No exceptions

Baptism beyond inclusion

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Many congregations wish to compassionately include the marginalized in society, which includes people with disabilities, but fail to articulate what this inclusion refers to. When questions about inclusion remain unasked, a more troubling reality becomes possible—namely, that the theologies and practices of these communities may not be as inclusive as their members think they are.

In this essay I ask if many well-intentioned efforts at inclusion of those with intellectual disability founder, particularly regarding those labelled as profoundly intellectually disabled. I focus on the Anabaptist-Mennonite practice of believer's baptism, which demands capacities that may exclude persons from that core ecclesial practice. There are ecclesial attempts to respond to this challenge, but I claim them as insufficient and argue that churches need to go further in their theology and practice to be truly hospitable.

I acknowledge the risk of writing about people considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled.[1] Whenever one speaks of a group of persons as part of a distinct category, one risks objectifying those persons. While acknowledging this risk, I write as someone who has known and learned from such persons in my life, encountering them as fully human. In my experience, these persons, through their significant difference, offer the most profound challenge to norms of personhood in late modernity. I argue that, if our communities want to be truly inclusive, we must investigate the hospitable nature of our anthropological norms.

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1   Two significant characteristics of profoundly intellectually disabled people are having (1) no apparent understanding of and access to verbal language and (2) a (near) total dependence on others for care. See H. Nakken and C. Vlaskamp, "A Need for a Taxonomy for Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities," *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 4, no. 2 (2007): 85.

The problem of inclusion

Few contemporary words have such traction as *inclusion*, which stands as a descriptive adjective for the good society in the liberal West. The concept is ubiquitous in discussions of churches and disability. While there seems to be agreement on the need to include people with disabilities, it is less clear what is meant by the term *inclusion* in these discussions. Often authors assume inclusion as a good without explicating its meaning. For example, in his book *Disability and Inclusive Communities*, Kevin Timpe writes, "We are better off when we include rather than exclude individuals with disabilities."[2] Likewise, in *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*, Lamar Harwick writes, "The absence of the disability community from the church is not a matter of invitation; it is a matter of inclusion."[3] And in an article announcing the Mennonite Church USA's Welcoming EveryBODY Initiative, Jeanne Davies is quoted as stating, "Disability inclusion is central to the vitality of the church. When all people with their various needs and gifts are fully included in the life of the church, the Body of Christ becomes whole."[4]

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Simon van der Weele and Femmianne Bredewold point out that most define *inclusion* through the narrow conception of "community participation" and relationships with non-disabled people.[5] While community participation and relationships are valuable, the question is whether these are goods in themselves for people with profound disabilities. The dominant non-disabled majority thinks so and thus usually assumes that people with profound disabilities would agree. Such a view often results

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2   Kevin Timpe, *Disability and Inclusive Communities* (Grand Rapids: Calvin College Press, 2018), 17.

3   Lamar Harwick, *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2021), 18.

4   As quoted in the article, "MC USA Launches 'Learn, Pray, Join: Welcoming Every-BODY' Initiative," Mennonite Church USA, May 18, 2022, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mc-usa-launches-learn-pray-join-welcoming-everybody-initiative/.

5   Simon van der Weele and Femmianne Bredewold, "What's Good about Inclusion? An Ethical Analysis of the Ideal of Social Inclusion for People with Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities," *Health Care Analysis* 32, no. 2 (2024): 109.

from a vision of equality based on the *sameness* of people with profound disabilities and non-disabled people. Thus, when people with profound impairments participate in society *like everyone else*, they are considered to be equal, and non-disabled people are thereby considered to be showing them inclusion.

Seeing people with profound cognitive impairments as equal persons is just and necessary after the sordid history of treating these persons as inferior defectives. Yet, when we emphasize our *sameness* at the expense of acknowledging our *difference*, we are liable of exhibiting sincere paternalism or of subjecting them to more subtle forms of exclusion. A common dynamic of inclusion then ensues. First, sincere non-disabled people feel bad that persons with intellectual disabilities appear excluded from faith communities. Then the non-disabled majority believe their well-intentioned attitudes of repentance and being or becoming an "inclusive" church solve the problem. However, too often the people being included still remain in relational isolation rather than experiencing true belonging.

Whenever the desire to include arises, we should ask ourselves at least three questions: (1) Who is being included? (2) Who is including them? (3) What are those excluded persons being included *into*? Arguably, this last question stands as the most important, for if excluded persons are being included into a milieu not hospitable to them, all the efforts at inclusion can wind up doing more harm than good.

The choosing self

A prominent theme in much theologizing around disability concerns questions regarding what it means to be human. Revealing the assumptions in our conception of persons helps determine not only anthropological norms but also which people count in our communities. Social groups often base their practices on their conception of the human, and churches are no different. Clarity on social understandings of the human can help to discern what kind of culture people with profound impairments are being included into.

