Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability, Baptism, and the Practice of Christian Community

by

Sarah Jean Barton

Date: April 16, 2019

Approved:

[Signatures]

Warren A. Kinghorn, Co-Supervisor

John Swinton, Co-Supervisor

Susan Grove Eastman

Willie James Jennings

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation takes up questions of how theologies and practices of baptism shape visions of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and a participant in Christian ecclesial communities. In particular, the dissertation investigates how baptism as the paradigmatic initiatory practice of the Church might transform communities to cultivate radical belonging for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

In order to address these questions, the dissertation engages a variety of methods, including historical and thematic analysis of theological texts (particularly in the field of disability theology), theological engagement of New Testament texts and biblical scholarship on the Pauline epistles, as well as an analysis of qualitative research conducted by the dissertation’s author (in-depth, semi-structured interviews) among adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, their families and key support persons, as well as clergy and lay leaders in Christian denominations across the ecumenical spectrum. An integrative analysis of theological texts, biblical texts, and narratives arising from the qualitative research analysis provides a foundation for constructive theological suggestions, in a practical and pastoral register, at the conclusion of the dissertation.

This dissertation concludes that a baptismal hermeneutic provides a critical lens to faithfully reflect on disability, as well as transformative practices to support the flourishing, belonging, and witness of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Christian faith communities. Baptismal theologies and practices suggest the centrality of communal,
Jesus-centered, and participatory accounts of Christian identity in the Church – the community this dissertation names as the baptized Body. In particular, the dissertation commends practices of baptismal preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation as key avenues for participation of all people in ecclesial spaces (robustly inclusive of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities). These practices constitute transformative pathways to affirm the centrality of baptismal identity and baptismal vocation to discipleship for an ongoing, radical transformation of ecclesial life, empowered and sustained by the Holy Spirit. In addition, the baptismal hermeneutic and baptismal practices explored throughout the dissertation critically expand discourse on intellectual and developmental disabilities in the field of Christian theology.
To all those who witnessed to me, both with and without words.

And to Andrew, my Beloved, whose steadfastness sustained me in this work.
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Introduction

In 2014, I met a young woman named Hallie and her mother Heather at a specialty clinic for children and adolescents with multiple disabilities. One day, between Hallie’s visits with different clinicians on the interdisciplinary healthcare team, Heather and I struck up a conversation. She asked me how long I had worked as an occupational therapist on the clinical team and what I enjoyed doing in my free time.

Heather and I began to discuss my work as a theologian – specifically, my research at the intersection of Christian practices of baptism and the experience of disability. As soon as I mentioned my research on baptism, something lit up in Heather’s eyes. She expressed to me her anguish over her and Hallie’s experiences in church. Heather longed to see Hallie baptized. She recounted going to church after church, seeking a community to call home. But instead of finding a place of belonging, Heather and Hallie encountered rejection, in both explicit and subtle ways, at church after church they visited.

Heather explained that the pastors’ explanations for these rejections varied slightly, but the root cause was always the same: Hallie was too loud, too disruptive, and too distracting. And besides, *Hallie could never understand what happened in baptism*, as one pastor told Heather. Baptizing Hallie, therefore, *wouldn’t really matter*. Heather sighed and with tears in her eyes told me that she and Hallie had not been to a church in months.

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1 All names, including people, cities, and faith communities, have been changed to protect identity and preserve anonymity. Names mentioned more than once represent the same person, city, or faith community throughout the dissertation.
The Practice of Christian Community: Room for “All of God’s Children”? 

Hallie and Heather’s story suggests a disruption of hospitality within Christian communities. Despite common signage or website headlines suggesting “all are welcome here!” or “come as you are!,” many churches struggle to welcome, integrate, and embrace the presence and gifts of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)\(^2\) and their loved ones. Why might this be?

Christian faith communities across the ecumenical spectrum tend to share a scriptural, theological, and pragmatic commitment to welcoming the stranger through acts of hospitality. As Mary McClintock Fulkerson posits, “most churches understand themselves to be welcoming communities; a mantra for ‘inclusiveness’ is found in many of their mission statements.”\(^3\) This hospitality often finds its roots in a shared sense of communal affiliation and identity – belonging to a life of common worship, work, and service, or in other words, belonging in the body of Christ. In churches, members of the community respond to

\(^2\) Broadly defined, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) experience problems with mental abilities affecting their function in two primary areas: intellectual functioning (skills such as memory or problem-solving) and adaptive functioning (skills such as self-care and communication). I offer a fuller definition of IDD in a later section of this introduction. I engage the specific terminology “intellectual and developmental disabilities” (IDD) throughout this dissertation as a result of my academic and professional clinical context in North America. This language also reflects the self-identification of the majority of my research participants. While this vocabulary is familiar throughout contexts in North America, it is not universal. For example, the term “learning disabilities” is commonly used in place of IDD within the context of the United Kingdom, while in continental Europe, “mental disabilities” or “mental defect” constitute the commonly accepted language.

newcomers with an eager desire to authentically come to know them, and in return, to be more fully known.

Concrete instances of this practice of welcome often find their beginning in the identification of shared commonality. Recall some of your own initial experiences in a new church community. First encounters seeking connection often center on shared affinity: “wow, my spouse has worked in that same industry for 15 years,” “it’s so nice our children are in the same grade,” “you have a dog? We have a Saturday hiking group once a month,” “oh, I’ve also been an Episcopalian my entire life!” These sites of commonality and affinity serve as natural avenues through which individuals and families can meaningfully “plug in” at a local church.

Often, the stronger the similarity between newcomers and the majority of members at an existing ecclesial community, the greater the ease of integration of those who are new. In particular, people who engage in conversation with a certain comfort and familiarity, as well as those who others in the community may wish to emulate, come to be perceived as those who are especially welcome. John Swinton frames this in the following way:

For most of us this process of becoming persons-in-relation occurs through interaction with a very limited range of people. For the most part, those whom we become persons-in-relation with are pretty similar to ourselves. We develop our sense of self, our personal constructs and we shape our interpretative universes in dialogue with our partners, pastors, friends, our academic colleagues, and so forth all of whom, for the most part are people who are not particularly different from ourselves. We then assume that the theology and practices which emerge from such interactions are both real and universal. Most people rarely get the opportunity to
become persons-in-relation with people whose life experience and existential perspectives are significantly different from their own.⁴

As Swinton claims here, newcomers in a community who initially seem to present with more needs than affinities, or people simply marked by perceptible differences in comparison to the majority of the gathered community, do not receive the same ease of integration into a Christian ecclesial gathering. These disparities in affinity between community members disproportionately affect particular groups of people, such as those living with severe and persistent mental illness, older adults with dementia, and people across the lifespan with IDD. As Fulkerson highlights, discomfort with any significant differences between worshippers in a single community, including differences in racial or disability identity, typically produces strikingly homogenous communities.⁵ So, for example in the case of people with IDD, descriptions of a church community may consistently affirm their welcome and inclusion, however, these descriptions constitute a “symbolic gesture” rather than an embodied reality in the majority of contemporary Christian faith communities.⁶

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⁶ Ibid., 242. In her essay on Eucharist, exclusion, and race, Fulkerson reports “only 7 percent of American churches are significantly interracial – communities in which no more than 80 percent of the membership identifies as the same race.” Further empirical research is needed with regard to the percentage of people with disabilities in American churches, however, strong anecdotal evidence across ecumenical traditions suggest that the number is far below the 1 out of 5 Americans who reported having a disability in the 2012 U.S. Census (United States Census Bureau, “Nearly 1 in 5 People Have a Disability in the U.S., Census Bureau Reports,” https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/miscellaneous/cb12-134.html [accessed February 14, 2019]).
As a result, people with IDD and their loved ones who accompany them to spaces of potential ecclesial belonging often face discomfort and awkwardness, and at times, outright rejection. Communities who root their practices of belonging in commonality or affinity, typically communities marked by homogeneity, cultivate insufficient imagination and practices to welcome and foster belonging among people who do not typically present with a number of relatable similarities. As we saw in Hallie and Heather’s story, this may result in the denial of baptism. However, in traditions that baptize infants, the same phenomena may present in communities of homogenous belonging that do not support the baptismal vocation and gifts for discipleship imparted at the baptism of an infant or small child with IDD, as they grow into their adolescence and adulthood, resulting in similar exclusion and pain.

How might Christian communities committed to welcoming newcomers and strangers break away from these patterns of homogenous belonging that rely on commonality, affinity, and comfort to sustain hospitality and belonging? What resources and practices within the Christian tradition draw together those who are far apart?

The Practice of Christian Community: Becoming the Baptized Body

In his essay “Being Baptized: Race,” Willie James Jennings describes the rise of the racial condition inside the colonial and missionary life of European Christianity. Jennings highlights the emergence and formation of ecclesial communities of homogeneity as deeply tied to projects of colonial missionary work with a sole focus on narrating the lives, lands,
and spaces of all peoples through the narrative of whiteness: “we have naturalized a formation process that is nothing less than the emergence of totalitarian subjectivities that grew out of a mass upheaval of peoples, places, and ways of life.” In turn, Jennings indicates how baptism as the paradigmatic practice of Christian initiation – of welcome into the community of Jesus’ body – becomes a practice through which homogeneity is affirmed and perpetuated, rather than a radical practice where all bodies may be joined in belonging to the body of Jesus.

Jennings highlights how distorted perceptions of baptism result in communities of homogenous belonging, rather than belonging in Jesus:

We have robbed the baptisms we perform of their message of death and rebirth into Jesus Christ. A family gathered around a baptismal font or a congregation staring at a baptismal pool often see themselves reflected in those waters, either remembering their own baptism, or contemplating the joy of their community gathered for that event. Neither thought is wrong, but neither yet sees what the waters hold. This child or adult enters through the waters of baptism the body of Jesus filled with different bodies, spanning space and time. The newly baptized are set on a journey that will bind them to peoples they have not seen, to ways of life they have not known, and endow them with a holy desire to love other people different from the people who brought them to those waters.

This baptismally-initiated journey toward belonging, toward embracing people and ways of life previously unknown, unfamiliar, or even uncomfortable, offers Christians a practice of formation in radical hospitality and welcome. Though we may be tempted to most fully embrace those with whom we share the greatest affinity, baptism provides another way.

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8 Ibid.
Baptism breaks down the boundaries of belonging. Dwelling in Jesus’ body – the baptized Body – enacts a disruptive new site of belonging that confronts the baptized community with the basic Christian task of radical love of one’s neighbor.

However, this vocation of radical love of neighbor and the cultivation of communities marked by belonging across disability, class, and racial differences, meets frequent resistance. As Jennings writes, baptizing communities often hold a “counter-commitment” to belonging in Jesus, a commitment that resists the binding together of different people from different ways of life. Jennings illustrates this in the following way:

Churches in so many ways tell the newly baptized that they belong only to Jesus and to their people. They tell them that no journey toward others is required, only recommended, and that their baptism was not an event of disruption, but one smoothly seamless with their life in that community, with their race, and their people. But a baptism that does not frighten us is a baptism invisible to us.⁹

Cultivating resistance to baptismal theologies and practices that render baptism invisible, particularly among people with IDD, constitutes the heart of this dissertation. In what follows, I engage operant baptismal theologies and practices in contemporary ecclesial communities to construct and suggest life-giving theological practices that seek to re-enliven the church’s engagement in baptism to support the discipleship of all baptized, particularly those living with IDD, within the community of the baptized Body.

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⁹ Ibid.
Christian theologies and practices of baptism\textsuperscript{10} provide a central site for gathering, forming, and sustaining the Church – the baptized body of Christ. In this dissertation, I argue that a baptismal hermeneutic is essential for cultivating imaginations and practices inclusive of people with IDD, including those who experience profound disability.\textsuperscript{11} My argument relies on engagement with multiple conversation partners – participants from my qualitative research project, including adults with IDD and their family, friends, and clergy, theologians who focus on IDD, scriptural accounts of baptism and anthropology (particularly in the Pauline epistles), baptismal liturgies, theological reflection on baptism, practical theologians, and disability studies scholars. In these conversations, I describe a common difficulty among contemporary Christian churches– the ability to support discipleship among people with IDD. In response to this difficulty, I explore practices of baptismal preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation as key loci for the transformation of

\textsuperscript{10} By baptism, I have in mind the Christian sacramental practice of water baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This practice finds its roots in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and has been practiced throughout the centuries of the apostolic church, first evidenced in New Testament and other early Christian writings. I am grateful to my 2019 Winter Seminar group at the Louisville Institute for suggesting this clarification. They raised helpful questions about traditions who practice both water baptism and “spirit baptism” (or “baptism in the Holy Spirit”). While this dissertation considers water baptism alone, I look forward to potentially engaging questions at the intersection of disability and “baptism in the Holy Spirit” in future research.

\textsuperscript{11} The characterization of “profound” disability refers to people with the most severe or significant expressions of IDD. I am partial to John Swinton’s rendering of profound intellectual disability as “a group of human beings who are deemed to have limited communicational skills, restricted or sometimes no self-care skills, and significant intellectual or cognitive difficulties, or both. Such people reside in the world without language and concepts that many people use and that are often assumed, by some, to be necessary to understand the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Those living out their lives in such ways are people to whom the modern category of free, autonomous individual – someone whose life is marked by individual choice – could never be applied…” (\textit{Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness and Gentle Discipleship} (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 89).
ecclesial imaginations about identity, as well as practices that embrace the full discipleship of people with IDD.

As I will illustrate, the Church’s failure to support the baptismal life of discipleship among people with IDD reflects an entanglement with anthropological commitments of Western liberal democracies. In addition, I will argue that theologians engaging IDD have fallen short in offering the church a set of practices with adequate transformational power to shift Christian imagination about identity and transform lived practices to support full belonging and discipleship among people with even the most profound IDD. While the paradigms of the *imago Dei*, friendship, and inclusion in the field of disability theology have initiated some positive change in the Church’s work with and among people with IDD, these paradigms have not fully succeeded in providing avenues for radical belonging among people with IDD in most Christian communities.

I argue that baptismal theologies and practices, sites of radical affirmation of the *imago Dei* as present in all human persons, the deep interdependence of human persons on Jesus Christ and the community of Jesus’ body, and a deeply embodied and Spirit-enabled participation in discipleship, are critical for the re-narration of theological anthropology in contemporary Christian faith communities. These theologies and practices of baptism not only provide a foundational means to reshape the Church’s anthropological imagination toward a Jesus-centered, communal, and participatory vision for all human creatures, but also offer concrete avenues of participation for all people to serve and follow Jesus, including those with profound IDD.
Defining Frameworks for Identity: From Intelligence Testing to Baptism

As Robert Bogdan and Steven Taylor succinctly observe in their research on disability and human identity, “the ability to think - to reason, understand, and remember - has sometimes been presented as defining humanness. Intelligence is what separates people from animals.” In a similar vein of argument, Peter Singer puts forth the following assertion in his 2011 edition of *Practical Ethics*: “the fact that a being is a human being, in the sense of a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, is not relevant to the wrongness of killing it; it is, rather, characteristics like rationality, autonomy, and self-awareness that make a difference.” A more subtle example of privileging particular intellectual capacities when thinking about normative anthropology surfaces in Eleonore Stump’s work on theodicy in *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Stump focuses her argument and analysis on “mentally fully functional human adults,” setting aside the complicated question of whether or not God’s allowance of suffering among infants, children, or adults who are not “mentally fully functional” resonates with her anthropological analysis.

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12 The remainder of this introduction engages a broad range of sources, attesting to my formation as an interdisciplinary scholar as well as my bi-vocational position as a theologian-clinician. In engaging a diversity of sources, I hope to illustrate the multi-layered nature of my own formation as an academic, as well as draw novel connections between existing literatures that can helpfully inform future research and scholarly inquiry regarding disability.


The lives of people with IDD often challenge anthropological frameworks that privilege capacities of autonomy, rationality, and self-awareness. The lives of people who do not outwardly demonstrate these capacities, including those who live without participation in spoken language, symbolic reasoning, or engagement in independent execution of day-to-day activities, often find themselves carrying the label as profoundly intellectually or developmentally disabled.

What kinds of narratives animate these tacit assumptions about human beings as primarily thinking, reasoning, and understanding creatures? What factors have contributed to the exclusion of many people with IDD from a normative vision of what it means to be a human being? And how might we begin to tell new and truthful stories about personhood and identity that include even people with the most profound IDD? We will begin to answer these questions here by exploring one powerful narrative that has shaped many forms of anthropological imagination in contemporary Western culture: the establishment of intelligence as a single, quantifiable characteristic, centrally indicative of human identity.

The Rise of Intelligence as A Primary Identity Marker in the United States

Among many factors leading to the ascendancy of cognition in understanding human identity lies the development of intelligence testing in North America. In The Mismeasure of Man, Stephen Jay Gould traces the deployment and embrace of intelligence (IQ) testing in the United States throughout the 20th century. Gould’s thesis contends that these tests construed and eventually established intelligence as a “single number capable of
ranking all people on a linear scale of intrinsic and unalterable mental worth”\textsuperscript{16} with a “genetically fixed” foundation.\textsuperscript{17} The widespread adoption of formal intelligence testing in the American educational system, as well as its early popularity among immigration and military officials for assessment, created a foundation for the widespread influence of IQ testing on the anthropological imagination of the contemporary United States.

Before the rise of IQ testing, a foundation of biological determinism had already animated a hierarchy among different human beings, rooted in interpretations of race, class, and sex. Gould defines this biological determinism as the notion that “shared behavioral norms, and the social and economic differences between human groups - primarily races, classes, and sexes - arise from inherited inborn distinctions and that society, in this sense, is an accurate reflection of biology.”\textsuperscript{18} The rise of IQ testing propelled the lives of the “feeble-minded”\textsuperscript{19} onto the stage of biological determinism. People with IDD, with lives marked by little to no social productivity, were perceived as deserving the lowliest position in society. Their intelligence, rendered through IQ testing as a single number correlated to severely decreased worth, suggested a biological basis for denying them the goods and protections of “typical” citizens.


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{19} Vocabulary from the early 1900s.
The rise and embrace of IQ testing, however, did not begin in a quest to establish a numerical ranking system for human beings based in cognitive skills. As Gould carefully illustrates, the early development of intelligence testing by French psychologist Alfred Binet first emerged as an attempt to develop a tool that would enable educators to identify potentially delayed students in the primary school system. This screening would then enable educators to adopt different pedagogical strategies in order to support learning among potentially at-risk students. In contrast to a definitive ranking tool, Binet envisioned the IQ scale as a pragmatic means to refine pedagogical practice. In Gould’s interpretation, Binet himself feared “that his practical device, if reified as an entity, could be perverted and used as an indelible label, rather than as a guide for identifying children who needed help.”

From the original envisioning of the IQ scale as Binet’s pragmatic tool, Gould traces its adoption and further development within the United States. Perhaps most notorious for his role in drastically shifting the intent and usage of Binet’s IQ scale, the American psychologist (and eventual eugenicist) H. H. Goddard wrote in 1920, “the chief determiner of human conduct is a unitary mental process which we call intelligence.” The tethering of human worth and identity to the “unitary mental process” of intelligence, decipherable through the deployment of IQ testing, became a driving force across American society for the determination of one’s capacity as an economic producer. Higher IQ testing scores necessarily correlated with higher efficiency and economic productivity, and therefore an

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assignment of greater societal worth. The interconnections between productivity and human capacity, as measured in IQ testing, began to emerge as a central marker of human identity in the American anthropological imagination. Affirming this, Dorothy Roberts emphasizes the dangerous moral imagination cultivated by the American understanding of intelligence: “eugenicists claimed that the IQ test could quantify innate intellectual ability in a single measurement, despite the objections of its creator, Alfred Binet. Just as damaging, intelligence became a shorthand for moral worth as well as cognitive capacity.”

Roberts also demonstrates how IQ testing reinforced racial hierarchies in American society. For example, eugenics lobbyists insisted that lower IQ scores among African Americans, indicating decreased social worth, called forth a societal responsibility to curtail their reproduction of “undesirable” and “unintelligent” children. Concretely, these lobbyists called for decreased support for social programs to improve the conditions of poor, African Americans. In a striking parallel to the communities of homogenous belonging generated by distorted baptismal practices in Jennings’s essay on race and baptism, IQ testing perpetuated a myth of “innate native intelligence” tied to one’s race, with native-born Americans of Western European descent thought to possess superior “mental alertness.”


23 Ibid., 65.

These falsely constructed racial differences of innate worth, according to proponents of IQ testing, serve as definitive guides of social belonging and privilege.

Lewis M. Terman, a contemporary of Goddard with a special interest in education, further intensified the role of IQ testing in determining one’s moral and economic worth in the fabric of U.S. society. In sum, Terman popularized the social imaginary of IQ that undergirded the institutionalization, sterilization, and extermination of thousands of people living with IDD in the United States. In 1916, Terman wrote,

> It is safe to predict that in the near future intelligence tests will bring tens of thousands of these high-grade defectives under the surveillance and protection of society. This will ultimately result in curtailing the reproduction of feeblemindedness and in the elimination of an enormous amount of crime, pauperism, and industrial inefficiency.²⁵

Gould summarizes Terman’s bleak embrace of IQ testing as follows: “Terman argued that we must first restrain or eliminate those whose intelligence is too low for an effective or moral life.”²⁶ Terman’s interpretation of the role of IQ testing draws clear connections not only between this testing and the prioritization of cognition in determining human identity, but also the subsequent justification for the negative and prejudiced treatment of people with IDD.²⁷


²⁷ In the trajectory of Binet and Terman’s assumptions, nearly a century later, Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein published The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life. Murray and Herrnstein affirm the presence of “an accurate unitary measure of general intelligence,” suggesting low IQ as “a cause of poverty, unemployment or illegitimate births.” Murray and Herrnstein also assert that white people generally possess a higher IQ than people of color. Their work was widely and harshly critiqued as faulty science with
The Role of Time in Supporting the Primacy of Intelligence for Human Identity

The embrace of intelligence testing in the 20th century U.S. as a means of designating the innate worth and identity of human beings sheds light on the prioritization of cognition and intellectual capability in many contemporary anthropological imaginations. IQ testing's negative construals of people living with IDD, particularly in their failures to meaningfully support the economic good of society, resulted in ongoing notions of the dispensability of people unable to participate in capacities supportive of economic productivity and efficiency. In his essay “‘These Pushful Days:’ Time and Disability in the Age of Eugenics,” Thomas Baynton considers the construction of time in modern Western contexts as another catalyst for anthropological imaginations that designate people with IDD as ultimately disposable.

Baynton suggests the turn to eugenics and the increasing negativity in social attitudes toward people with disabilities in the 20th century was centrally influenced by a shift in the meaning of time, with life conceptualized “as a race, and seeing evolutionary change as an unending struggle for existence.”28 Looking also to modern changes in terminology describing disability, Baynton argues that words such as “handicap” signaled a turn from previous vocabulary about the universal experiences of human existence (such as “affliction” or “fragility”).29 This shift from a shared understanding of affliction, fragility, and

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29 Ibid., 45.
contingency as universally marking the human condition, put forth a new vocabulary with words such as “disabled” or “handicapped” - words only applicable to certain humans with perceptible differences. This new vocabulary signaled groups of people who failed to possess a common set of capacities, including demonstrations of autonomous and rational decision-making, as well as economic productivity. The parallel shifting of understandings of human identity and time, as Baynton highlights, disadvantaged people with disabilities in the “race for life” or “struggle for existence,” rather than construing their lives as one expression of a universally shared concept of humanity.  

With the rising pervasiveness of “the felt necessity to use time more efficiently,” descriptions of human identity that did not align with efficient capacities developed. This new category of people, those with disabilities, were primarily identified as those who could not participate in the activities most indicative of human beings in the Western societal imagination: the autonomous self, centrally marked by capacities for efficient production.

From Individual to Communal Constructions of Human Identity

Baynton illustrates how the embrace of rushed time for the sake of economic productivity in the United States provided a new way of envisioning and evaluating not only individuals but also communities and people groups. In this efficiency-oriented framework,

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50 Ibid., 48.

51 Ibid., 49.
“able-bodied” people with a capacity for efficient action could protect their place in society amidst a world focused on a race for survival. In contrast, those people living with IDD, people without an autonomous stake in the betterment of a productive society, encountered increased vulnerability in their identities. In an age of the prioritization of efficiency, people with IDD (among others with marked dependency such as children, older adults, and those with physical or sensory disabilities) found fewer resources and possibilities for workforce participation. Subsequently, these populations failed to comport with an increasingly efficient and autonomous understanding of what human beings are and are for, resulting in a diminished standing within society and disregard for the potential fullness of their humanity.

As I have traced above, among people with IDD in the United States, the confluence of economic realities and a sense of value tied closely to IQ testing, provided a foundation for the development of an anthropological imagination that positions those with IDD at the bottom of the societal hierarchy. As Gould and Roberts both argue, this resultant ranking of human capacity and identity results in the casting of negative moral judgments against people with IDD. John Swinton, in his book on dementia, also captures the moral weight of the contemporary Western liberal democracy’s anthropological imagination. In conversation with the work of Tom Kitwood and Stephen Post on dementia, Swinton identifies a general impulse to “isolate intellect, reason, and rationality and identify these aspects of human beings as having particular moral and social significance.”  

cultural bias against people living with dementia - a bias I suggest here is also extended to people with IDD, especially those with profound disabilities. Swinton notes that in addition to the possession of particular cognitive characteristics that shape our moral vision of individuals and communities, other negative features of a person’s particular diagnosis, disability, or impairment also assume a primary location in defining the identity of those living with dementia or IDD. 33 We now turn to explore how these anthropological imaginaries can shape the practices of communities, especially communities such as Christian churches that most often boast at least an abstract commitment to people with IDD.

An Ecclesial Turn: The Distortion of Human Identity in the Practices of the Church

How do anthropological commitments to cognitive skills, autonomy, and economic productivity shape the practices of various communities? In other words, do negative interpretations of disability affect disabled people’s acceptance within particular communities, including participation in the community’s constitutive practices? I turn here to consider these questions in light of the Christian practice of baptism – the Church’s shared ritual of initiation into not only the community of the Church, but the very body of Jesus. Turning to both historical and contemporary practices of baptism, we see a disheartening reality: the ritual exclusion of people groups outside a normative anthropological vision.

33 Ibid., 45.
In *The Black Christ*, Kelly Brown Douglas exposes the ways in which anthropological imagination shapes Christian practices, through her historical analysis of the participation of black slaves within communities dominated by white evangelicals in the 19th century American South. In the sphere of “slaveholding Christianity,” Douglas notes the distortion and revision of baptismal practices in order to ensure “the slaves understood baptism was not synonymous with earthly freedom.”

In order to maintain the status quo of an anthropological imagination that designated those of African descent as sub-human, slaves were forced to consent to declarations that affirmed baptism as a ritual “merely for the good of [their Souls]” rather than a promise of freedom “from the Duty and Obedience you owe to your Master while you live.”

This sobering example of ritual manipulation, in order to serve particular anthropological commitments, illustrates the power of social imaginaries about human identity to deeply deform communal practices.

M. Shawn Copeland also analyzes the deeply disrupted practices of baptism in the historical context of slavery in the American South. Copeland argues that the majority of white slaveholders bristled at the theological underpinning of baptism: all human beings share a common, non-violable, and non-hierarchical nature. This radical theological assertion rooted in baptism – that slaves and slaveholders alike share a mutual human identity – “represented a threat to the power differential, which sustained the positions of master and

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35 Ibid.
slave.” However, this baptismal pressure on the dominant anthropological imaginary of the historical American South did not ultimately change the course of white evangelical churches. White slaveholders continued to subject their slaves to distorted practices of baptism, framed as procuring a goodness for the souls of slaves, but resonate with no measure of earthly freedom from bondage.

**Considering the Case of People with IDD**

As we explored above in the historical context of slavery in the American South, how have cultural and ecclesial imaginations about identity shaped contemporary practices of baptism among people experiencing IDD? People with IDD face heightened vulnerability in society, closely tied to their dependency upon other people to maintain access to safety as well as materials to meet their basic needs, such as food and shelter. As a result of this vulnerability related to heightened dependency, people with IDD are not only subject to a greater likelihood of abuse, but also face more subtle forms of discrimination within contemporary cultural spaces. When capacities such as autonomy and symbolic language use reflect a society’s dominant vision of what it means to be a fully flourishing human being, people with IDD challenge this communal imagination. In presenting this challenge, people with IDD often face resistance, exclusion, or distorted forms of welcome into communities who are unable to exercise a flexible imagination with regard to human identity.

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Unfortunately, as evidenced in both scholarly literature and anecdotal evidence, this lack of flexibility in imagination about identity often results in negative implications for people with IDD.

In their systematic review of maltreatment among people with IDD, Rebecca Leeb et al. uncover the heightened likelihood of emotional abuse, neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse in childhood among people living with IDD.\(^3^7\) Marisa Fisher’s research on adult populations with IDD underscores ongoing realities of victimization and heightened vulnerability among people with IDD throughout the lifespan. The most common forms of victimization include criminal, sexual, psychological, and financial forms of vulnerability and abuse.\(^3^8\) Fisher concludes that though victimization clearly occurs at much higher rates in the IDD population, there is an urgency for further study to determine appropriate prevention measures, as well as the development of interventions to support resiliency and flourishing among survivors of these victimizations.\(^3^9\)

A less familiar category - spiritual abuse - constitutes another area of maltreatment among people with IDD. Theresa Pasquale defines spiritual abuse (synonymous in her work

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\(^3^9\) Ibid., 156.
with “religious injury” or “church-hurt”)\textsuperscript{40} as “any painful experience perpetrated by family, friends, community members, or institutions inside of a religion,” often complex and devastating in nature.\textsuperscript{41} Narrative evidence from caregivers, parents, and people with IDD, as well as scholars who study theology and disability, underscore the pervasive realities of maltreatment of people with IDD within ecclesial communities.\textsuperscript{42} Understanding the stories of victimization and marginalization among people with IDD in Christian faith communities provides one way that Christian communities might begin to imagine new ways to respond and welcome people with IDD. In addition, these stories of pain among people with IDD challenge ecclesial communities to examine their assumptions about personhood and identity that may underlie maltreatment of those living with IDD.

Contemporary practices of baptism in light of Western liberal democratic constructions of human identity often reveal debates surrounding the appropriateness of baptism for people with profound IDD.\textsuperscript{43} Jill Harshaw highlights long-standing debates

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\textsuperscript{40} Teresa B. Pasquale, *Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2015), 37.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 22-23.


\textsuperscript{43} While these debates have become more frequent in the post-Enlightenment context, questions of the appropriateness of baptism and sacramental participation among people who lack some normative sense of “reason” began long before the rise of modernity. For example, Thomas Aquinas engages arguments from his contemporaries about the appropriateness of baptizing people with some notable absence of reason (see IIIa 68.12 in the *Summa Theologica*).
across Protestant denominations about access to baptism for people with IDD who cannot “access linguistic communication” or make “cognitive responses to postulations of truth.” Myroslaw Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn also point to the rising importance of “intellectual consent” in modernity as a complicating factor regarding the Christian initiation of people with IDD, especially in traditions that do not baptize infants and young children. These divided opinions have led to practices of dismissing people with IDD from ecclesial communities, or, such as in the story of Hallie, denial of baptism. At times, these experiences constitute cases of spiritual abuse among not only people with IDD but those who love and care for them.

In parallel to the opening story of Hallie’s repeated rejection from faith communities and the denials of her baptism, research participants for this project recalled to me additional stories of hurt in ecclesial settings and particularly surrounding baptism. Barbara recalls a pastor’s wife approaching her when Barbara’s young son with Down Syndrome, Bob, was three years old. The pastor’s wife asked Barbara: “what are you going to do with him next year?” Barbara responded: “I don’t know. I mean…we will probably keep Bob in Sunday nursery school for a bit.” The pastor’s wife then firmly responded, “well, Bob can’t come to church anymore.” Barbara was shocked and remembers this as the first of many experiences of rejection of Bob and her family in the church.

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Steve, a lay leader, recounted a story of the delay of the baptism of Aaron, a young adult with IDD. Steve served as a lay preacher several times a year at First Avenue Baptist Church, the faith community where Aaron regularly attended. Steve observed that this young man “handed out bulletins at the back of the church, and helped ladies find their ways to the pews.” Steve recalls asking the lead pastor at First Avenue Baptist whether or not Aaron had been baptized. The pastor answered emphatically, “oh, no! We don’t baptize intellectually disabled people.” Steve pushed back: “Why don’t you baptize Aaron? He obviously has a role within the congregation. He’s a welcomer. Everyone knows him. Do you think he’s supposed to know what is happening when he’s baptized?” This conversation led the church leadership to meet and later decide to baptize Aaron. Steve recalls a conversation with Aaron’s parents after his baptism - they were incredibly pleased. But, as Steve recounts, Aaron’s parents had remained silent for years about their deep desire for Aaron’s baptism: “they had never wanted to make it a controversial matter.”

In *Redefining Perfect: The Interplay Between Theology and Disability*, Amy Jacober opens her text with a story of baptismal refusal. Jacober writes of a story recounted to her by the mother of an adolescent girl living with IDD. In this story, the mother describes how her daughter participated in a series of baptismal preparation courses at her church. When the courses ended, this mother was summoned to speak with the church’s pastor, who informed her of a decision from the church’s leadership:

They would be happy to pray for her daughter, but she was not a candidate for baptism because they believed she did not understand the meaning of baptism. This act was so sacred, they rationalized, that baptism itself would be defiled should it be administered to anyone who had less than a full understanding of what was taking
place. Baptizing a person with a disability, they argued, would cheapen the sacred duty of the church to administer such a ritual.46

A final story emerged during my conversation with a pastor named Ambrose. Pastor Ambrose discussed the formation of some of his initial questions about practices and theologies of baptism in the church. At the time, Ambrose was a young adult attending a non-denominational church where “baptism was always presented as this choice that you must make. You must rationally say you understand you are a sinner and that you have put your faith in Jesus.” At the time, Ambrose also worked as a caregiver at a group home for adults with profound IDD. Ambrose remembers one resident in particular who he worked with - “a guy named Fred [pseudonym, not a research participant]. It was my job to watch John Wayne movies with him. Make a meal. Take him to the bathroom. Clean him. Shower him. Get him ready for bed. Drive him to dialysis.” Ambrose continued, “and it occurred to me with Freddie, one day in the shower - water! It was like ‘aha!’ - Fred is never going to walk down the aisle in our church and say ‘I’ve decided to give me life to Jesus. I want to be baptized.’”

Ambrose continued,

The math worked out real quick for me that my church’s baptismal theology does not have room for someone like Fred. They would say: “he doesn’t need to be baptized.” I knew that the baptismal theology I had been given did not have room for people with disabilities. And that really set me on a hunt. It was Fred that taught me that my theology of baptism was too shallow. God has shown me that God’s baptismal theology is really for all of God’s people - all of God’s children.

In the course of this work, I will take up Pastor Ambrose’s longing to uncover baptismal theologies and practices “for all of God’s children.” Though I specifically engage stories and questions at the intersection of IDD and baptism, the constructive conclusions of this dissertation strive to resonate among a diversity of Christian ecclesial communities as well as among both disabled and non-disabled people. But first, before turning fuller attention to baptismal theologies and practices, it is necessary to attend to important methodological and definitional matters that frame my particular theological engagement of disability.

*How Do We Speak of Disability?*

My research’s focus on engaging baptism as a framework for supporting and amplifying the witness and discipleship of people with IDD in Christian faith communities necessitates the provision of a framework for what I have in mind when I use the words “disability” and “IDD.” The framework I offer here, in conversation with other scholars exploring the complexities and ever-morphing topography of disability, includes both definitional boundaries of disability and IDD, while also seeking to describe the category of witness as it relates to the task of Christian theology. No single, unifying definition for disability exists in academic, community, or ecclesial settings. In response to this reality, my framework for disability seeks to provide a category in which we might envision the witness of people with IDD as indispensable for baptismal identity and vocation.
A Framework for Disability: Attending to Political and Relational Realities

Disability studies scholars and disability theologians alike engage a wide range of frameworks for thinking about the complex definition of disability. The medical model provides one contemporary framework for disability, though it is rejected as the best way to narrate disability by most disability studies scholars and theologians. In short, the medical model envisions disability as an intrinsic, individualized problem. This negatively construed and individualized notion of disability is most properly responded to with some kind of medicalized or therapeutic fix (e.g. surgery, rehabilitation, or medication).

In response to the negative valence surrounding disability in this medical framework, early disability rights activists and disability scholars offered a new framework for understanding disability: the social model. In this model of disability, an inherently negative impairment no longer disables individuals – rather, the contexts, environments, and societies which disabled people inhabit serve as the primary factors that “disable” particular individuals. To give a simple example, if a particular society eliminated stairs and instead built ramps for navigation in all public and private buildings, people using wheelchairs would perhaps no longer be considered “disabled.” As Alison Kafer concisely argues, disability is a “product of social relations.”47 Disabled people challenge communally understood visions of “normative” bodies and minds – whether they read with Braille, communicate without use of spoken language, or ambulate with wheels. The social model of disability posits that the constructions of our shared society discriminate against people with disabilities – societal

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barriers for access and participation are what disables people, not bodily differences or limits. In this social model, disability loses much of its negative connotation, and the impetus falls not upon individuals with particular impairments, but upon societies as a whole, to make systemic changes for access and justice.

