

Restoring the Image: Spirituality, Faith, and Cognitive Disability

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ABSTRACT: There is a great deal of theological confusion within the church as to the level of participation people with profound cognitive disabilities should be allowed within the orders of the church. For some, sacramental participation without intellectual comprehension is dishonoring to God, while for others, lack of cognitive ability precludes any kind of meaningful spiritual life. This paper sets out some of the various positions and argues that faith and spirituality are not intellectual concepts, but relational realities. It is only in and through our relationships that any of us can learn anything about the divine. A relational understanding of faith and spirituality as outlined here offers the church the freedom to avoid evaluating a person's spiritual life according to intellectual criteria and to begin to find new ways of preaching the Word to those who have no words.

There has been for some time a movement toward community care for people suffering from profound cognitive disability.¹ As a result of this, the church inevitably will have to face many new and exciting challenges. Such challenges are not purely pastoral in their nature. The presence of the profoundly cognitively disabled among us throws up many serious theological questions and it is vital that the church acknowledge and seriously engage with these questions. This article is an attempt to open up some of the theological arguments which will have to be worked out if we as Christ's representatives on earth are to minister effectively to the needs of such people.

At a very basic level, the question which I intend to address in this article is this: How can we communicate the gospel with its God-given message of value and acceptance to people with profound cognitive disability? This question is made especially pertinent when we contemplate the degree to which our communication of the gospel and understanding of salvation, at least within the Reformed tradition, is traditionally so dependent on words and

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intellect. Perhaps the dilemma becomes clearer if we pose the question in a slightly different way: How do we offer the Word to those who have no words?

For many of us whose roots lie within the Reformed theological tradition, there is often the idea that literacy and verbal assent to intellectual formulations are inseparable companions in the quest for authentic faith. Therefore, to ask how one might communicate the Word to those who have no words, immediately poses a theological and epistemological dilemma. Could it be the case that in fact it is not possible truly to communicate the gospel to people in these circumstances? This appears to be the position taken by Peter Birchenall, who argues that

people with a profound mental handicap possess a limited ability to reason at the complex level, and are therefore not able to work through any doubts and develop any sort of faith.²

In a later article, he states that

severely mentally handicapped people are denied the very substance of a rational productive existence, and are confined to a life of almost total dependence on others for even their most basic needs. Such an existence gives no real opportunity for inner spiritual growth, or the nourishment of the human spirit, both of which are important when coming to terms with the meaning of Christianity. It gives no real opportunity to experience the joy of seeking a lifetime relationship with the Almighty, because the concepts involved are complicated and require a level of awareness which the profoundly mentally handicapped do not have.³

I would suggest that this view is inaccurate and misleading for three main reasons.

Firstly, a gospel based on divine grace reveals us all as essentially dependent beings. Our status before God and our relationship with Him are products of His undeserved and unearned grace, quite apart from any contribution we may seek to make, and as such are independent of our cognitive capabilities. Certainly our intellect and cognitive capacities help us to participate with God in ways relevant to our current understanding of reality. However, the essence of our relationship of grace is that it is initiated and sustained by God in a way that lies *outside* our current understanding, and as such is independent of our cognitive capabilities. Within such a framework, all of us are therefore seen to be wholly dependent on God for both our physical and spiritual existence. There is therefore no direct correlation, as Birchenall appears to be suggesting, between dependence, even total dependence, and an inability to communicate with the transcendent. The witness of scripture would suggest that in fact it is those who seek to assert their autonomy, their independence from God and His community who have an inability to enter into His saving grace.⁴ Dependency, then, far from debarring a per-

son from productive spiritual existence, is in fact the very essence of spiritual existence.

Secondly, I would dispute the suggestion that an inability to reason at a complex level is necessarily incompatible with meaningful spiritual experience and the development of authentic faith. We do not have to look far to see that rational analysis of faith and the gospel is not necessarily the best way to attain truth about God. Today we have equally convinced Christians taking up mutually contradictory positions in the name of faith, as participants argue about everything from the historicity of the resurrection to the liberation movements. There is no uniformity about the Christian faith, even at its most basic level, as the multitude of denominations and cults which exist "in the name of Jesus" throughout the world bear ample witness. As Bluck rightly observes,

It seems clear that cognitive conviction alone is no assurance that our understanding and analysis will lead us to a true and saving knowledge of God, and enable us to serve His purposes of justice and love.⁵

Knowledge alone is not necessarily indicative of a genuine relationship with God. It is possible to have a vast knowledge of the abstract and often highly intellectualized ideas which surround the faith, and yet have no knowledge of how to put these concepts into action or how to live in an authentic, loving relationship with God and humankind. As Wilson astutely observes, "Great scholars do not necessarily make the greatest lovers."⁶

Real affective apprehension of the divine must take place at a much deeper level than our personal comprehension. The exclusionary effect of assumptions that link wisdom with complexity and insight with abstraction can deny a person with profound cognitive disabilities full inclusion and participation in fellowship and as such must be treated with the utmost seriousness. Perhaps a key concept, which will enable us to examine critically such intellectualization of the faith as Birchenall proposes, is that of "the image of God in man."