A common understanding of what constitutes the flourishing human revolves around a lack of limitations or impairments. Such an anthropology presents a concept of a person as a self-conscious agent, possessing robust rational abilities to autonomously determine one's life or lifestyle according to one's own will. Such a vision of the human person has been adopted by some within the disability rights movement who are eager to

show Western societies that just having an impairment does not make one "stupid" and that self-determination is a matter of basic justice.[6]

Hans Reinders names this anthropological norm the "choosing self." He finds that it may work well for people with physical and neurological impairments but portends to exclude people with profound cognitive impairments.[7] In Reinders's view, the two main characteristics of the "choosing self" are the capacity to have a robust "inner life" and the agency to choose from the options created by that inner self. Such interiority and agency reside not just in the professional philosopher. We engage in this reflexivity any time we think intentionally about any subject or task, whether it be theologizing about the Trinity or buying produce at the grocery store. Having the capacity to determine our own lives puts us squarely in the realm of the human who has access to the good life.

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The problem is that many persons considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled do not have the capacities for this kind of self-determination (as far as others are able to tell). Reinders writes, "It will be clear that this conception of the good life excludes all those incapable of purposive agency. It excludes those human beings who, because of their impairment, cannot affirm their own being."[8] People with profound cognitive impairments cannot choose their own lifestyle. Determining the inner lives of these persons is difficult, if not impossible, not merely because of their lack of oral or written communication abilities but also because of the severe limitations they face due to their significant intellectual impairments.

Some have tried to ameliorate this problem through the use of "supported decision making." Supported decision making (SDM) involves the use of friends, families, and colleagues of people with cognitive disabilities to assist in determining and actuating the good life for them. While I

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6   See James I. Charlton, *Nothing about Us without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

7   Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

8   Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*, 137.

have seen the benefit of SDM for people with cognitive impairments, it arguably still holds to the concept of the choosing self. As long as a person has enough support from others, they can still autonomously choose their own life for themselves. SDM does not question the dominance of the choosing self but extends that category to as many people as possible, resting on the belief that everyone desires the *same* things—namely, autonomous choice and self-determination.

The choosing self's requirements of interiority and agency have two arguably exclusive consequences. First, they create an "anthropological minor league" for people with cognitive impairments, placing their dignity and worth in jeopardy.[9] At the same time, they create a boundary line for personhood. When one can determine their own version of the good life—with or without support—they are safely within the boundaries of personhood and can participate in social practices as an equal. However, without these capacities one lives outside the boundary line, completely dependent on the good will of those with the agency to include them.

Baptism as choice

Contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiology often assumes the norm of the choosing self, at least in practice. The Anabaptist-Mennonite practice of believer's baptism especially highlights how the norm of the choosing self can be problematic for people considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled.

In *Believing and Belonging: An Accessible Anabaptist Membership Curriculum*, Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADN) executive director Jeanne Davies offers a curriculum written to make membership accessible to people with intellectual disabilities. In a chapter devoted to baptism, Davies presents the motivation for receiving baptism as residing in the individual will of the candidate. "In the Anabaptist church," she writes, "each person chooses to be baptized. We believe this choice is very important. Anabaptists do not baptize babies or young children. We baptize people who are old enough to make a choice."[10] The language of *choice* pervades Davies's treatment of baptism. For Davies, we know this choice is legitimate when candidates can express a "desire" for baptism and answer yes to some sim-

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9   Hans S. Reinders, "Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency," in *God and Human Dignity*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 131.

10   Jeanne Davies, *Believing and Belonging: An Accessible Anabaptist Membership Curriculum*, teacher's edition (Elkhart, IN: Anabaptist Disabilities Network, 2023).

ple questions of belief, agency, and commitment. Baptism without these signs of desire and assent represents "coercion" because the choice for the ordinance cannot be made by anyone other than the candidate.[11]

Davies's explication of baptism aligns well with the norm of the choosing self. Reception of the ordinance demands the inner desire for baptism and the agency to choose it. Even God's role in baptism is discussed in terms of awakening the interior will. Without a robust sense of purposive agency from the candidate, any admittance to baptism would presumably be a form of coercion. Davies discusses the church as a place of support, but the congregation she envisions is predicated on a covenant among individuals who have all made their own individual decisions to follow Christ. The candidate for baptism is one more individual choosing to become a member of the group. In Davies's vision of Anabaptist, accessible baptism, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to imagine someone with a profound cognitive impairment being admitted to the baptismal font.

Responses to the challenge of profound impairment

There are two potential responses to the challenge persons with profound impairments raise for Anabaptist-Mennonite baptismal traditions. One way forward consists in performing baptism for these persons regardless of their capacities. For these congregations, an inclusive response requires acknowledging the equal dignity of all people and demanding the performance of baptism for these persons, regardless of ecclesial traditions.

