world in the way the disabled person feels the world. To call God disabled reminds us of the concreteness of God's loving presence in the world.

The biblical text that serves as a paradigm of God's concrete, suffering presence in the world is the Parable of the Great Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46. There is nothing in this parable that hints of a divine cause either behind the poverty, sickness, and loneliness or in the way that people respond to the poor, sick, and lonely. What is suggested is that God is present to us in the most concrete way: in the stranger, the poor, the hungry, and, of course, we can add the disabled. Certainly the Parable of the Great Judgment tells us that our daily decisions have ultimate significance. But it also encourages us to think of God as poor, hungry, disabled, needing help from us to attain the

most elementary necessities of food, drink, clothing, and companionship.

There is another sense in which the “disabled” image helps us to think about God, particularly about the nature of God’s power. Our tendency is to think of divine power in the same terms as our power, except to extend God’s power unlimitedly. That is, there are limits to our power; there are no limits to God’s power. If we can do some things, God is able to do anything. Thus, human “ableness” provides us with the image to think about God’s power. In this context, the image of a disabled God is not simply a shocker but also a theological reminder that we are not to think of God’s power or abilities as simply an unlimited extension of our powers or abilities. “Disabled” as an image of God jars us out of our tendency to conceive God as “unlimitedly” able. It reminds us to think of God’s power christologically—God’s being with us, suffering with us, broken for us. Of course, God is with us in a way that “ables” *us* to sustain ourselves, affirm ourselves, and vitalize ourselves toward increasing compassion, creativity, and richness of life. But that is a far cry from thinking of God as able to do whatever God pleases.

### III

We now come to our third question: What are we to hope for? What, particularly, can be the nature of the Christian hope for those of us who are disabled? In the play *The Elephant Man*, the physically deformed Merrick says, “The Bible promises in heaven that the crooked shall be made straight.” The hope here is that bodily wholeness will be restored or granted in a kingdom that is not of this world but follows upon it. The hope reflects the intensity of our longing for the recovery of a grievous loss. Such intensity of longing is found not only among the disabled but among those who have, through death, lost children or parents when they were young or some other loved one. It is found, also, in those who work with and care for the retarded and otherwise disabled.

I have a friend who, for several years, has been teaching in a school for severely retarded children. Many of these children are capable of very little. My friend phones me from Texas perhaps four or five times a year, always with the same sort of questions on her lips. How can such things happen? Why doesn’t God do something? Usually, I can stammer some kind of answer to her questions, but last fall she asked a question I could hardly begin to answer, one that has stayed with me since first I heard it. She asked, “Is there any fulfillment for my children?” She was in anguish because she sensed no fulfillment in these children’s lives. She wanted some kind of assurance that these children would experience fulfillment, if not in this life, then in eternal life.

Perhaps the meaning of eternal life in regard to retarded people is, in principle, different for those with other types of disabilities, let

alone for those who have no serious mental or physical disabilities. My own thinking, at least at this point, is that the principles and biblical texts that guide our thinking on eternal life are the same for all Christians. Still, for those of us with disabilities, there would certainly be special poignancies associated with the hope of eternal life, and I can only have the barest glimmer of them.

The Christian hope is that nothing can separate us from God, not even death (Romans 8:38–39). Ultimately, our hope is life in God's kingdom, life where God is our ever-present reality. Since this kingdom is not of this world, perhaps we should conceive of it as life in God or life in God's eternal reality. This will help guard us against too individualistic a notion of eternal life, as if the fulfillment that Christianity promises is a private, individualized perfection. The New Testament talks of the church as the body of Christ, the parts of which are the members, each necessary to each other for the full reality of the body. We will not go too far wrong to think analogously of eternal life as life in a body, in a society or kingdom to which we belong as a member or participant. We should think of this body as a living or growing reality, one that is "upbuilding." When we enter into it, we are entering into God's life, participating in the living body of God. Of course, I am talking metaphorically, for the body of God is a spiritual body, as is our resurrected body. I am following Paul's language here. We are "sown a physical body," Paul writes, "and will be raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44).

The New Testament uses such language as "flesh," "body," "soul," and "spirit" to refer to human life. Flesh is mainly a this-worldly referent and, though soul and spirit sometimes refer to life after physical death (Hebrews 12:23, Matthew 10:28, Revelation 6:9–11), the most common term used is "the resurrection of the body." Besides the claim of scriptural dominance, there is another reason to prefer the term "body," with its Pauline interpretation of *spiritual* body, to that of soul or spirit. The term "body" reminds us that we do not come to selfhood apart from temporal, physical existence. Our particular identity, with all its differences and richness, is tied up with our physical, organic being. Thus, the term "body" symbolizes, in a way that soul and spirit cannot, the contribution of physical nature to our particular, individual identity. The term "resurrected body" would then express our total personality, spiritually transformed. It would point not so much to our identity at one moment in our life—namely, the moment of our physical death—but to what we have become, given our physical and mental potentialities, our socio-historical environment, and our experiences, values, commitments, and decisions.

In speaking about eternal life, we need to be careful that we do not pretend to know too much. But surely we can say this: It is our total personality, formed by a history of our experiences and activities, that enters into and participates in God's eternal life. If that history is a history of a blind or deaf or paralyzed person, it is the person formed

by and responding to that particular history who enters into eternity. This does not mean that the blind or deaf person enters eternal life blind or deaf. According to Mark, Jesus was once asked whose wife at the resurrection would a woman be who had married seven times? Jesus answered, "You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. When they rise from the dead they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven" (Mark 12:24–25). Can we not then say that, at the resurrection, we will not hear with flesh and blood ears nor see with flesh and blood eyes nor run with flesh and blood legs, yet we will see and hear and move "like angels in heaven?"

#### IV

This kind of thinking brings us to the final reason for God as disabled. The view of God presented here is one for whom the world process means something to the divine life and contributes to God's eternal life. Disabled people enter in, contributing their reality to God and eternity. God receives the reality of the disabled and gives a place in God's eternal life that adds to the divine richness of God's being and all other beings. Insofar as the reality of the disabled participates in God, God can be said to be disabled.

If we ask ourselves how it is possible that the world of the disabled pouring into God adds to the richness of eternal reality, the only answer we can give is love. For the bedrock of our faith regarding eternal life is summed up by Paul:

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord (Romans 8:38–39).



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