The minority framework offers a third commonly accepted model for considering disability, related closely to the social model. In the minority model, disability is primarily understood as a minoritized identity. The widely heterogenous group of people with disabilities (whether intellectual, learning, psychiatric, physical, or sensory) share a minority identity by virtue of the shared discrimination and prejudice they face in society. This uniting factor of discrimination establishes a basis for solidarity of identity across groups of disabled people.

In her “political/relational” model of disability, Kafer seeks to refine and combine important realities present in these three major approaches to describing disability. Kafer describes her narration of disability as follows: “the problem of disability is located in inaccessible buildings, discriminatory attitudes, and ideological systems that attribute normalcy and deviance to particular minds and bodies. The problem of disability is solved not through medical or surgical normalization but through social change and political transformation.” However, Kafer’s model does not entirely displace forms of medical or rehabilitative intervention in understanding disability. For Kafer, interventions within the

48 Ibid., 6.
medical realm may be desired among some disabled people, especially to address realities such as chronic pain.\textsuperscript{49} Kafer’s model raises important attention to the social and ideological contexts of normalcy that construct understandings of disability and often marginalize disabled people. Theologian Tom Reynolds understands this notion of “normalcy” as:

A force that flows according to strategic mechanisms of power that serve the conventions of the status quo, which in turn serves primarily those people whose bodily appearance and abilities fall within a recognizably standard range. The normal then becomes representative of a community’s identity or sense of itself and, accordingly, functions by marking out and idealizing those attributes and capacities competent to contribute to its good.\textsuperscript{50}

In Kafer’s “political/relational” model that resists centering normalcy, she offers an understanding of disability “as a potential site for collective reimagining.”\textsuperscript{51} In other words, Kafer’s framework envisions disability as a site for the asking of new and creative questions, rather than a site for static and measured definitions.\textsuperscript{52} The disability community, therefore, becomes a space of collaboration and coalition, where people are bound to one another not by specific impairment type or a particular IQ score, but rather through shared action to


\textsuperscript{51} Kafer, \textit{Feminist, Queer, Crip}, 9.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 11.
resist and reimagine the social and political landscapes that perpetuate discrimination and prejudice against disabled people.

I find Kafer’s “political/relational” framework for disability, in its attending to the communal, relational, social, medical, and political aspects of disability, as the most fitting framework in which to think creatively about the witness of disabled people in Christian communities. Understanding experiences of disability as generative sites for reimagining allows us to begin the task of theologically re-narrating human identity and what it means to live in the baptized Body. What are the communal consequences of embracing the witness of people with IDD in their baptismal vocation to discipleship? How might the experiences of disabled people both guide and challenge the Church’s witness to the good news in Jesus Christ?

Naming the Particular: A Framework for IDD

Reflecting within Kafer’s overarching framework for disability, I want to clarify what I mean when making specific claims about the kinds of people we tend to label in contemporary contexts as “intellectually and developmentally disabled.” Medical and other professional organizations, including the American Psychiatric Association and its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the American Psychological Association, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, and The Arc, yield no shortage of definitions for IDD. Interestingly, in the title of a 2016 online publication of the American Psychological Association, Marc Tassé lauds the relative consensus on a medical
definition of IDD: “Finally We All Agree…Almost.”53 As the American Psychiatric Association plainly reports, this consensus is that IDD “involves problems with general mental abilities that affect functioning in two areas:” intellectual functioning and adaptive functioning (life skills such as self-care and communication abilities).54 This definition of intellectual disability has often been accompanied by the assignment of a severity level, describing the impact of one’s IDD on daily functioning as either mild, moderate, severe, or profound.

I concur that this medical definition of IDD can accurately, but not fully, describe the lives of people with IDD. It is also important to recognize that the lived experiences of people with IDD represent a strikingly heterogenous group. For example, many people with IDD communicate fluently with spoken language and enjoy life activities such as full-time employment, marriage, and parenting. Other people with IDD may communicate apart from any spoken language or require 24-hour support from family or professionals. Others with IDD have shifted from claiming a particular level of severity of disability to focus on empowerment and rights.55

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55 Notable organizations of people with IDD embracing this focus on rights and empowerment include People First (https://www.factmo.org/people-first/#PeopleFirst) and Self Advocates Becoming Empowered (https://www.sabeusa.org/).
I choose to use the term intellectual and developmental disability (IDD)\(^{56}\) throughout the dissertation, in full recognition of its diverse signification, including medical and political meanings, and also acknowledging its widespread use among self-advocates with IDD, as well as their allies, friends, caregivers, and families. I move between the use of identity first language (e.g. disabled people) and person-first language (person with IDD) as a means of reflecting the variance of preferences among people with IDD as well as their allies, chosen support persons, and caregivers, including the specific participants in the qualitative research for this project.

In one sense, I adopt language that has already been chosen - hoping to think, write, and live faithfully in relationship to people who happen to be called those with IDD, whether their disability’s impact on their daily life is minimal or profound. My task here is one of theological re-narration. My writing and research in response to the witness of the lives of people with IDD seeks to construct a more faithful theological and practical picture about the place of baptism in supporting a vocation to discipleship among all the baptized, regardless of disability status. Therefore, throughout my argument, I hold together the witness of Christians across the spectrum of experiences of IDD – reflecting on conversations with participants who spoke about their own baptisms, as well as amplifying the witness and stories of people living with profound IDD, who I met during my research process and spoke with their families, friends, and clergy. In this way, I envision the

\(^{56}\) For an excellent account of the history of the category of “intellectual disability,” as well as careful attention to the power and privilege of naming certain people as those with IDD, I commend Licia Carlson’s *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
baptismal witness of people with IDD as not only bound to spoken language, but also revealed in practices of presence and as present within the stories of communities who love, welcome, and receive the witness of people with more profound experiences of IDD.

_Speaking with the Other: Disability Theology as Witness_

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.57

In the field of disability theology, and the disability community more generally, much attention has rightly been given to discussions of representation and identity. Who has the right to speak about the experiences of disability? Who or whose voices should carry the greatest weight? How might theologians faithfully and rigorously support the central maxim of the disability rights movement - “nothing about us without us”? The challenge of the disability community, primarily to non-disabled academics writing about disability, has led to the amplification of previously marginalized perspectives of disabled people.

However, this prioritization of disabled voices in disability theology becomes increasingly complex with a turn to engaging people with IDD. Of course, in the present

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work, I embrace the amplification of the voices, stories, and perspectives of people with IDD, particularly through qualitative interviewing. However, my embrace of the interview methodology notably prioritizes those who use words to communicate. People who do not communicate with spoken language, often due to experiences of profound disability, raise an important challenge to the field of disability theology - who, if anyone, ought to “speak for” these people? Why am I, a person without an intellectual or developmental disability, focusing my efforts and writing on these matters?

In addition to these questions of representation, I would be remiss to ignore the pernicious power of ableism, and the ways it has benefitted me, even as a person living with an intermittently disabling chronic illness, especially as a white, privileged academic who easily passes as non-disabled. My reputation, scholarship, and livelihood are protected by the discourses of ableism that perpetuate violence and oppression against many, if not the vast majority, of people living with IDD. As Simi Linton eloquently highlights, while even disabled people are not “exempt from the tendency to stereotype or objectify,”

…non-disabled people…have a particular responsibility to engage consciously and deliberately with these issues in their scholarship and teaching to avoid contributing to the problem…it is incumbent on non-disabled scholars to pay particular attention to issues of their own identity, their own privilege…and the relationship of these factors to their scholarship.58

Linton’s assertion about the responsibility associated with scholarship seems particularly apt as I write about the experiences and concerns of people with IDD, especially as a person without these particular lived experiences of disability. I am also aware of these particular

questions as I write in a mode largely inaccessible to the very people whose lived experiences centrally inform my own discourse. In the following section, I engage scholars on representation, account giving, and identity in order to construct a critical framework for my theological engagement of the experiences of people with IDD.

_Critical Frameworks for Account Giving_

In her essay on Julian of Norwich in _Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader_, Amy Laura Hall pointedly raises the question of academic engagement with IDD:

> Writing academic prose about disability is potentially a self-defeating effort. Put plainly, for every supposedly excellent essay I publish, I shore up the legitimacy of an institution that excludes individuals bearing genetic marks for which the majority of women in my denomination choose to abort. How may I write well on a struggle that is so often excluded from what is considered to be proper, theological prose, without, by writing well, contribute further to an exclusion I believe is death-dealing?

In what follows, I offer my understanding of a basic framework for representation, identity, and witness, in which I humbly undertake the task of faithfully writing theology faithful to the lives of people with IDD.

> I find Judith Butler’s _Giving an Account of Oneself_ as a helpful place to begin reflections on definitions of the “I” and the “other” in accounts of disability theology. Butler writes,

> When the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, an

account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist.60

For Butler, an “I” can never independently stand apart from others in its formation, identity, or self-definition. Differently stated, “the ‘I’ has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation.”61 Ultimately, for Butler, an individually conceived “I” cannot give an account of itself. Dependence on the other is a foundational necessity in the act of self-accounting. As Butler argues, “when I near the prospect of intellectual self-sufficiency in the presence of the other, nearly excluding him or her from my horizon, the thread of my story unravels.”62

This unraveling of stories apart from dependence finds resonance with John Swinton, Harriet Mowat, and Susannah Baines’s essay “Whose Story Am I? Redescribing Profound Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of God,” where they reflect on their experiences witnessing the role of people with profound IDD in Christian faith communities.63 Swinton, et al. write,

The problem for people with profound intellectual disabilities is that they are limited in their opportunities to develop narratives of resistance, that is, counternarratives that will stand against oppressive or misleading stories that others tell about their lives and which will bring about active transformation...64

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 68.
64 Ibid., 7.
Swinton, et al. argue that profoundly disabled people are not the only ones with significant vulnerability to narratives that construct their personhood in a negative valence.\textsuperscript{65} All stories that resist interdependence are untruthful stories. Theologically, these stories arising from self-sufficiency miss the reality that “we are all people who are storied by a Creator God who resides within a narrative of creation, cross, and redemption that we can share in but can never own.”\textsuperscript{66} The interdependence between those with and without disabilities to faithfully tell the stories of our lives marks Swinton, et al.’s vision of discipleship – disciples are “friends of Jesus who are charged to live out and to tell different stories about the world.”\textsuperscript{67} There is a responsibility and an accountability to faithful witnessing in the context of discipleship that arises from accounts marked by dependence.

Charles Taylor, in his essay “The Politics of Recognition,” contributes further salient insights for constructing a framework in which an academic might carefully, charitably, and critically speak of the experience of people with IDD. In particular, Taylor offers insights on premature misjudgment of the other. For example, Taylor argues that when speaking of another, “a favorable judgment made prematurely would be not only condescending but ethnocentric. It would praise the other for being like us.”\textsuperscript{68} For Taylor, this kind of

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{68} Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” 71.
ethnocentricity arises from two assumptions: that excellence must always “take forms familiar to us” and that the contribution of the other “is yet to be made.”

Taylor’s argument here at the intersection of respect and judgment offers a weighty challenge to disability theologians who engage the lives of people with profound experiences of disability. Taylor’s notion of premature “ethnocentric judgment” parallels with what John Swinton has identified as an “able-bodied hermeneutic” that dominates the field of theology. Unqualified judgments about people experiencing IDD, as well as premature conclusions about proper narrations of their identities and roles within ecclesial communities, remove the onus for deep listening and respect toward people with IDD. Taylor’s resistance to this premature judgement calls theologians addressing disability to open themselves to unfamiliar understandings of the experiences of persons with IDD. For Taylor, these understandings can only emerge through encounters of recognition grounded in careful listening that guards against premature judgment. In the summary of his argument regarding recognition, Taylor’s calls for scholars to presume the reality “that all human cultures…have something important to say to all human beings.” My engagement with people with IDD over the past decade, through friendship, allyship, church life, community activism, and in the context of clinical relationships, underscores my commitment in this

69 Ibid.


present research to careful and extended listening to the stories, lives, and witnesses (both verbally proclaimed and wordless) of people with IDD.

Theological Account Giving: Examples from Theologies of IDD

Within disability theology, and more particularly, theologians engaging questions about IDD, differing frameworks for account giving arise. For example, Jill Harshaw, reflecting on the spiritual experiences among people with profound intellectual disability, warns of the grave danger of assuming the “right to speak from a position of certainty of the spiritual experience of people who cannot speak for themselves.”

Harshaw disagrees with qualitative research methodologies as a means of probing the spiritual experiences of people with profound intellectual disabilities (for Harshaw, people who do not use spoken words for communication), citing issues of obtaining consent, verifying validity, and the non-negotiable use of spoken language in the majority of qualitative research methods.

Harshaw critiques other theologians, notably John Swinton, who have suggested that research within faith communities can provide insights into the witness and vocation of people with profound disabilities in ecclesial life. Harshaw instead turns toward reflection upon the nature of God’s self-revelation as the basis for exploring the spiritual lives of people with profound disabilities. According to Harshaw, because qualitative interviewing is

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72 Harshaw, God Beyond Words, 20.

73 Ibid., 70-77.
inaccessible for the participation of people with profound disabilities, and because Harshaw wishes to affirm the personal spiritualities of people with profound disabilities (spiritual lives not wholly captured, understood, or facilitated through community), Harshaw argues that while human beings experience a myriad of limitations in their communication and their understanding of their neighbors, God is unencumbered by these limitations.\textsuperscript{74} God’s self-disclosure of God’s self is unhinged from any kind of human limitation; God is an accessible God who graciously and accessibly provides “a God-designed bridge which spans the otherwise unbridgeable gap between the infinite God and a finite humanity which, without this act, remains helpless to construct such a bridge and moreover, to conceive of the need for one.”\textsuperscript{75} For Harshaw, the conclusion to the debate of representation in disability theology lies only in God’s condescension to creation in the Incarnation of Jesus.

While I take seriously Harshaw’s critique of misapplying qualitative methodologies (particularly techniques such as interviewing that require participants to engage in discrete capacities of spoken language and consent) among people profound IDD, and also affirm her theological emphasis on the Incarnation as God’s condescension to human creatures in their myriad limitations, Harshaw’s interpretation of the over-emphasis on faith communities strikes me as misguided. In an attempt to avoid speaking descriptively of the spiritual experiences of people with profound disabilities, Harshaw misses an opportunity to describe the witness of the lives of people with profound IDD within Christian faith communities. In

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 92.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 95. Here, Harshaw is interacting with John Calvin’s doctrine of Accommodation (or condescension).
contrast to Harshaw, I see the non-verbal witness and presence of people with profound disabilities as a necessary and non-negotiable site for reflection and theological challenge. As I have already indicated, this witness in the context of baptism provides an especially key way to challenge many contemporary Western ecclesial commitments to a distorted anthropological imagination.

In contrast to Harshaw, Brian Brock offers an alternative methodological route for theological engagement of the experiences of people with IDD. Brock puzzles over the current methods of representation for people with profound IDD within the field of disability theology. How can theologians speak with or for people who do not speak without violating the call for “nothing about us without us?” How can theologians, who engage disability in academic papers and formal conferences, resist pushing actual people living with profound IDD to the edges of their discourse? And, how do academics engaging disability not simply “co-opt” non-speakers into their own stories and academic purposes?76

Brock affirms that “speaking our lives is one way of living them,” though this practice of speaking necessarily excludes disabled people who are non-speakers. Though Brock’s approach to disability theology centers stories involving people with profound IDD (for Brock, both members of his ecclesial community and also his son, Adam), his approach also attends to the complexity and paradox of representing people who do not use words through both his text and speech.77 Brock’s life with his son Adam brings to the fore the

76 Brian Brock, How Can We Talk About Disability?, Lecture (The Summer Institute on Theology and Disability: Azusa, CA, 2017).

77 Ibid.
reality that Adam continually complexifies how Brock sees the world around him. In this way, Adam challenges Brock’s use of binaries (e.g. low and high functioning; non-disabled and disabled) by opening Brock up to complexity. Adam is a powerful witness. Brock concludes with a focus on this witness as a possible way forward amid the muddied questions of representation and methodology in the field of disability theology: “I tell Adam’s story as a witness of his witness.”

A Framework of Witness: My Approach to Discourse on IDD

Following Brock, I see my academic work at the intersection of theology and disability as a practice of witness. My practice of witness is deeply dependent upon the lives and communities who have witnessed to me. In gratitude and humility to the gifts of these witnesses, I seek to respond throughout my dissertation to the insights from the lives of people with IDD, privileging and amplifying their stories, and wondering how the specific witnesses I have received from those with IDD might challenge, enliven, and reinvigorate the baptismal practices of the Church.

My understanding of the definition of witness emerges from Benjamin Conner’s work in Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities, which Conner further expands in Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness: Exploring Missiology Through the
In this latter text, Conner defines witness as “a response to a divine call to action in the service of human flourishing for the sake of the kingdom of God.”

The medium of academic theology provides the context for my faithful response to God’s call to action. Following the frameworks for respect, accountability, and complexity framed by Butler, Taylor, and Brock above, I understand my theological work as a witness in its advocacy and testimony, seeking the flourishing of all the baptized, especially people with IDD. Seeking this flourishing necessitates challenging contemporary anthropological commitments and patterns of homogenous belonging across many ecclesial communities. Throughout the dissertation I will argue that this challenge comes most powerfully through a renewed embrace of baptismal theologies and practices to reframe the Jesus-centered, participatory, and communal nature of human identity and discipleship.

My practice of witness exists only within community; I am unable to manifest a faithful witness apart from relationships of interdependence. Therefore, I offer this dissertation as a particular expression of my Christian witness not as mine alone, but as a witness inexplicably bound to the witnesses of individuals and faith communities across North Carolina who are daily living into the baptismal promise of becoming new creation in Christ. In this work of witness, I am responsible to those who have witnessed to me. In this sense of responsibility, I acknowledge that my interpretations of the qualitative data are


80 Conner, Disabling Mission, 27.
already co-created with the participants I interviewed and worshipped with in their home church contexts.

This framework of witness helps explicate the mode in which I strive to engage as a researcher and scholar. Conner’s communal conception of witness as diverse ways of responding to God for the sake of God’s coming good future, through supporting practices oriented toward human flourishing, helps clarify my positionality as a researcher in partnership with people with and without disabilities. Throughout this dissertation, I do not simply “speak for” or “on behalf of” people with IDD. Rather, my witness, through the medium of a dissertation, amplifies the witnesses I have received, and am ultimately indebted to, from the lives of people with and without disabilities.

I receive these witnesses and join them with my voice toward the flourishing of the Church: the analyses, constructive theological proposals, and practical pastoral practices that I exhort in this dissertation are offered toward an end of supporting disciples of Jesus to live in the already but not yet of God’s Reign. My particular witness, crafted through relationship to others with IDD and their gifts of witness to me in the contexts of clinical encounters in my role as an occupational therapist, as well as my relationships as a researcher, a friend, a teacher, a community member, a Christian, an Episcopalian, and a fellow human creature who has encountered rejection, judgement, and discrimination in church communities due to experiences of disability, seeks to stir up a new openness in contemporary faith communities to receive more creatively and generously the witnesses of people with IDD, particularly in the context of baptism.
This vision of my dissertation as a form of witness affirms the importance of baptismal identity at the center of this work. The labor of this dissertation is at its core interdependent, most notably, dependent upon the lives and witnesses of people with IDD who participated in my qualitative research. I do not suppose that I have produced this work primarily on my own. This dissertation as witness is also participatory: the facets of my identity, my ongoing processes of self-reflexivity and criticism, and the testing out of ideas and practices occurred primarily within communities where I have lived as a listener, a teacher, a leader, and at times, an uncomfortable observer. Finally, the process of bringing forth the witness of this work has been focused on Jesus - I have looked to the witness of Jesus Christ’s life, baptism, and ministry as depicted in Scripture, I have engaged in prayer, and finally, I have returned again and again to a commitment to live a life of discipleship.

Roadmap: What Lies Ahead

In Chapter 1, I provide a scoping survey of current work on IDD in disability theology, highlighting the decreased attention to the body as well as historic Christian practices, particularly the sacraments, as central interpretive categories for theological work on IDD. I illustrate the prioritization of three hermeneutical categories for theologies of IDD: friendship, “image of God” language, and emphases on inclusion. I also explore engagements with the body and baptism in current theologies of IDD. I conclude by demonstrating how my work critically expands the existing literature.
In Chapter 2, I explore the methodological underpinnings of my approach to the qualitative research component of my dissertation, with particular attention to best practices for engaging people with IDD in the research context. I argue that the stories of people with IDD, alongside stories from their caregivers, clergy, and other support people, provide a rich source for theological reflection. I provide a detailed research summary that reviews my specific research approach and processes of analysis, concluding with a discussion of my primary findings, implications for faith communities, and connections with existing themes in disability theology concerning IDD.

Taking a turn toward scripture in Chapter 3, I argue that a foundational commitment to a baptismal portrait of personhood arises within Paul’s anthropology. Engaging the core themes of community, Jesus, and participation from the qualitative research participants, I analyze and expand on Paul’s baptismal logic as it relates to his anthropological thought. The chapter begins by drawing on the central importance of Jesus’ baptism for the majority of research participants and next explores Paul’s theological interpretation of Jesus’ baptism and the place of baptism in the Christian life. For Paul, Christian personhood and identity, rooted in the very body of Jesus, finds its paradigmatic expression in baptism – embodied participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection to the life of new creation. Paul’s baptismal theology, exemplified in Romans 6, supports and sustains a Christian counter-narrative of identity, challenging the contemporary Western vision of anthropology as autonomous and capacity-based. Paul’s New Testament writings suggest inextricable bonds between an
anthropological vision of human creatures and practices of baptism, creating room to conceptualize all those in the baptized Body as Jesus’ disciples, regardless of disability status.

Turning from scripture to liturgy, I offer a critical disability reading of the baptismal rite from The Episcopal Church’s 1979 Book of Common Prayer in Chapter 4. I identify and explore key theological themes in the baptismal rite, demonstrating how this specific baptismal liturgy can act as both a barrier and a faithful companion in welcoming and sustaining people with IDD in the life of discipleship. In response to critiques from the field of disability studies, I engage perspectives on baptism from research participants and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in relationship to sin, community, Jesus, and transformation. I demonstrate how these key themes, through their shared emphases on divine agency and multi-modal, communal sacramental participation, support belonging in the baptized Body for all disciples, regardless of disability.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I explore and offer pastoral exhortation toward practices of baptismal preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation as sites for the robust participation and identity formation of all Christian disciples, including those with IDD. Alongside perspectives from research participants as well as theologians concerned with ecumenical unity and liturgical renewal, I argue that reimagining and recommitting to baptismal practices reflective of the Jesus-centered, participatory, and communal nature of identity and discipleship, provide a key avenue to foster the belonging of people with IDD in the life of the Church, as well as a crucial way to affirm the vocation of discipleship among all the baptized.
Chapter 1

Surveying the Terrain

Over the past several decades, Christian theologians have increasingly turned their attention to issues at the intersection of theology, ethics, and people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). As reviewed in the introduction, I define the experience of IDD as involving notable functional limitations in intellectual capacities (skills such as memory and problem-solving) as well as adaptive functioning (skills such as self-care and communication). The life experiences represented among people with IDD are strikingly heterogenous. In this work, as in the majority of theological engagements with IDD, careful attention is given to people living with profound IDD, those who John Swinton renders as

...a group of human beings who are deemed to have limited communicational skills, restricted or sometimes no self-care skills, and significant intellectual or cognitive difficulties, or both. Such people reside in the world without language and concepts that many people use and that are often assumed, by some, to be necessary to understand the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Those living out their lives in such ways are people to whom the modern category of free, autonomous individual – someone whose life is marked by individual choice – could never be applied.


2 John Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness and Gentle Discipleship (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 89.
The majority of theological work considering the lives of people with IDD, including profound experiences of disability, attempts to challenge the ascendancy of autonomy and rationality as centrally constitutive of human personhood and identity.

In this chapter, I survey the corpus of contemporary disability theology, with close attention to accounts focused on IDD. I consider the following as the primary frameworks for theologizing IDD: the *imago Dei* (the “image of God”), friendship, and inclusion. I next consider more minor themes of the body as well as historic Christian practices in relationship to contemporary theological reflection on IDD. Finally, I turn to theological accounts of IDD that focus on baptism as a central interpretive category. Throughout this chapter, I highlight the scriptural, theological, and disability-related themes that scholars draw upon to offer a theological re-narration of IDD. At the conclusion of this chapter, I briefly consider how effectively these analyses and re-narrations of IDD strike a counter-narrative to the notion that capacities, autonomy, and rationality are the core trifecta of what it means to be a human being. In conclusion, I offer a baptismal hermeneutic as a way to expand and clarify existing arguments in theologies concerning IDD.

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3 Later in this chapter, I detail the different understandings and deployments of “the image of God” among theologians engaging IDD. These theological approaches vary widely, ranging from understandings of God’s image arising from the creation accounts in Genesis to understandings that privilege Paul’s New Testament accounts of Jesus Christ as God’s image.
In his research report, “Who Is the God We Worship?,” Swinton defines the field of disability theology as

the attempt by disabled and non-disabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities. It has come to refer to a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability.4

In this report, Swinton’s own survey of the field of disability theology traces the primary frameworks engaged by contemporary theologians of disability, characterizing them by the guiding “God images” they deploy: God as disabled, God as limited, God as giver and receiver, God as vulnerable, and God as accessible.5 These God images often highlight differences in theological methodology: for example, the liberatory and political disability hermeneutic engaged by Nancy Eiesland, Sharon Betcher, and Deborah Creamer, or alternatively, the focus on theological anthropology put forth by Amos Yong, Hans Reinders, and Tom Reynolds.

Yet despite the differences in methodology and resultant God images, theologians of disability share some key assumptions, primarily established by Nancy Eiesland. Eiesland is often regarded as the primary pioneer in the contemporary field of disability theology and in her seminal work, The Disabled God, she describes the rejection of people with disabilities

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5 Ibid., 281.
from Christian faith communities. Eiesland explicitly eschews engagement with the lives of people with IDD, however, her challenge to Christian faith communities to find more faithful ways to narrate disability, particularly in light of “the dissonance raised by the nonacceptance of persons with disabilities and the acceptance of grace through Christ’s broken body,” extends beyond the experience of physical disability alone. Eiesland’s keen focus on accessibility and inclusion for disabled people in the church, exemplified in just practices of the Eucharist that embrace “the unexpected participant” (people with disabilities), set the stage for subsequent theologians of disability to adopt this same prioritization of access.

In addition, Eiesland established the foundational priority of human dignity as a matter of justice for disabled people, theologically rooted in the *imago Dei*. Eiesland’s work set a trajectory for both critique and collaboration among subsequent theologians of disability with her focus on practices rooted in inclusion, hospitality, and respect for the *imago Dei* present in each human being. Scholars engaging issues of IDD continue to find these themes particularly salient, though many theologians critically challenge and expand Eiesland’s image of God that imagines the post-resurrection Jesus as one who carries impairment, but still relies on a normative vision of cognitive functioning.

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7 Ibid., 23.

8 Ibid., 115.

9 Ibid., 107.
Eiesland’s conceptual concerns surrounding justice and human dignity also continue to guide scholarship in disability theology. Seeking to turn toward a relational narration of Christian identity and personhood, theologians engaging the lives of people with IDD seek to critically re-narrate key theological loci including hospitality, friendship, and anthropology. Both expanding and challenging the foundational priorities of Eiesland, theologians focusing on IDD have offered these three primary frameworks for engaging disability: the imago Dei, friendship, and inclusion. Through the development of these three frameworks, theologians engaging IDD strive to reshape a Christian vision of what it means to be a human being and a disciple of Jesus, without a prioritization of human capacity, autonomy, and rationality.

The Invocation of the Image of God

“A lot of theological traditions begin with you are a wretched sinner. And I would say, oh, no, no, no. You haven’t read your Bible. You are beloved and you belong. You are a child and an image bearer of God.”

- Pastor John

In theological writings focused on issues surrounding IDD, the majority of authors explore the image of God as somehow normative for their theological claims. To varying degrees, these accounts of the imago Dei challenge and deconstruct assumptions of personhood contingent on the exercise of particular capacities, including autonomy and rationality. The careful attention to defining the imago Dei in disability theology attempts to turn from the notion of God’s image as intrinsically connected to an individual human

10 Unless otherwise attributed, select quotations throughout this chapter indicate contributions from participants in the qualitative research for this project.
capacity to “act as responsible stewards.” Instead, disability theologians frame people with IDD, and perhaps especially those with profound disabilities, as equal image bearers as non-disabled people. This equality in bearing the *imago Dei*, regardless of disability status, calls for practices of care, dignity, and respect.12

Stanley Hauerwas’s famous 1986 assertion provides one foundational example of engaging language of God’s image in theology concerning IDD: “God’s face is the face of the retarded, God’s body is the body of the retarded.”13 In this image, Hauerwas seeks to deconstruct notions of God as self-sufficient, inviting Christian worshippers and disciples to encounter a God who “needs people.” Erik Carter’s practical guide to ministry for and with people with disabilities, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, relies on “image of God” language and the associated “inestimable worth” of people with disabilities to encourage churches to cultivate membership of disabled people in their midst.14

These more general gestures to the image of God in disability theology find accompaniment by more detailed accounts of the *imago Dei* in the work of Amos Yong, Ben

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Conner, Tom Reynolds, Hans Reinders, Molly Haslam, Shane Clifton, and Pia Matthews. The following sections attend to the specific constructions of God’s image by these authors, and the connections between God’s image and their theological accounts of people with IDD.

**Amos Yong on God’s Image**

In *Theology and Down Syndrome*, Amos Yong argues for a “relational” view of the *imago Dei*. This understanding of God’s image seeks to move beyond structural (or substantive) perspectives - those that suggest God’s image consists of inherent human capacities that reflect characteristics of God (such as cognitive capabilities, responsibility, or morality). Yong’s relational vision of the *imago Dei* also diverges from a “functional” view of God’s image, which understands not only innate human capacities as a necessary component of imaging God, but also prioritizes participation in responsible dominion over non-human creation - the image of God manifests itself in what human creatures actually do. Yong’s concern regarding these frameworks for the *imago Dei* resides in the reality that many people with IDD do not possess these particular capacities or exercise these types of agency, and are therefore regarded, both historically and in the contemporary church, as somehow sub-human, or as an aberrance of what typically constitutes God’s image.

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15 Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 172.

16 Ibid., 173.
Yong’s shift to the relational view of God’s image emerges from reflection on the theology of Karl Barth. Yong points to three critical emphases in Barth’s theological anthropology to define his notion of the relational *imago Dei*: human creatures exist truly *only* in relationship to God, one’s self, and one’s neighbors; this relational nature of human beings is most clearly communicated in Scripture’s creation narratives where human creatures are created in God’s image “as male *and* female;”\(^{17}\) and finally, Scripture emphasizes Jesus’ status as “the image of the invisible God”\(^{18}\) – in Barthian language, “the consummate ‘man for others.’” For Yong, following Barth’s anthropological framework, Jesus is “the prototypical image of what it means for human beings to be created in the image of God.”\(^{19}\)

With this Christological focus, Yong proposes the following thesis about the relational nature of God’s image:

The *imago Dei* is less about some constitutive element of the human person and more about God’s revelation in Christ and in the faces of our neighbors; yet the life of Jesus provides a normative account of what it means to be human, and the Holy Spirit creatively enables and empowers our full humanity in relationship to ourselves, others, and God, even in the most ambiguous of situations.\(^{20}\)

Expanding Barth’s thought, Yong emphasizes the pneumatological elements of the image of God in each human life. What it means to live in the image of God, revealed truly in Jesus Christ, is constantly unveiled throughout the course of each human life, reliant on

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17 Genesis 1:26-27
18 Colossians 1:15
20 Ibid., 180-181.
the power of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{21} For Yong, the church constitutes the space in which human creatures might most carefully attend to this transformative work of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{22}

In \textit{The Bible, Disability, and the Church}, Yong further develops his relational framework for God’s image as a counter-narrative to the modern era’s prioritization of human individualization, autonomy, and capacity-defined personhood. Yong again defines the image of God as the person of Jesus Christ - over and against a notion of God’s image exemplified in extraordinarily capable human creatures (e.g. “Mr. And Mrs. Universe”).\textsuperscript{23} Yong’s Christological \textit{imago Dei}, focused through the hermeneutic of disability, hinges on: a) the risen Christ bearing the physical marks (or impairments) of the cross, and b) the impaired, crucified Christ overcoming the chasm threatening to separate people with disabilities from the church and the saving work of God.\textsuperscript{24}

From the perspective of the “normate biases” - what Yong defines as “the unexamined prejudices that non-disabled people have toward disability and toward people who have them”\textsuperscript{25} - the cross and the marks of the crucifixion that Jesus carries in his body are “defective.” In this way, Jesus departs from a “normate” and capacity-based vision of the

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 191.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 102.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 10.
imago Dei, witnessing through his post-resurrection scars to the presence of disability within the image of God.

Yong further develops his “disability Christology” through an engagement with 1 Corinthians 1:8-2:5 to illustrate how people with IDD might be participants in and reflections of God’s image. In this passage, Paul’s description of Jesus centrally highlights the foolishness of the cross in a world wedded to conventional senses of wisdom, capacity, and human merit (see especially 1 Corinthians 1:18: “for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God’). The cross of Jesus places “the weakness of God manifest in Christ and the cross” as central to our imaging of God (we are “incapacitated” to justify ourselves, “unable” to sanctify ourselves, and “powerless” to save ourselves). Yong’s Christological account of Jesus as God’s image illustrates how even people with profound experiences of disability might participate in displaying God’s image.

Ben Conner on God’s Image

In Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness: Exploring Missiology Through the Lens of Disability Studies, Ben Conner explores a theological re-imagination of Christian witness and mission

26 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

27 Yong, The Bible, Disability, and the Church, 102.
through engagement with the lived experiences and stories of disabled people. Conner understands Christian witness as “a response to a divine call to action in the service of human flourishing for the sake of the kingdom of God.” Conner specifically engages IDD in chapter four of his text, drawing upon Christian Orthodox theologies of mission, as well as a Christological and relational understanding of the *imago Dei* (following the work of Kathryn Tanner in *Christ the Key*), to support a theological anthropology inclusive of people with IDD. Conner writes, “I contend that our status as persons is more about our relationship to the One who makes us persons and the fact that God is acting toward us in a particular way than it is about discerning what a person is with reference to some thing or capacity that makes us persons.” Clarifying the Christological center of his perspective on God’s image, Conner further argues “divine agency, not human agency, is at the center of our capacity to participate in the image of God to bear witness.” Like Yong’s turn to the centrality of God’s power for establishing human imaging of God, Conner also prioritizes God’s agency to create an alternative narration of God’s image that does not overly rely on human merit.

Conner engages Christian Orthodox iconography as an embodiment of his vision for God’s image - an image not contingent on spoken language, but rather, fully reliant on

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29 Ibid., 112.

30 Ibid., 122.
the work of the Holy Spirit's divine agency. Conner describes icons as “Christocentric” - icons orient those who engage them toward Christ. In this way, “individual lives and narratives are submitted to a communal vision that has as its focal point Jesus Christ, Pantocrator.” Conner’s engagement with icons provides a thicker framework for his Christological and pneumatological vision of the imago Dei, deemphasizing a capacity-based and individualized account of anthropology, and instead centering Jesus, who all may image, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thomas Reynolds on God’s Image

Thomas Reynolds, in Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality, also centers a relational narration of the imago Dei. Reynolds understands God’s image as constituted by three key dimensions: human openness to creativity with others, relation to others, and availability for others. For Reynolds, the image of God both “marks and fosters a human imitation of God: the imago Dei as imitatio Dei.” Imaging God by imitating God requires actions that Reynolds envisions as equally accessible among people with IDD

31 Ibid., 124.
32 Ibid., 127.
33 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 179.
as well as non-disabled people: an openness to others, being in relation with human
neighbors, and finally, being available for others.