Enlightenment rationalism has taught us that reason and intellect are to be understood as our primary faculties. Some adherents of this philosophical outlook suggest that the image of God is to be equated with humanity's cognitive capacity; our ability to *think, reflect* and *deduce*. It is this, they would argue, that is the distinguishing characteristic of humanity. Humanity is classified biologically as *Homo sapiens*, the thinking being. It is therefore in this cognitive cerebral aspect that they are most like God. Consequently it is this that is to be emphasized and developed.⁷

I wish to suggest that to adopt such a line of thinking is not only to isolate just one aspect of human nature for consideration, it is also to concentrate attention upon just one facet of God's nature. Undoubtedly omniscience and wisdom constitute a significant dimension of the nature of God, but they are

by no means the very essence of divinity. If we understand the image as being primarily human reason, then our dealings with others will be basically of an educative and cognitive nature, the implications for those unable to compete cognitively being, as before, exclusion and devaluation. If however, as I wish to argue here, the image of God is understood in terms of personal relationships, then our theological understandings will revolve around the development of a truly *relational theology*, based on criteria independent of, or at least not determined by, intellect.

Such a relational view of the image of God realizes that man is said to be in the image of God when he stands in a particular relationship to the triune God. In fact that relationship is the image.⁸ In all of us the image is broken and distorted and the purpose of the gospel is to bring about reconciliation with God and a consequent restoration of His image within humanity. Even the most severely impaired individual, as part of fallen humanity, stands in need of this reconciliation. However, we must ask the question: If they cannot understand the concept of God even at its most basic level, how can they relate to Him and thus reconstitute the broken image? I would suggest that a key to answering this question is to be found in Brunner's observation that "while the first command of God is that we love God, there is a second command—that we love man."⁹

Fundamental to my argument at this point is the proposition that we recognize that the two are not separate linear or consecutive commands. They belong together, and in fact interpenetrate each other; we cannot truly understand one without the other. The basis of our love stems from our essential relationship with God. Love is a gift of the Spirit.¹⁰ We love God in and through the Holy Spirit, as we also love each other in and through the Holy Spirit. Understood in this way, love is seen to be a dynamic process whereby we reach out to both God and humanity in and through the work of the Spirit. Viewed from this perspective, our temporal relationships are seen to be inextricably bound up with our transcendent relationship. Both are part of the same process. Thus in a very real way God is present and at work within our temporal relationships.

This perichoretic relationship between the transcendent and the temporal, is central to the relational concept of the image of God I am endeavoring to formulate. The image is restored as we participate in the dynamic circulation of the Spirit as it unceasingly pervades the temporal and the transcendent, enabling us to respond and relate on levels hidden from the intellect.¹¹ The sovereign Spirit of God has an inherent unpredictability¹² which enables it to proceed on a plane with human comprehension and knowledge, which will not allow it to be bound by man-made dogmas, definitions, or requirements.

If we accept this proposition, then we can see that for the profoundly handicapped individual, awareness of the transcendent love of God is mediated through, and experienced in, temporal love, offered in loving relationships. It is therefore in the quality of our relationships, as opposed to the quantity of

our intellect, that the image is restored. Consequently, *all* human persons can be seen to have spiritual potential. For the profoundly cognitively disabled person, as for all of us, the effective development of that potential is dependent on the outworkings of the Holy Spirit, in the development of authentic loving relationships which are not restrained or determined by the confines of intellect. The absence of a certain level of cognitive capability does not exclude a person from the experiential spirituality made manifest in loving relationships. Authentic religious faith thus understood is a matter of an “existential commitment to the reality of the divine as made manifest within relationships, which determines the basic character of a person’s life.”¹³

It would be wrong for us to assume that this type of experiential faith is somehow inferior to faith gained through cognitive knowledge. Faith gained through experience does constitute genuine knowledge concerning God. The difference between this knowledge and society’s “norm” of knowledge, is that it is not the scientific, empirical knowledge demanded by modernistic thinking.¹⁴ There is not merely one type of knowledge, however. For example, it is very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to define an emotion such as love empirically. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate the concept of love as a reality within the knowledge and experience of a person. Humanity has more ways than one of approaching transcendent truth. All relationships work on a variety of levels. We acquire knowledge in one way as scientific thinkers and acquire it in a different and equally valid way as we have a direct encounter with the divine, which stands outside of our knowledge and our ability for comprehension and verbalization. There is an immeasurable difference between knowing about Christ and knowing Him in personal encounter. To encounter Him as loving Savior in personal relationships is to discover knowledge of a different kind. It is different in kind, but it is just as true, just as verifiable in suitable ways, just as closely in touch with reality as the other, and independent of ability for logical analysis. Seen in this light, faith has a closer resemblance to friendship than dogmatic assertion.¹⁵