While admirable, this option risks making people considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled as "exceptions" that prove the rule, a problem exemplified when churches refuse to investigate the theologies that make these persons an exception in the first place. The demands of interiority and agency stay firmly ensconced, even when SDM is used as an inclusive means of baptism.[12] The congregation supports the individual but never removes the requirements of autonomy and choice. The typical question of when someone should receive baptism—at the age of accountability?—becomes murky when discussing persons with extremely limited rational capacities. In addition, denoting a particular age for baptism assumes that these persons are like everyone else, exemplifying a view of inclusion based on sameness. One cannot leave the choice for

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11 Davies, *Believing and Belonging*, introduction.

12 For an argument on using SDM to include people with cognitive impairments in believer's baptism, see Melissa Florer-Bixler, "Believers Baptism as Supported Decision," *Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 135–46.

baptism to those who know the candidate best because this contradicts the requirement for autonomous choice, representing an exception no other candidate would be subject to.

Another potential response to the challenge persons with profound impairments raise for Anabaptist-Mennonite baptismal traditions is for congregations to create alternative membership rituals for these persons. Davies writes that "baptism is not for everyone" and argues that baptizing anyone who does not express a desire for baptism and an ability to answer simple questions of belief is illegitimate.[13]

Davies includes a testimony from a Mennonite church that created a membership ceremony for a congregant with significant impairments—a ceremony that they viewed as an alternative to baptism that nevertheless serves as a symbol of belonging to God and the community.

Not baptizing persons with significant impairments coheres with traditional Anabaptist theology and practice. But it also means disqualifying certain persons from receiving baptism, due not to behavior or occupation but to capacity. One could argue that such congregations are making membership more inclusive by respecting the real differences between people with significant impairments and those without them. Yet if multiple ways toward membership exist, this raises the question of why *anyone* should choose baptism. It thus makes baptism look optional, which contradicts Davies's discussion of an early Anabaptist belief that "youth and adults *should* choose to follow Jesus and be baptized."[14] By making different requirements for different people, such congregations risk creating a two-tiered system of baptism: if you can choose, you can receive baptism; if you cannot, you receive an alternative ceremony. Those who adhere to such a view might respond that the real benefits of baptism come not only from those who can understand it but also to those who need it—that is, baptism as a cleansing from sin. Yet this kind of response reinforces the view of baptism as only for those with interiority and agency —in this case as the capacities that lead one to sin. Claiming people with

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13 Davies, *Believing and Belonging*, introduction.

14 Davies, *Believing and Belonging*, 30, emphasis added.

profound cognitive impairments as perpetual innocents might be well in-tentioned, but it potentially makes them more akin to angels—who are *not* like the rest of us, not only in capacity but also in *species*.

These two responses to the challenge persons with profound impair-ments raise for Anabaptist-Mennonite baptismal traditions are attempts to bring people with profound impairments into church communities in a spirit of compassion. However, the choosing self remains dominant as the rule to which people with profound impairments are the exception. In this kind of anthropology, such persons must either receive an alternative ceremony or be baptized as an exception to the rule. Either option reveals how a form of equality resting on such an anthropology requires seeing people considered profoundly intellectually disabled as the special ones on the borderlines of personhood.

Going further

Given the above problems with typical approaches to inclusive baptismal practices in Anabaptist-Mennonite communities, I propose that churches should consider extending the meaning of baptism beyond a practice that requires choice. The Christian theological tradition has been reflecting on baptism for two-thousand years and has developed various ways of understanding the ordinance—as a new birth or new creation in Christ, for example, or as the reception of grace. Integrating other theological emphases into current practice could assist in making baptism more in-clusive for those considered to be profoundly impaired.

Indeed, I propose that Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations could go even further. Understandings of baptism can be expanded, but if quali-fication for baptism still demands a choosing self, baptising people with profound impairments still remains an exception at best. In order for baptism to have no exceptions, arguably the task is not just to expand meanings of baptism but also—perhaps more importantly—to expand our understanding of who can legitimately receive the ordinance. If people considered profoundly impaired can receive baptism, we might consider expanding the rite to other non-agential persons, like infants and people with severe forms of dementia. Doing so means that people with pro-found impairments would receive baptism not as exceptions but as fellow children of God. Admittedly, removing the demand for robust subjectiv-ity offers a direct challenge to Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and prac-tice. For a church identified historically with the "rebaptized," foregoing a requirement for choice can amount to heresy. However, when orthodoxy

demands the disqualification of certain persons from the baptismal font, perhaps the real challenge is not for people with profound impairments but for the theology and practice that excludes them because of their lack of certain capacities.

The option exists to stay faithful to the Radical Reformers and maintain baptism as a choice for Christ and the church. But for those who wish to go further, let the presence of people with profound impairments not be special in your midst but be paradigmatic for an ecclesial theology and practice. Let there be no exceptions in the Body of Christ but only fellow children of God brought into fellowship with the Lord through the waters of baptism.

About the author

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