Like Yong and Conner, Reynolds rejects visions of God’s image that require humans
to possess particular characteristics, arguing,

The image of God in humankind is not a stable substance or identifiable trait
embedded in everyone so much as a dynamic correspondence to God that plays out
variously in relationship to other creatures. Indeed, it is an extension of God’s
creative relationship with the world. God invites participation in God’s own creative
activity, giving over to human beings the task of tending to the becoming world.\textsuperscript{36}

In this way, Reynolds suggests the deep interdependence of imaging God. Human creaturely
dependence upon God the Creator stirs an openness within human creatures to participate
in receiving God’s love and creativity. Reynolds also suggests that interdependence among
human creatures, in the context of mutually loving and vulnerable relationships, provides the
site where humans might be shaped in God’s image. Reynolds argues that because another
person bears the image of God, the other is always

…worthy of respect, fidelity, and compassion. Such insights do not emerge because
humans are autonomous, have the ability to use reason, or communicate through
language…they happen in a loving encounter with the other’s difference that
transpires in the context of a basic desire for God. Welcoming another is being in
relation to God, and being in relation to God means welcoming another.\textsuperscript{37}

In summary, Reynolds deconstructs notions of autonomy sustaining the framework for
God’s image and instead gestures toward hospitable welcoming, made alive in mutual, loving
encounter, as the basis of what it means to image God.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 180.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 185.
In addition to the prioritization of capacity-based anthropologies in many contemporary Western Christian communities, Reynolds also identifies the forces of sin as primary distorters of God’s image in human creatures, especially people with IDD. Instead of vulnerable, bidirectional, and hospitable relationship between human neighbors, Reynolds suggests that sin is an orientation of distrust in response to God’s welcome. This distrust results in disobedience to God marked by denying relationship with one’s neighbor and seeing the other as a threat rather than one created in God’s image. The corrupting power of sin twists visions of human identity toward finite goods of autonomy, rationality, and the use of spoken language—goods that are not consonant with a relational understanding of God’s image. Sin, therefore, working in and through Reynolds’s notion of the “cult of normalcy” (the prioritization of the attributes and capacities of “those people whose bodily appearance and abilities fall within a recognizably standard range”) distorts the image of God. This distortion leads to the failure of many non-disabled people in contemporary faith communities to understand the common identity they share with people with IDD. Subsequently, the forces of sin curb the participation of non-disabled people in practices of vulnerability, openness, creativity, and availability to people with IDD.

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38 Ibid., 188-192.
39 Ibid., 48.
Hans Reinders on God’s Image

In *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, Hans Reinders narrates a slightly different relationally-grounded notion of God’s image. Reinders argues that the *imago Dei* exists completely *external* to human creatures. God’s image is rooted in the Triune God’s community of love, which lovingly spills into the lives of human creatures as God’s children. For Reinders, it is the loving relationship of the Triune God to human creatures, rather than any human characteristic or capacity for reciprocal relationship with God and neighbor, that constitutes God’s image.40

Reinders contextualizes his claims about the *imago Dei*, and the overall trajectory of his argument, as seeking to provide an account that makes the humanity of people with multiple, profound intellectual disabilities “intelligible.”41 This goal of his scholarly project leads Reinders to emphasize that there can be no theologically faithful construction of human identity apart from the love of God.42 Any special status afforded to human creatures through the *imago Dei* springs from the love of God alone. This singularity and externality of God’s love grounds Reinders’s theological development of a framework for God’s image:

Nature cannot provide a firm grounding of what it is that makes our humanity special, nor can reason or history. It follows that, if there is anything significant about our existence, it can only be sustained if it is sustained extrinsically - that is, from elsewhere, through the love of God...only because of who God is, and what he does, can we understand our humanity in a way that sustains their [people with


41 Ibid., 31.

42 Ibid., 38.
profound IDD] humanity independent of the many and profound disabilities that characterize their lives. That is, their humanity, as well as our own, is grounded adequately only when grounded unconditionally.\textsuperscript{43}

The unconditional and external grounding of the imago Dei leads Reinders to critique other conceptions of the image of God. Reinders argues that the history of Christian theological thought on the imago Dei is at best ambiguous in its potential to include people living with profound IDD. For example, Reinders suggests that most contemporary Christians understand God’s image as a set of particular innate characteristics possessed by human creatures, instead of the result of God’s superabundant and unconditional community of Triune love. The theological trajectory initiated by Irenaeus of Lyon, in Reinders’s interpretation, identified the human mind as well as capacities for “symbolic language and discursive thought” as constitutive elements of imaging God.\textsuperscript{44} Reinders claims that both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas subsequently supported this conflation of “rational souls” and human capacity with God’s image.\textsuperscript{45} Through a re-working of theological anthropology, Reinders’s rooting of personhood entirely in the extrinsic relationship of unconditional love that the Triune God extends to human creatures seeks to decenter capacities and intellectual abilities as primary human identity markers.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 39.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 232.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 229.

\textsuperscript{46} Both Reinders’s interpretation of Aquinas, as well as his subsequent anthropological conclusions, have been met with significant resistance and critique, particularly among Roman Catholic theologians. The most thorough critique and counter-argument comes in Peter A. Comensoli’s \textit{In God’s Image: Recognizing the Profoundly Impaired as Persons}, ed. Nigel Zimmerman (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).
Like Yong, Reinders turns to Barth as a corrective to these capacity-oriented narrations of God’s image that do not make it possible to coherently narrate the full humanity of people with profound IDD. Reinders interprets Barth’s notion of the *imago Dei* as follows: “Barth identifies the divine image as the actuality rather than the potentiality of relation…thus the community in which human being is created is not grounded in a natural capacity preceding this togetherness but in the act of divine freedom.”

In this turn to Barth, Reinders raises a Christological emphasis in his account of God’s image: “true human nature is only visible for us…in its original uncorrupted form in Jesus Christ. Only in him we see that truly being human means being free for others.”

For Reinders, this freedom for the other is not a human capacity, but a relationship completely dependent and sustained in God’s love. To summarize and clarify his argument, Reinders interacts with the work of John Zizioulas in *Being as Communion*, arguing: “my being as imago Dei is not to be taken ontologically as a subsistent entity, but as a relationship that is ecstatically grounded in God’s loving kindness toward me.”

Reinders clarifies this assertion, writing, “theologically speaking, we are truly human because we are drawn into the communion with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

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47 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*, 239.

48 Ibid., 240.

49 Ibid., 273.

50 Ibid., 273.

51 Ibid., 274.
and unconditional welcome of all human creatures into the Trinity’s community of loving communion grounds Reinders’s vision of the *imago Dei* for all people, including those with profound disabilities. For Reinders, his turn to the externality of God’s love attempts to evacuate the necessity of human capacities from theological constructions of human personhood and identity.

As we will explore in the following major section, Reinders also narrates his understanding of the *imago Dei* as friendship with God. Because of God’s friendship with human beings, rooted in God’s love of human creatures despite our failures to respond to God’s loving call, human beings “exist truthfully in God’s friendship, regardless of abilities or disabilities.” God’s image narrated as God’s external and unconditional friendship for humanity provides the groundwork for Reinders’s emphasis on the pursuit of friendship between nondisabled people with those experiencing profound IDD.

**Molly Haslam on God’s Image**

In *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, Molly Haslam grounds her exploration of the theology of God’s image in a similar manner to Reinders: Haslam seeks to provide an understanding of the *imago Dei* that is ultimately “life-giving” for people with profound IDD. Haslam critiques the accounts of God’s image

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52 Ibid.

found in Yong and Reynolds, primarily in their failures to attend to theologies of God’s image specifically inclusive of people with profound IDD.

Haslam’s primary critique in response to Yong’s account of the *imago Dei* suggests that even in Yong’s relational model, one must possess the ability to conceive of oneself as a self, and to subsequently act with intention in the world. For Haslam, these necessities in Yong’s theology of God’s image constitute “agential capacities,” suggesting the requirement to possess some kind of individualized notion of agency. According to Haslam, this kind of agency proves unattainable for people with profound IDD, disqualifying Yong’s understanding of God’s image from applicability to the lives of people with experiences of profound disability.

Haslam levels a similar critique of Reynolds’s relational view of the *imago Dei*, affirming Reynolds’s turn to mutual vulnerability, but rejecting his notion that “we image God in our capacity to respond to God and others” through some kind of capacity for “self-conscious” acknowledgement of the other.54 This capacity for some kind of self-consciousness, Haslam claims, disqualifies people with profound IDD from participation in imaging God, or at least does so without further clarification from Reynolds on how this self-consciousness of mutual vulnerability, availability, and openness functions among people without the capacity for individualized “agential” participation in the world.

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54 Ibid., 4.
Haslam next turns to Reinders’s account of the *imago Dei*. Haslam agrees with Reinders’s step “beyond” a purely relational account of imaging God, however, she takes issue with Reinders’s external grounding of human relationship, that is, his exclusive grounding of imaging God in the unconditional love of the Trinity. Haslam interprets Reinders’s theological move here as constituting human being in an entirely passive construction. This is troubling to Haslam on two counts: first, if human creatures passively receive God’s agential gift of love, “in what way does human passivity image this divine agency?” For Haslam, a passive imaging of an active God presents a theological inconsistency in need of clarification. Second, Haslam suggests Reinders’s emphasis on the externality of God’s love as the foundation for the image of God creates a problematic “cosmological dualism” that cannot comport with theologies that espouse “a modern concept of the universe.” In this critique, Haslam questions whether or not Reinders’s understanding of God’s image can resonate with theologians committed to an understanding of “God in this-worldly terms.” For Haslam, Reinders’s framework does not adequately attend to relational realities between human neighbors, human embodiment, and God’s solidarity with all of Creation as exemplified in the Incarnation.

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55 Ibid., 8.
56 Ibid., 8-9.
57 Ibid., 9.
58 Ibid.
Building on these critiques, but in solidarity with other scholarly attempts to “move away from a substantialist view toward a relational understanding of the human being,” Haslam offers her alternative vision for the *imago Dei*:

Rather than turn ‘inside’ and ground our concept of human being in a particular capacity, or rather than turn ‘outside’ the human being and construct a theological anthropology based on the movement of the other toward us, I suggest that we employ a more holistic understanding of the God/world relation. With the help of Martin Buber’s dialogical thought, I suggest that we locate our understanding of human being not on one or the other side of the subject/object dichotomy but in the realm of the ‘in between.’ We find our humanity in relationships of mutual responsiveness, in which individuals with profound intellectual disabilities participate as responders, albeit in nonsymbolic, nonagential ways.\(^{59}\)

In her thesis, Haslam centers the active responses of people with profound disabilities, but clarifies that these responses are not marked by common human capacities - namely, symbolic communication. Rather, a mutual responsiveness constitutes Haslam’s vision for the *imago Dei*: “the imago Dei in human being is a relational concept that involves participation in the meeting between responsive partners.”\(^{60}\) For Haslam, this notion of responsiveness includes both symbolic and non-symbolic modes of response, making imaging of God accessible to people with even the most profound IDD. Haslam uses the example of “Chan” to illustrate and support her responsive portrait of God’s image. Chan is a man with profound IDD who does not speak, but who demonstrates nonsymbolic responses to his environment and neighbors through perceptible actions such as shifting his attention and sustained visual engagement.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 104.
More specifically, Haslam suggests that human beings image God through response as an expression of “longing.” For Haslam, response as an expression of longing (whether symbolic or nonsymbolic) parallels God’s character and being - the very “longing that God is.”¹⁶¹ Departing from the work of Yong, Reynolds, and Reinders, Haslam does not narrate the image of God in Christological, pneumatological, or Trinitarian terms. In this regard, her unique account is perhaps easily challenged by historical Christian theological interpretations of scripture related to God’s image.¹⁶²

Shane Clifton on God’s Image

In Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics, and the Good Life, Shane Clifton engages IDD from a multi-faceted framework for understanding the imago Dei. While Clifton affirms the traditional association of God’s image “with rationality and morality,”¹⁶³ he offers other, co-existing visions of God’s image. The “multiple ways of understanding the image of God” include a “teleological” viewpoint: “Christ is God’s image and we are being transformed into his likeness (Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18).”¹⁶⁴ Clifton also includes a “functional” view of the imago Dei, looking to Genesis 1:26-28 to identify human beings as those creatures who

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 110.

¹⁶² See Genesis 1:26-27, 9:6; John 14:9; 1 Corinthians 15:49; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15-17, 3:10.

¹⁶³ Shane Clifton, Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics, and the Good Life (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 153.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.
image God primarily through “dominion” or “designated responsibility” over the whole of God’s good creation.\textsuperscript{65}

Clifton suggests that these multiple valences of God’s image do not compete with one another, but instead complement each other. Just as Clifton argues to retain reason, will, and individual moral agency as important (but not necessary) components of human identity, he resists a framework for the \textit{imago Dei} that provides only a “single category of relationality” and instead champions a multi-vocal understanding of God’s image. These multiple valences of the \textit{imago Dei} provide different ways to participate in imaging God for different human creatures, especially those who live with significant impairments of intellectual capabilities.\textsuperscript{66}

\textit{Pia Matthews on God’s Image}

A final account of God’s image emerges in Pia Matthews’s text \textit{Pope John Paul II and the Apparently ‘Non-Acting’ Person}. In parallel with other theologians engaging IDD and in contrast to Clifton’s account, Matthews moves away from capacity and ability-based constructions of anthropology and God’s image. Interpreting the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, Matthews explores sermons and other materials to sketch anthropological claims rooted in the thought of John Paul II: “all human beings have the same dignity regardless of

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
their abilities. We have this dignity because ‘when God turns his gaze on man, the first thing he sees and loves in him is not the deeds he succeeds in doing, but his own image.’

Matthews explores Karol Wojtyla’s theological thought prior to his papacy, drawing attention to his priority of “being over activity.” Wojtyla, according to Matthews, draws upon the creation story to emphasize the dignity of each human creature, over and against accounts of God’s image as rooted in the activities or merits of any particular person. Matthews also summarizes later thought from John Paul II on God’s image as a gift - an understanding of the imago Dei that people with IDD exemplify. Matthews argues for this exemplification in the following way:

The significance of each and every human being as an image of God indicates that every person present him or herself as a gift to others and nowhere is such a gift more complete than where a person entrusts him or herself to another in total dependency on that other person, where a person makes a gift of his or her humanity.

The gift of being as central to the imago Dei calls attention to the vocation of all human persons as “co-laborers in the vineyard” - if for no other reason than their participation in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, the crucified redeemer. Matthews interprets John Paul II’s theology of God’s image as radically dependent - human intellect and action cannot achieve

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67 Pope John Paul II, “Mentally Ill Are Also Made in God’s Image” in L’osservatore Romano (11 December 1996). Quoted in Pia Matthews, Pope John Paul II and the Apparently ‘Non-Acting’ Person (Leominster, United Kingdom: Gracewing, 2013), xiii.

68 Pia Matthews, Pope John Paul II and the Apparently ‘Non-Acting’ Person (Leominster, United Kingdom: Gracewing, 2013), 55.

69 Ibid., 71.

70 Ibid., 146.
or sustain the life of discipleship. In the Holy Spirit, those who live with profound disabilities demonstrate the gift of this dependent discipleship - a vision of what it truly means to live in the image of God.\textsuperscript{71}

The Friendship Framework

The common theme of relationality among accounts of the \textit{imago Dei} in disability theology suggests the need for further development of themes regarding relationship in connection to IDD. We now turn to how various disability theologians narrate the vulnerable, loving, and bidirectional friendship between human beings with and without IDD, as well as between human creatures and God.

\textit{Stanley Hauerwas on Friendship}

Stanley Hauerwas’s theological and ethical reflections on IDD throughout the past three decades offer an initial turn to friendship as an important framework for thinking theologically about IDD. Many of Hauerwas’s later reflections on disability arise out of engagement with the thought of Jean Vanier, as well as Hauerwas’s own experiences visiting L’Arche communities around the world. In his essay “Timeful Friends: Living with the Handicapped,” Hauerwas emphasizes the witness of people with IDD as an affirmation that it is in relationships of friendship where Christian communities can affirm there is no need

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 250.
to justify the existence of the “mentally handicapped.” “Friends need no justification.”

For Hauerwas, friendships anchor L’Arche communities, providing a key teaching he sees as vital for all Christians: receiving our neighbors, with or without disabilities, constitutes a gift that frees us for timeful relationships of grace, care, and presence. Friendship constitutes the context and the ongoing practice in which Christians may continually receive their neighbors as a gift. For Hauerwas, L’Arche communities, especially core members, witness to this central reality of Christian life and discipleship.

**Hans Reinders on Friendship**

Reinders expands upon Hauerwas’s framework of friendship for theological reflection on IDD. Reinders approaches friendship through the frame of theological anthropology and ethics, demonstrating how friendship with God constitutes human identity and dignity. For Reinders, the Triune God’s external and unconditional loving welcome of human creatures is constitutive of the *imago Dei*, and the proper response to this loving relationship with God is both friendship with God and human neighbors, including people with profound IDD.

In introducing his work, Reinders lauds the disability rights movement in their effectiveness in promoting disabled people as equal citizens across many parts of the globe.

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73 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*, 4.
However, Reinders also laments that the disability rights movement has not achieved resolution of the widespread isolation and loneliness particularly among people with IDD. Reinders claims, “disabled people are rarely chosen as friends, except by other disabled people.” In response to these realities, Reinders suggests a turn toward friendship as one practice that allows for the “blessing of intimacy” among people with IDD, especially profound manifestations of disability. Reinders illustrates how the virtue and practice of friendship, especially among nondisabled people and people with profound IDD, renders the possibility of fully acknowledging and celebrating the humanity of people with profound disabilities, by creating a community where these friendships are evident and sustained.

Reinders points to the “culturally dominant conceptions of what it means to be human,” notably self-determination, individualization, and “purposive agency” as thoroughly capacity-based and therefore typically exclusive of people living with profound IDD. For Reinders, moving toward teleological reorientation of human flourishing reveals that belonging, rather human cognitive capacities, constitutes the “good life.” Cultivating this sense of belonging “does not depend on choice but on being chosen. Therefore it is more properly found in relationships with friends than within the family.” Friendship constitutes

74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 6.
76 Ibid., 89.
77 Ibid., 129.
“the ultimate good of being human.” Reinders’s assertion here moves friendship (and specifically friendship that does not depend on a notion of purposive human agency, but rather “being chosen”) as a universally applicable framework for the ultimate good of human life. This teleological re-orientation toward friendship roots human dignity and identity in being received, rather than identity based in some kind of particular capacity.

Reinders turns to Christian theology in order to further establish friendship as the foundation of a theological anthropology robustly inclusive of people with profound IDD. In light of the reality that God chooses to befriend human beings, Reinders claims that “friendship with our fellow creatures” becomes the core vocation of Christians. A Trinitarian understanding of God’s nature and the reality of God’s unconditional love for human creatures establishes God’s relationship of friendship with human beings. Reinders highlights the Incarnation as the expression of this triune and unconditional love - “God’s graceful action toward us in Christ.” God’s unconditional love as the foundation of God’s friendship with all human beings constitutes the “one condition” necessary for human life and flourishing. Reinders argues that this common human identity presses us to celebrate difference in friendship - difference “can be celebrated only because it has no theological

78 Ibid., 131-132.
79 Ibid., 132.
80 Ibid., 162.
81 Ibid., 224.
82 Ibid., 283.
significance: in the eyes of God, human beings are equally worthy of his loving kindness, no matter what differences the bodies of these human beings may exhibit." This theological vision of difference understands friendship as a gift. Interacting with the theology of Paul Wadell, Reinders affirms that the Holy Spirit enables human participation in this gift of divine friendship, as well as friendship with other human beings. This participation does not emerge out of some kind of capacity, but rather, is sustained by God’s action and love from the very beginning to the very end.

Seeking to make concrete his theological claims about the gift of friendship, Reinders suggests that the gift and vocation of people with profound IDD is a witness of “how to receive” the ultimate good of human life: belonging manifested in friendship. Reinders describes this gift of people with profound IDD as a witness emerging from their participation in God’s friendship:

First, they participate in the freedom of being who they are and what they are without any need for further justification. Second, they participate in God’s friendship in that they reap the fruits of the friendship we extend to them insofar as we know how to have ourselves transformed by their presence in our lives.

Reinders’s argument suggests not only a theological foundation for thinking about anthropology and identity in light of God’s friendship with human beings; Reinders also

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83 Ibid., 284.
84 Ibid., 301.
85 Ibid., 321.
86 Ibid., 349.
impresses upon his readers a call toward transformation - learning how to receive from the witnessed lives of people with profound disabilities, and in return for those without profound disabilities, a call to love and welcome those with profound IDD in practices of friendship.

Jason Greig on Friendship

Like Reinders, Jason Greig highlights the practical and communal implications of friendship in his text *Reconsidering Intellectual Disability: L'Arche, Medical Ethics, and Christian Friendship*. Greig’s turn toward friendship emerges from his treatment of Christian bioethics, with a particular analysis of the “Ashley X” case - a young child with profound IDD who in 2004 received a combination of treatments aimed at prematurely ceasing her physical growth and puberty. 87 Greig laments the instrumentalization and reductive accounts of Ashley’s body and offers instead a narration of Ashley as a friend - a child of God with a body which is a “sacramentally endowed gift.” 88 Greig’s vision of Ashley as a friend follows Jean Vanier’s notion of friendship as an open and mutually transformational relationship that offers hospitality to all people, regardless of disability. 89 For Greig, Vanier’s vision of friendship

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89 Ibid., 5.
finds its roots in the Christian telos of friendship with God, as well as an ecclesiology that understands the church as a community of friends. The church as a “community of friends” grounds Greig’s notion of anthropology: rather than defining identity on capacity or achievement, Greig understands being human as “a gift granted by God within the relationships in the community of the church.”

Following Reinders, Greig’s account begins with the prevenience of God’s friendship with human creatures, exemplified in what Greig calls “the Trinity’s radical friend-making mission.” Greig develops this vision of friendship through an analysis of Jesus’ friendship with his disciples. These friendships rooted in philia - Christian love exemplified in friendship – appear in an especially prominent way throughout the gospel of John. In addition, Greig considers “receiving” and “availability” as pillars of Christian friendship - two abilities often possessed by people with profound IDD, who can in turn witness to the church both friendship and receptivity to the work of the Holy Spirit.

For Greig, the church as a community of friends requires a politics of dependence. This dependency at the core of Christian ecclesial communities creates space for friendship

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90 Ibid., 7.
91 Ibid., 8.
92 Ibid., 10.
93 Ibid., 116.
94 Ibid., 135.
95 Ibid., 170.
with people like Ashley - those with profound cognitive impairments.\textsuperscript{96} In this way, Christian friendship offers a counter-narrative to modern medical conceptions of the bodies of people with profound IDD who are often portrayed as “pathological objects.” In contrast, the economy of ecclesial dependency publicly proclaims people with profound IDD as friends, engaged in relationships of mutuality in a community of people committed to hospitality of the stranger.\textsuperscript{97}

In Greig’s assessment, L’Arche communities exemplify the commitments to friendship that sustain any meaningful theology of IDD. Greig argues that in L’Arche communities, “the human \textit{telos} as friendship with God means that friendship becomes a normative mode of relationality.”\textsuperscript{98} Greig’s theocentric understanding of friendship shifts the priority of anthropological commitments from autonomy to God’s grace.\textsuperscript{99} With this renewed anthropological vision rooted in friendship, Greig lifts up L’Arche communities as places where reciprocal teaching and learning can emerge from people with and without IDD, in the context of shared life, celebrations, meals, foot washing, and mutual dependency.

\textit{Shane Clifton on Friendship}

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 213.
In Clifton’s chapter on IDD in his work on disability and virtue ethics, he advocates for the important place of friendship among nondisabled people and people with IDD.\textsuperscript{100} Clifton pragmatically asserts that friendship between people with IDD and those who are non-disabled can address unmet “practical and psychosocial needs” among people with IDD who experience some of the greatest levels of isolation and loneliness in contemporary Western societies.\textsuperscript{101} Clifton also highlights the bidirectional good of friendship in what he names the cultivation of “disabled intimacy.”\textsuperscript{102} Clifton defines this intimacy as unmasking “the tedium of the status quo,” revealing the beauty found in deep interdependence, vulnerable sharing of emotions, laughter, and a bidirectional sense of “being needed and loved.”\textsuperscript{103} These marks of disabled intimacy, Clifton argues, can be engaged by people with IDD through their exercise of “independent moral agency.”\textsuperscript{104} It is unclear from Clifton’s account if people experiencing profound disabilities can exercise this “independent moral agency,” though Clifton stresses that nondisabled people must remain agnostic to the functioning of “independent moral agency” among people with profound IDD, as nondisabled people lack the skills to evaluate “a person’s reasoning capacities if they are

\textsuperscript{100} Clifton, \textit{Crippled Grace}, 155.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 157.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 141.
unable to communicate in ways that we recognize.” Following this assertion, Clifton stresses that the presence of profound disability and impairment itself does not provide grounds for dismissal of one’s humanity.

John Swinton on Friendship

In the article “Whose Story Am I? Redescribing Profound Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of God,” John Swinton, with Harriet Mowat and Susannah Baines, traces the role of friendship as a key framework for theologizing IDD. While this article engages research emerging from a specific project among people with profound IDD and their carers in the framework of person-centered planning, Swinton also draws upon his earlier work on the theological importance of friendship in relationship to people with mental health challenges (Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Severe Mental Health Problems). In “Whose Story Am I?, “ Swinton considers anew the role of friendship and storied personhood to bring forth more faithful stories about people with profound IDD. Instead of stories that focus on the limitations and negative portrayals of disability, friendship creates a space where new stories of the personhood of people with IDD can emerge.

At the conclusion of the article, Swinton, Mowat, and Baines define disciples as “those friends of Jesus who are charged to live out and to tell different stories about the

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105 Ibid., 154.
106 Ibid.
How does this definition of discipleship and friendship concern people with IDD? The authors point to the Incarnation as the pattern and foundation for Christian friendship. Within these friendships, marked by deep listening and faithful ways of storytelling about personhood, the authors claim we see marks of the Incarnation:

God in Jesus enters into friendships with human beings who are radically unlike God's self. In so doing God lays down a principle of grace that forms the pattern for friendships that claim to be genuinely Christian; friendships that reach towards, embrace and are embraced by those whom society considers to be least like “us.”

In this framework, the authors note that Christian friendship provides one context in which people, both with and without disabilities, can most faithfully encounter God.

In this incarnational view of friendship, Swinton, Mowat, and Baines refocus how the narratives of people with profound IDD might shift from highlighting their lack of autonomy to instead creating a space for the emergence of new counternarratives that “honor, respect and listen to people who have no words but who have much to say.” The incarnational encounter of friendship between a person with IDD and someone else unveils personhood as a state of dependent-independence - a reworking of autonomy where “we need one another in order to be autonomous and to sustain autonomy.” In other words,

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108 Ibid.

109 Ibid., 15.

110 Ibid., 11.

111 Ibid., 12.
our gifts to this world never emerge purely from autonomy and independence. Rather, as the authors exemplify in the story of Mary (a woman with profound disabilities who participates in Quaker worship meetings), spirituality “is something she shares in; it is an experience that rises beyond her; an experience that happens in the space between the members of the community: the space of meeting.” Friendship constitutes this holy and indispensable place of meeting in which God’s love is encountered and stories of identity are transformed from isolated individualism to stories of following Jesus together. For Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, friendship offers an invitation to listen carefully to people with profound IDD as sources of wisdom about Christian counternarratives of identity.

Continuing the theme of learning to tell new stories of discipleship among people with profound IDD, Swinton offers a dual account of friendship both with time as well as with people with profound intellectual disabilities in his most recent book-length work, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship*. Swinton argues that Christians faithfully respond to God’s good gift of time through practices marked by timefull discipleship: a slow, gentle, and peaceable way of being. Relationships between nondisabled people and people experiencing profound IDD exemplify one means of encountering a “different mode of time and experience, a mode of time that is personal, present, deep, loving, caring, and timefull.” For Swinton, becoming friends with time as a

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112 Ibid., 14.

113 John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 47.
Slow and gentle gift from God is exemplified in L’Arche communities, where people with and without IDD live together and become friends through slowness, gentleness, and timefullness. Swinton, along with Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, offers further comments on L’Arche communities as exemplifying the kind of gentle relationship with time that emerges from friendship in their book *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*. The slowness of time and sharing of physical presence witnessed to in L’Arche communities demonstrates the power of friendship as a theological category and lived reality among people with IDD. Vanier writes, “the heart of L’Arche is to say to people, ‘I am glad you exist.’ And the proof that we are glad that they exist is that we stay with them for a long time. We are together, we can have fun together. ‘I am glad you exist’ is translated into physical presence.” This physical presence as a manifestation of friendship is sustained by eating, praying, and celebrating together.

Building on these reflections on friendship in his book on time, Swinton emphasizes how friendships between people with and without disabilities reveal critical lessons about the nature of discipleship. Swinton writes,

> The body of Christ is a place of embodied learning wherein the presence of profoundly intellectually impaired people reminds the Body of the necessity and responsibility of revealing the love of God through the practices of love, practices that are not exhausted by the world that the intellect reveals.

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114 Ibid., 73-74.


116 Ibid., 37.

Swint on engages the theme of friendship in his theology of IDD as a critical way that the church might faithfully enlarge and expand its notion of discipleship - what it means to follow Jesus in a rhythm of slow, deliberate love.

**Ben Conner on Friendship**

In *Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities*, Ben Conner also engages friendship as a central practice for understanding the *imago Dei* and enlivening Christian faith communities in their engagement of youth with IDD. One of Conner’s primary theses in the book suggests that a faithful response to the lives of adolescents with IDD is the creation of spaces in ministry settings that support the development and sustaining of “durable friendships.”\(^{118}\) Conner understands these friendships as one important way of enacting mission theology:

> A kind of practical theology that explores in every aspect of the theological curriculum, and praxis of the church the implications of the missionary nature of God with the purpose of forming congregations to better articulate the gospel and to live faithfully their vocation to participate in the ongoing redemptive mission of God in a particular context.\(^{119}\)

For example, Conner’s affirmation of God’s image as a relationally-rooted reality, rather than a particular form of human rationality, must manifest itself in a “practice-centered approach

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\(^{119}\) Ibid., 17.
to discipleship.”120 The practice most faithful to this vision of God’s image, for Conner, is friendship.

In response to the witness of being in relationship with young people with IDD, Conner envisions friendship as sacramental, rooted in election and call, and participatory. Dialoging with Barth’s notion of human neighbors as sacramentally significant, Conner suggests that encounters with fellow human neighbors are inherently sacramental - the grace of God can be mediated to us through our neighborly relations.121 In addition to the sacramental nature of friendships, Conner reflects (in parallel to Reinders’s theology of friendship) on God’s election of human creatures as God’s friends - “irrespective of our worth.”122 This reality of God’s extension of friendship in the doctrine of election presses on nondisabled people to initiate friendships with those with IDD - not out of a sense of pity or duty, but rather in celebration and reflection of God’s unconditional choosing of all human creatures for friendship.123

Finally, Conner envisions friendship as rooted in connected participation.124 Conner’s notion of “durable friendship” suggests the cultivation of mutual relationships that create increased opportunities for consistent connection between disabled and non-disabled peers.

120 Ibid., 38.
121 Ibid., 43-44.
122 Ibid., 47.
123 Ibid., 46.
124 Ibid., 48.
Conner comments on the difficulty of this kind of friendship for adolescents with IDD without the appropriate supports - hence, the necessity of non-disabled people in facilitating environmental factors that might support sustained participation among adolescents with IDD in these friendships. Specific examples of cultivating these spaces of participation and connection include mindfulness toward any specific dietary needs of adolescents with IDD, assisting adolescents with IDD in hygiene and toileting when appropriate, and finally, navigating realities of different understandings of humor. Conner’s account highlights the responsibility on non-disabled people to facilitate environmental accommodations to support the flourishing of friendships with people with IDD.

The Inclusion Paradigm

“Doing church isn't about perfection. It's about inclusion and about experience together. And it doesn't have to be a perfect thing.” – Anna

Frameworks of access and inclusion, often as they intersect with considerations of God’s image and practices of friendship, constitute another major category in theological reflection on IDD. In their embrace of the inclusion paradigm, practitioners from a diversity of fields, including ministry settings, special education, and practical theology, provide a helpful pastoral and practical focus in their theologies of IDD. These scholars expand and interact with Reinders’s claim about the nature of inclusion for people with IDD: “to live a human life, properly so called, [people with IDD] must not merely be included in our

125 Ibid., 58.
institutions and have access to our public spaces; they must also be included in other people’s lives, not only by natural, familial necessity but by choice.”

Theologians who engage an inclusion paradigm in response to IDD help suggest modes of formation that allow communities to imagine new emphases for human identity and take up new practices of radical welcome in response to the presence of people with IDD.

**Erik Carter on Inclusion**

Working from a background in special education, Erik Carter exemplifies the prioritization of an inclusion paradigm in his book of pastoral and practice guidelines, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*. In his chapter specifically addressing issues of inclusion, Carter suggests the following strategies for more fully engaging disability in faith communities: acknowledging and engaging disability from the pulpit, including disability-focused events or accommodations in written or electronic weekly bulletins, providing disability-specific information about a faith community through flyers or electronic means, and facilitating conversations on disability with clergy and lay leaders in a faith community. Carter further contextualizes this inclusive approach, arguing that leaders in faith communities ought to “frame conversations about inclusion within the language of

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126 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*, 5.

theology, scriptures, values, purpose, and call so that people understand why this vision is one worth attaching themselves to.\textsuperscript{128}

Carter’s background in education is reflected in his attention to inclusion within religious education programs as well as his emphasis on the importance of collaboration with service providers and other community allies who might support faith communities in developing increasingly welcoming contexts for disabled people.\textsuperscript{129} Carter also seeks to empower leaders in faith communities to serve as inclusivity advocates for people with disabilities, particularly IDD, in order to educate and work with non-church professionals in meeting the spiritual needs of disabled people. For Carter, this practice of inclusivity with regard to the spiritual needs of people with IDD fills a critical gap in contemporary faith communities.\textsuperscript{130}

\textit{Jill Harshaw on Inclusion}

Expanding on Carter’s pragmatic approach to issues of inclusion among people with IDD in faith settings, other scholars in disability theology provide more focused theological accounts within the inclusion paradigm. In \textit{God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experience of People with Intellectual Disability}, Jill Harshaw acknowledges the important

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 62-63.
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\textsuperscript{129} A similar approach derived from the inclusion paradigm of special education can be found in Barbara Newman’s work, with her attention to cultivating environments where people with disabilities, especially IDD, might grow more faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ. See Barbara J. Newman, \textit{Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship} (Wyoming, MI: CLC Network, 2015), 3.
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\textsuperscript{130} Carter, \textit{Including People with Disabilities}, 151.
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contribution of the lives of people with IDD in the church as they have shaped theological discourse on the *imago Dei*. However, Harshaw argues that development of this area of theological reflection has not adequately been matched by theological reflection on inclusion, evidenced in part by the need for greater attention to inclusion in the practices of the church. Harshaw also highlights the heightened attention to friendship frameworks in theological work on IDD, not doubting the overall benefits of these theological accounts, but noting that they fail to seriously attend to the relationship of people with IDD to God (not just other human neighbors). Stressing the inadequacy of both the *imago Dei* and friendship models to attend faithfully to the lived experiences of people with IDD, including those with profound disabilities, Harshaw argues:

Asserting their [people with IDD] equality as those who should be included within and contribute to the life of ecclesial communities is vital but it does not go far enough. Valuing and reflecting on their humanity intrinsically requires us to give attention to their capacity to enjoy a meaningful relationship with God in the face of those who would deny it.

Harshaw’s intentional engagement of an inclusion framework focuses her overarching argument about the inclusivity and accessibility of God: “ultimately, it is not human


132 Ibid.

133 Ibid., 52.

134 Ibid.
incapacity in any form that matters, but God’s infinite capacity to accommodate his revelation to it.”

**Jennie Weiss Block on Inclusion**

In *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*, Jennie Weiss Block shares with Harshaw a commitment to an inclusion paradigm, appealing to scripture to argue that the “mandate for access and inclusion is biblically based, central to our baptismal promise and commitment, rooted in the Triune God.” With a theocentric and scriptural commitment to inclusion at the heart of her work, Block embraces a liberationist approach to re-imagining practices of radical hospitality and welcome for people with IDD in Christian faith communities, primarily through an address of anthropological commitments, as well as issues of embodiment, spirituality, and social justice.

Block envisions the Bible’s witness against the “chronic exclusion” in ecclesial settings of people who experience disability as an invitation to embrace practices of inclusion, reflective of a “theology of access.” Block’s central image for churches that

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135 Ibid., 117. Harshaw illustrates this central claim by turning to historical theological accounts of the sacraments, the Scriptural witness to the accommodative work of the Holy Spirit (particularly in Acts 10-11), as well as the tradition of Christian mysticism, as supports for her arguments of the inclusive and accommodating nature of the Triune God.


137 Ibid., 84.

138 Ibid., 115.

139 Ibid., 120.
embrace this “theology of access” are communities of hosting. Practices of inclusivity, for Block, are constitutive and indispensable for Christian churches, as grounded in Paul’s theology of community and affirmed in baptismal promises: “the church as the Body of Christ is the quintessential inclusive community, where Jesus Christ, the one who is always identified as the outsider, presides as the copious host. We are called, through our baptism, to be his co-hosts.” Block envisions this kind of hospitable community as reliant upon shared vulnerability, as enacted in “genuine friendships” among people with and without disabilities. These friendships witness against “the values of modernity such as independence, individuality, and rationality.” In this way, Block’s concluding vision for Christian faith communities combines her emphasis on inclusion with the framework of friendship.

**Kathy Black on Inclusion**

Kathy Black, in *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*, offers reflections on homiletical practices of inclusion, in the face of “the theological and attitudinal barriers” against people experiencing disability “enforced through the interpretation of healing texts in the preaching event.” Black’s disability hermeneutic draws from the inclusion paradigm,

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140 Ibid., 132.
141 Ibid., 158.
142 Ibid., 161.
evidenced by her commitment to scripture’s witness to the liberation of Jesus’ acts of healing. For Black, Jesus’ acts of healing primarily proclaim “incorporation back into communities.”