Reasonable as this line of argumentation may appear to be, however, one must still ask the question: Is it possible truly to relate to another person, in this case God, if the identity of that person is somehow veiled?¹⁶ Answering this question allows me to address my third point of criticism of Birchenall’s statement, and his comments concerning “meaning.” I would not agree that it is necessary to grasp cognitively the meaning of Christianity to be able to commune with God. Words, books, and the media are very efficient at communicating ideas. For those who have the cognitive capacity, theological reflection on the content of a person’s faith is valid and an appropriate way of ensuring that their faith is understood and correctly applied. We must never lose sight of the fact that words only point to the reality they refer to, however. They are not the reality itself. It is the actuality that matters and not our self-conscious identification of it.¹⁷

Words provide a way of enabling people to become aware that what they

experience in some of their encounters with other people is an experience of the character of their relationship with God.¹⁸ As Christians, the divinely ordained purpose of our words is that people should live fully,¹⁹ and that their lives should be transformed experientially as they encounter human and divine loving relationships. Certainly words help us give an accurate response, but our inability to articulate or fully comprehend our experience does not invalidate that experience.

Of course, we may ask, Do cognitively disabled people recognize the divine referent of such experiential, representational love? However, unless our conception of God is that of an egotistical despot, who demands recognition before accepting relationship, we would have to answer "Does it matter?" Surely the object of God's salvation is loving transformation, manifested in the restoration of broken relationships, and not some idolatrous lust for power on His behalf. If we view God as self-seeking and demanding of recognition, we are in danger of projecting onto Him our own self-centeredness and insecurity. Surely "love loves. It does not seek payment."²⁰

It is then my assertion that spirituality has as much to do with *feeling* as with *thinking*. Concrete experience of friendship at a human level reveals the "inexpressibleness" of the transcendent God of love. The doctrine of the incarnation suggests that God is revealed not primarily in ideas, but in concrete reality. It is in the flesh of Jesus that we encounter God most fully. In the same way as scripture reveals God as unceasingly accommodating Himself to humanity's inadequacies throughout history, and ultimately in the Word made flesh, so also He accommodates Himself in the communication of love to cognitively disabled people through loving relationships. It is only when we recognize this that we can begin to grasp the practical implications for the faith-lives of cognitively disabled people. For them, contact with us is contact with the divine, as God continues to work the wonder of His incarnation through His Spirit in the lives of His people. Simply put, loving attitudes reveal a loving deity, and if cognitively disabled persons' experiences help develop a trusting confidence that they exist in a relationship which is fundamentally loving and accepting, then the Christian gospel has been preached experientially and effectively.

References

1. What at one time would have been described as a mental handicap.
2. Birchenall, Peter "Caring for Mentally Handicapped people: The Community and the Church" in *The Professional Nurse*, March 1986, 1, p. 6.
3. Birchenall in Parish, Alan, *Mental Handicap*. London: Macmillan, 1987, p. 75.
4. Cf. for example, the story of the Tower of Babel, Genesis 10:10ff.
5. Bluck, John, *Beyond Technology Contexts for Christian Communication*. Geneva: WCC, 1984, p. 17.
6. Wilson, in Wynn-Jones, A., ed., *Emotional Responses of Mentally Handicapped People*. Somerset: Royal Society for Mentally Handicapped Children & Adults, South West Region, 1983, p. 42.

7. Erickson, Millard, J., *Christian Theology*, Vol. 2. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1984, p. 499.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 502.
9. Brunner in *Ibid.*, p. 504.
10. Galatians 5:22–23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”
11. Romans 8:26: “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes with groans that words cannot express.”
12. Cf. for example John 3:8: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”
13. Pailin, David A., *A Gentle Touch: From a Theology of Handicap to a Theology of Human Being*. London: SPCK, 1992, p. 127.
14. I.e., it is not knowledge which we can *define* scientifically or *control*.
15. Mackintosh, H.R., *The Christian Apprehension of God*. London: SCM Press, 1934, p. 55.
16. I.e., not *intellectually* available to a person.
17. Pailin, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
18. Pailin, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
19. John 10:10: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”
20. Pailin, *op. cit.*, p.137.