After recounting typical responses to realities of disability in Scripture, primarily in the mode of theodicy (e.g. God’s will displayed as punishment for sin or an opportunity for redemptive suffering), Block frames her own response to these texts as a “theology of interdependence.” Inclusive communities who take up this theology of interdependence offer a bold witness “in the midst of a culture that highly values independence that sets us apart.” Embracing the presence of people with IDD in Christian faith communities, through acts of welcome and inclusion, helps cultivate and sustain a new vision of personhood based on presence and being, rather than economic productivity.

Black explores the practice of preaching, particularly in relationship to stories of Jesus’ healings in the New Testament, as one important avenue to sustain church communities marked by interdependent inclusivity. In her chapter on leprosy and chronic illness (examining the healing narratives in Mark 1:40-45, Luke 17:11-19, and Mark 5:25-34), Black’s “healing hermeneutic” focuses on how inclusion of people with disabilities

\[144\] Ibid., 12.
\[145\] Ibid., 23.
\[146\] Ibid., 34.
\[147\] Ibid., 42.
\[148\] Ibid.
challenges “the unwritten symbolic codes established by faith communities that label certain behaviors as sinful and some states of being as ‘unclean’ and therefore not fit for the holy sphere.”\footnote{Ibid., 140.} In other words, embracing a paradigm of inclusion, exemplified in practices of preaching, opens opportunities for the witness of disabled people to shape communities toward interdependence and liberation. Without a core commitment to inclusion among faith communities, Black suggests that embracing a theology of interdependence becomes impossible.

Body and Sacrament as Minor Themes in Theological Reflection on IDD

“Baptism is a reminder and confirmation that we are bodily. And that we are not just souls. There’s water. And there’s people. And we touch the water in some way. And so that is a reminder that God created us human with bodies.” – Randy

Throughout disability theology focused on IDD, invocations of the body, as well as engagement with Christian practices, such as the sacraments, are commonplace. However, as we will see, these subjects are often engaged in a brief excursus or the re-telling of an anecdote. They may also be invoked in a more conceptual register, potentially leaving readers to draw independent conclusions regarding the application of scholarly theological reflection for transformation within faith communities. In this section, I trace the connections of themes of the body and Christian sacramental practices to theologies of IDD, especially as they intersect with core themes of the imago Dei, friendship, and inclusion.
Next, I turn to accounts of IDD (primarily in essay or chapter forms) that explicitly engage baptism as a central locus for Christian theological reflection. At the conclusion of this survey of Christian disability theology engaging IDD through the lens of baptism, I draw attention to under-investigated areas where expansion is needed.

Gestures Toward the Body in Theologies of IDD

In connection to the friendship framework, Swinton consistently appeals to the body as an important site for both theological reflection and lived discipleship. Reflecting on intellectual disability and friendship, Swinton writes,

Friendships towards others is the place where we meet God. The full revelation of love requires bodies and not just words. *The theology of disability draws our attention to the importance of ‘body proclamation’ and what that might look and feel like. If this is so, even the most intellectually disabled person has access to God in Jesus via the practice of friendship as they are offered by and through the Christian community.*

In his later work, Swinton also points to the body as necessary to portraying the fullness of discipleship: bodies constitute “the places through which we come to know the world” and how we also come to know Jesus. Swinton's account of the body in connection to IDD does not discount the intellectual aspects of discipleship embraced by many followers of Jesus, but rather seeks to illustrate a fuller picture of Christ’s Body and practices of discipleship:

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150 Swinton, "Who is the God We Worship?,” 306.

Embodied ways of being in the world do not provide better or worse experiences. They are just different. They may seem better or worse if one resides in a culture that prioritizes certain ways of being in the world, but they are not. It is only when all of these experiences as they are manifested within the body of Christ are recognized, re-membered, explored, respected, and shared that the fullness of what it means to know Jesus can begin to come to the fore. The discipleship of people with profound and complex intellectual disabilities is not a poor approximation of the discipleship of others within the body. Quite the opposite, it is a revelation of the fullness and the diversity of the God who calls each one of us within Christ’s body and gives us a vocation. The body of Christ is a place of embodied learning wherein the presence of profoundly intellectually impaired people reminds the Body of the necessity and responsibility of revealing the love of God through the practices of love, practices that are not exhausted by the world that the intellect reveals.\textsuperscript{152}

Swinton highlights 1 Corinthians 6:19 - Paul’s description of the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit - as deeply significant for discipleship and a turn toward the bodies of people with intellectual limitations, whether minimal or profound, as not only a basis for practices of discipleship, but the ground for friendship between people with and without IDD.

Greig also turns to the body as an important category in theologies of IDD. Specifically, Greig envisions the body and embodied experience as a critical site of producing moral knowledge.\textsuperscript{153} In the “Ashley X” case, Greig suggests that attending to Ashley’s body yields a radically different perspective: when Ashley’s body and her bodily experience are centered in community, she can be received as a friend rather than an instrument. For people with profound IDD who do not speak, Greig encourages the Christian community to receive the communications of their bodies, gesturing to Romans 8:26 where the Holy Spirit

\begin{footnotes}
\item[152] Ibid., 108.
\item[153] Greig, Reconsidering, 10.
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communicates in sighs too deep for words, as one way that the embodied experience of people with profound IDD may shape the life of the church.¹⁵⁴ Greig’s vision of Christian friendship centers the need to regard friends as “whole persons,” with no neglect of the body.¹⁵⁵ For Greig, this resists the modern tendency to prioritize cognitive agency.¹⁵⁶ Greig also sees embodied participation in ecclesial practices, such as the sacraments, as a key way that the church is formed in welcoming all people, including those with profound IDD.¹⁵⁷ These practices do not primarily form ecclesial communities in principles of intellectual assent, but rather, in habitus or wisdom of love, friendship, and welcome. For Greig, a paradigmatic embodied practice that forms Christian communities in the virtues of friendship and hospitality is that of foot washing¹⁵⁸ - a common practice in L’Arche communities across the globe as well as a central practice in John’s Gospel. Greig argues, “foot washing reminds Christians of their true identity not as the autonomous monad of the choosing self, but rather the creaturely person of the ecclesial self.”¹⁵⁹ For Greig, this sacramental centering of the body names the other as friend, and resists narratives focused on capacity and independence.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 7, 135.
¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 139.
¹⁵⁶ Ibid.
¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 179.
¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 184.
¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 187.
Turning toward the body in theology concerning IDD also intersects with key commitments about God’s image and inclusion, as well as provides a gateway toward integrating liturgical theology and practices of the sacraments. Yong provides one example of connecting themes of body and liturgy. Yong gestures toward kinesthetic practices and other forms of non-verbal participation in the life of Christian discipleship. In light of the kinesthetic and affective learning patterns among many people with IDD, Yong suggests that Christian communities might benefit from a deepening of practices within their liturgies to further emphasize bodily postures and other multi-sensory worship experiences that do not restrict participation to only those individuals with complex reasoning skills and capabilities for symbolic communication.\textsuperscript{160}

Yong offers the “hermeneutic of Pentecost” - a “many tongues, many senses” approach - to illustrate the plurality of communication modes and embodiments of Christian disciples. Yong argues, “God’s communicative speech-acts engage us through the multiplicity of our sensory capacities…what if the miracle of Pentecost isn’t limited to speaking, hearing, and seeing, but also includes touching, feeling, and perceiving?” In this vision, both people with and without IDD serve as “possible conduits for the Spirit’s revelatory work” and testify to this work through the diverse manners of the Spirit’s outpouring.\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{160} Yong, \textit{The Bible, Disability, and the Church}, 111.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 70-73.
Like Yong, Frances Young also engages the connections between themes of the body and liturgy in her theological reflections on her son Arthur, who lives with profound and multiple disabilities, in *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability*. For Young, full participation in worship does not hinge on intellectual ascent. Imaging and glorifying God through worship manifests in many modes - not only words and intellectual understanding but being caught up in the in-breaking Reign of God through silence, facial expressions, and rapture during music. Imaging God through participation in worship therefore transcends the intellect alone, opening space for embodied participation even among people with profound IDD.

Young also draws a direct connection between matters of the body and IDD in relationship to the paradigm of inclusion. Reflecting on 1 Corinthians 12:22-23, Young argues, “some aspects of God’s image in Christ can only be reflected in the Church as the body of Christ by the full inclusion and honouring of those who have bodies that are likewise impaired.” Young continues,

This suggestion that the image of God can only be reflected in the body of Christ by the inclusion of damaged persons flies in the face of traditional presuppositions. In the history of Christian theology, the notion that humanity is made in the image of God has been interpreted in elitist and individualistic terms. My argument would

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162 In the United Kingdom, “learning disability” is synonymous with the use of intellectual and developmental disability in North America.


164 Ibid., 149.
be that the image of God is to be found fully only in Christ, and that its thrust is corporate.\textsuperscript{165}

For Young, issues of inclusion and participation in the Church are inextricably tied to a centering of bodies in a community of believers who together reflect Christ as God’s image. Young unpacks and narrates her Christological understanding of God’s image as it connects to the body in baptism - it is in the church’s embodied act of baptism that all Christians, with or without IDD, are incorporated into Jesus’ body.\textsuperscript{166}

Young’s connections between the body, liturgy, and sacrament in her theological account of IDD, can also be found in many of Hauerwas’s essays engaging disability. Like Young, Hauerwas shares an emphasis on communal participation and constitution, over and against individualized notions of identity. In his concluding essay “Reflection on Dependency: A Response to Responses to My Essays on Disability” in \textit{Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas’ Theology of Disability}, Hauerwas argues that people with IDD remind the church “that the ‘us’ that is saved is the body constituted through Christian baptism that is anything but an individual.”\textsuperscript{167} Here, Hauerwas strives not to instrumentalize people with IDD, but rather, to “draw attention to their significance for any faithful understanding of the church.”\textsuperscript{168} For Hauerwas, the lives of people with IDD witness to the centrality of the body

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 151.


\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 192.
and baptism for Christian communities, but in order for communities to receive this witness, spaces of welcome and inclusion must necessarily be sustained. In addition, receiving the gifts of the witness of people with IDD requires practices of ongoing friendship.

In “The Gesture of a Truthful Story,” Hauerwas draws again upon connections between the body and liturgy. Hauerwas’s primary thesis in this essay claims that “liturgy is social action.” Liturgy shapes Christians into who they most fundamentally are. Christians cannot be Christians without the enactment or the gestures of the Church found in the practices of eucharist and baptism. Hauerwas points to the lives of people with IDD as those who provide a “test case” for Christian communities in their faithful telling of the Christian story - how are people with IDD cared for? Are their bodies included in the gestures of the church, through liturgical participation? The Church’s faithfulness in embodying the story of God’s work in the world requires a life of discipleship sustained by repeated, embodied practices of care and liturgy. Without the inclusion of people with IDD, the kind of embodied worshipping community Hauerwas envisions ceases to exist.

Returning to the work of John Swinton provides a final example of gestures to the body and Christian sacraments as a theme in theologies of IDD. Throughout his book on


time, Swinton’s description of discipleship among people with profound IDD draws a tight connection between the body and the church’s practice of baptism. Swinton envisions baptism as a public way of welcome and radical affirmation of the belonging of people with IDD in Christian faith communities.\(^\text{171}\) Swinton argues,

> Within Jesus’ body diversity has become the new norm, and living faithfully in the midst of diversity is the expected way of being in the world. As people are baptized into the body of Christ, so they enter into a space of deep and radical belonging. Within the body of Christ, every body has a place, and every body is recognized as a disciple with a call from Jesus and a vocation that the church needs if it is truly to be the body of Jesus. Such vocations stretch our ecclesial imaginations in powerful and deeply healing ways. Doing nothing can be an act of discipleship. Being cared for can be a fulfillment of one’s humanness. The truth of who we are is held and hidden in Christ…if the only norm is Jesus, then our task is to live well and to live faithfully with our differences. If difference cannot separate us from Jesus, then it should not separate us from one another.\(^\text{172}\)

In this powerful passage, Swinton weaves together the core themes of theologies engaging IDD - living in God’s image, friendship, and inclusion - by engaging the body and baptism as nonnegotiable components for both theological reflection and pastoral practice. Swinton provides a way to imagine not only the belonging of people with IDD in Christian churches, but to also affirm their vocation to discipleship, rooted in the call of all the baptized to serve Jesus in a common priesthood.\(^\text{173}\)

Swinton’s argument here also provides a clear counter-narrative to the anthropological imaginations active across contemporary Western societies. Envisioning and

\(^{171}\) Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*, 110.

\(^{172}\) Ibid., 208.

\(^{173}\) Ibid., 119. Swinton follows Martin Luther’s baptismal theology in emphasizing the priesthood of all believers.
affirming people with IDD as disciples disrupts anthropological commitments that so often marginalize people with IDD as unable to participate in autonomous, rational, and independent societal contributions. Swinton shifts the core constitution of identity from abilities to the person of Jesus Christ:

I may (or may not) be able to think clearly, talk smoothly, walk steadily. These abilities are not what makes me who I am. I am who I am in Christ alone. In a real sense I have died and risen with him, and now I can see the world only as I look to him: ‘We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life’ (Rom 6:4 NIV).174

Swinton’s attention to the body and baptism suggest new and expansive ways to theologize about IDD, though it remains unclear exactly how practices and theologies of baptism, as they are deployed in the lives of actual people in faith communities, might enable Christians to more faithfully affirm the discipleship of people with IDD. In other words, do practices of baptism in contemporary ecclesial communities actually shape anthropological imaginations and serve as an entry point for belonging and faithful service to Jesus among people both with and without disabilities? To begin to answer this question, we now turn to theologians who center a baptismal hermeneutic in their work on disability and reflections on the witness of people with IDD.

174 Ibid., 188-189.
Emerging Engagement of Baptism in Theologies of IDD

In disability theology, engaging the sacraments as key loci for shifting anthropological assumptions about people with IDD, as well as sites where greater belonging and participation might be invited among people with IDD, surface in multiple modes. General invocations of participation in Christian sacramental practices, namely eucharist and baptism, help some authors to support overarching theological claims. For example, in his essay “Toward a Spirituality of Inclusiveness,” Don Saliers emphasizes how radical hospitality and inclusion of people with disabilities in liturgy reflects “the prodigal hospitality of God found in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.” Saliers emphasizes the need for the presence of disabled people in liturgical and worship spaces as necessary for faithful Christian practice. Saliers’s gesture toward the sacraments does not receive further theological unpacking, but does support his overall argument for inclusion.

Another example is found in Lesslie Newbigin’s essay “Not Whole Without the Handicapped,” found in the World Council of Churches’ 1979 book Partners in Life (Faith and Order Paper No. 89). In this essay, Newbigin turns to the gospel accounts of Jesus’ own baptism as a theological foundation for the welcome of people with disabilities in the life of the contemporary church. Newbigin argues that in his baptism Jesus “accepts total identification with ordinary men and women in their bondage to sin and their estrangement from God. In that baptism he accepts proleptically the weakness and God-forsakenness of

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the cross.”176 For Newbigin, Jesus’ baptism provides the foundation for a faith that accepts human limitation and weakness.177 The inevitability of human limitations highlighted in Jesus’ baptism powerfully illustrates for Newbigin the indispensable place of people with disabilities in the life of the Church178 - without the witness of the disabled, the church cannot fully embrace and express its core of dependency and contingency.

Other turns to Christian sacramental thought in disability theology posit more radical conclusions. Yong, reflecting on the connections between the Pauline notion of weakness and “Chirstological suffering,” points to one important New Testament witness to Jesus’ particular solidarity with “the least of these.”179 Yong argues (drawing upon the book of Hebrews), that “Jesus’ sacramental solidarity with ‘the least of these’ highlights the incarnational mystery of Christ’s embodied presence in the lives of the needy in general, and in the bodies of those who are sick, diseased, blemished, defective, and impaired in particular.”180 Yong continues, “seen in this way, people with disabilities become sacraments - conduits for the presence and activity of Christ - to an unsuspecting world, confronting the powerful, the rich, and the wise with the weakness that God has chosen to embrace and


177 Ibid., 22.

178 Ibid., 23.

179 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 139.

180 Ibid.
identity with.” Moving beyond Saliers’s invocation of sacramental participation among people with and without disabilities together as the most faithful expression of Christian worship, Yong shifts to envision people with disabilities as sacramental themselves - conduits for the work of Jesus among the rich, wise, and nondisabled.

Yong furthers his argument by highlighting the paradigmatic example of people with disabilities in God’s ultimate judgment and salvation. In Matthew 25, Jesus teaches that care for the “least” in the community, those with whom Christ lives in sacramental solidarity, entails care for Christ himself. As we see above, Yong’s understanding of people with disabilities as constitutive of “the least of these,” leads Yong to claim that disabled people serve as

…channels through which a lost world encounters the divine, and the means by which redemption is received…in other words, ‘the least of these’ are the standard and sacramental media of God’s saving grace, apart from whom there may be no opportunity to encounter and experience the redemption of God. In this claim, Yong leaves behind more traditional arguments invoking eucharist and baptism, instead suggesting that disabled people themselves serve as the sacramental elements for the transformation, and ultimately, redemption, of Christian faith communities.

Yong also provides an example of a more traditional engagement with baptism as a supporting aspect in larger arguments for inclusion, participation, and belonging among people with IDD in Christian faith communities. Yong reflects on 1 Corinthians 12 and Acts

\[\text{\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 140-141.}\]
2 to emphasize that all those who are baptized into the body of Jesus hold equal value in their inclusion in Jesus’ body.\textsuperscript{183} In a similar way, Jennie Weiss Block undergirds her focus on inclusion with a baptismal turn. Block argues that the body of Christ is the quintessential inclusive community. The incarnate Jesus, who welcomes and identifies with the outsider, presides over the community of his body as a copious host. Through baptism, all the baptized are empowered and called to participate as Jesus’ co-hosts.\textsuperscript{184}

Other theologians writing on IDD invoke baptism and the eucharist informally or anecdotally in brief sections of their work.\textsuperscript{185} For example, Ben Conner turns to baptism and eucharist for two pages in his section on developing a “proclamatory program” to serve adolescents with IDD. For Conner, these sacraments underscore the deeply communal nature of ecclesial participation in proclamation available to all people, with or without disabilities.\textsuperscript{186} Donald Allehin provides another example, reflecting on how the heightened awareness of death and mortality in L’Arche communities, due to the presence of significant fragility and limitation among people with IDD, sheds new light on the sacrament of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Yong, \textit{Theology and Down Syndrome}, 204.
\item Block, \textit{Copious Hosting}, 132.
\item Conner, \textit{Amplifying Our Witness}, 88-90.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
baptism.\textsuperscript{187} Allchin highlights not only the cleansing waters of baptism that bring forth new life, but the same baptismal waters that must destroy and put to death before bringing forth new life to those who enter the waters.\textsuperscript{188} For Allchin, the bodily realities of life in L’Arche communities affirm “the bodiliness of the human experience of God,” making L’Arche communities places of great sacramental depth throughout the practices of day to day life.\textsuperscript{189} Allchin emphasizes that the sacrament of baptism includes not only water but the associated sacramental acts of the laying on of hands and anointing with oil.\textsuperscript{190} The washing aspect of baptism is mirrored in L’Arche communities by the washing and cleaning of bodies, often bodies who cannot wash and care for themselves.\textsuperscript{191} Overall, the sacramental life together in L’Arche communities highlights the contingency and “provisionality of our life in time”\textsuperscript{192} - deeply embodied and finite, especially as witnessed in the lives of L’Arche core members.

Considering IDD and Christian Practice: Accounts of Baptism

Participation in Christian practices opens the door for new ways of knowing through a kind of experiential knowledge that does not depend on one’s cognitive capacities...\textsuperscript{193}


\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 104.

\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 106.

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 111.

\textsuperscript{193} Conner, \textit{Amplifying Our Witness}, 9.
As Conner argues, a turn toward participation in Christian practices provides a means of generating experiential knowledge. We now look to scholars in disability theology who seek to explore the theological underpinnings of this claim as evidenced in the lives of people with IDD, analyzed through a baptismal framework.

**Analyzes from Historical Theology**

In *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, Miguel J. Romero contributes an essay on Thomas Aquinas’s theological anthropology. Romero’s essay focuses on the flourishing of those Aquinas understands as *amens*, people who suffer “a corporeal infirmity in which the lower powers of the human body necessary for the operation of reason (sensation and phantasm) do not cooperate with the immaterial intellect in the exercise of its proper act in relation the phantasm, which is to understand.”194 Romero argues that for Aquinas, “the dependency and vulnerability of human creatures are intrinsic to our mortal creatureliness - these are the constitutive limitations of embodiment and a good common to all human beings.”195 Romero further argues, “Aquinas vigorously maintains that no measure of bodily affliction - including mental illness, profound cognitive impairment, and severe dementia -
can decisively frustrate the highest good and ultimate end of the human creature.”

Therefore, visiting a common theme in theologies interacting with issues of IDD, Romero argues, “what is not hindered in the amens is her active imaging of God (which is an immaterial operation of the rational soul), nor is she prevented (as we shall see) from participating in the supernatural life - which is a foretaste of the beatific vision.”

To support his claims about the amens, Romero turns to baptism, as a means of divine restoration toward friendship with God. For Romero, following Aquinas, this common human need for divine restoration finds its roots in original sin, where in the Fall, humanity lost their right relationship with God, resulting in a divine withdrawal of “sanctifying grace.” Human creatures, therefore, stand in need of a restoration to this grace, which Romero argues, with Aquinas, is restored through Christ in baptism. Romero writes “original sin did not destroy the capacity of the human creature to be moved by grace toward her ultimate good, which is beyond and above human nature: that is, our participation in the life and love of Triune God.” Because this human capacity to be moved toward grace remains even in the face of sin, “baptism elevates the condition of the

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196 Ibid., 109.
197 Ibid., 112.
198 Ibid.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
201 Ibid., 113.
person whose bodily operations are insurmountably impeded or profoundly impaired to a supernatural status operative according to the economy of divine grace: the ultimate human flourishing called faith, hope, and love."\textsuperscript{202} This power of baptism does not operate in such a manner only for the \textit{amens}, but for all human creatures. Romero, however, in highlighting Aquinas’s engagement with the \textit{amens}, argues that even those with the seemingly most profound impairments are not beyond the hope of baptismal restoration. Through divine grace restored in baptism, those with and without profound IDD can live into a vocation of flourishing and friendship with God.

Summarizing Aquinas’s position up to this point, Romero stresses, “persons who have even the most profound sorts of cognitive impairment are capable of receiving and responding to the movements of divine grace, operative in the sacraments of the church.”\textsuperscript{203} In support of this summarizing claim, Romero next unpacks Aquinas’s baptismal logic in relationship to the \textit{amens}. For Romero, Aquinas’s baptismal logic highlights the twofold effects of baptism. The first consists in “the restoration of harmony to the human creature and relation to God,” with the second constituted in receiving the gifts of “supernatural grace and virtue, which are our membership and incorporation into the Body of Christ.”\textsuperscript{204} For Aquinas, Romero argues, a reception of these two primary effects of baptism does not depend upon a person’s capacity to reason. “Grace makes possible a supernatural life by way

\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 114.

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 115.
of the infused virtues independent of a particular measure of occurrent awareness."\textsuperscript{205} But if grace makes this possible, what accounts for the endurance of post-baptismal impairment and disability?

In order to answer this question, Romero turns to Aquinas’s account of the effect of baptism upon original sin. “Bodily disorder” (for Aquinas, a product of original sin) does not resolve itself in the imparting of baptism. Rather, baptism gestures toward the hope of the resurrected body. Because Aquinas’s notion of bodily impairment tied to original sin stems from the “material donation of the parents in the process of human creation,” realities of bodily disorder do not find resolution until the “divine gift of bodily restoration - which is the Resurrection.”\textsuperscript{206} Therefore, even the baptized (including the\textit{ amens}) will continue to suffer in likeness to the Passion of Christ, and it is through this baptismal participation in Christ’s Passion that the baptized will be perfected.\textsuperscript{207} Baptism does not only initiate Christians into a life of suffering, but also baptizes Christians into the Resurrection of Jesus, which will be achieved when at the last day “our bodies are restored and raised to their supernatural glory.”\textsuperscript{208}

In conclusion, Romero highlights that though the moral virtues (such as prudence) may never be achieved by those with profound IDD, baptism confers upon all the

\textsuperscript{205} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 116.

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.
“supernatural habits of moral virtues.” In this paradox of baptism, Romero stresses that “Aquinas soberly acknowledges the profundity of the affliction experienced in the body of the amens, as it impairs the development of moral virtue, while concurrently developing an understanding of how the amens virtuously participates in the life of the body of Christ.” Romero’s analysis of Aquinas on the amens and baptism leads to the conclusion that all human creatures, regardless of profundity of cognitive impairment, realize their “ultimate potential for God in baptism” when they are “made a member of the Body of Christ and drawn into the goodness and beauty of the Triune God.”

Aquinas’s attention to people described in the contemporary world as “cognitively impaired,” particularly in relationship to questions of sacramental participation, surfaces as a key area for analysis in additional work at the intersection of baptism and IDD. In his 2016 article “Thomas Aquinas on Mental Disorder and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist,” Ivan Bankhead critiques English translations of the furiosi et amentes in Aquinas’s question of whether or not people characterized by “mental disorder” should be baptized. Though Bankhead acknowledges common English translations of “amentes” as inclusive of intellectual disability, he highlights the complex difficulties of translating “archaic

209 Ibid., 121.

210 Ibid.

211 Ibid., 123.


213 Affirming the work of Miguel Romero (2012) and John Berkman (2013).
psychiatric terminology into contemporary ‘equivalents’…not least because our understanding of mental disorders is continually evolving.”214 In Bankhead’s interpretation of Aquinas’s sub-categorization of the amentes, he suggests that Aquinas refers to some kind of permanent, profound, and congenital mental disorder, consonant with contemporary labels of profound IDD.215 For Bankhead, Aquinas seems to suggest that this subgroup of people are assigned a “special sacramental status” - they may be given baptism, but may not partake in the eucharist.216 Bankhead summarizes Aquinas’s position on sacramental participation as follows: adults who possess sufficient “use of reason” ought to make their own decisions regarding baptism and eucharist; adults who do not possess this use of reason, for a number of reasons (many originating in mental disorder or illness of some form) should have others discern their participation in these sacraments.217 Additionally, Bankhead argues that in Aquinas’s thought, the provision and urgent need for baptism of people with profound IDD in the “Faith of the Church” proves necessary for salvation. In other words, for Aquinas the amentes must be made members of Christ’s body. Baptism provides a unity in Christ’s Body available even to those who lack the capacity to make a “decision” for reception of the sacrament.

214 Bankhead, ”Thomas Aquinas,” 241.

215 Ibid., 245.

216 Ibid., 255-256.

217 Ibid., 258.
For those with profound mental impairment, this baptismal unity with Christ is sufficient for sustained life in Christ (while participation in the eucharist is not necessary for salvation).\textsuperscript{218} Bankhead concludes that Aquinas’s argument resonates with more modern notions of mental capacity and urges contemporary faith communities to see if their sacramental theologies and practices might reflect the nuance and care with which Aquinas tends to particular manifestations of “mental disorder.” In Bankhead’s account, Aquinas provides a strong theological basis for the necessity and urgency of baptism among people with permanent, profound, and congenital forms of cognitive disability.

John Berkman also engages Thomas Aquinas as his primary interlocutor in his essay “Are Persons with Profound Intellectual Disabilities Sacramental Icons of Heavenly Life? Aquinas on Impairment.” Berkman introduces his article by highlighting Aquinas’s heightened concern for “spiritual impairment” over and above physical and intellectual manifestations of bodily difference.\textsuperscript{219} In emphasizing this reality for Aquinas, Berkman draws the reader’s attention to the possibility of the end of happiness (beatitudo) for those with even the most profound manifestations of disability (people with no evidence of “discursive reason”),\textsuperscript{220} especially as Aquinas’s anthropology relates to the sacrament of baptism. For Aquinas, because all human beings possess an intellective soul, all human

\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 259.


\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 86.
beings may participate in a teleological journey to God—culminating in the beatific vision. This pursuit, in Berkman’s reading of Aquinas, does not rely on human capability to participate in typical activities of cognition and intellect.\textsuperscript{221} For Berkman, this claim is supported in Aquinas’s engagement of baptism, where Aquinas prioritizes “God’s gracious initiative to all humans. God provides all that all human beings need for salvation.”\textsuperscript{222} In baptism, God freely dispenses the gifts of the Holy Spirit, regardless of human impairment. In particular, Berkman highlights that Aquinas assigns the Holy Spirit’s gift of wisdom as specifically imparted to the amentia in baptism.\textsuperscript{223} Berkman’s argument builds, as he suggests

\begin{quote}
The severely mentally impaired, having been baptized and thus cleansed from the stain of original sin, and having been endowed with the Holy Spirit’s gift of wisdom as a disposition in their soul, are unable to sin. Since the severely mentally impaired are thus unable to separate themselves from the love of God, they are in a sense sacramental icons of heavenly life.\textsuperscript{224}
\end{quote}

Since people with significant cognitive impairment, such as those with profound IDD, do not possess the moral and spiritual “indispositions” that require correction, Berkman argues people with profound disability are “closer to heavenly perfection than those who can and do act.” In this way, people with profound IDD serve as possible icons of heavenly life.\textsuperscript{225} In conclusion, Berkman affirms the baptism of people with profound IDD as a sign of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 93.
\item \textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 94.
\item \textsuperscript{223} Ibid., 95.
\item \textsuperscript{224} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 96.
\end{itemize}
human journey toward friendship with God. Berkman also concludes that Aquinas’s sacramental theology provides an indispensable contribution in contemporary theological accounts of disability.²²⁶

In a final account of the theology of Thomas Aquinas as it intersects with disability and baptism, Richard Cross argues for “a positive understanding of those of us with severe cognitive impairments to share in the graced existence of redeemed humanity and in the life of the church.”²²⁷ In particular, Cross explores the theologies of severe disability that result from the notion in medieval theology that a person might possess a “disposition” for faith, gifted by the Holy Spirit in baptism, however, at the same time, remain unable to participate in “the corresponding act” - occurrent manifestations of that same disposition.²²⁸ Cross argues that Aquinas responds to this quandary by concluding that what is ultimately needed in the case of a baptized person with profound disability is the presence of occurrent acts of faith in another person in the ecclesial community, such as a parent or baptismal sponsor.²²⁹

²²⁶ Ibid.


²²⁸ Ibid., 430-431.

²²⁹ Ibid., 431.
In contrast, Cross turns to Duns Scotus’s account as an alternative that does not suggest, like Aquinas, an “occurrent act of assent” as a requirement for salvation. In other words, “explicit faith,” or perceptible habits are not required among those with profound disabilities. Cross offers a summary of Scotus’s nuanced movement away from Aquinas’s position: “the presence of a habit is sufficient for an (implicit) act irrespective of any further internal or external condition.” In contrast to this perspective from Scotus, Cross argues that Aquinas makes “habitual faith dependent on the actual faith of others.” Framing this distinction between the thought of Aquinas and Scotus, Cross emphasizes that the act of baptism itself (with no additional requirement of particular human capacity, apart from being baptized) imparts implicit faith which is “sufficient for salvation and full participation in the life of the church.” Cross argues that for Scotus, the habit of faith initiated in baptism cannot be “a mental state with conceptual content.” Instead, Cross describes Scotus’s notion of the baptismally-imparted habit of faith as the disposition “to assent to the relevant propositions, even if these propositions are not stored in the thinker’s

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230 Either demonstrated by a severely impaired person or another person in their ecclesial community.


232 Ibid., 432.

233 Ibid., 433.

234 Ibid.

235 Ibid., 433-434.

236 Ibid., 435.
memory.” Therefore, the theological habit of faith imparted in baptism constitutes salvific faith for Scotus - “open to all irrespective of mental abilities, and independently of the presence of others who may have such abilities.”

Cross concludes that reading alongside medieval theologians plainly reveals no connections between notions of disposition and capacity. Therefore, people with profound IDD may fully participate in the life of the church via their baptismal disposition. Cross does not dispense with interdependent or relational visions of personhood, but Scotus’s account removes the necessity of the occurrent act of faith in another person as requisite for the salvation of a person with profound IDD (in contrast to Aquinas). In other words, Scotus equals the playing field between people with and without profound disabilities by making neither person reliant on the faith of another for the completion of salvation worked in the sacrament of baptism. For both people with and without IDD, salvation in baptism is the total and complete work of the Triune God.

Finally, Cross expands Reinders’s vision of theological anthropology rooted in the Triune God’s friendship with all human creatures regardless of capacity or disability. Cross argues that Scotus provides a path where we might also acknowledge that people with even

\[237\] Ibid., 436.

\[238\] Ibid.

\[239\] Ibid.

\[240\] Ibid., 437.
the profoundest impairments have a reciprocal relationship with God by notion of their baptism, which orients them toward the good through the instilling of the habit of faith. For Cross, this matter of human orientation fundamentally undergirds the concerns of medieval theologians, and should likewise animate and expand the contemporary field of disability theology.

Sharing a commitment with Cross and Scotus that the presence of faith need not to “be empirically identifiable,” Harshaw turns to accounts of baptism in Calvin and Luther to support her theology of profound IDD that hinges on God’s accommodation to human creatures. Harshaw finds theological allyship in both Luther and Calvin’s baptismal logics, specifically in their resistance to cognition and linguistic capacities as necessary for salvation. For Harshaw, Calvin’s doctrine of election allows a construction of baptism as “the sign of purgation but not the actual means of justification” - those who remain unbaptized may still be saved if they are among God’s elect. Harshaw also points to Luther’s baptismal theology, particularly his claim that demonstration of “an intentional faith response to divine grace is irrelevant.” Though Harshaw eventually departs from Luther’s baptismal theology (which she notes requires a “later intentional commitment to the grace imbued at baptism”),

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241 Ibid., 438.

242 Harshaw, God Beyond Words, 119.

243 Ibid., 123.

244 Ibid.
she does expand on Luther’s notions of *fides aliena* and *fides infusa* as relevant baptismal concepts for constructing a theology of disability inclusive of people with profound IDD.

Following contemporary theologian Olli-Pekka Vainio, Harshaw defines *fides aliena* as faith which “originates in God, outside the individual,” (in contrast to *fides infusa* which connotes “the actual effects of God in the human being”).245 This baptismal grace, originating outside of human persons, without requirement of “any overt response to revelation,” creates room in accounts of baptismal soteriology for people with profound IDD.246 Through these brief engagements with historical theologies of baptism and grace, Harshaw argues that a lack of perceptible evidence of the faithfulness of people with profound IDD does not negate the effects of baptism, nor does it disqualify people with profound disabilities from rich relationship with God, and ultimately, salvation that culminates in the beatific vision.

*Denominational Reflections at the Intersection of Sacraments and IDD*

In addition to the treatment of historical theologies of baptism as they intersect with the lives of people with IDD, some theologians have provided denominationally-based theologies that look toward the resources found in specific Christian traditions for supporting the participation and inclusion of people with IDD across ecumenical baptismal practices. The Roman Catholic tradition, in addition to a myriad of general resources on *fides aliena* and *fides infusa* as relevant baptismal concepts for constructing a theology of disability inclusive of people with profound IDD.

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245 Ibid.
246 Ibid., 124.
engaging disabled people in the life of the church, contributes two notable sources at the intersection of people with IDD and baptism: Edward Foley’s 1994 edited volume *Developmental Disabilities and Sacramental Access*, as well as Joseph Bernardin’s 1985 pastoral guidelines, “Access to the Sacraments of Initiation and Reconciliation for Developmentally Disabled Persons.” In his essay in Foley’s edited volume, “Pondering the Anomaly of God’s Love,” Paul Wadell, C.P., frames the sacraments as means of God’s accessibility to human creatures. Wadell argues that in contrast to a sacramental framework that emphasizes human understanding and capacity as necessary to approach the divine, “the starting and crucial point in questions of sacramental access is not that we can approach God, but rather that God humbly approaches us. Though the aim of the sacraments is to rescue us by making us new, the first transfiguration belongs to God…” Mark Francis’s essay, “Celebrating the Sacraments with Those with Developmental Disabilities: Sacramental/Liturgical Reflections” explores the shifts in sacramental theology in the Roman Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council, as they relate to the lives of people with IDD. Francis understands the liturgical renewal as a shift toward an increased focus on the symbolism present in the sacraments of the church as “understood to express and celebrate the presence of God in human life.”

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247 Bernardin’s pastoral guidelines are included as an appendix in Foley’s edited volume.


communal and celebratory nature of the sacraments challenges “the predominantly
countual” mode of accessing sacraments, preferred by many in the contemporary ecclesial
scene, but ultimately unattainable by many living with IDD. Francis also identifies this highly
countual perspective on the sacraments as problematic within the manualist (pre-Vatican
II) tradition, particularly because the sacraments were administered in Latin with little to no
lay understanding. 250 After Vatican II, Francis notes a renewed centering of the paschal
mystery in the sacraments: “all of the sacraments derive their power and efficacy from the
saving work of Jesus Christ.” 251 For Francis, this shift in sacramental theology exemplifies
that sacraments are “not based on propositional theology or concepts about God, but on
everyday human actions that our tradition has determined are sacramental because they are
potentially revelatory of the intimate and loving relationship established with us by God in
Christ.” 252 Since assent to propositional theology does not bear on the efficacy of
participation in the sacraments, Francis stresses that for all people, including those with
IDD, it is within human capacity “to enter into the communal symbolic language used in the
liturgy to express the depth of God’s love for us.” 253 Participation in the sacraments
generates a kind of body knowledge for Francis - knowledge not dependent on “analytic,


250 Ibid., 82.
251 Ibid., 83.
252 Ibid., 84.
253 Ibid., 88.
linear, and logical” ways of knowing. Therefore, in celebrating baptism among people with IDD, Francis commends the liturgical recovery of celebrations that “reflect those human actions which link sacramental actions to our everyday life.” Using an abundance of water in parallel to bathing is one example of making intrinsic symbolic connections to the mystery of the Triune life alive in the sacraments.

John M. Huels, O.S.M., reflects theologically on baptism in his chapter “Canonical Rights to the Sacraments.” Huels argues that the Church’s tradition of baptizing infants, those

…who lack the use of reason…makes a clear statement about whom it considers to be human beings of being reborn as children of God through water and the Holy Spirit. This includes not only those who can take part in standard catechetical programs. Or those who can personally attest to their faith in Christ, but all God’s children, no matter what their age or level of physical or intellectual functioning. Huels also stresses the Roman Catholic stance on baptism as never an individualized act, but always a communal practice of the faith community. This reality of baptism as an ecclesial act, resulting in the incorporation of the newly baptized into Jesus’ body, is supported for Huels by the church’s canon law. Both ecclesial theology and polity affirm incorporation

254 Ibid., 89.

255 Ibid., 90.


257 Ibid., 97.

258 Ibid., 98. Huels looks specifically at Canons 96 and 204.
into Jesus’ body as the effective action of the sacrament of baptism. Specifically, canon law understands all the baptized as “Christ’s faithful.” Huels suggests that following canon law challenges ecclesial communities to affirm baptized persons with IDD as included in “the Christian faithful.”

Part of participating in this community of Christ’s faithful entails the duties of sharing in Jesus’ priestly, prophetic, and royal offices. Huels challenges ecclesial communities to envision baptized people with IDD as faithful disciples with a baptismal vocation to ministry. Since the “starting point” of this ministry is baptism, Huels argues for a theological equality between nondisabled people and those with IDD. Particular human capacities in the realm of intellectual skills do not more effectively empower the embrace of one’s baptismal vocation.

Finally, Huels draws upon Canon 777 and its admonition to provide appropriate baptismal preparation, or catechesis, to people with IDD. Huels impresses on lay leadership and clergy the theological importance of robust inclusion of people with IDD both in baptismal preparation, as well as supporting them in their lifelong vocations as faithful disciples.

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259 Ibid., 99. Huels specifically considers Canon 204 here.

260 Ibid.

261 Ibid., 100.

262 Ibid., 101.
Joseph Bernardin’s 1985 pastoral instructions to the Archdiocese of Chicago regarding sacramental participation in baptism and reconciliation among people with IDD begins with an introduction with enduring salience for contemporary churches: while in the past the participation of people with IDD would likely be characterized as passive, “now they are to be welcomed as full members of the parish and, in particular, the liturgical assembly.” Bernardin understands the liturgical assembly to denote the full gathering of a local parish, with all members together offering praise and thanksgiving to God. For Bernardin, the sacraments place a challenge before church communities who would advocate for the exclusion of people with IDD:

The parochial assembly provides continuity in the sacramental life of all its members, including those who are developmentally disabled. If families cannot bring all their members to the parish church, where can they bring them? If each person does not have a place before the table of the Word of God and the table of the Bread of God, where is there a place?

Like Huels, Bernardin stresses the “right” of participation among people with IDD to engage the sacraments and to receive appropriate catechesis. With careful pastoral attention, Bernardin also reminds those in positions of lay and clerical leadership that people with IDD living in residential settings (particularly those without family members to help

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264 Ibid.

265 Ibid., 142.

266 Ibid.
support their growth in a spiritual life) should be attended to by the local parish, through the provision of pastoral care and encouragement for full participation in the life of the local worshipping community.\textsuperscript{267}

Bernardin next turns to a description of the nature of sacramental participation, asserting “religion is neither fundamentally abstract nor purely conceptual. It is primarily relational, and for that reason, the developmentally disabled person can be educated in faith.”\textsuperscript{268} Stressing the importance of baptism not only as a single moment of God’s salvific action, but rather, the gateway into God’s family as a community of belonging, Bernardin focuses on the centrality of “active spiritual nourishment” throughout the lives of all the baptized.\textsuperscript{269} This spiritual nourishment begins with careful baptismal preparation for people with IDD, and continues with nurture from ecclesial leaders throughout their baptized lives. For Bernardin, it is imperative that parish priests model a sensitive, intentional, and relational engagement with people with IDD, in order to encourage the parish as a whole to inhabit flexibility with regards to the liturgy.\textsuperscript{270} Bernardin’s exhortation to maximize the participation and inclusion of people with IDD in local parishes reflects his core understanding of liturgy

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{267} Ibid., 143.
\footnote{268} Ibid.
\footnote{269} Ibid., 143-144.
\footnote{270} Ibid., 145-146.
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and baptism: “the liturgy is not an ‘extra,’ something nice that may give us good feelings. It is
our life, our very spirit. It is the source of our identity and renewal as a Church.”

Beyond Roman Catholicism, other Christian traditions also offer insight into
theologies and practices of baptism as they relate to people with IDD. Writing for the
Anabaptist Disabilities Network, Melissa Florer-Bixler reflects from within the Mennonite
tradition on a renewal of baptismal logic in light of the lives of people with profound IDD.
Florer-Bixler draws attention to the tension present in many denominations who practice
“believer's baptism:” for those with profound IDD, how much do they understand about
what happens in baptism? Is their faith in any sense voluntary? How might a community
receive the full participation and membership of people with IDD, who for Florer-
Bixler exemplify the “such as these” to whom God's Kingdom belongs? In other words, Florer-
Bixler asks, what does the rational acknowledgment of repentance and the reception of
forgiveness mean “when we consider baptism for an adult who does not have the capability
to grasp the concepts of sin, evil, and death?”

In order to address this tension, Florer-Bixler invites a shift from evaluating the
“mental processes” of any particular individual and suggests instead a turn to the witness of
scripture: “baptism makes us into the people of God by compromising all competing
allegiances to God's kingdom. The Gospels tell us that rival allegiances include family, nation,

\[\text{271 Ibid., 149.}\]

\[\text{272 Melissa Florer-Bixler, "Baptism and Profound Disability," ADNotes, 2011.}\]

\[\text{273 Ibid.}\]
wealth, and even capabilities.” Following John Howard Yoder, Florer-Bixler highlights the prioritization of “modern humanistic individualism” as the key challenge to faithful interpretations of baptism in the church, especially among people with IDD. In response to this challenge to Anabaptist baptismal theology, Florer-Bixler draws attention to Galatians 3:2, where “loyalty to Jesus overshadows our differences” and allows for a prioritization of our gifts as primarily for serving the church. Florer-Bixler reflects on the gifts of adults with profound disabilities as those of dependency and vulnerability - key components of God’s Kingdom. Instead of interpreting the behaviors or readily perceptible gifts of a person with profound IDD as an indicator for baptismal readiness, Florer-Bixler instead suggests that “the church’s ability to recognize and utilize that person’s gift, rather than the individual’s ability to make a confession of faith” should indicate baptismal readiness. Florer-Bixler concludes her article by asking if the church can truly be Jesus’ body without the witness of people with profound disabilities.

Sharing the Anabaptist commitment to believer’s baptism, Baptist theologian Jason Whitt also engages questions at the intersection of profound IDD and baptism. Whitt frames the central question of his essay as follows: if baptism is symbolic of what has already occurred in the life of a Christian (“a conscious and voluntary act of obedience”), what is the place of people with profound IDD in believer’s baptism traditions? Whitt

274 Ibid.

275 Ibid.

does not wish to question the salvation of people with profound IDD but posits a common Baptist confidence that children and adults with profound disabilities “are held firmly within God’s love.” What primarily concerns Whitt are the limitations for full belonging in the believing community among people with profound IDD, due to their exclusion from believer’s baptism which typically requires a recognizably voluntary act of obedience.

Whitt frames a common Baptist understanding of baptism as an ordinance: “an act that symbolically portrays a spiritual reality that is already accomplished - namely, salvation.” In contrast, Whitt illustrates that a more sacramental view of the ordinances suggests that “God’s grace is conveyed” through the ordinances - they are not a symbol alone. Whitt further develops this sacramental view of the ordinance of baptism as an act “of belonging…they [baptism and the Lord’s Supper] are more than mere symbols: they help to form the identity of individuals who have accepted the saving grace of Christ.”

Baptism, therefore, both in its initiating work and its ongoing reaffirmation in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper reinforces the belonging of all baptized people as well as forms the community’s identity as people who live in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This identity-forming power of the Baptist ordinances arises from the believing

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277 Ibid., 61.
278 Ibid.
279 Ibid.
280 Ibid.
281 Ibid., 62.
282 Ibid.
community that seeks to live “the gospel story” - a community where people are deeply dependent on God and one another.\textsuperscript{283} This mutual dependency that animates the Christian community offers what Whitt sees as a key challenge for contemporary faith communities, especially those who would suggest that people with IDD are not full members: how are the gifts of who Paul calls “the weak” received? For Whitt, “God’s economy of gift giving over turns the world’s economy of merit.”\textsuperscript{284} How might upholding this biblical paradigm relate to baptism among people with profound IDD? 

Whitt challenges Baptists who equate the baptism of adults with profound IDD with the practice of baptizing infants, based on the lack of voluntary commitment to enter a community in both of these cases.\textsuperscript{285} Instead, Whitt suggests that baptism of infants is rejected in anticipation of a future day when a decision for faith will be voluntarily made. In contrast, people with profound IDD do not look toward a day when this kind of obedient commitment may be perceptible to others. Because “Christians who practice believer’s baptism already recognize that salvation is something accomplished in us by Christ,” Whitt suggests that the human participation in the ordinance of baptism is not primary.\textsuperscript{286}

\textsuperscript{283} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{286} Ibid.
However, this participation is still significant. How might this significance be understood among those with profound IDD?

Whitt, like Florer-Bixler, wonders what gifts we might be missing in church communities due to the absence of people with profound IDD. Whitt argues that in Christ’s body “each member is uniquely gifted for the good of the whole,” including people with profound IDD. Whitt clarifies that we receive the gifts of those with profound IDD not in “doing for” them, but rather, carefully attending to their presence and receiving their teaching. As a means of spurring his readers’ imaginations, Whitt offers a non-exhaustive list of what these teachings and gifts might be: gifts of “gentleness, peacefulness, joy, wonder, or simply silence.” In conclusion, with trepidation and humility, Whitt suggests that those in believer’s baptism traditions ought to joyfully baptize those with profound IDD. Whitt notes that these people are those who have been faithfully brought to the church, sometimes for their whole lives. In the ordinance of baptism, the believing community affirms together “that person’s place in the body of Christ.” In other words, practicing baptism of people with IDD in the Baptist tradition provides a means of radical identity formation - confirming people with profound IDD as full members of Jesus’ body.

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287 Ibid., 65.
288 Ibid.
289 Ibid.
290 Ibid.
Whitt understands this exhortation as a challenging and complex call which he encourages communities who practice believer’s baptism to take up with “significant discernment.”

A final theological proposal at the intersection of baptism and IDD emerges from a Reformed scholar, Myk Habets, in his article “‘Suffer the little children to come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ Infant Salvation and the Destiny of the Severely Mentally Disabled.” Habets provides a detailed review of Scriptural and theological underpinnings, from both Catholic and Protestant perspectives, of the potential salvation of children who die prior to baptism. This issue, for Habets, who frames baptism as a substitute for “personal faith,” concerns not only infants but also the eschatological fate of people with profound IDD. Drawing upon the authority of creeds in the Reformed tradition, Habets suggests that “no Reformed confession states either that all infants who die are saved or that infants of unbelievers are not saved.”

Engaging Romans 5, Habets highlights the necessity of faith, at least in his interpretation of Paul’s vision of baptism. Habets understands faith requiring human merit and capacity as theologically problematic. But wanting to retain faith as crucial in baptism, Habets suggests the following: “only the faith of Christ is sufficient, for adult/believer and

291 Ibid., 66.


293 Ibid., 298-300. In Habets’s interpretation, Article I/17 in the Canons of Dort clearly suggests “that all children of believers who die in infancy or are severely mentally disabled are elect and saved.”
infants and the severely mentally disabled. Thus the vicarious humanity and faith of Christ is necessary.\textsuperscript{294} For Habets, a Christological view of faith is what solidifies and clarifies the role of baptism not only among people with profound IDD, but all of the baptized. Habets also gestures toward Galatians 2:20 as evidence of a thoroughly Christological narration of faith and election.\textsuperscript{295} Habets brings this Christological view of faith to the culminating question of his essay: should the “severely mentally disabled” be baptized?\textsuperscript{296} Following theologian Mark Beach, Habets concludes yes: “if one participates in the reality of salvation he or she must receive the sign of that salvation - the mark of baptism.”\textsuperscript{297} This answer, to baptize those with profound IDD, is a witness to the profound inclusion of all of God’s children in God’s covenant of grace, established and sustained through the faith of Jesus Christ. Ultimately for Habets, failure to baptize those with profound IDD, even among communities who practice believer’s baptism, constitutes a failure of the “very meaning of what it means to the Church.”\textsuperscript{298}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{294} Ibid., 315.
\item \textsuperscript{295} Ibid., 316.
\item \textsuperscript{296} Ibid., 321.
\item \textsuperscript{297} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{298} Ibid., 322.
\end{itemize}
Where To Go From Here?

In her survey of the field of disability theology’s engagement with issues of IDD, Harshaw laments the “inadequate connection between theological theory and ecclesial practices,” resulting in little transformation within contemporary ecclesial communities as a result of disability theology. In response, Harshaw challenges theologians engaging disability to more rigorously engage in respectful, informative, and transformational conversation with church communities and other spaces of theological education and formation.

In the present exploration of the field of theology and IDD, the emergence of central themes surrounding the image of God, friendship, and inclusion find supplement in gestures toward the centrality of embodiment and Christian sacramental practices. Engagement of these themes aims toward a transformation of anthropological and theological imagination: the displacement of capacity, efficiency, and autonomy as central markers of what it means to be a human being. In turning toward the practice of baptism in disability theology, we see an emphasis on historical theological analysis, as well as denominationally-based practical theologies that attempt to re-think baptismal theologies typically prohibitive of participation among people with IDD.

In the following chapters, I push further into a baptismal hermeneutic for theological reflection on IDD. In this turn to baptism, I highlight a new avenue, rooted in historic


300 Ibid.
Christian practice, the witness of scripture, and the lived experiences of people with IDD, to address the prevalence of exclusion of disabled people in contemporary Christian faith communities. In the next chapter, we will begin to engage accounts baptism involving people with IDD, narrated either by themselves or by those who love them. Their narratives raise critical questions that highlight the salience of baptismal identity, baptismal theologies, and baptismal practices for the transformation of anthropological imaginations about disability, especially when compared with alternative themes of God’s image, friendship, and inclusion.

These baptismal stories from across the ecumenical spectrum expand on historical theological analyses as well as contemporary denominational reflections on theology and baptism. In addition, these stories raise new central themes for consideration in theological accounts of IDD: engagement of scripture beyond the *imago Dei*, particularly the story of Jesus’ baptism and Paul's theology of participation, a turn toward baptismal incorporation into Jesus’ body as constitutive of Christian identity, development of the primacy of baptismal identity and vocation even among people with profound IDD, and the role of communal participation in rites of baptism for transforming both the Christian anthropological imagination and sustaining practices of authentic belonging among all the baptized in ecclesial communities.
Chapter 2

“Tell Me More About Your Baptism:” Methodology and Research Summary

In *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, Mary McClintock Fulkerson describes the situational nature of theology: “theological reflection is not a linear form of reflection that starts with a correct doctrine…and then proceeds to analyze a situation; rather, it is a situational, ongoing, never-finished dialectical process where past and present ever converge in new ways.”¹ For Fulkerson, this kind of situational theological reflection arises from the site of a discrepancy or disjunction - the site of an ecclesial wound. Fulkerson writes, “like a wound, theological thinking is generated by a sometimes inchoate sense that something must be addressed.”² Similarly, Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen argue that theology “cannot simply be applied to situations; it must, at least in part, take flesh within them.”³ Responding to this framing of the task of theology, these three scholars embrace theological ethnography, and qualitative research more broadly, as a way to explore God’s presence through a combination of more traditional avenues for theological inquiry (including systematic, doctrinal, and constructive theological work) in conversation with a

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² Ibid., 13-14.

serious engagement of qualitative research. In this chapter, I explore how a theological approach to qualitative research can generate creative and meaningful responses to the ecclesial wound of homogenous belonging at the expense of belonging of people with IDD in contemporary ecclesial communities.

While theologians continue to demonstrate an increased interest in disability, relatively few theological inquiries embrace qualitative research methods to guide or supplement speculative, conceptual, and constructive modes of theologizing. In the particular case of people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), few theologians seriously engage these lived experiences throughout their scholarly work. In contrast, many theologians engage people with IDD in a reductive manner; for example, in academic theology, people with IDD are frequently reduced to their first name, usually accompanied by some brief anecdotal details about their life experience, level of impairment, or relationship to the author. These treatments of people with IDD neglect the fullness of their witness as sites for critical theological reflection.

4 Ibid.


As outlined in the introduction, the lives of many people with IDD are marked by exclusion from Christian faith communities, rooted in ecclesial preferences for patterns of homogenous belonging. This tendency for churches to produce communities marked by homogeneity, to the exclusion of people with perceptible differences that challenge the status quo as it relates to categories including disability, race, and gender, finds some of its foundation in modern liberal societal commitments to autonomy and rationality. As John Swinton writes, “it is clear that within a society which values cognition, intellectual prowess and social status above loving relationships, friendship and community,” the status of people with IDD “as fully human is always in question.” As a result of this questioning, people with IDD often face discrimination in church life, as well as denial of sacramental participation. Even for those who are baptized, finding meaningful support for a life of discipleship often proves challenging.

My qualitative research amplifying the experiences of people with IDD in Christian churches around stories of baptism arises not only from my own intellectual curiosity, but from what anthropologist James Spradley calls “community-expressed needs.” Within theological inquiry, Scharen and Vigen identify these “community-expressed needs” as

7 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 244-245.

particular questions, wounds, and challenges faced within local ecclesial communities.⁹ Theological engagement of qualitative research provides one means to push against the cultural and theological currents that question, both explicitly and implicitly, the full personhood, baptismal identity, and Christian discipleship of people with IDD. In engaging research participants with IDD, I take seriously some of the “millions of human beings who are excluded when theology remains ‘academic’” who in reality are “faithful believers with unique wisdoms” whom Fulkerson argues “academics need to honor and learn from.”¹⁰ In seriously engaging the contributions of people with IDD, my research also pushes against epistemic injustice (“the idea that social power ensures that the knowledge of some groups is excluded from the collective epistemic resources”)¹¹ as it specifically amplifies disabled experiences. In this chapter I challenge the assumption of “a global epistemic incapacity” among people with IDD (including people with profound disabilities), offering the importance of spoken testimony and wordless witness of people with IDD in Christian faith communities.

In what follows, I describe the turn to qualitative methodology among theologians as a rich source for theological reflection. Next, I explore existing best practices for qualitative research among people with IDD, drawing upon interdisciplinary sources to probe

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methodological benefits and barriers to engaging in qualitative methodology with this population. I then review the current state of qualitative research among theologians engaging questions surrounding people with IDD, demonstrating how my project expands existing scholarship (both in content and methodological approach). Finally, I provide a detailed account of my research process, including methods, analysis of results, and discussion of my findings as they apply to expanding and clarifying work at the intersection of theology and disability.\footnote{In brief, my qualitative research project consisted of interviews about baptism with adults with IDD, their primary family or caregivers, their clergy, and a lay person from their church. In addition to the interviews, I attended some of the churches associated with interview participants as a participant observer, in order to further understand the practices and theologies of these congregations supporting people with IDD in their baptisms and lives of discipleship.}

*The Turn to Qualitative Methodology in Theology*

In the spirit of interdisciplinary inquiry, with a goal of probing sources beyond theological texts as critical for theological analysis and construction, Christian theologians and ethicists over the past two decades have increasingly turned to qualitative research methodology\footnote{With a particular emphasis on ethnographic methodology.} to glean new insights for critical description, analysis, and construction of situations of woundedness.\footnote{Including the work of the following theologians (listed alphabetically): Luke Bretherton, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Nicholas Healy, Mary Clark Moschella, Harriet Mowat, Emily Reimer-Barry, Christian Scharen, John Swinton, Aana Marie Vigen, Pete Ward, and Todd Whitmore.} Scholars engaging theology in this manner also acknowledge the deeply formative practice of encountering individuals, communities, and situations of
woundedness in the context of qualitative inquiry.\textsuperscript{15} The turn to qualitative methodology in Christian theology and ethics provides not only an avenue to take more seriously truths “revealed through embodied habits, relations, practices, narratives, and struggles,” but also a mode that complexifies the privileges and assumptions held by many academics, through dialogue with traditionally marginalized populations. More specifically, Scharen and Vigen suggest that critical engagement of ethnography and other qualitative methodologies assists “white (especially affluent and/or well-educated) persons” to “no longer be the frame of reference for understanding what it means to be human.”\textsuperscript{16} Displacing this “frame of reference” requires careful engagement in processes of self-reflexivity throughout the research process, as well as an acknowledgment of the realities of co-creation in the research context.

Christian theologians and ethicists seeking to make normative claims envision qualitative research as existing in partnership with more “traditional” modes of theological reflection. The theological researcher, “in apprenticeship to the situation/people - aids in the articulation of those embedded theological convictions as primary theology itself.”\textsuperscript{17} In other words, according to Scharen and Vigen, traditional theological materials such as texts “do


\textsuperscript{16} Scharen and Vigen, ”Preface,” in \textit{Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics}, xx-xxi.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., xxii.
not automatically have privilege over the local theological understandings operative in the lives of those studied.”

In this sense, qualitative inquiry provides a mode of “embodied theology.” Qualitative research also provides a methodological context in which “the meanings of the word ‘God’” might be discovered: as Rowan Williams commends, “by watching what this community does when it is acting, educating or ‘inducting,’ imagining and worshipping.”

The turn to qualitative methodology in Christian theology and ethics also seeks to comport with traditional practices of the Christian life. As Stephen Bevans argues, “theology has always been embodied in ritual, as the rule lex orandi, lex credendi points out.” Engaging qualitative research, particularly surrounding issues of liturgical and sacramental practice, helps move away from solely textual and verbal forms of theologizing. As Fulkerson argues, qualitative research methodologies help scholars to both challenge and correct “theology’s obsession with texts.”

In Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, John Swinton and Harriet Mowat describe the richness of human experience as a site for theological reflection: this experience constitutes a “place” where theological assumptions, commitments, and practices are “grounded, embodied, interpreted and lived out.”

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18 Ibid., xxiii.


22 Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 5.
the work of qualitative research enables theologians to “remind” the Church of the subtle ways in which it differs from the world and to ensure that its practices remain faithful to the script of the gospel.” This theological work of remembering, emerging from qualitative inquiry into situations of woundedness, complexifies lived realities for the sake of exhorting a more faithful living of the gospel. In other words, practical theology, when engaged alongside and within processes of qualitative research, “works toward the unification of the Church’s theological understandings and her practices in the world, and in doing so, ensures that her public performances of the faith are true to the nature and actions of the Triune God.” My attention to stories of baptism as experienced by people with IDD, their clergy, and their loved ones, seeks to probe how theological understandings of Christian identity are worked out in baptismal practices, toward an end of supporting the church’s embrace of the lives of discipleship among all the baptized and especially those with IDD.

Swinton and Mowat envision the intersections of situations of woundedness, theological inquiry, and qualitative research as framed in hospitality, conversion, and critical faithfulness. They define hospitality as a Christian practice characterized by “the Spirit-enabled ability to show kindness, acceptance and warmth when welcoming guests or strangers (Hebrews 13:1-3).” Alongside this hospitable engagement with qualitative inquiry,

23 Ibid., 9.
24 Ibid., 25.
25 Ibid., 91.
Swinton and Mowat commend an engagement of qualitative research that results in conversion: a treatment of the research which grafts it into “God’s redemptive intentions for the world,” using it “in the service of making God’s self known within the Church and from there on into the world.” Finally, Swinton and Mowat exhort theologians engaging qualitative methodology to take an approach marked by critical faithfulness. This critical form of faithfulness includes acknowledging both the work of the Holy Spirit and scripture in both the interpretation of situations marked by wounds, as well as the “interpretive dimensions” of engagement with qualitative data.

Engaging the Lives of People with IDD in Qualitative Research: Best Practices, Benefits, and Barriers

An emerging corpus of interdisciplinary literature suggests a number of best practices for engaging people with IDD in qualitative research, identifying particular benefits of increased recruitment of people from this population, as well as warning of potential barriers and ethical issues in the research context. In this section, I engage a variety of sources to describe best practices, benefits, and barriers to engaging people with IDD in qualitative research, highlighting areas of integration in my own research methodology.

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26 Ibid., 92.

27 Ibid., 93.
Best Practices

Many researchers engaging people with IDD hold a shared commitment to improve the lives and situation of these research participants. In methodologies such as participatory action research, this aim is pursued within the research process itself. Other approaches to qualitative data gathering involving people with IDD respond to the historical exclusion of people with IDD from research efforts, seeking to rectify the previous gathering of inaccurate data and also seeking to transform negative societal perceptions about the lives of people with IDD.

Research seeking to support the wellbeing and flourishing of people with IDD requires the centering of respect, beneficence, and justice throughout the research process with regards to disabled participants. Practices associated with these ethical principles include engaging pseudonyms for people with IDD. In my study, all participants who communicated with spoken language selected their own pseudonyms. Family members or

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caregivers who also participated in the interviews for the study provided pseudonyms for participants with IDD who did not communicate with words and were unable to otherwise indicate choice regarding a pseudonym.

Practically, seeking the well-being of people with IDD through research also requires research that is accessible in order to support maximal participation among people with IDD. For example, in her 2012 article addressing respect for adults with IDD in research contexts, Katherine McDonald calls for the careful tailoring of interview questions to focus on the experiences of people with IDD, rather than focusing on more conceptual or abstract content.31 My study focused most closely on the telling of stories related to baptism - both experiences of one’s own baptism, as well as stories about witnessing the baptisms of others. In addition, the study questions welcomed reflection on how baptism influences overall participation in a faith community.

When engaging participants with IDD, existing studies on methodology suggest the use of person-first language and plain language in recruitment and interview materials as a way to maximize research accessibility.32 The use of plain language also extends to all associated research materials, such as study descriptions and information sheets, which should also be supplemented with visual aids such as simple pictures, including when possible a photograph of the researcher(s).33 I engaged plain language principles to develop

31 McDonald, "We Want Respect," 264.
33 Ibid., 1018-1019.
all my research materials and also provided visual aids for recruitment and interview stages of the research, including a picture of myself on the study information sheet.

McDonald focuses on the practical importance of providing compensation as a means of communicating respect and appreciativeness for the participation of people with IDD in research studies. All research participants in my study were compensated with twenty dollars in cash. As an added gesture of appreciativeness, people with IDD who chose to withdraw from the study for any reason, or whose interviews were unable to be used for final analysis, were still provided with equal cash compensation.

Heather and Kenneth Keith encourage researchers engaging people with IDD to offer transformative recommendations from their research findings to their home academic communities. Keith and Keith argue that qualitative research provides not only an avenue for advocacy in the improvement of the everyday lives of people with IDD, but also provides a foundation upon which scholars can dismantle academic practices that perpetuate the marginalization of people with IDD. Expanding upon this, Keith and Keith write,

We note that the environment which most affects what we learn about disabilities in our classrooms and from books such as this, is academic culture. Consistent with standpoint theory, social ethics, and any other theory aiming to be responsive to and engage the real lives of individuals, the voices and views of people with intellectual disability need to be moved from margin to center. This is not solely for the sake of best practices in disability ethics…but the value of widening the scope of what constitutes knowledge is that it serves to enhance the “neurodiversity” of our academic pursuits.

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34 McDonald, "We Want Respect," 268.

35 Keith and Keith, Intellectual Disability, 173.

36 Ibid., 129.
Many researchers engaging people with IDD suggest that participants serve as active collaborators across all aspects of the research process, in order to guard against bias in analysis of research data. Jocelyn Cleghorn adds that support people of those experiencing IDD can serve as important informants in qualitative research. Taking up these pieces of advice for best practice, I engaged in interviews across participant groups in my study, including interviewing adults with IDD, as well as their parents, siblings, friends, clergy, and other professional support people. My interviews also occurred across an ecumenical range of Christian traditions, seeking further representation and diversity in my sample.

Cleghorn cautions researchers to resist an over-emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of individuals that support people with IDD, suggesting instead that researchers rely more heavily upon participant observation data (and interviews, if applicable and available) among people with IDD themselves. Similarly, Robert Bogdan and Steven Taylor argue for the emergence of key research insights by embracing methods that engage “the relationship between the definer and the defined;” in other words, engaging both people with IDD and the nondisabled people who relate to them in accepting, close, and

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affectionate ways.\textsuperscript{41} Engaging nondisabled people inhabiting support roles in relationship to people with IDD protects against research perpetuating “overly deterministic conceptualizations of labeling, stigma, and rejection.”\textsuperscript{42}

Multiple researchers commend the cultivation of research protocols with inherent flexibility in order to engage people with IDD across a spectrum of impairment. One example of this flexibility includes research protocols that can engage people with IDD who communicate with words as well as participants who are non-speakers.\textsuperscript{43} This commitment can help prevent the extrapolation of data gathered from participants with mild experiences of IDD and applying it to automatically reflect the experience of people with more profound IDD.\textsuperscript{44} In particular, Swinton and Mowat point to the importance of “persuading ethics committees that qualitative research requires and indeed demands a degree of flexibility and openness with regard to its structure and design.”\textsuperscript{45} This best practice of methodological flexibility includes facilitating multiple data gathering techniques, or “entry points” within research (for example, engaging people not only through interviews but also turning to practices of participant observation).\textsuperscript{46} In-depth, open-ended interviews among people with


\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 138.

\textsuperscript{43} Cleghorn, "The Ethnographic Method," 1-2; Tuffrey-Wijne and Davies, "This is My Story," 10-11.

\textsuperscript{44} Cleghorn, "The Ethnographic Method," 2-3.

\textsuperscript{45} Swinton and Mowat, \textit{Practical Theology and Qualitative Research}, 176.

\textsuperscript{46} Michael V. Angrosino, "Participant Observation and Research on Intellectual Disabilities," in \textit{The International Handbook of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities}, ed. Eric Emerson (Chichester, West Sussex:
IDD, as well as their families, friends, and other potential support people, are also considered best practice.\textsuperscript{47} In my own study, I spent nine months in collaboration with the Campus Institutional Review Board at Duke University in order to design a protocol that would welcome participants across the spectrum of IDD, while also remaining rigorous. My study involved both in-depth interviews among people with IDD and their parents and other identified support people, as well as participant observations at worship services and other publicly open events in participants’ Christian faith communities.

Best practices also exist surrounding “proxy selection” when potential research participants with IDD are under legal guardianship. Scholars in the area of disability research stress the onus which rests on researchers to identify the proxy who will be most effective in both supporting and protecting the person with IDD in the research context.\textsuperscript{48} Of course, obtaining consent from all research participants, both disabled and non-disabled, is of prime necessity. Griffin and Balandin highlight the additional need for caregivers, family members, or support providers of people with IDD under legal guardianship as providing consent on

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In my study, I obtained verbal assent for all people with IDD who were under legal guardianship and who could participate verbally in the interview portion of data-gathering.

Research Benefits Among Populations Experiencing IDD

Numerous benefits, both for individuals with IDD, as well as the larger disability community and other disability adjacent communities, have been established in research literature considering qualitative research methodologies engaging people living with IDD. Some of these benefits include direct benefits for disabled people, for example, the opportunity to meet new people and a sense of making a valuable, worthwhile, or helpful contribution to a project for the greater good. In addition, a 2016 study by Katherine McDonald et al., also found the direct benefits of incentives (such as monetary compensation) and the opportunity to learn something new, as the most valued benefits of participation in research studies among adults with IDD.

Griffin and Balandin highlight the specific ethical benefits of using qualitative research among people with IDD, as these study designs do not typically require researchers


51 Ibid.
to withdraw any helpful interventions in order to confirm validity. Michael Angrosino also identifies the benefits of qualitative and ethnographic research approaches when engaging people experiencing IDD, arguing that these approaches seem “to be the only truly effective way of ascertaining their insider’s perspective,” gleaned through interviews and observation in everyday settings. This notion raised by Angrosino is echoed in the work of Cleghorn who highlights the nuance which can be achieved through qualitative research with participants experiencing IDD, in comparison to other research methodologies. Davies also affirms the increased ease of gathering more meaningful data via qualitative approaches to research, including participant observation, casual conversation, and interviews with people with IDD. Keith and Keith point to the complexification of the lives and experiences of people with IDD as a key benefit of engaging this population in qualitative research.

52 Griffin and Balandin, "Ethical Research" in The International Handbook of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 76.


56 Keith and Keith, Intellectual Disability, xi.
Research Barriers Among Populations Experiencing IDD

In reviewing potential barriers to engaging people with IDD in qualitative research, particularly in interviews, Jonathan Perry stresses that these barriers should not render a dismissal of people with IDD as potential research participants. Rather, Perry urges researchers to carefully consider potential barriers as they create research proposals, such as participant travel limitations due to mobility or cognitive limitations. In addition, Perry encourages the use of visual aids for participants with IDD throughout the research process to decrease barriers for access and participation.57 These strategies, preparatory access planning and visual aids, can also help alleviate barriers related to obtaining proper consent among people with IDD.58

In my study, interviews were conducted at sites selected by participants, with the only requirements as relative quiet and privacy. This provision decreased potential barriers related to transportation among participants with and without IDD and also provided the chance to conduct research interviews in maximally familiar and comfortable settings for participants. Following the suggestions of Kidney and McDonald, interview location was selected by participants in order to meet any needs which they did not wish to make explicit to me in the recruitment process.59 I utilized a visual consent guide for both participants with

57 Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 243.


IDD and also among nondisabled participants. In addition to their coherence to plain language principles, interview questions were written with attention to Universal Design for Learning standards, per best practice recommendations of multiple research scholars. All participants were provided with a simple visual cue card to indicate a need to take a break during interview proceedings or to indicate the need for further explanation of questions (“Help”; “I don’t understand”).

Attending to additional potential barriers in qualitative research among people with IDD, Perry raises the importance of fostering awareness about potential complexities surrounding interviewees with IDD desiring to please the interviewer. Griffin and Balandin also identify these potential ethical complexities among nondisabled researchers and participants with IDD, especially among researchers who do not have strong previous experience interacting with disabled people. Angrosino also acknowledges the difficulties of researchers without previous experience in populations with IDD, noting that research

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63 The desire of individuals with IDD to please ethnographers and others in positions of power within research studies is well documented throughout the current body of evidence, according to Perry. "Interviewing People" in *The International Handbook of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 118-122.

among people with IDD, including interviewing and participant observation, often involves “duties that are not, strictly speaking, those of a professional researcher.” For example, Angrosino discusses the potential of encountering awkwardness in engaging individuals with IDD who may have little to no experience of friendship or typical norms regarding conversational exchange. Additionally, Taua and Farrow highlight the potentially negative construals of disability even among people with extensive experience collaborating with people with IDD. For example, Taua and Farrow warn that institutional models for care might negatively skew conceptions of IDD among clinicians, resulting in negative practices.

This insight underscores the importance of critical reflexivity for researchers collaborating with people experiencing IDD.

Balandin and Griffin identify a related risk among participants with IDD who may desire an ongoing relationship with a researcher following the conclusion of a study, including the possibility of risky behavior in pursuing this desired end. Charlotte Davies reflects on the importance of developing a “non-joking” attitude when responding to at times far-flung “fantasies” of individuals participating in ethnographic and qualitative research. Davies’s refusal to make “joking references” regarding her ethnographic


66 Taua and Farrow, "Negotiating Complexities," 281.

participants with IDD served as one attempt to break down “the social obstacles” that prevented many of the participants from being granted a “full adult status.”

To allay these potential risks and barriers to successful research, Griffin and Balandin suggest that researchers reflexively address these issues prior to the start of a formal research protocol, in order to determine a clear set of boundaries for their research, not only for themselves but especially for participants with IDD. Other researchers also stress the importance of research preparation, in order to guard against undue coercion and damage in the research context for people with IDD. In designing my research protocol, I drew upon over a decade of clinical and community experiences and relationships with people with IDD. In addition, I spent significant time during the three years leading up to my research project studying qualitative research issues when engaging populations with IDD.

When designing my research study materials, including my recruitment information (designed with guidance from Kidney and McDonald’s model for describing “key phases of participation”), I foregrounded the limited nature of the research relationship for participants in the study. For example, the visual research study information guide concludes

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68 Davies, *Reflective Ethnography*, 82.

69 Griffin and Balandin, "Ethical Research" in *The International Handbook of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 78.

70 Kidney and McDonald, "A Toolkit," 1017; McDonald, "We Want Respect," 264-265; McDonald and Kidney, "What Is Right?," 32.

71 Tuffrey-Wijne cites her extensive experience interacting with people experiencing IDD as a nurse as critical for the success of her ethnographic research. Tuffrey-Wijne and Davies, "This is My Story," 8.

with a picture of a “home,” indicating that both myself and the research participants would return home at the conclusion of the interviews. I noted that although research participants may see me at a future service at their church, I would not approach or converse with research participants in this setting.  

Jan Blacher and Iris Mink note barriers that may emerge in the context of research interviews among people in support roles for individuals with IDD. Reflecting on interviews with these supporting individuals, Blacher and Mink note that it requires a highly skilled interviewer “to obtain information that captures an individual’s experience and perceptions without predetermining the response categories.” According to Blacher and Mink, careful interviewers will intentionally determine the number of informants that will be present at one time and the nature of the interview questions (for example, if a person lives with IDD in addition to a degenerative condition, will questions about this individual’s future cause undue harm to family members also being interviewed?). In my research process, I invited answers from participants with IDD before any other individuals (a maximum of two additional individuals were present at any given interview) answered the same question. I also explicitly invited participants with IDD to rephrase, correct, or expand upon answers

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75 Ibid., 136.

76 Ibid., 153.
provided by their parents, other family members, or friends throughout the interview process. My skills and experiences engaging family units within high-stake clinical situations as an occupational therapy practitioner aided in my awareness of approaching family dynamics in the interview setting. In addition, my ongoing support of self-empowerment organizations for people living with IDD guided my deference and prioritization of perspectives from interviewees with IDD throughout my research process.

The State of Current Theological Research Engaging People with IDD in the Context of Qualitative Research

People with profound intellectual disabilities may be vulnerable to constructions of their life stories that are negative and destructive. But that is so for all of us. None of us really tells or owns our stories. We are all people who are storied by a Creator God who resides within a narrative of creation, cross, and redemption that we can share in but can never own. Certainly we need to learn to tell that story well; or perhaps better to let that story tell us well. This is the essence of faithful discipleship. But even there we do not tell our stories on our own. Our stories are told as we learn to live well together in ways that recognize the strength of difference and the difference of strength within the coming Kingdom of God (1 Cor 1:18-31). It is this radical counternarrative that offers the possibility of redescribing the world in ways which honor, respect and listen to people who have no words but who have much to say.77

Swinton, Mowat, and Baines highlight both a framework and conclusion for engaging people with IDD in qualitative research: telling stories faithfully as an act of Christian discipleship. This discipleship necessitates the production of counternarratives that

highlight the stories of people with disabilities who live into God’s central story of creation, cross, and redemption. Engagement in qualitative research complexifies and reveals new insights with which to regard available statistical information about faith community participation among disabled people, indicating less frequent church attendance and decreased likelihood of naming spirituality and religion as centrally important (in comparison to nondisabled people). As Victoria Slocum highlights, further research representation is needed, especially surrounding issues of accessibility, educational strategies, as well as disability-related training for nondisabled clergy and lay people, with a goal of decreasing barriers to religious participation among people with IDD. I would add to Slocum’s recommendation that further studies exploring the stories and experiences as recounted from the perspectives of people with IDD, as well as their caregivers, are desperately needed. We will now turn to some of the ways theologians have engaged qualitative research to faithfully tell stories of the lives of people with IDD.

Lorraine Cuddeback-Gedeon, reflecting on her ethnographic fieldwork among adults with IDD in the setting of a community-based nonprofit service provision organization, draws upon three conceptual theological commitments toward a framework of engaging qualitative research among people with IDD. Cuddeback-Gedeon names solidarity,

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accountability, and participant action research as necessary channels for nondisabled researchers to creatively embrace when collaborating with research participants living with IDD. For Cuddeback-Gedeon, these are not only markers of a robust research protocol, but they constitute necessary foundations for research in the trajectory of liberation theology: theological research shaped by a deep commitment to the flourishing of the research participants and an equally deep respect for their epistemic privilege.

Cuddeback-Gedeon’s commitment to participatory research, where participants contribute to shaping the protocol, discussion, and suggestions for future studies, seeks to promote agency among people with IDD engaged in qualitative research. Her centering of accountability, following the work of Aana Marie Vigen and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, finds close connection with participatory research commitments, such as the particular practice of following-up with participants to avoid misappropriation and misinterpretation, as well as a clear commitment to research outcomes contributing to the “positive transformation of society.” Finally, Cuddeback-Gedeon commends solidarity as a central marker for engaging people with IDD in qualitative research. This solidarity is marked for Cuddeback-Gedeon by four clear features: “a commitment to the wellbeing of the community in which we engage,” which results secondly in “some kind of ‘break’ with a theologian’s positions of privilege,” third, the preservation of agency among people with IDD, and finally, ongoing practices of dialogue with the community from which the research emerged, accompanied by ongoing

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80 Cuddeback-Gedeon, "Nothing About Us," 11.
processes of “humility and reflexivity.” For Cuddeback-Gedeon, these specific commitments to solidarity help theological researchers to carefully and continually consider if privilege and power have been properly attended to throughout the research process.

Erik Carter and his research associates have provided the most prolific research at the intersection of people with IDD and participation in faith communities. Carter, who comes from a background in special education, merges both quantitative and qualitative work to paint a thick description of people with IDD in faith communities across different religious identities. Some of Carter’s more scoping work, as well as his development of specific frameworks for spirituality, religious expression, belonging, and disability, are published in non-theological journals. Carter’s work also features prominently in literature reviews conducted by non-theological researchers with a special interest in the religious life and experiences among people with IDD (such as the work of Slocum in the field of special education).

In Carter and his co-authors’ article “Congregational Participation of a National Sample of Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities,” they seek to describe religious involvement among adults with IDD toward an end of more faithfully supporting people with IDD in their religious participation. Carter et al. found that in comparison to participation among adults with IDD in other community activities, such as entertainment or

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81 Ibid., 10.

eating out, monthly involvement in a religious activity was much less common (only 48.3% of the 12,706 sample reported attending at least one faith gathering in the previous month).\textsuperscript{83} In response to these findings, Carter et al. suggest that further research is needed to probe the nature of participation in faith communities among adults with IDD, versus the notation of their attendance alone.\textsuperscript{84} Since only 6% of adults with IDD were noted to attend religious gatherings without another person, Carter et al. stress the importance of sustaining and supporting relationships among people with IDD that allow their continued participation in faith communities.\textsuperscript{85} The researchers also conclude that the onus for supporting increased attendance and vibrant participation among adults with IDD in religious communities does not belong to these individuals alone - religious communities must commit to re-evaluating “barriers of architecture, awareness, and attitudes.”\textsuperscript{86}

In “A Place of Belonging: Research at the Intersection of Faith and Disability,” Carter engages his previous research to provide a framework of “belonging” for people with IDD in faith communities. Carter develops his central assumption - that “churches are called to be places of welcome, belonging, and contribution for people with disabilities and their families” - from both theological and empirical sources.\textsuperscript{87} Carter draws up mixed-method

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 390.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 391.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.

research, including in-depth interviews, to sketch a 10-part framework for “belonging.” Implications for future research in Carter’s study center on improved preparation for clergy and other ministry leaders regarding issues at the intersection of disability and belonging, beginning in the context of theological education.\textsuperscript{88} Carter also urges faith communities to move beyond questions of “why” (e.g., why should we foster belonging in our churches for disabled people?) to questions of “how” (e.g. how will our specific community commit to the belonging, befriending, and knowing of our neighbors with disabilities?).\textsuperscript{89}

Carter’s 2013 article on supports for flourishing in religious settings among people with IDD seeks to provide an initial framework for faith communities to engage in designing and offering appropriate spiritual supports for people with IDD.\textsuperscript{90} Carter draws upon existing descriptive research to highlight the inconsistent support of people with IDD in the lives of most faith communities.\textsuperscript{91} Responding, Carter suggests several best practices: “a clear conceptualization of what inclusion means within a congregational context and a comprehensive listing of components reflecting high-quality, inclusive practices” as well as the development of alliances with people in the disability community in order to implement shared best practices regarding inclusion for people with IDD.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 178.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 179.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 69.
Eleanor Liu, with Carter as a co-author, centers the stories and experiences of disabled young adults in “In Their Own Words: The Place of Faith in the Lives of Young People with Autism and Intellectual Disability.” Recognizing the dearth of research on the faith lives of people with IDD, especially young adults, Liu et al. interviewed 20 young adults on themes of faith, spiritual expressions, and disability.\(^\text{93}\) Liu and her co-authors found diverse expressions of faith among their participants, including service-oriented ministry, prayer, and congregation-based activities (such as church services and retreats).\(^\text{94}\) The study participants testified about faith communities as “beneficial,” providing places of belonging, assistance, and friendship.\(^\text{95}\) Liu et al. highlight the need to foster supportive relationships within communities of faith in order to sustain the participation of young adults with IDD and autism in congregational life (and beyond).\(^\text{96}\)

Another article co-authored by Carter, Melinda Jones Ault’s “Congregational Participation and Supports for Children and Adults with Disabilities,” explores parental perspectives to glean insight on effective supports, strategies, and practices to support both children and adults with disabilities in faith communities. Interestingly, this research’s focus on enhanced quality of life among people with IDD with greater participation in faith


\(^{94}\) Ibid., 393-394.

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 396.

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 400.
communities did not include reports from disabled people themselves. Overall, Ault and her co-researchers found that existing accessible facilities, as well as pre-existing attitudes of welcome toward disabled people, were associated with the greatest percentages of congregational participation among those with IDD: “faith communities that can provide appropriate supports, welcoming and accepting attitudes, and members and leaders educated in inclusive practices can contribute to enhanced quality of life for families and their children with disabilities.”

Additional studies draw conclusions regarding the lives of people with IDD and the impact of participation within (or exclusion from) communities of faith from primarily nondisabled people, sometimes characterized as allies or “disability adjacent” individuals. Megan Griffin et al. demonstrate this kind of approach in “Characteristics of Inclusive Faith Communities: A Preliminary Survey of Inclusive Practices in the United States,” soliciting survey participation from 160 respondents (14% were disabled and 44% were family members of people with disabilities). Griffin and her co-researchers found that

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98 Those considered “disability adjacent” include nondisabled parents, caregivers, academics, or professionals whose life experiences and/or careers significantly intersect with those of disabled people. For further definition and context for “disability adjacent” individuals, including a critique from disability studies about the amplification of the perspectives of nondisabled allies over and above disabled people, see s.e. smith, Vilissa Thompson, and Alice Wong’s “Disabled Writers in One Place!” Blog: Disability Arts and Media. http://whoamitostopit.com/disabled-writers-in-one-place/ (accessed March 6, 2019).

congregations with the best inclusion-related outcomes for people with disabilities were supported by clergy and other leaders’ commitments to inclusion, had collaborative partnerships with community-based disability organizations, and embraced theological teachings that positively framed disability. In conclusion, Griffin and her colleagues exhort continued attention to building disability awareness among faith leaders, as well as the pursuit of further connections between communities of faith with disability-related community groups.

Similarly, Elizabeth O’Hanlon drew exclusively upon parental perspectives to explore the religious experiences of children with disabilities in her qualitative study. O’Hanlon frames religion as a “coping mechanism” for families with a child experiencing disability, as well as source of support for family units that are impacted by disability. She identifies the dearth of research on understanding religious communities as sources of support for disabled children and their families, and in response developed a survey tool to probe this topic. O’Hanlon found that families of children with disabilities, including the 29.3% of participants who had children with IDD (designated as “mental retardation” in the survey) and 41.4% with autism, identified religious education, youth activities, formal religious

100 Ibid., 389.
101 Ibid., 390.
103 Ibid., 45.
cere monies, and worship serves as most important to their child’s participation in a religious community.\textsuperscript{104} Youth activities and religious education were the activities most frequently participated in by children with disabilities and 90\% of parental respondents understood clergy and lay members of their church community to facilitate a “positive or somewhat positive” experience for their child.\textsuperscript{105} O’Hanlon commends future research that engages additional caregivers for people with disabilities (beyond parents). She also commends further research on spiritual supports provided to families as a whole (not only to children with disabilities) and looks to further describe and analyze the current availability of these supports.

In DongDong Zhang and Frank Rusch’s article, “The Role of Spirituality in Living with Disabilities,” the authors engage historical and research literature on spirituality from the perspectives of families with disabled children. They also look to the stories of disabled people to articulate the role of spirituality in their own lives. Zhang and Rusch highlight spirituality among people with congenital or early-acquired disabilities primarily as a way of coping and meaning-making, especially in times of enduring difficulty.\textsuperscript{106} For people disabled in their later life, Zhang and Rusch explore how spirituality serves as a source of strength amidst difficulty, not specifically manifested in healing, but in attitudes of acceptance and

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\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 50.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 52.

Among parents of children with disabilities, Zhang and Rusch identify three central conclusions regarding the role of spirituality: a tool for parental meaning-making of a child’s disability, a source of support when facing difficulties associated with a child’s disability, and the means to embrace a journey of transformation as a result of parenting a child with a disability. Zhang and Rusch commend future qualitative research studies to more fully understand the communal role of spirituality in spaces where both disabled and nondisabled people participate in religious activities.

The work of Swinton, Mowat, and Baines provides an example of participatory and action-oriented research with a methodology “derived from person-centered planning…focused on reflecting theologically on the lives of people who have profound intellectual disabilities with high support needs.” Engaging people with IDD as well as their families, support workers, and caretakers, their study yielded “a series of extended meditations on the lives of some real people and the issues that they bring to the table as theological conversations develop.” Drawing upon these stories, the researchers reflected on emerging conceptual themes of “dependent-independence” and communal spirituality. In

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107 Ibid., 88.
108 Ibid., 90.
109 Ibid., 90, 92.
110 Ibid., 92-93.
111 Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, "Whose Story Am I?", 6.
112 Ibid.
this framework of “dependent-interdependence,” autonomy is reconfigured as dependent upon one’s relationships - relying upon the gifts of support and presence received from neighbors in order to sustain a relationally-grounded notion of autonomy for personhood. This theme of dependence finds resonance in the researchers’ attention to the communal aspects of spiritual expression - an experience dependent on meeting with others - a spirituality that cannot be sustained apart from one's neighbor.

In “Rediscovering the Mysteria: Sacramental Stories from Persons with Disabilities, Their Families, and Their Faith Communities,” Donald Healy offers his analysis of stories of sacramental participation he gathered from among disabled and nondisabled individuals from a wide range of Christian traditions. Healy focuses on increasing sacramental access among people with IDD, specifically suggesting the following considerations for Christian faith communities: never underestimate the abilities of disabled people, the sacraments hold deep “instructional value” for demonstrating acceptance of people with disabilities in faith communities, and a renewed focus on the Holy Spirit is central to sacramental efficacy and empowerment.

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114 Ibid., 211.

115 Ibid., 213.
Responding to and Expanding the Current Literature: Disabled Narratives, Baptismal Practices, and Ecclesial Transformation

As evidenced above, the existing qualitative research that centers the perspectives of people with IDD is sparse. Notably, many studies rely primarily upon professional, academic, or caregiver perspectives on the religious needs and experiences of people with IDD. In addition, as highlighted by Swinton, Mowat, & Baines (2011), current literature reveals a dearth of commentary on how the witness and participation of people with IDD in Christian faith communities might shape and form core theological convictions as well as ecclesial practices.

My qualitative project, focused on theologies and practices of baptism as they inform practices of belonging among people with IDD, offers a rich description of the experiences of people with IDD. With the perspectives of people with IDD centered, I also draw upon insights from pastors, lay people, family members, and friends of those with IDD in order to probe resonances within their reflections on baptism. I approached this project with a primary curiosity about how participation among people with IDD, and especially their inclusion or exclusion from baptismal practices, might shape ecclesial visions of anthropology.

In addition to describing important baptismal themes among Christian faith communities that celebrate the baptismal identity and discipleship of people with IDD, my research also has a generative purpose: in concert with the stories of baptismal practices, experiences, and theologies, I provide concrete recommendations for Christian practice across ecumenical settings. While these practices are rooted in baptism, my proposals aim
not only to re-enliven baptismal practices and theologies in and of themselves, but also at transforming assumptions about Christian identity, discipleship, and vocation.

The stories that emerged in the context of my research project testify to what Paul Fiddes names as a sacramental understanding of reality: “God is encountered in an embodied way, through concrete realities, and not merely through ideas.” Through my research project, I sought to explore these concrete realities of baptismal practice and discipleship, engaging Nicolas Healy’s model of “practical-prophetic ecclesiology.” This kind of inquiry “is not about the business of finding a single right way to think about the church, of developing a blueprint suitable for all times and places. Rather…it’s function is to aid the concrete church in performing its tasks of witness and pastoral care within…its ‘ecclesiological context.” Healy’s notion of this context acknowledges that local congregations are continually formed by the greater context in which they find themselves. In other words, “the concrete church, living in and for the world, performs its tasks of witness and discipleship within particular, ever-shifting contexts, and its performance is shaped by them.” It is this nexus of the baptismal practices within concrete church


118 Ibid., 39.

119 Ibid.
communities, alive in a wider societal context that often glorifies capacity-based, individualized, and rational accounts of personhood, that I explored my research questions.

My dual research aims\textsuperscript{120} of contextual description and suggestions for generative practices seek not only the improved wellbeing of people living with IDD, but also seek to facilitate the Church’s performance of “its task of truthful witness within a particular ecclesiological context” as well as the Church’s ability to foster “good discipleship so that its members may more truly embody their claims about Jesus Christ and about the life made possible in and through him.”\textsuperscript{121} In the following sections, I recount the details of my research process, followed by an in-depth exploration of the study’s findings, with a concluding discussion of practical implications for churches across the ecumenical spectrum (further developed in Chapter 5).

\textit{Study Methods}

Reflexivity and Co-Creation in Theological Qualitative Research

“All research is, to an extent, autobiography. Reflexivity brings to the fore…that the creation and interpretation of texts is necessarily an act of co-creation.”\textsuperscript{122} Swinton here, as well as Emily Reimer-Barry in her essay “The Listening Church: How Ethnography Can

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\textsuperscript{120} Swinton and Mowat, \textit{Practical Theology and Qualitative Research}, 51-52.

\textsuperscript{121} Healy, \textit{Church, World}, 50.

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Transform Catholic Ethics,” stress the necessity of critical self-reflection throughout the process of qualitative research, in order to foster an ongoing process of reflection upon the surprises, challenges, and confusions a researcher faces throughout a project’s duration. Swinton and Mowat define reflexivity as “the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings.”

Mary Clark Moschella also argues for the foregrounding of reflexivity as a means for opening oneself toward personal transformation through interaction with others in the process of qualitative research. Charlotte Davies’s work on reflexive ethnography argues for the necessity of candor in identifying one’s “theoretical influences,” and particularly how these influences shape one’s research and interpretive processes.

Swinton stresses that beyond identification of theoretical influences upon one’s research, it is also critical to develop “a mode of reflexivity within which the theological is assumed as a normal and primary reflective dimension of the researcher’s epistemological and methodological assumptions.” Fulkerson echoes this importance of theological

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124 Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 59. Later in this section, I provide several footnotes that illustrate how I engaged field notes as a way to reflect and shape my engagement with research participants.

125 Moschella, Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice, 109.

126 Davies, Reflexive Ethnography, 199.

127 Swinton, "Where is Your Church?" in Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography, 83.
categories (such as anthropological assumptions about sin, the *imago Dei*, and limitation) in shaping the overall logic of qualitative research, as well as the role of these theological assumptions in shaping subsequent analysis of qualitative data.\(^{128}\)

My positionality as a Christian disciple, an occupational therapist, a theologian, a long-standing advocate for people with IDD, an Episcopalian lay leader, and a person living with chronic illness which manifests in intermittently disabling ways, as well as my commitments to scripture and Christology for the work of doing theology, reflect key components that have shaped my research interests and the “logic” with which I pursue the task of qualitative theological research. In seeking to honor my multi-facted roles and commitments, I find John Swinton’s following exhortation strikingly truthful and humbling: “the honest methodological position from which Christians should begin their ethnographic practices is not neutrality but prayer.”\(^{129}\)

Prayer consistently marked my research process from its initial steps of conceptual formation through my retrospective transcription, coding, and analysis of data. Though these prayers often focused on receiving divine assistance to expedite the Institutional Review Board process or that an awkward conversational detour would end, my prayers also focused on my anthropological commitment to human limitation. Part of my process of self-reflexivity was to acknowledge to God in prayer the limitedness of myself - to confess my

\[\text{\footnotesize 128 Fulkerson, "Roundtable on Ethnography," 6-7.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 129 Swinton, "Where is Your Church?" in Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography, 84.}\]
temptations to limit what another might authentically wish to share with me about baptism. I needed grace to approach the research process with an open perspective, ready to listen, learn, and challenge the limits that I found myself either shrinking into or inadvertently imposing on others. ¹³⁰

Throughout my qualitative research process, I kept notes of my questions, experiences, and responses to new situations and people. At times these notes were filled with great joy and excitement, and at other times, with discomfort and distress, often regarding theological claims or conceptions of disability. These notes shaped the formation of my ongoing interview and participant observation skills.¹³¹ My process of self-reflective note taking became an exhortation to embody what Swinton names as “soulful

¹³⁰ For example, I found myself skeptical of one of my participants after our initial conversations during the study’s recruitment phase (the participant talked to me about an “autism section” in their congregation). An excerpt from my field notes after this encounter reads as follows: “I was surprised to see how strongly and negatively I felt internally about the “autism section” comment. My mind automatically thought, “don’t they know about disability studies?! About preventing patterns of discrimination and institutionalization?! Especially in church!” Their comment even tempted me to potentially disregard this person as a participant. But reflecting on this now, I see how closed off I was in that moment. And how without this process of reflecting back, I would likely carry that closed kind of mind with me into our formal interview. I don’t want to do that. And I need to extend grace – just like hundreds of people have extended grace to me as I’ve learned how to speak truthfully and faithfully about disability. And how I’ve received grace as I’ve tried to collaborate with disabled people to create meaningful church spaces with them.”

¹³¹ For example, in my field notes after my first two interviews, I reflected on the following: “my participants seemed to become visibly anxious when I asked them more general questions about baptism – such as “what happens when someone is baptized?” Their excitement decreased and many of them avoided eye contact. One person actually said “well, I’m not really good at theology.” I panicked a bit inside, thinking we’d just lost a great rapport after exploring more open-ended questions. I felt guilty for unintendingly placing theological pressure on participants, especially because it seemed like some people with IDD and their parents felt pressure about giving me the “right answer.” So I found that giving a reminder at the beginning of the interview about there being “no wrong or right answers,” and emphasizing this again throughout the interview made people feel more at ease (evidenced in facial expressions and relaxation of their body posture throughout the interview process). I’ll continue to offer this reassurance to help sustain rapport throughout future interviews and also to clarify the intent of these interviews in the first place – to share stories, not to tell me a “correct” theological proclamation about baptism.”
“companioning” - a ministry of presence.\textsuperscript{132} The gifts of presence extended to me by my research participants helped me facilitate this kind of companioning:

The sacrament of the present moment simply means providing the opportunities and having the epistemological awareness to allow people to notice things that they never could have noticed before and, in noticing them, to see and respond differently. To be with someone in the moment is to be open to surprise, new possibilities.\textsuperscript{133}

I pray that the fruit of the gifts emerging from sharing the “sacrament of the present moment” with my research participants and their communities provide a robustly self-reflexive and truthful account of the stories they shared with me.

The sharing of stories in the research process calls for what Swinton and Mowat name as a “sensitivity” to the inevitability of “co-creation” between researchers and research participants.\textsuperscript{134} This notion of co-creation recognizes that my position as a researcher shaped research encounters, both in interview and observation contexts. Acknowledging this co-creation also highlights the complexity of the research data - a complexity which Donald Polkinghorne names as the “dijunction between a person’s actual experienced meaning and his or her storied description.”\textsuperscript{135} For example, the interview transcripts which I analyzed and interpreted are at least in part, reflective of my tone, demeanor, and body language.\textsuperscript{136}


\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 255.

\textsuperscript{134} Swinton and Mowat, \textit{Practical Theology and Qualitative Research}, 61.

\textsuperscript{135} Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Validity Issues in Narrative Research," \textit{Qualitative Inquiry} 13, no. 4 (2007): 480.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 482.
researcher, I attended to this disjunction through practices of critical self-reflexivity. While cultivating my awareness of co-creation helped me to recognize the goods of reciprocity involved in qualitative research, this awareness also helped me shape my analysis, resisting temptations to re-write, strongly re-interpret, or perhaps most blatantly, to “colonize” the stories shared with me by my research participants. I also committed to resist reductive descriptions of the stories emerging from my research. Finally, following Luke Bretherton, I sought to amplify the stories of my research participants, particularly people with IDD, in order to not only offer some novel theological insights, but to come to “judgments leading to better action.”

Study Design

This study utilized an exploratory case study design with qualitative interviews and participant observation, in order to describe contextual factors and explore resonances among multiple participant reflections on baptism. The study also worked within a narrative inquiry framework, committing to “a respect for ordinary lived experience.”

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137 Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 61.


Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly define this relational\textsuperscript{141} methodological framework of narrative inquiry as:

A way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people’s lives, both individual and social.\textsuperscript{142}

Recruitment and Sampling

In order to recruit adults with IDD baptized in a received Christian tradition as well as associated family members, support people, and lay and clergy leaders, this study employed purposive sampling.\textsuperscript{143} This approach to sampling allowed for greater representation of diverse participants, denominations, baptismal practices, and geographical locations,\textsuperscript{144} though sampling occurred within the boundaries of the state of North Carolina to ensure adequate support for travel expenses.

I recruited study participants through flyers distributed at my home academic institution (Duke Divinity School), as well as to local churches and community-based disability organizations. In addition, I recruited participants via email invitations, distributed

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 23.


\textsuperscript{143} Creswell and Poth, \textit{Qualitative Inquiry}, 157; Swinton and Mowat, \textit{Practical Theology and Qualitative Research}, 69.

\textsuperscript{144} Creswell and Poth, \textit{Qualitative Inquiry}, 158.
among clergy and lay denominational leaders in the state of North Carolina (95 distinct initial invitations to individuals representing 22 different Christian denominations).

Following these initial email invitations, I provided follow-up communication via email and phone. All printed recruitment materials, as well as email and telephone scripts, were approved by the Duke University Campus Institutional Review Board (IRB). Seven extended follow-up conversations resulted in neither interviews nor site visits (denominational affiliations were: The Episcopal Church, The United Methodist Church, Mennonite Church USA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The Roman Catholic Church, and The Alliance of Baptists).

Ethical Considerations

The Duke University Campus IRB approved this study in its entirety after a full review. Any potential study participants who had an existing relationship with me in the context of my home faith community or in my professional role as an occupational therapy clinician (in either the past or present) were excluded from recruitment efforts.

I provided all sites where I undertook participant observation with a letter organizational consent. At each of these sites, the interviewed clergy provided verbal consent to my presence as a researcher and participant observer. Per the IRB, these clergy also offered written and verbal announcements of my presence as a researcher but did not disclose the specific focus of my research on people with IDD, in order to protect people
with IDD in the community from the risk of undue stigmatization during the course of my research.

Before each interview, I verbally reviewed the study information sheet (with accompanying pictorial study information guide) with all participating interviewees, in order to clarify the interview process and answer any participant questions. Family, designated support persons, people with IDD not under legal guardianship, as well as clergy and lay leaders, all provided verbal consent prior to the initiation of the research interview. I utilized a visual consent guide among all participants. Per the IRB parameters, I assumed that people with IDD not under legal guardianship (typically individuals with more mild cognitive impairment) possessed the potential capability of providing independent informed consent and subsequent independence in the research process, including voluntarily termination of participation at any point. I offered all participants with IDD who were not under legal guardianship and were able to provide verbal informed consent with an option to interview by themselves or to have a support person present during our interview.

For people with IDD under legal guardianship, as well as people with IDD not under legal guardianship who a) were unable to provide informed consent and b) still desired to participate in the research interview, an additional interviewee (the person’s designated guardian, either a parent or sibling for all participants in this study) provided permission for the individual with IDD’s interview participation. This permission granting was integrated into the guardian’s informed verbal consent process. Individuals with IDD then completed
the assent process (as able) and were required to have their designated guardian, parent, sibling, or support person with them throughout the entirety of the research interview.

In the case of people with IDD unable to provide informed consent or assent, such as people with profound IDD, the researcher requested their presence throughout the duration of the interview with their guardian, parent, sibling, or support person. I invited participants with IDD who demonstrated limited spoken language to communicate as desired via assistive communication devices or with interpretation from a guardian, following permission for their participation in the study.

During interviews, I provided visual cue cards to all participants in order to assist participants with requesting clarification or re-wording of interview questions. These visual cue cards also provided a means of communicating confusion, misunderstanding of any research questions, or the need for a break at any point during the interview process. Upon completion of the interview, I provided a $20 cash payment to each study participant, with the exception of participants with IDD, who were compensated regardless of their ability to complete the interview.\footnote{In order to recognize and compensate their efforts toward participating in the study.}

As part of the informed consent and assent processes, all participants selected a pseudonym (or, in the case of individuals with limited communication, the researcher consulted with their guardian, parent, sibling, or support person to select a pseudonym on behalf of the participant with IDD). Clergy selected pseudonyms for their faith
communities. In order to protect confidentiality, I fictionalized or disguised any identifying personal or institutional information reported in interviews, as well as any distinguishing features of faith communities recorded in my field notes.146

Participants (Table 1)

The study recruited 33 total adult participants, ages 18 years and older, from Christian faith communities in the state of North Carolina. The participant ages ranged from 24 to 77. 13 participants identified as adults with IDD, 8 as parents or siblings of a person with IDD, 5 as lay leaders, and 7 as clergy.

Among these 33 participants, the Christian traditions represented included: Churches of Christ, The Episcopal Church, The Southern Baptist Convention, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and The United Methodist Church. Among these denominations, 15 individual congregations yielded participants for the study. Among these 15 distinct faith communities, I gained institutional consent to engage as a participant observer at 5 different congregations (1 United Methodist church, 3 Episcopal churches, and 1 combined Southern and Cooperative Baptist congregation).

For 14 participants, their church association identified within a “believer’s,” “confessional,” or “credobaptism” tradition. In denominations following this baptismal tradition, baptism typically occurs after evidence of faith or discipleship in an individual’s

146 Per requests from multiple research participants with IDD, I also withheld participant reported race and gender identities, to further protect anonymity.
life, often accompanied by a verbal testimony and an independent affirmation of the desire to pursue baptism. Of note, 2 of the study participants who associated themselves with a credobaptism perspective attended an Episcopal Church (which primarily practices paedobaptism) at the time of the study. Additionally, 1 participant attending a United Methodist congregation held a primarily confessional perspective on baptism. 17 of the study participants identified within an “infant” or “paedobaptism” tradition (traditions that consider the baptism of infants and young children as normative). The baptismal tradition among the two participants unable to complete interviews (see below) was unknown.

Data Collection

With 29 research participants, I conducted in-person, in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews. I conducted 2 interviews (with 1 participant each) over the phone due to travel-related barriers for the participants. Out of 33 total participants, 2 participants declined or were unable to complete interviews (these interviews were not subsequently transcribed). I conducted 23 total interviews with between 1 and 3 participants present for each interview. In 4 interviews with individuals with IDD under legal guardianship, the person with IDD was the only contributor to conversation (parents or support people declined participation). Two participants were non-speakers.

Interview length ranged from 7 to 89 minutes, with an average interview length of 39 minutes. In-person interviews took place at a location selected by participants or their legal guardian. Faith communities (5 interviews), places of employment (5 interviews), and
primary residences (8 interviews) comprised the predominant in-person interview locations. The additional 3 in-person interviews took place in semi-private community settings familiar to the interview participant/s.

To conduct all interviews, I utilized one of three IRB-approved interview guides (one designated with specific questions for lay participants, one designated with specific questions for clergy participants, and one designated with specific questions for people with IDD and their guardian, parent, sibling, and/or support person). Open-ended interview questions prompted exploration of stories of baptism, especially those among participants with IDD. Questions sought to evoke feelings, memories, and impressions associated with experiences surrounding baptism. Interview questions also probed general theological meanings about baptism among participants (“what does baptism mean to you?”; “what happens when someone is baptized?”) as well as the role of baptism in shaping understandings of human beings, the church, and God. Throughout the interviews, I invited participants to reflect on particularly meaningful Bible stories that resonated with them in relationship to baptism. Toward the end of each interview, I provided open sharing time for all participants (“we are almost finished with our interview - is there anything else you’d like to tell me that we haven’t talked about?”).

For data collection in the context of participant observation, I attended at least two gatherings at the 5 faith communities who consented to participation in the research study. These gatherings included Sunday morning worship services (8 gatherings), a weeknight worship service (1 gathering), and a musical event sponsored by a church community (1
gathering). I took detailed field notes following attendance at each gathering, with specific attention to the following areas (outlined in an IRB-approved participant observation guide): contextual and environmental factors, service content and structure, service participation, and accessibility and inclusion.

**Data Analysis**

After completion of each of the 21 interviews, I reviewed the full audio files to check for any recording or technical issues and to begin reflection on the data. Next, a professional transcriptionist produced transcripts for each interview. While re-listening to each interview, I validated each of these transcriptions for textual accuracy. Next, I reviewed each full transcription synchronously with its recording three times, writing handwritten analytic memos to identify emergent themes, questions, and connections throughout the data. In these memos, I also sought to capture the most poignant and meaningful stories and reflections of the interview participants, regardless of their connection with other interviews.

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For thematic analysis, following the insights from these memos, I created an initial code list and then proceeded with both descriptive coding and a combined In Vivo and process coding approach to complete first-cycle coding. Next, I engaged in a subsequent round of coding with a focus on thematizing the descriptive codes. I recorded first-round and subsequent levels of coding within NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (Version 12.1.0, QSR International, 2018). After completion of coding, I cross-tabulated the code assignments to identify the most frequent codes across all interviews, specific questions, and among specific categories of participants (for example, clergy or people with IDD), as well as differences between participants aligned with a paedobaptism versus a credobaptism tradition.

Ibid., 27.

Ibid., 76. Descriptive coding was initially utilized to establish a list of important topics and sub-topics in the interview data.

Ibid., 77.

Ibid., 78.

Ibid., 231.

I utilized NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software primarily as an organizational tool for my data, as well as an efficient instrument for noting important shared themes across the interview data and field notes (arising from my process of descriptive coding). As Swinton and Mowat advise, I attempted to situate my “wider reflection and interpretive process,” including my practices of self-reflexivity, as the practices that “formed the heart” of my data analysis (Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 178). My handwritten analytic memos helped me draw upon the unique richness and meaning of various stories that did not fall within the shared themes across study participants. I explore these unique findings throughout the remainder of the dissertation, particularly in Chapters 4 and 5.
In addition to the interview data, I transcribed my field notes from participant observation experiences and uploaded these transcriptions to NVivo in order to allow for analysis of the content, including contrasts and comparisons among different sites.

Findings

Accessible Summary

Sarah talked with some people about baptism. Some people Sarah talked to have disabilities. Some people were parts of families, like moms, dads, brothers, and sisters. Some people were pastors and priests. Some people were from church. Sarah talked to people from many different churches. These people told Sarah stories about baptism.

People said that baptism is about Jesus. In the Bible, Jesus was baptized by his cousin named John. When we are baptized we are connected to Jesus. When other people are baptized they are connected to Jesus. This happens to babies, kids, and older people.

People said that baptism connects us to other people. Baptism puts us in a family. Being baptized is becoming family with people at church. We become family with people in our churches. We also become family with people at different churches around the world. All different kinds of people are baptized.

154 The following four paragraphs provide an “accessible summary” of my dissertation’s qualitative research. Some scholars suggest providing this kind of accessible summary alongside a more traditional academic abstract, especially when research participants include people with IDD. Provision of an “accessible summary” makes research results more accessible to people with IDD (Tuffrey-Wijne and Davies, “This is My Story,” 10).
People said that being baptized is important. When we are baptized it can make us happy. When we see other people baptized it can make us joyful. Baptism is being a part of a big and important thing. Baptism is a big and important thing that connects us to other people and to God.

Describing Baptism

“I think baptism is primarily the act of God through the church in which God is proclaiming the truth of a person. The truth of God and therefore the truth of a person. And that this is, for whatever reason, the way God has given to us to draw people into that story in a corporate mode of worship and celebration.” -Pastor John

Seeking to create maximal openness in exploring stories of baptism across ecumenical traditions, I offered no formal definition of baptism for research participants. Several key foci for describing baptism emerged from across the diversity of research participants, including those from both believer’s baptism and infant baptism traditions. We will first explore these shared reflections on what baptism is - focused on Jesus, being welcomed into a community, and participation.

Baptism is Jesus-Centered

“Baptism is about following Jesus.” - James

“Baptism is God in Jesus.” - Henry

“Baptism is when someone becomes a Christian.” - Pastor Alicia
Reflections on baptism with deep connections to Jesus surfaced among all categories of participants, occurring in nearly half the interviews. Participants named both being a part of Jesus’ body and baptismal identity rooted in Jesus as particularly important:

“People are made part of the body of Christ…baptism is being received into the body of Christ.”
- Steve

“I believe in being baptized I was fully adopted in the body of Christ.”
- Pastor Paula

“Baptism is a participation and a welcome into who Jesus is.”
- Randy

“I became a new man in Jesus Christ.”
- David

“Baptism is through - is like Jesus Christ, our Lord - he is with you and is with me.”
- Al

“I think we all got saved a long time ago. We got fully incorporated in Jesus’ baptism.”
- Pastor John

“Baptism marks a turning point in someone’s life. A transformation turning point. They’re transformed from being turned to self to turning now to Christ.”
- Pastor Daniel

Participants also shared about baptism as a way of participating in Jesus’ death and resurrection:

“Baptism shows that Jesus was buried, and that he rose again from the dead. I was buried just like Jesus was. I was buried like Jesus. I was buried like Jesus and rose again. Rose up from the dead.”
- Danny

155 Thirteen interviews and 16 total participants. This reporting raises the question of why I present exact numbers in a qualitative (vs. quantitative) research project. After all, according to Swinton and Mowat, the task of qualitative research consists in creating thick descriptions to faithfully narrate “reality in ways which enable us to understand the world differently and in understanding the world differently begin to act differently” (Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 45-46). I include numbers throughout the findings section not to suggest that my research precisely measures, generalizes, or explains the world of baptismal theologies and practices as they intersect with disability. Instead, I include brief numerical reports as an additional way to affirm shared meanings across different narratives and experiences of my research participants. In addition, some readers may more clearly understand the world of baptismal practices when the themes of the study find emphasis not only in thick textual description but are also accompanied by numbers as an additional descriptive category. In summary, I provide brief numerical reports to assist readers who may benefit from this information to “understand differently,” and in turn, “begin to act differently.”
“And I rise like Jesus did.” — James

“For me, baptism is symbolism of the burial and resurrection of Jesus, being made new.”
- Elisabeth

“Baptism represents the decision that you’ve made to make the tremendous representation, like Elisabeth said, of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.” — Eric

“Baptism is going to be a visible expression of an inward grace...it’s a symbolic act...it really has to do with a witness. It’s a way of bearing witness of this person, that they are giving physical and visible witness of the gospel. It goes to Romans 6. It is about sharing in Christ’s death and sharing in Christ’s resurrection. In fact, sometimes I will talk about this in the baptismal pool...and tell people that going into the water is a way of symbolizing and showing - or sharing in the death of Christ and coming up out of the water is symbolizing and giving a visible expression to our sharing in Christ’s resurrection. And so we are sharing in what Christ has done for us.” - Pastor Soren

“Baptism is to be immersed three times in the water of baptism through which we are made part of Jesus’ death that we may experience the resurrection...you are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. You are put under the water...which is a reminder that you are so immersed that you can’t breathe - that’s death. But you are raised up. That’s life.” — Steve

“They are dying to themselves and rising in Christ through the waters of baptism and are welcomed into the community...the community consists of Christ’s body.” — Hope

Other emphases in participants’ reflections on baptism included Jesus’ forgiveness of sins, baptism as a key act in being a disciple of Jesus, and being transformed to “new life” in Jesus at baptism.

Community

“Baptism is a proclamation of our salvation and what that means. It’s not for the candidate only, but it’s for the whole community.” - Pastor Daniel
The importance of community in stories about baptism also arose across all categories of participants. Participants considered baptism a public practice and proclamation of belonging, acceptance, and welcome into a church community:

“Baptism is a decision that important and it’s important that it’s public - saying it publicly to your congregation plus having the congregation support you in that decision... in baptism we enter a community of support. We are accepted for who we are” - Andrew

“To me, baptism is a way for the Christian community to welcome a new member...it is the way of the church community to welcome new family members. I do approve of the trend during my lifetime of making baptisms public...now it’s moved out into the larger congregation, which if it’s a way of welcoming new members, that’s as it should be. And in the Episcopal Church, the words are something like, let us welcome the newly baptized.” – Robert

“There is something in the act of worship, the public confirmation [in baptism] of something that matters.” - Pastor John

“God has shown me [through relationships with parishioners and friends with IDD] that God’s baptismal theology is really for all of God’s persons, all of God’s children.” - Pastor Ambrose

“Baptism means that for us as people of the church, we’re here to connect with you through a hand given in the Holy Spirit.” – Ava

Several participants also understood baptism as relating to a communal identity, often involving “family” language:

“Baptism to me is, it’s like joining the fold. Like everybody’s in, regardless of who you are, what you believe, what you like - we’re all in with God...Baptism sets you up in a community of people who are going to be your tribe.” – Mary

“What baptism has meant for me is a commitment that my family made, that they didn’t take lightly...this faith community is making a commitment to this person, to this baby, usually. And you as a family, you as their parents are making a commitment to bring this child up to love Jesus. And I feel so discouraged sometimes when someone moves churches, or the family isn’t committed...and then we just have to remember it’s like God’s faithfulness that keeps us in... we belong to God. We belong to this faith community. And we belong to the church, maybe capital “C”

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156 Eleven interviews and 16 total participants.
Church. Larger than just the little “c” church that we’re in. We belong to God. We belong to the church. We belong to our family.” – Randy

“I love to watch the mom’s and dad’s face during baptism - it’s just joyful. It’s just joyful…it’s a moment of commitment to your child…and it’s not just the family but the other people that are there - they are giving a commitment to that child also. Which is a lovely thing, because it’s not just your own family. It’s all these folks, and they are saying that they take ownership of this and they’ll be there. They’ll be your village.” – Barbara

“Bob is a delight and a joy and a reminder in our baptism that we are to respect the dignity of every human being. And I believe that the way that we welcome Bob is the way that God welcomes us…as part of our church family, we are called to love one another the way that God loves us. And that love is part of our baptism.” - Pastor Paula

Participation

Reflections on participation constituted the final, shared theme that emerged in descriptions of baptism among participants. Several participants affirmed participation in baptism as meaningfully connected to Jesus:

“Baptism is a participation and a remembering too. I guess we’re participating in an act that Jesus also participated in. And in doing that, we’re remembering something that Jesus did.” - Randy

“I think in a real way, we are participating in something that is already true…what we do is really a joyous participation in what God has emphatically and completely done in Christ.”
- Pastor John

“[Baptism] is an active, and I would even say conscious participation - in, you know, in the Triune God. This is sacramental reality. Right here. Right now.” - Pastor Ambrose

Several participants also drew on connections between baptism and Eucharist when describing the importance of participation:

“You know, I often tell my congregation as we celebrate the Eucharist, and as we baptize: we are participating in an unbroken stream with all Christians across time. You know, it seems so

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157 Ten interviews and 12 total participants.
simplistic or whatever. But, I mean, we’ve done this for two thousand years straight. Isn’t that awesome?” - Pastor Daniel

“I think a lot of our life of faith is one of participation. And one of remembering. And the Eucharist is a participation in the suffering and death—a participation and remembrance in the suffering and death of Jesus. And the liturgical calendar is a participation and remembering of the way of Jesus’s life. And it is in the participation in this way that folks have ordered their life for many thousands of years.” - Randy

“Baptism is fully realized through the reception of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. So, there’s a close connection between baptism, being received into the body of Christ, and the participation in that body through Eucharistic celebration.” - Steve

Some participants from credobaptism traditions specifically reflected on participating in “deciding” or “making a decision” as a central part of baptism:

“Baptism is the representation of the decision you’ve made to follow Christ…Baptists certainly don’t believe that, you know, immersion or baptism is what makes one a believer. It’s a decision that you make. But it is the visual representation, to me, of that decision.” - Eric

“Baptism is a choice.” - Andrew

“In Holy Baptism - they choose to have a heart and they get baptized then.” – Al

Overarching Themes: Community, Jesus, and the Materiality of Baptism

Expanding from the participants’ emphases in their descriptions and definitions of baptism, several major concepts arose as central to the participants’ stories about baptism. These additional themes overlapped considerably with the participants’ primary descriptions of baptism, such as the overarching theme of community:

“Baptism is about the church saying that we are not going to be doing this by yourself. That we are a community of people together who are going to be witnesses in the world together and we’re going to

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158 Seventeen interviews and 20 total participants.
support you as an individual while you do that. And it’s also about God’s call to us to be in community. Even in stories in the Bible where people start out in some sort of isolation...human beings are always called back into community. And so I think that the nature of God is togetherness. And baptism is a reflection of that.” - Lea

Jesus was another primary thematic emphasis across different participant stories and reflections. Experiences of Jesus in baptism and baptismal affirmations about who Jesus is included:

“I felt like Jesus came into my soul.” - Danny

“Jesus died on the cross for us.” – Bunny

“[Symbolized in baptism] through the blood of Jesus and his death on the cross, our sins are completely washed away and as if they were never there.” - Elisabeth

“I think baptism allows the church to feel that it is not in the declining headlines that we hear about. That in that one moment of baptism, we celebrate life and death and resurrection. And we celebrate incorporating a new member into the fuller body, the wider body.” - Pastor Paula

The materiality and embodied nature of baptism arose as another common theme throughout participant stories, including connections between baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as well as reflections on baptism and the body:

“Baptism is a reminder and confirmation that we are bodily. And that we are not just souls. So there’s water. And there’s people. And we touch the water in some way. And so that is ... a reminder that we were created - that God created us human with bodies.” – Randy

159 Fifteen interviews and 18 total participants.
160 Fifteen interviews and 19 total participants.
161 Ten interviews and 10 total participants.
162 Four interviews and 4 total participants.
These emphases on materiality and embodiment also resonated with other central baptismal themes of participation and Jesus, such as Pastor Paula’s reflection here:

“There is that point in the liturgy where we hear the story of water. How in creation we began with water. Through water Israel moved from being slaves into freedom. And in water, Jesus Christ was baptized. And in baptism, we share in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Similarly, Pastor Ambrose reflected:

“These [the baptismal waters] are the waters of the Red Sea, these are the waters of the Jordan. These are the waters of Mother Mary’s womb. I mean, it’s right here. Right now. Bam. It’s amazing.”

Additional participants’ stories also drew strong connections between the materiality of baptism and the importance of Jesus in baptism:

“This bodily act that Jesus did and also received is something we still do and it’s unifying.”
- Randy

“We are dying under this water because we’ve already died with the one who died for us [Jesus].”
- Pastor John

The importance of baptismal water often arose in connection to bodies, particularly bodily limitations and challenges:

“And at the beach, the man helped me into my baptism in the water.” - David

“We just take our head and we go forwards or backwards into the water. And we have a big tub, a pool. It’s like a bathtub.” – Ava

“For Danny it was rather logistically challenging because his mobility was so limited. And, you know, it’s like babies. There are two types of babies. There are some who know how to be held and there are some that are just like bags of sand. And Danny is a bag of sand. He didn’t know how to help you help him. And so we had to make extra preparations to get him into the waters of baptism…”

“We ended up having four or five deacons and strong bodies to help hoist him into the water. And I do remember very vividly how tenderly they spoke to him… I wish people could sort of overhear the gentle whispers and affirmations as they picked him up and reassured him they wouldn’t drop
him... I don't want to belabor it, but getting him in and out of the water. And the team effort that was required. I mean, my vivid recollection of the thing that touched me was hearing these men... many of whom are not very emotive or emotional or tender - being extremely gentle and affirming and caring of Danny, you know, just very quietly telling him he's going to be okay, we've got you, those kinds of things... the narrative that came to mind and I've never been able to shake is the group of friends who cut a hole in the roof, you know, and dropped their paralyzed friend into Jesus' lap. That was the image. And, I mean, you could just sort of lift that story out of the Gospel and change the names. And that's what Danny's baptism was like...

I asked him, “are you ready?” Danny said, “Yeah. I'm ready.” And I tried to take him back and he stiffened up like a board and would not go down. I said, okay. We're going to try this again. Waited a minute. I said, “you want to try again?” He said, “yeah. We'll try again.” And the second I kind of put pressure on him he just reflexively stiffened up and did not want to go back or under. None of that. Twice was enough.

I said, “Danny, I'm going to put some water on your head now. And, I did that three times. I believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He smiled at me, toothless grin. And the church applauds. And then the strong bodies come back to hoist him out. And very slowly have to help him leave and dry off. Danny has a chaperone. You know, everybody has like a shepherd in back in case they need help... and it's just a lot - it's a lot of work to help a guy get undressed, dry, redressed. I mean, all of this... it's part of the process.” - Pastor Daniel

“There were certainly some conversations around logistics. Like, you know, Shaina [pseudonym, not a study participant] was the only one who's a wheelchair user who we've baptized. And Shaina was able to coach us and think through how do we do this. We did a full run though with Shaina without the water, but had the tub and practiced how do we get her out of the chair and how do we get her into this tub. And that was - that was quite an experience. It was a bit harrowing.”

- Pastor John

“So I just said to her quietly, I said, Renee [pseudonym, woman with IDD, not a research participant], can I pour some water over your head? And she said, yes. And so I said, Renee, having heard your profession of faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and in obedience to his commands, I baptize you, my sister. In the name of the Father. And I put a handful of water on her head. In the name of the Son. I put water on her head. And in the name of the Holy Spirit. And I put water over her head.

And she was happy. She was so happy that she got baptized. And for the first time I can remember that church erupted in applause for a baptism. They were not, you know, a totally high liturgical church that would never clap. But they weren't the kind of church that clapped at everything. And I had never recalled them clapping at a baptism. But that sort of unleashed for the church a different mentality... and after that, quite often- not all the time- but quite often at baptisms, they would
“clap when you baptized somebody. That was their contemporary way of saying amen. So be it. This is as it should be.” - Pastor Soren

“We get Eli [pseudonym, man with IDD, not a research participant] into the water. And we baptize him.

Well, you know, he comes up out of the water. And I was kind of expecting to give him a big bear hug. I was like, you know, hey, I'm so happy for you. You did awesome. You know. Just joy, right?

But he turned away from me and he turned toward the altar table. And, you know, everyone's just silent in the room. And he bends, you know, he bends at the waist to the altar table and says, amen.” - Pastor Ambrose

Participants also shared deeply emotive reflections (both in content and expression) on the experience of baptism as it related to the physical elements of the practice:

“That water felt really good.” - Danny

“I liked the pastor to dunk me.” - Bunny

“He [Pastor Soren] put me in the water and he called me a beloved son...he dunked me in the water.” - James

“We sure are made of the most basic elements and those are incorporated into the baptism rite, the rite of baptism. Water and light and oil and flesh and holding and, you know, getting bathed. It’s very incarnational...”

I've experienced most of my life through touch. That's just kind of who I am in that way, and so having the water present is really - I think it's just an amazing kind of connection...” - Anna

“Basically [baptismal] water is a symbol both of bathing and cleaning and new life. But also water is very dangerous.” - Hope

This central theme of embodiment, exemplified in water and the bodies of the baptized, also resonated with Barbara and Randy in the practice of Eucharist:

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163 Pastor Ambrose notes that Eli rarely spoke throughout the years they knew each other. Eli’s post-baptismal verbal response was one of only a few times Pastor Ambrose heard Eli speak.
“The thing that’s good about the Episcopal church is…that we go through the baptismal service and that we get, you know, we get sprinkled as a reminder…If we didn't have that reminder, I would miss it. The first time I went through that, I thought this is the craziest thing. It was just funny. And sometimes, you know, it still can be funny. But it is meaningful. This is what we do. This is like when you go to the altar [for Eucharist], it's just that experience over and over again.

And for Bob, he thinks it's great [baptismal reaffirmation]. And they always sprinkle right on him…It seems to be about three or four times a year that we do it. Enough that Bob is familiar with it. You know, he knows he is going to get water sprinkled on him.” - Barbara

“John the Baptist was like saying to Jesus, you should be baptizing me. And Jesus wanted to give him the gift of baptizing him; he was teaching John like how to receive. And the Eucharist is something we receive. Not something we take. Pastor John always says we don't take it. We receive it…I really like it. He never uses the word take. Because it's a gift we're receiving.” – Randy

The Bible and Baptism

Five stories from the Bible emerged as significant for multiple participants in their reflections on baptism. Sixteen participants engaged accounts of Jesus’ baptism in the Gospels:

“I think the one [Scripture story] where Jesus was baptized is in the forefront.” - Hikare

“I think that it just makes it such a personal connection that Jesus was baptized. And that was the transition of his life in a major way, and his connection with God, if you look at it in terms of the Trinity. And the Spirit was present that day, so I think that baptism kind of wraps that all up.” - Anna

“He [Jesus] was baptized in the river, like his son - he was baptized God’s son.” - Ava

“We read the story of Jesus's baptism in the river…the fact that God spoke when Jesus was baptized. And that's something very significant. That the creator of all the universe spoke: that this is my Son. I mean, that's powerful when you think about it. Sometimes when you hear the same story over and over, maybe it loses some of its power. But when you start to really think about that the God of the universe and the Maker and the Creator of all things, that He would speak so loudly.” - Parke
“It’s about Jesus being baptized by his cousin… it was on his shoulder and said to him, you’re my beloved son in who I am well pleased.” - James

Four additional passages from Scripture also resonated across participant interviews.

Pastors John, Daniel, and Soren, as well as lay leader Steve, reflected on the importance of Paul’s writings on baptism (especially Paul’s account of baptismal participation in Romans 5-6). Pastors Daniel and Soren, as well as Lea and Eric, spoke about the meaningfulness of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Ava, Elisabeth, and Pastor Soren engaged the story of the Pentecost in Acts 2 as important in their own framings of baptism. Finally, Pastors Alicia and John reflected on the importance of Matthew 28 and Jesus’ command to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. With the exception of the reflections on Pentecost, participants from both credobaptism and paedobaptism traditions reflected on all the Scriptural themes beyond accounts of Jesus’ baptism. Additionally, participants with IDD (with the exception of Ava) did not reflect on Bible stories beyond Jesus’ baptism in the interview context.

Meaningful Baptismal Practices (Table 2)

When sharing stories related to baptism and people with IDD, several participants explored specific baptismal practices. Table 2 displays the four most frequently mentioned practices among participants (Eucharist, baptismal preparation, baptismal reaffirmation/remembrance, and the giving of testimony), with each practice representing perspectives from both believer’s baptism and infant baptism traditions. Some participants’ reflections demonstrated an integration of multiple practices, such as Barbara’s story of how
participating in the Eucharist served as a means of baptismal remembrance and reaffirmation:

“The thing that I think is special about the Episcopal church is that you come to the altar every Sunday, that you are reminded of baptism every Sunday...And it's kind of, you know, it's important...if you've been miffed at someone at church or something and you're on your knees at the altar rail. Ours is circular. So we see everybody. It is always a form of remembrance.”

In addition, identity arose as a key category of meaning associated with baptismal practices. For example, Pastor John reflected on baptismal remembrance as a primary activity of affirming one’s baptismal identity:

“We don't talk about remembrance of baptism as the memory of you being baptized. But the remembrance that you have that you were baptized. That you've been cleaned. That you have had this truth told over you countless times as we baptize...the remembrance of baptism is a remembrance of every baptism which we've ever been given a gift to participate. It's the iterative declaration of who God is and therefore who we are.”

The refrain of “who we are” /“who I am” also surfaced in conversations with James and Al:

“I was just asking Pastor Soren to be who I am.” - James

“I told my Dad, yes. I would like to get baptized. It's truly in God that I become - I become who I am.” - Al

Pastor Paula also reflected on baptismal practices as reflective of identity:

“I think for the Episcopal Church, it's so much a part of who we are in our identity, it's baptism and communion...A couple of weeks ago I did a retreat on exploring our baptism and helping prepare some folks for confirmation. And what's really a beautiful thing is when you have someone state their name - my name is Paula —and then say, I'm a beloved child of God. It doesn't matter how old you are. If that doesn't move you in some way to say it out loud and to hear it...that's what we get through our baptism...it's that we know that we are beloved.”
Randy, engaging Pastor John’s notion of baptism as “wordless preaching,” also reflected on baptismal identity in community:

“What Pastor John said was baptism is a way for you to preach to the church. To say without words that you - to affirm - for everyone without words, that you belong to God. And to remind others that they belong to God.”

Randy and Pastor John’s notion of baptism as wordless preaching reveals one key tension within the stories shared among research participants: is baptism primarily about volitional and verbal proclamation, decision, and understanding? Or is it ultimately about non-verbal, mysterious expression of what God has already done?

Apparent Tensions

Two primary tensions arose among interview participants regarding narrations of baptismal stories, as well as narratives surrounding the attitudes toward people with IDD in Christian faith communities. We turn first to the primary narrative tension regarding the definition of baptism.

Understanding vs. Unknowing

When exploring stories of baptism, what aspects constitute the necessary elements of this practice? Human decision, understanding, and commitment? Individual or communal action? Divine action? Wordless participation? Some combination of these elements? This cluster of questions highlights some of the greatest tensions when comparing baptismal stories of participants in this study. Put succinctly, some participants told stories of baptism
hinging on an element of human understanding and decision. In contrast, other participants recounted baptismal stories primarily marked by mystery and an ultimate sense of unknowing, naming volitional human understanding as a non-necessary element of baptismal practice. Pastor Soren, a pastor at St. Matthew’s Baptist Church, described the scriptural foundation for practices of baptism that include central elements of human decision, understanding, and confession:

“It has traditionally been very important for us that the norm of scripture, not every single scripture, but the norm of scripture is that baptism follows confession of faith…that's why we do not baptize infants…so the chronology of the act is an important element of the Baptist tradition. And it's really based on confession of faith. A voluntary non-coerced profession, or confession, of faith.”

Other participants in confessional baptism traditions continued in this same theme:

“We wanted to make sure Al wanted it [baptism] done. And be understood it and was clear.”
- Andrew

“Well, I think that baptism, if Jesus had not considered it important, he would not have been baptized. And I think that when you look at baptism as a whole, you know, it's the first time that God outwardly said that Jesus was His son and He was well-pleased with him. Because Jesus had the choice to do what he did because he was man. So, at that point in time, Jesus begins his ministry and follows what God wants him to do. And I think that that's what baptism represents for us is that at that point in time in our lives, after we have accepted Jesus as our Savior and we follow through with baptism, that's the point in time where we begin our ministry as believers and follow Christ's example on a day-to-day basis.” - Elisabeth

“I think the key for me is that baptism go with the decision. I think that a very important representation that when you're old enough, whatever that age is, or when you get to the point of accepting Christ, then you are realizing what baptism means then. And I think- and again, I'm not putting down other denominations or faith traditions - but to me it's by far the greatest representation and probably for somebody experiencing baptism immersion after they have accepted Christ, it means more, far more to them than say if you were, you know, sprinkled very young…Baptists certainly don't believe, that, you know, immersion or baptism is what makes one a believer. It's a decision that you make.” - Eric
In contrast, other participants described baptism as a practice of the church primarily characterized by mysterious participation in the work of God:

“*What happens in baptism and lots of other theological ponderings...I wanted to be able to approach them with a rational brain at a younger age...The idea was maybe that you would need to understand what was happening in baptism in order to be baptized. And I remember reading a particular book that I found in the stacks at my local university. And I can’t remember the name of it now. But it really altered all of that to my understanding that, well, nobody really understands baptism. Nobody really understands what happens in communion. It’s not really like we can wrap our minds around and about it. We can manipulate intellectual ideas so that they represent the most comfortable way possible...but that made me think that it certainly doesn’t matter what level of cognitive ability you have in order to be baptized here. It’s much more than you are going through a transformation that God and we are all enacting at once.”* - Hope

“A sacrament is the mysterious blending of the already and the not yet in an instant. Where what is already true is actualized, if that’s possible. But it was true before it was actualized...And so it was kind of within that framework that the question - the question of would I baptize a person who couldn’t confess Jesus? And I thought surely we must be able to, because it’s true. Like Jesus’s life, death, resurrection, ascension and intercession incorporates that person. How dare we not baptize them? And then it was an easy job from that to, well, of course we can baptize infants...And then, you know, not somewhere in that trajectory I came under the conviction that none of us really know what we’re talking about anyway. Like that we’re fundamentally entering into mystery here. And so to attach some intellectual prerequisite to the sacrament is silliness. Like, you know, get me a Baptist pastor to give me a good explanation of what happens at Eucharist or baptism. You know. Or any pastor for that matter.” - Pastor John

Interestingly, reflections on mystery and the power of wordless proclamation within baptismal practices arose across both paedobaptism and credobaptism traditions, affirming Steve’s assertion here:

“I’ve always thought that adult baptism was probably the norm. But I don’t like that phrase – ‘adult baptism.’ Baptism is baptism. It’s not paedobaptism. It’s not adult baptism. It’s baptism. And so I have a strong view that if you’re going to baptize the mentally disabled, which I certainly think you should, I don’t understand then why you don’t baptize young children and infants.”

Responding to a question about what happens when someone is baptized, Ava illustrated a blurring of the tensions sketched above:
“I feel like they’re not sure what that means. But we tell the people this means you’re majorly connected to God spiritually in the mystery of the Holy Trinity.”

In addition, three participants (from both infant and believer’s baptism traditions) described baptism as a wordless witness, testimony, or mode of preaching - not directly contingent on volitional or verbal action on the part of the baptized:

“[At a baptism service] I’ll say, ‘most folks are not going to remember what I preached about today - but they will never forget what they see you preach in your actions today.’ You know, the very kind of core of our faith is that in being buried with Jesus we are raised with him to a life like his. And I said: you are preaching this in what you do today. So, in a sense it’s a proclamation of our salvation and what that means. It’s a recitation of it and it’s not for a candidate now, but again it’s for the whole community.” - Pastor Daniel

“[During baptismal preparation] I talked about baptism as a sermon and a story...I said a sermon is a way that we talk about how good God is. And how much God loves us. And baptism is one of the sermons that we preach in the church. And it tells a story about how good God is and how much God loves us. And how we belong. And I told them that it tells the story of who they really are.” - Pastor John

Randy related this wordless preaching exemplified in baptism to the nature of Jesus’ own ministry:

“Words are always inadequate. And I think that’s because like the Word is God. And we are not God. And so words have always been inadequate. And there’s something about - I mean, I think like the two - like the three seminal events in Jesus’s life were not words. They were like things that happened. The Incarnation, and then the Eucharist, and then death and resurrection.”

**Attitudes**

A second significant tension in the research arose in baptismal stories related to differing attitudes among Christian faith communities regarding people with IDD - ranging
from unconditional welcome to discrimination. Unfortunately, several participants encountered ecclesial environments marked by unwelcome:

“She [a former lay leader] made it clear that I was inferior to everyone else and did her best to get me off the acolyte list.” - Hikare

Barbara recalls her pastor’s wife approaching her when Barbara’s son Bob was three years old:

“The pastor’s wife asked me what are you going to do with him next year? I responded, I don’t know. I mean, what are you asking me? We will probably keep Bob in Sunday nursery school for a bit. Then the pastor’s wife firmly responded…well, Bob can’t come to church anymore.”

In contrast, communities with attitudes marked by an embrace of “imperfection” as well as “acceptance,” particularly of people with IDD, fostered a communal sense of genuine belonging:

“There is this sense of a casualness, a comfort level, with visible imperfections. And a sense of being okay with things that, you know, just aren’t perfect…[adults with IDD] would sing with joy and beauty and gusto. But it wasn’t precise music. And it wasn’t what a normal choir would do. There would be some moans and there would be some notes that were off key. And there would be those kinds of things. But the church, they weren’t absorbed by that…it really was a communal experience in that the congregation was embracing and appreciating what this group was bringing as their gift to God. And so it became a gift for everyone. So, I think it helped the church. I just have a greater sense of what’s really important…these are our brothers and sisters, participating in a way that edifies the Body of Christ. And it was - they were edifying the Body of Christ, and I think the congregation, there was a mutual edification.” - Pastor Soren

“Total support…when Al was baptized…everybody embraced it. I don’t think there was any hesitation at all, from anybody. So, yeah, it was really quite wonderful.” - Andrew

“Hikare’s presence is, I’m sure, a gift to our whole community. She really has been to me. I mean, I think it connects me back to my experience when I worked in the residential facility, that there was just so many times that people in the community, in the general community, had no idea what the people living in that facility were capable of. With how they could just change your life, by your experience with them. And I think that’s how Hikare is here. She’s had all these gifts and now
she's flowering in some other ones…this isn't about perfection. It's about inclusion and about experience together. And it doesn't have to be a perfect thing…all of us count the same here. And it was like you don't have to prove who you are to anybody. It was like, yeah, we all count the same.”  - Anna

Several parent participants reflected on their church communities as spaces of deep belonging for their adult children with IDD:

“I feel grateful to Holy Angels for being so accepting of Hikare. I mean, these people have just scooped her up and loved her and would do anything for her. You know. Paid for her to go to a special camp. And just, you know, I feel like if I left her on a basket on the doorstep, she'd be taken care of here.” - Lea

“We would never move from here is because of St. Mary's. We would never. And our kids aren't here, our other kids. But we won't because for Bob, that's home. It totally is…he has big parties. We have big celebrations for his birthdays. You know, we have forty people here from church. And they're always from church. Or we have the church at the bowling alley. It's the entire church. You know, everything has always been the church for him.” - Barbara

For Mary, attitudes of acceptance, despite imperfections, found a direct relationship to baptism:

“For me, it's [The Gospel of] Matthew, the lilies of the field thing. Because it's again…baptism is a visible symbol of being brought into that tribe and a part of the tribe. It's like an 'I got you' moment. You don't need to worry about things because, you know, this community of people, you know, you little baby or you big person, you don't need to worry about what it is that you're going to be struggling with, because we've got you.”

A final story from Barbara points to the centrality of the attitude of clergy in creating an environment of welcome and belonging for people with IDD:

“Bob was just really noisy during church. And he wouldn't do what he was supposed to do or, you know, whatever. He was too old to be in the nursery. But he was not behaving. And on the floor kicking the chairs - we had folding chairs - all during the service. And so Jim thought we should not return to church for…well, at that point it was ever. Because Bob was so disruptive to other people who were there worshiping, you know. And so that was fine.
But I had to go in and talk to the priest, who was a lovely woman, because I had some commitments for that year that I had made and so I went to talk to her and tell her I wasn’t going to be able to do them. And so she listened to me. And then she said, Barbara, do you think that God’s just for you? And I was like, uh, no. And she said, of course you don’t. He’s for Bob. And you have to promise me that you’ll be here every Sunday with Bob. And we’re going to work this out. She said, if he’s kicking the chairs then he’s kicking the chairs. That’s just fine. You know. But I want him here. Every Sunday. And I was like, oh yes ma’am.”

Field Notes

The field notes I took as a participant observer testified to a great diversity of architectural styles, liturgies, and multi-modal access points to participation in church services and other ecclesial programming I attended during the course of the research. This diversity of denominations and worship contexts serves as a testament to the cohesion of particular baptismal themes in an ecumenical diversity of practices, as well as stylistic preferences. As evidenced throughout the footnotes above, I primarily engaged field notes to support my practices of self-reflexivity. In particular, the process of recording and reviewing field notes helped me intentionally reflect on uncomfortable or confusing aspects of conducting the research. The detailed field notes I kept regarding faith communities also assisted in providing a thick description of interview interactions and the specificities of insights for practice offered among participants. These details emerge more concretely throughout the next three chapters, where I engage the research data as a source not only for description but also interpretive importance.
Discussion

In my processes of self-reflexivity, as well as pragmatic planning for this study, I originally set out to analyze differences and similarities between narrative emphases among a) different participant categories and b) differences in baptismal theologies (credobaptism and paedobaptism traditions). I hypothesized that analysis of my field notes would help support and accentuate these differences in my findings.

Surprisingly, I found that despite disparate observations from field notes during periods of participant observation, churches across several axes of diversity demonstrated a strong core of shared themes related to baptism and disability: participation, community, and Jesus. Despite theological and denominational differences in baptismal practice and theology, a surprising unity of practices and themes arose, from narrative emphases to scriptural resonances.

At times, participants seemed to demonstrate signs of slight anxiety, especially surrounding answering questions in the “right or wrong” way. This was particularly evidenced when I attempted to open space for us to talk about baptism more generally. I encouraged participants that I was not seeking a particular answer, but rather desired to hear the stories that came to their minds - stories of beauty and joy, but also stories of challenge and doubt.

I anticipated that I would need to reframe questions about scriptural resonances (or “Bible stories”) as they applied to baptism. However, this question consistently evoked animated sharing of stories among participants - more so than any other question during the
interview process. I found myself surprised at how engaged participants became when sharing about the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism, as well as the excitement of participants who reflected on Paul’s affirmations about baptism in his New Testament epistles. The themes of the most cited scripture passages among participants - participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection, the public nature of Jesus’ own baptism, and baptismal proclamations of belonging, welcome, and belovedness - strongly resonated with the core themes of baptism among people with IDD: participation, Jesus-centeredness, and community.

The tensions between communities demonstrating attitudes of discrimination or welcome, as well as tensions between baptism as a volitional decision marked by some kind of understanding, versus an ultimately unknowable divine action, marks an important area for further investigation. First, future research should consider potential comparisons and contrasts between the current study and stories from new participants who consider baptism wholly apart from disability. Second, a future study designed to allow for more extended conversations with participants with experience at the intersection of baptism and IDD could allow for more explicit questions regarding theological commitments (for example, asking participants from believer’s baptism perspectives if they would baptize someone with profound IDD who could not offer a verbal confession marking their Christian faith).

Together, the data from interviews and field notes suggests that baptismal affirmation of Christian identity, as well as engagement in baptismal practices, constitutes an important element of sustaining communities of belonging for people with IDD across a
diversity of Christian practices and theologies. Despite marked differences in buildings, theologies, and concrete practices, my research gestures toward hope that baptismal practices offer an important way to welcome and support the discipleship of people with IDD. Across the great diversity of the Christian traditions, God in Jesus Christ breaks in through the witness of baptism - the uniting of God’s children with Christ in his death and resurrection life - with the Holy Spirit empowering all the baptized for a life of discipleship in the diversity of concrete Christian ecclesial communities.

In Chapter 5, I offer a more detailed account of how participation in baptismal practices among people with and without IDD shapes belonging and discipleship in ecclesial communities. In particular, I suggest that practices of baptismal preparation, baptismal testimony, and baptismal reaffirmation, can create meaningful spaces of belonging for people with IDD in ecclesial communities, and also refresh ecclesial imagination about what it means to be a disciple.

Study Limitations

Several limitations exist within the current study. For example, participants were all recruited from a single geographical area. In addition, recruiting for further denominational diversity could have impacted the study’s conclusions. I also identify three minor methodological limitations in the present research. First, I conducted the study as a single researcher for the purpose of gathering novel data for this dissertation. Though this
approach proved advantageous for my coding process, subsequent data analysis and interpretation may have been strengthened by the diversification of research perspectives. Second, while I tailored the study’s design and methodology to include the participation of people with IDD in interviews, my geographical and financial limitations did not allow for ongoing participation among people with IDD in the research process, as is an ideal model for participatory research methodologies, particularly among people with IDD. Third, while people with profound IDD could not participate in verbal interviewing, they were present for interviews of caregivers and during participant observation stages of this research. In future studies, I would strive to more intentionally engage methods of participant observation and narrative inquiry guided by person-centered planning, as exemplified in the theological research of Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, in order to more specifically investigate the impact of the witness of people with profound IDD on baptismal theology and practice.

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165 Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, 140.


167 Swinton, Mowat, and Baines, "Whose Story Am I?" 6.
Areas for Expansion and Future Research

I envision the following as critical avenues for future theological research engaging baptism among people with IDD: inclusion of a greater number of participants with profound IDD and modified research methodologies to support this recruitment goal, more diversity in geographical and denominational representation, and designing an ethnographic study to follow one or two families through processes of baptismal preparation, baptism, and post-baptismal life.

Conclusion

Engaging qualitative research, particularly among people with IDD and those with lives closely connected to them, surfaces new and important considerations for theologies of disability. This study’s exploration of ecclesial belonging and participation through the lens of baptism highlighted the importance of participation, community, and the life of Jesus, as central to practicing community with and alongside people with IDD. Interestingly, interviews and field note data yielded little remark on the specific themes of friendship, God’s image, and inclusion. In this way, the present research opens up questions about new categories for reflection on the lives and witness of people with IDD in Christian ecclesial communities. In other words, engaging a baptismal hermeneutic among people with IDD raises important challenges, critiques, and expansions of core themes and methods in contemporary disability theology.
In addition, the heightened focus on biblical stories in this research suggest further exploration of scripture as a source for fruitful expansion of current theological arguments concerning IDD. As evidenced in this study, participants’ engagement with scripture highlighted key areas of synthesis between ecclesial practices and environments of belonging, focused on themes of community, participation, and Jesus.

In response to these central themes from research participants, as well as the participants’ strong engagement of biblical accounts of baptism, we shift in the next chapter to carefully explore how New Testament accounts of baptism might provide new insights for contemporary disability theology, particularly related to questions of Christian identity and discipleship among people with IDD. Toward an end of reimagining communities marked by radical belonging and post-baptismal newness of life inclusive of participation among people with IDD, we turn toward Paul’s theology of baptism as a salient conversation partner to expand and interact with the baptismal stories and reflections highlighted in this chapter. How might Paul’s theological reflections on baptism comport with or depart from the research participants’ strong emphases on Jesus, community, and participation? How do Paul’s New Testament writings critically connect and expand to the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism and this story’s importance for research participants? Finally, how do insights from participants in this research challenge or conflict with Paul’s vision of baptism in forming Christian community and identity?
Table 1. Participants

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<td>Table 2. Practices</td>
<td>Number Participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eucharist</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Baptism is fully realized through the reception of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. So, there’s a close connection between baptism, being received into the body of Christ, and the participation in that body through Eucharistic celebration.” – Steve</td>
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<td>Baptismal Preparation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&quot;I was preparing with my mom. And she helped me to tell my testimony to my sister.” – James</td>
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<td>&quot;I said you go check on some baptism videos and see what you connect with...Eli had so loved his YouTube research that he got in the bathtub and practiced immersing because that’s what he decided on doing.” – Pastor Ambrose</td>
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<td>&quot;We had conversations in the car about this...Danny would say his belief in baptism and ask if he was correct.” – Charley</td>
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<td>Table 2. Practices (continued)</td>
<td>Number Participants</td>
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| Baptismal Reaffirmation        | 9                   | 1     | 3                 | 2      | 3   | "We have a little small bowl so you can remember your baptism." - Ava 
"You know, in the Episcopal church, we renew our baptismal vows every time someone is baptized. So it's a significant reminder of our own baptism when we see other people be baptized...every year when I remind my children on their baptismal day, we send them a note and I always say this is the day you were marked as Christ's own forever." - Parke |
Table 2. Practices (continued)

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<tr>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Number Participants</th>
<th>PWIDD</th>
<th>Parent or Sibling</th>
<th>Clergy</th>
<th>Lay</th>
<th>Significant Quotes</th>
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| Testimony and Witness | 9                   | 2     | 4                 | 2      | 1   | "I would have people write their testimony and then let someone that was important to them read their testimony, so they wouldn't have to be anxious and nervous about speaking in front of people, because most people are terrified to speak in front of others. And we let them write this out ahead of time. And then someone would read their testimony."  
- Pastor Soren                                                                                                                                 spoof |
|                    |                     |       |                   |        |     | “To me baptism is just one of those moments where I see God and entering that person who's being baptized...it's like a little crack so God can get in. Cracks you open a little bit. Whether you know it's happening or not, it's happening. And then for the people around your experience in that baptism, it is also just another little crack for them as well. And, you know...I think it changes the person who's being baptized. And I think it also changes the people who are there supporting you, witnessing that.”  
- Mary |
Chapter 3

The Bible and Baptism: Jesus’ Baptism and Paul’s Theological Response

As explored in Chapter 2, the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism resonated among research participants from both credobaptism and paedobaptism traditions. For example, Anna shared with me:

“I think that it just makes it such a personal connection that Jesus was baptized. And that was the transition of his life in a major way, and his connection with God, if you look at it in terms of the Trinity. And the Spirit was present that day, so I think that baptism kind of wraps that all up.”

In this chapter, building on research participants’ keen focus on the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism, I turn to biblical scholarship to further explore the theological import of Jesus’ baptism, and its relationship to Paul’s theology of baptism, for reimagining Christian identity and belonging. I explore Paul’s theological engagement with baptism as it resonates with, expands, and clarifies the key themes of community, Jesus, and participation identified by research participants at the heart of their reflections on baptism and IDD. I first identify these core themes as they relate to participants’ engagement of the gospel stories of Jesus’ baptism, followed by an exploration of how these themes find further expansion in Paul. Next, I argue that Paul’s theology of baptism (especially as it relates to community, Jesus, and participation) grounds his anthropological logic. I then demonstrate how Pauline theological anthropology offers an account of human beings that affirms the baptismal identity and vocation of people with IDD. In my final section on Pauline anthropology, I
engage reflections on baptismal identity shared among research participants to both expand and challenge existing scholarship on Paul’s vision of the person, suggesting that reading Paul through his own baptismal hermeneutic provides salient insights for not only the radical inclusion of people with IDD in the baptized Body, but underscores their active participation in the Body’s ongoing sanctification – walking together in newness of life.

Overall, I argue that baptism provides perhaps the most powerful Christian practice that affirms human identity – the site where human creatures are incorporated into Jesus’ body and bound to one another. In Paul, we see that the key responsibility of the baptized Body is a life marked by shared baptismal incorporation into Jesus’ Body – a life of ongoing transformation in the Holy Spirit that empowers the gifts of each of the baptized, regardless of disability, to witness to God’s ongoing work in the world.

**Setting the Stage: Jesus’ Baptism as Theologically Paradigmatic**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice came from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” - Matthew 3:13-17

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” - Mark 1:9-11
Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” - Luke 3:21-22

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me. I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” -John 1:29-34

Historical Foundations

These gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River do not arise ex nihilo - as Ronald Byars argues in his commentary *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*, Jesus’ baptism opens “out of an old story” - “drenched in Old Testament precedents, images, and language.” For Byars, the strong themes of repentance and forgiveness of sins accompanying baptismal washing anchor Jesus’ baptism in familiar Jewish language about “repentance, confession of sin, a heavenly voice, and the anointing of the spirit.” Bryan Spinks discusses possible antecedents to John the Baptist’s baptism of Jesus, including “Jewish cleanings and lustrations, and proselyte baptism,” “the ritual bathings of Qumran,”

1 All Gospel accounts here are in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).


3 Ibid.
and foundational Old Testament texts such as Isaiah 1:16-17 and Ezekiel 36:25-28. Jesus’ baptism also resonates with additional “watery” Old Testament narratives. Martin Luther’s famous “Flood Prayer” traces the continuity of Jesus’ baptism with the flood in Genesis, particularly the deliverance of Noah and his family from these flood waters (Genesis 6:9-9:17), as well as Israel’s escape from bondage through the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14).

Robin Jensen offers further Old Testament motifs parallel to Jesus’ baptism, following the affirmations of early Christians (such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem, and Cyril of Jerusalem): the Israelites following Joshua across the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land (Joshua 3:14-17), Naaman’s healing in the river (II Kings 5), and the four rivers flowing from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10-14).

Jensen also reflects on potential connections between baptismal waters and the waters in Psalm 42, in light of common early Christian baptismal art that depicts a deer drinking at a pool. For Jensen, the gushing forth of water from the rock that Moses strikes in Exodus 17:1-7 also resonates closely with John’s baptism of Jesus.

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7 Ibid., 186.

8 Ibid., 189.
Key Theological Foundations of Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan

In light of the witness of Jesus’ baptism, early Christian thinkers raised new central theological themes and tensions for consideration in the Church. One key paradox, upon which theologians continue to reflect, is the juxtaposition of baptism as containing both life and death. For Jensen, this paradox finds particular clarity in the Gospel of John’s account of Jesus’ baptism: “the close juxtaposition of Jesus’ identity as sacrificial lamb and as the bringer of Spirit baptism implies that Spirit baptism transmits the benefits of Christ’s redemptive death.” During his interview, Steve reflected on this paradox of life in death in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism to highlight how baptism occupies the center of Christian life:

“To be immersed three times in the water of baptism through which we are made part of Jesus’ death that we may experience the resurrection...you’re put under the water in the third time down, which is a reminder that you are to be so immersed as you can’t breathe, so that’s death. But you are raised up. That’s life.”

Steve’s reflections here highlight the core importance of both Jesus and participation, two key themes from the qualitative research, for embracing baptism and disciples with IDD. As we will further explore in Paul’s theological account of baptism, this interplay of death and life, and human participation in this interplay, forms Paul’s central logic about participation in Jesus’s death in the practice of baptism.

In addition to this baptismal paradox of life and death, Byars notes how some early Christians primarily conceived of Jesus’ baptism as a womb - the site of new life. Maxwell

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9 Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 139.

Johnson, reflecting on early Christian interpretations of Jesus’ baptism affirms this central theme of new life, writing, “Christian baptism is a birth ritual modeled on Jesus’ own baptism in the Jordan, where Christians become by adoption what Christ is by nature, sons and daughters begotten by God through water and the Holy Spirit.”

During our interview, James, reflecting on the gospel stories of Jesus’ baptism, put it this way: “baptism is really about…you’re a beloved son and a beloved child.” Later, talking about the importance of church community, James told me that when “members get baptized they get to be a beloved child.” James’ parents affirmed his love for the story of Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River, especially God’s proclamation of Jesus’ belovedness. This centrality of belovedness in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism, as well as for the identity of all the baptized, also resonated with Pastor Daniel: “the baptism of Jesus sort of narrates who we are at the core, in our belovedness.”

As James and Pastor Daniel illustrated in our conversations, this baptismal birth into new life and belovedness holds ecclesial implications. As we will see further developed in Paul’s New Testament writings: in baptism, “Christians become members of the Church.”


12 Pastor Daniel mentioned Henri Nouwen’s book *The Life of the Beloved* as a formative text that emphasized this heart of belovedness at the center of baptismal identity both for Jesus and among all the baptized.

These themes of death and new life, especially as they manifest in communal belonging and belovedness initiated in baptism, connect closely to the reality of post-baptismal transformation, highlighted by the themes of cleansing and repentance highlighted in the accounts of Jesus’ own baptism. Jensen writes, “John’s baptism of Jesus is the model and source of Christian baptism. It was administered to sinners who wished to repent and change their lives.” Jensen further clarifies the theological nature of the cleansing of baptism:

The cleansing was not merely a washing away of inherited or personal sin; it also brought healing, both to individuals and to humanity as a whole. Thus, as an act of solidarity with humanity, Jesus’ baptism modeled submission to God. At the same time, by assuming the fallen and sinful human race through his incarnation, Christ inaugurated its redemptive healing.

The symbolism of death and new life performed in baptism supports a goal of transformation: those who are baptized are initiated into a new form of life, oriented not toward sinfulness but toward discipleship marked by new life in Christ. Elisabeth connected Jesus’ baptism, as well as his death and resurrection, to the forgiveness and “washing away” of sin. Reflecting on her own baptism at the age of 12, Elisabeth recounted “coming up out of the baptismal pool knowing I was a new creature in Christ.” The public nature of Jesus’ baptism and the Trinitarian affirmation of Jesus as God’s beloved Son, anointed for ministry in the Holy Spirit, provides a pattern of new and transformed life for all the baptized. As Hope told me, “it certainly doesn’t matter what level of cognitive ability you have in order to

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14 Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery*, 139.

15 Ibid., 13.
be baptized here. It’s much more that you are going through a transformation that God and
we are all enacting at once.”

Alexander Schmemann also affirms the importance of the transformational nature
of post-baptismal life through the power of the Trinity, testified to in the gospel accounts of
Jesus’ baptism: “the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan was the first epiphany of the Trinity in
the cosmos, the manifestation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To be redeemed,
therefore, is to receive this revelation, to know the Trinity, to be in communion with the
Triune God.”

According to Byars, this “epiphany of the Trinity” in the gospel accounts of
Jesus’ baptism deeply shaped early Christian baptismal liturgies, particularly in practices
reflective of the activity of the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit is at work in the rite of
baptism to anoint us for service, just as the Holy Spirit anointed Jesus in preparation for the
public launching of his mission.”

Ava beautifully drew these themes together in her
reflections on baptism to me, sharing baptism “means that you’re being cleansed by the Holy
Spirit to God…redeeming yourself from sin and temptation…this means you’re majorly
connected to God spiritually in the mystery of the Holy Trinity.”

This “mystery of the Holy Trinity” exemplified in the gospel accounts of Jesus’
baptism resounded not only among research participants, but also provided an important

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17 Byars, The Sacraments, 44.

18 Ibid., 45.
historical role in the Church’s early development of Trinitarian theology. “The voice of the Father, the declaration of Sonship, and the appearance of the Holy Spirit as a dove” at the scene of Jesus’ baptism,19 formed “a constitutive element in the Trinitarian faith and profession in early Syrian and Armenian churches. In this way, then, the event of the baptism of Jesus itself becomes in this tradition the very revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity.”20 Pastor Alicia reflected on the ongoing ecumenical importance of embracing Trinitarian language in baptismal liturgies, as well as a shared affirmation of faith in the Triune God as a means of supporting the wider Christian community. Jesus’ baptism, Pastor Alicia told me, reminds us that “the Trinity was not invented wholly at a later council…there’s an organic connection between the Trinitarian formulation and baptism.”

The centrality of Jesus in theological accounts of baptism constitutes a final theological emphasis exemplified among early Christian writers, in addition to this project’s qualitative research participants who consistently highlighted Jesus at the center of their stories of baptism and disability, and finally, as we will soon see, within Paul’s baptismal logic. For Byars, this Christocentricity directly concerns questions of identity:

Jesus’ baptism was intended, in God’s providence, to be a revealing moment, in which God would identify Jesus as the long-awaited One. It was a clarifying moment, an epiphany, for the crowds who had come out into the wilderness, thus establishing them as witnesses on behalf of all of Israel.21


20 Johnson, The Rites of Christian Initiation, 63.

21 Byars, The Sacraments, 49.
Not only does the clarification of Jesus’ identity hold theological significance in these accounts of baptism, but it also affirms the identity of all the baptized – those who “have been sacramentally joined to Christ.”

Spinks reflects on the importance of a thoroughly Christocentric understanding of baptism, especially as it relates to identity:

To be baptized into the name of Jesus may be regarded at the very least as to be dipped, immersed or poured into the person and identity of Jesus, and to participate in the sphere of his power, authority, and Lordship. Whatever else may be said of baptism - remission of sins, new birth, covenant, adoption - it is first and foremost into the name of the Lord Jesus...if there are allusions to baptism, they are linked firmly with the person of Jesus.

As presented in Chapter 2, we saw these same firm linkages between Jesus and baptismal identity, regardless of disability identity, as deeply meaningful among multiple research participants:

“I believe in being baptized I was fully adopted in the body of Christ.” - Pastor Paula

“Baptism is a participation and a welcome into who Jesus is.” – Randy

“They are dying to themselves and rising in Christ through the waters of baptism and are welcomed into the community...the community consists of Christ’s body.” – Hope

“I became a new man in Jesus Christ.” – David

“Baptism marks a turning point in someone’s life. A transformation turning point. They’re transformed from being turned to self to turning now to Christ.” - Pastor Daniel

“Baptism shows that Jesus was buried, and that he rose again from the dead. I was buried just like Jesus was. I was buried like Jesus. I was buried like Jesus and rose again. Rose up from the dead.” - Danny

22 Ibid., 62.

23 Spinks, Early and Medieval Rituals, 6-7.
“And I rise like Jesus did.” - James

In the next section, we turn to examine the themes that permeate Paul’s baptismal logic. Specifically, how do important theological themes from the qualitative research, as well as scholarly reflection on the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism, resonate, expand, or challenge Paul’s writings on baptism? Spinks suggests that Paul’s baptismal language of participation and exchange (partaking in the death, freedom, new creation, reconciliation, and justification24 of Jesus) establishes the foundation of Paul’s baptismal theology.25 Spinks argues that for Paul’s engagement of baptism, Jesus serves as “the eyepiece of the kaleidoscope…all other concepts and images are focused through him.”26 With this lens of Jesus at the center, we turn to Paul’s baptismal reflections in his New Testament epistles, particularly his account of baptism in Romans 6, to build upon the witnesses of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism to support a communal, Jesus-centered, and participatory vision of the baptized Body.

Paul’s Baptismal Theology

In comparison to other New Testament literature as well as other first century Christian texts, Paul offers the greatest “volume” of material attending specifically to

24 Romans 6, Galatians 3, II Corinthians 5, Acts 2, I Corinthians 12.

25 Spinks, Early and Medieval Rituals, 8.

26 Ibid., 13.
baptism. As affirmed by Spinks, Paul’s various treatments of baptism across his New Testament letters share a strong Christocentric focus. As the earliest writer of extant Christian texts that engage baptism from a theological perspective, Paul does not focus on offering a concrete baptismal rite or providing precise ritual guidelines for the Christian communities he engages throughout the near East. Instead, Paul seems to be in dialogue with communities who already practice baptism and share certain assumptions with Paul about baptism’s meaning. Because of this, Paul offers contextual teaching for communities who have already experienced baptism.

What follows, therefore, is not an attempt to reconstruct a firm Pauline definition of baptism, but rather, an exploration of the core themes that shape Paul’s engagement of baptism, particularly in Paul’s powerful account of sin, baptism, and Christology in Romans 6:1-14 (drawing upon the larger context of Romans 5-8). Rudolf Schnackenburg characterizes this passage from Romans 6 as the locus classicus on baptism in the New Testament, especially in its exemplification of baptism as a “salvation-event.”

Richard Carlson follows Schnackenburg in affirming Romans 6 as the locus “where Paul most clearly

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28 Chapters of Pauline epistles engaging baptism include (but are not limited to): Romans 6; 1 Corinthians 1, 6, 10, 12; 2 Corinthians 1; Galatians 3; Ephesians 1, 4-5; Colossians 2-3; 2 Timothy 2; and Titus 3.


interrelates the common initiatory rite of baptism with the sacred story of the Christ-event.”

Interestingly, many of my research participants also identified Paul’s account of baptism, with its focus on participation in Jesus, as central for their perspectives on the specific intersections of disability and baptism.

Paul’s central proclamation about baptism in Romans reads as follows:

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

This distinctive Pauline passage hinges on participation in Jesus’ death and deliverance from the realm of sin, specifically enacted through the praxis of baptism.

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31 Carlson, "The Role of Baptism," 257.


33 Ferguson, Baptism in the Early Church, 155.
Throughout the passage, Paul frames baptism as the event that centrally proclaims the core of the Christian faith - the salvific event of Jesus’ Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Romans 6 illustrates that through baptismal incorporation into Jesus, a new life, manifested in the transformation of Christian communities, witnesses to a distinctive Christian identity “under grace.”

In the following sub-sections, we explore how the three key themes arising among participants in the qualitative research resonate with Paul’s baptismal proclamation in Romans 6, as well as within the whole of Paul’s baptismal logic: participation, Jesus-centeredness, and community.

Participation: Death to Sin

It is impossible to understand the meaning of baptism, unless one keeps in mind that it implies a threat of death and a deliverance to life...what baptism portrays, according to the basic passage in Romans 6, is a supremely critical happening - a real event whose light and shade fall upon the candidate in the course of his baptism. This happening is his participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.34

As Karl Barth powerfully highlights here in *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, Paul offers a multi-layered account of participation in relationship to baptism in the first half of Romans 6. Paul’s emphasis on participation not only concerns the death and resurrection of Jesus, but also human participation in the realm of sin, the consequences of participation in baptism, and the fruit of participating in the Christian community of

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baptized believers - elsewhere in Paul understood as the Body of Christ - and what I name here as “the baptized Body.”

Baptismal participation as incorporation into Jesus serves as a central theme for Paul,\(^{35}\) exemplified in his argument found in Romans 6:1-14. As Leander Keck suggests, “for Paul, being baptized ‘into’ someone makes one a participant in that person’s significance by entering into it, by sharing it, and so accepting that person’s significance as authoritative for one’s life.”\(^{36}\) In other words, participation for Paul is never a static participation only for participation’s sake - it is rather a dynamic, transformative, and continuous union with Christ, sustained in the Holy Spirit, enabling ongoing mutual participation between the divine and human creatures. In this sense, baptismal participation is not a one-time event, but a rite that “continues to govern the life of the Christian in the present.”\(^{37}\) The continual effects of baptismal incorporation, for Paul, are rooted in none other than the power of the Christ-event over the realm of sin and death and sustained in the life of the baptized Body by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.


Teresa Tsui argues that the participatory incorporation of the baptized into Jesus’ death enables the baptized “to walk in newness of life in Christ, whose living power comes from the glory of the Father that raised Christ from the dead.”\textsuperscript{38} Romans 6:5 accentuates this reality of “present transformation” paired with hope and “anticipation of the future life of resurrection.”\textsuperscript{39} However, before moving too quickly onto baptismal participation in the hope of Jesus’ resurrection that foreshadows the final fullness of the new creation, we will first explore how Paul’s account of baptism intersects with participation in the present realm of sin and death.

While some academics interpret Romans 6:1-14 primarily as a message of the forgiveness of sins,\textsuperscript{40} most scholars suggest that Paul’s language of participation and incorporation conveys a much more radical message. A.J.M. Wedderburn understands participation in baptism as “the common starting point for all Christians’ existence; thus no Christian is exempted from that radical break with sin which Paul refers to as ‘dying to sin.’ It is a fundamental and integral part of his existence if he belongs to Christ.”\textsuperscript{41} If participation is crucial for Paul’s vision of baptism, participation in the Christ event, rather

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38} Tsui, "Baptized Into His Death," 398.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 398-399.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Wedderburn, "The Soteriology," 50.
\end{itemize}
than a primarily human effort toward repentance, is the central aspect of the transforming power invoked in baptism. As Carlson argues,

Christians die to sin because their baptism into Christ is a baptism into the salvific event of Christ's death. The upshot is that they no longer live in sin's dominion. Baptism is not merely an identifying with Christ...baptism into Christ, Paul says, is an inclusion into the event of Christ's death, an incorporation into the cross.\textsuperscript{42}

To neglect to reckon with the language of participation and incorporation risks rendering baptism as a mere identification or sign of one's closeness to Jesus. A Pauline narration of baptism, with its keen focus on incorporation in Christ's death in defiance of the realm of sin and death, reaches a radical conclusion: in being baptized, Christians participate in Christ's salvific death.

John Barclay understands Paul's vision of baptism as rescue from the body of death. The practice of baptism, therefore, is an enactment of the cosmic transition from death to life on the bodies of those who are baptized.\textsuperscript{43} Participation in baptism, therefore, offers a testimony about human identity in Jesus Christ: this participation conditions identity not in the appearance of new competencies and capacities among the baptized, but in a revelation of human dependence on Jesus. In other words, the identity of the baptized is rooted in a participation that testifies to their dependence on the resurrection life of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{42} Carlson, "The Role of Baptism," 258.


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 74.
Several responses from research participants help clarify this radical and perhaps paradoxical proclamation of dependency on Jesus at the heart of baptismal participation and identity. Pastor John reflected on baptisms at his congregation, Christ Church, sharing with me: baptism and God tell us “that we’re interconnected. Because you can’t baptize yourself.” In the baptisms at Christ Church, members testify to their dependence on each other and on participation in the death and resurrection life of Jesus together. Pastor John also offered a theological reflection on the practice of baptismal dependency at Christ Church:

“I think everything that is true of us happens in Christ… we can slip quite unintentionally into a Pelagian understanding of things where what we do really matters…and I would say what we do is really a joyous participation in what God, emphatically and completely has done in Christ.”

Pastor Paula also reflected on the nature of baptismal participation in Jesus as an act of “surrender.” This surrender, living into “the good news of God and Christ” as Pastor Paula described, works itself out “corporately” – “our common ground is rooted in baptism.” Paula’s account of baptismal “surrender” helpfully emphasizes not only the surrender exemplified in physical acts of baptism – such as the baptism of an infant or of a person with mobility limitations who requires extra care. But Pastor Paula also articulated that participation in Jesus continues in a community’s post-baptismal life of discipleship. The baptized Body, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, lives out a communal vocation of discipleship that witnesses to their corporate identity as incorporated in Jesus and highlights their commitment to living into a life of new creation not as a pursuit of their own merit and competencies, but rooted in radical dependence on Jesus. As we will see toward the end of this chapter in the section on Paul’s vision of new creation, this dependency on Jesus has
radical implications for baptismal identity that challenge anthropological imaginations that marginalize people with IDD and elevate possession of particular intellectual capacities.

In addition to these insights from research participants, Schnackenburg offers an important description of the radicalness of baptismal incorporation, writing, “through baptism we have been united in the closest fashion with the event of Christ’s dying and burial, and thereby attained to death (for sin).” Similarly, Keck describes Paul’s participatory thought in Romans as follows:

The Adamic situation is deeper than being wrongly related to God and so needs more than a rectified relationship. Sin entails also participation in a domain marked by sin’s enslaving power, whose consequence is death…Paul argues that freedom from this yoked tyranny of sin and death is through participation in an alternate domain - Christ’s death and resurrection, which in the present manifests itself as ‘newness of life,’ whose outcome is eternal life.

As Keck illustrates here, participation in the realm of sin and death cannot be overcome by a human commitment or capacity to walk in newness of life. Instead, what is needed is an equally powerful mode of participation. Freedom comes through the fullness of one’s life being bound to Christ - and somehow in the mystery of baptism, those who are baptized participate in Jesus’ salvific death and are incorporated into a community who lives out this participatory shift from sin and death to a grace-oriented newness of life.

As we will see more clearly in the next section, baptism’s power is not derived from the life of the believer. An “anthropological phenomenon,” argues Barclay, never primarily

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categorizes the baptismal transformation to participation in a discipleship marked by dependence on Jesus and a newness of communal life. Instead, Barclay claims, “it is experienced by human beings only inasmuch as they share in, and draw from a life whose source lies outside of themselves, the life of the risen Christ.”

Keck puts it this way: “Dying with Christ terminates the reign of sin over the baptized.”

Paul’s participatory description of baptism in Romans 6 (particularly verse 4) emphasizes that participation in new life cannot function apart from Christ - thus the stark inconsistency between a life of participation in sin, and a baptized life where believers, together and through the power of Jesus, participate in newness of life with hope of the final resurrection.

The Centrality of Jesus in Paul’s Baptismal Logic

For Paul the guarantee that the baptized man rises from death to life does not reside in the fact that after immersion he emerges again from the water, but it is in the sacramental fulfillment with Christ of the historical death and resurrection of Christ.

Paul’s participatory account of baptism, inextricably connected with the death and resurrection of Jesus in Romans 6, emphasizes the centrality of Christology for Paul’s

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understanding of baptismal theology and practice. As explored above, this participation is enacted sacramentally in deeply physical and dependent ways. Reflecting on Romans 6:6, John Robinson argues “Christians are those who have repeated in their flesh the process of the Cross.” For Paul, baptism is not fully baptism apart from a physical participation in the very person of Jesus.

Schnackenburg expresses it in this way: Paul’s theology of baptism hinges on belonging in and to Christ

…on a deeper foundation. That close, essential and experiential unity with Christ, which became a basic theme of [Paul’s] theology and a principal feature of his piety, was viewed by him as an effect of baptism. At the same time baptism became significant for his theology of the Church, because this experience of salvation made visible the unity of all in Christ and formed the foundation for the symbol of the “Body of Christ.”

Paul’s Jesus-centered focus on baptism in Romans 6 challenges commitments that display primary allegiance to human ritual or sentimentality in ongoing practices of baptism in the Church. Supporting this assertion, Carlson affirms, “baptism is not just a rite of entrance into an organization. It is initiation into a reality shaped by [Paul’s] own robust understanding of the Christ-event:” Jesus’ death, resurrection, and Parousia.

Interestingly, the emphasis on Jesus throughout the research participants’ reflections on baptism, particularly the central importance of baptism as a site of participation in the

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53 Robinson, The Body, 44; see also 2 Corinthians 4:11.

54 Schnackenburg, Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul, 30.

55 Carlson, "The Role of Baptism," 256.
death and resurrection of Jesus, suggested strong connections to baptismal identity. The participants reflected on an identity of “new life” marked in baptism, as well as embodied participation in baptism as critical for an identity wrapped up with Jesus, following both Jesus’ own baptism as well as Jesus’ death and resurrection as enacted in participants’ baptisms. For example, Pastor John reflected on baptism as “primarily the act of God through the church in which God is proclaiming the truth of a person.” Putting it in different words, David told me intently: “I become a new man in Jesus Christ…baptism makes you new.” This emphasis on baptismal and Jesus-rooted identity throughout the research resonates with the radical anthropological consequences springing from Paul’s teaching on baptism in Romans 6. Schnackenburg understands the interface of Jesus and baptismal identity in this way: in baptism, a human attains “thereby to death for sin and life for God. His fellowship with Christ is a single and unified one, but in relation to his dying and rising with Christ it maintains a double aspect: a being dead (for sin) and a being alive (for God).”56 This participatory fellowship, enacted paradigmatically in baptism and continuing with far-reaching and continuing transformative consequences in human life, hinges on unity with Jesus.

This shift in identity, rooted in Christological participation, plays out carefully in verses 6-11 of Romans 6: the old humanity (the “Adamic self”) of Romans 5 is no longer definitive of human creatures following baptism. Instead, Paul’s perspective of newness

assumes that those who participate in baptismal solidarity with Jesus “are no longer defined by Adam but by Christ.” This suggests a radical identity shift. The baptizand’s “derivation from Christ exists in a form that is contrary to its surrounding habitat: life in the midst of death.”

But a tension remains: despite the radical shift in identity attained in baptism through the salvific work of Christ that makes Christians alive in the realm of grace, on this side of the eschaton, Christians still remain in the world, where the realm of sin is alive and active. Though the consequence of unity with Christ’s death in baptism is that the Christian will attain ultimate union with Jesus in the final resurrection, this is an anticipatory reality. In this way, the unity of the baptized with Jesus’ death grants an already but not yet reality - the baptized are empowered through participation in Jesus to walk in newness of life, under the reign of grace and not the reign of sin, but are also oriented in assurance toward a future participation - the hope of the final resurrection. Samuli Siikavirta expresses this tension in the following way: “because the resurrection and redemption of the body are things yet to come, baptism is, above all, a rite that gives the Christian living in the tension between the aeons a drowned yet resuscitated identity.”

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57 Keck, Romans, 162.
58 Barclay, Paul & the Gift, 503.
59 Taylor, Paul on Baptism, 62.
60 Siikavirta, Baptism and Cognition, 117.
So while a very real identity shift occurs in baptism, human creatures continue to groan for the fullness of the coming new creation. Carlson names this partial transformation as follows:

Baptism negates the old boundaries of the present evil age that segregated humanity into categories - and also judged one’s relationship to God - based on religion-ethnic, economic, and gender criteria. At the same time, baptism also means that one is inaugurated into the new creation whose boundaries are defined by Christ because, in baptism, Christians are incorporated into and put on Christ.  

Paul’s Jesus-centered baptismal logic affirms that death is not the final word, and also suggestions what Schnackenburg calls “a junction to life” - a unity with Jesus that empowers the baptized to live for God in the current age.  

Jesus permeates not only the ritual moment of baptism for Paul, but also focuses the whole of the post-baptismal life of discipleship. The unity of the baptized with Jesus results in an identity shift oriented toward Jesus and performed communally in lifelong discipleship. Schnackenburg beautifully summarizes this baptismal nature of Christian life together as follows:

Dying with Christ, being crucified with Christ in baptism, stamps the whole Christian’s existence as being dead for sin; and rising with Christ, which is inseparable from it, is a being alive for God, and will find its last fulfillment in the bodily resurrection. That which takes place in baptism brings the Christian into so close a relation to the crucified and risen Christ, his entire way becomes fashioned after Christ. From sacramental dying with Christ and being raised with Him grows a perpetual discipleship and conformity to the likeness of Christ, who entered the

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61 Carlson, "The Role of Baptism," 259.
62 See Romans 6:7-8.
63 Schnackenburg, Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul, 41.
glory of God by way of the cross. Union with Christ and likeness to Christ is the real goal of Paul’s christocentric piety.  

What context does Paul envision for this post-baptismal transformation into increasing “christocentric piety?” To provide an answer from Romans 6, we will now turn to Paul’s account of the baptized Body – the participatory and Jesus-centered community of the Church as the site of belonging and ongoing transformation.

Community: Belonging in the Transformational and Anticipatory Baptized Body

Paul’s baptismal logic in Romans 6 envisions a community of holiness in which a radical, post-baptismal life of discipleship is cultivated and sustained by the Holy Spirit. For Siikavirta, baptism is foundational for supplying and supporting the identity of the baptized selves that make up this community of holiness.  

This identity is rooted in new life springing from a Christological unity between the baptized and Jesus. This unity entails a break from sin, but also entails a thoroughly communal orientation - a “baptismal identity” of death to sin and new life in God resists “individualistic formation,” in contrast to other “ancient moralists” who were Paul’s contemporaries. Therefore, in addition to Paul’s distinctive understanding of baptism as participatory and deeply Christological, Paul’s

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64 Ibid., 155.

65 Siikavirta, Baptism and Cognition, 6.

66 Ibid., 83.
baptismal vision also supposes a community of the baptized, marked particularly by transformation and anticipation.

For Paul, radical inclusiveness marks the baptismal community. As Robert Jewett writes in his commentary on Romans 6,

To be baptized into Christ’s shameful death is to quit the life of sin. The divisive competition for honor is exposed and laid to rest by the cross. If the Roman believers can understand the deeper meaning of their incorporation into Christ’s death, which they had experienced in an ecstatic manner, they will be able to welcome each other as fellow children of God despite their differences…

The inclusive community of the baptized finds its constitution and realization in its center: Jesus Christ. This Christological grounding of the baptized Body provides a communal definition and orientation toward ongoing transformation, marked by fruitful discipleship that anticipates the coming of God’s good future.

Paul’s writings on baptism outside of Romans 6 also affirm the centrality of the communally-rooted identity of the baptized. As Carlson argues, baptism for Paul is the event which inaugurates “people of radically different backgrounds…into the unifying reality of the body of Christ. Paul presents this common baptismal inauguration as the work of the Spirit rather than as the work of individual Christians themselves.” Carlson’s argument paints Paul’s baptismal theology as thoroughly pneumatological and communal, rather than individualistic. Paul’s particular writing on baptism in 1 Corinthians 12 (verses 13 and 27)

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67 Jewett and Kotansky, Romans, 398.

68 Carlson, "The Role of Baptism," 263.

69 Ibid., 260.
highlights this Spirit-cultivated unity and identity: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”; “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Schnackenburg reflects on the communal function of baptism in this way: “baptism has the important function of integrating new members into this Body of Christ, and thereby to build it up. That happens through the one Spirit, the Spirit of Christ and of God, who fills and pervades all the baptized.” For Paul, this initiation and incorporation of the baptized into Christ does not end in a one-time identity shift. Rather, Paul’s theology of baptism expects the ongoing flourishing of a community marked by ongoing transformation in the Holy Spirit.

A community marked by patterns of transformative discipleship displays the fruit of baptism. Siikavirta argues this as follows,

Paul’s notion of holiness is not detached from his notion of baptism. It is plausible, therefore, that his agenda is clear already at the beginning of the epistle: to recall to his recipients’ mind who they are and whose they are as baptized into Christ, called holy in Christ and called into the service of Christ.

In short, Paul’s theological understanding of baptism supposes a radical transformation of communal life. Paul’s writing in Romans 6, therefore, is not a compilation of baptismally

70 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).


73 Keck, *Romans*, 160.
inspired sentimental reflections. Instead, as Keck argues, the structural arrangement of “stark contrasts” in Romans 6 “show that the language of Romans 6 does not simply describe the new Christians. Rather, it summons them to be what they became in baptism.”

Paul’s emphasis in Romans 6 on the baptizands’ absolute and definitive incorporation into the reality of Jesus’ dying and rising transplants all the baptized “into a perpetual fellowship of death and life with Christ, which works itself out on the ethical, mystical, and eschatological planes.” In other words, one’s baptismal identity is worked out in the lived context of Christian community. This community finds its distinction by honoring an ethical obligation in the present age toward a life of ever transforming discipleship. This discipleship is not only reserved for clergy or those with culturally-honored gifts for ministry – risking a distorted and overly-individualized interpretation of Paul’s baptismal theology.

The radical nature of this community of transformative discipleship honors the baptismal identity of all people – including those with IDD. This non-negotiable aspect of communal identity and transformation in Paul’s baptismal thought challenges contemporary churches to not only include and foster belonging among people with IDD in their midst, but also become careful observers, companions, and listeners who wait for, learn from, and cherish the sometimes wordless or subtle ways of following Jesus among people with profound

\[74\] Ibid., 167. This theme of “becoming who I/we truly are” resonates with baptism as foundational for identity among many participant reflections in the qualitative research project.


expressions of IDD. Paul’s notion of baptismal transformation in community also presses on churches to examine their ethic of care and justice in relationship to people on the margins, such as people with IDD, but also the elderly, people with minority racial and gender identities, and others who live on the fringes of society.

In order to nurture this post-baptismal community of transformative discipleship, Tsui names the necessity of practices that hopefully anticipate the Parousia. Engaging Paul’s argument in Romans 6, Tsui argues that this embrace of hopeful anticipation requires a baptismal community where there is “a negation of one’s former reality of being in sin,” an “incorporation into the death of Christ as a passage from the old dominion to the new dominion…into the new inclusive reality that is the body of Christ,” a call for “new conduct” among those in the baptized Body, and finally, an anticipation that in Jesus’ second coming “the creation will be released from its bondage, and the resurrection, full transformation, and glorification will be realized.”

Carlson also reflects on the structure of Paul’s argument in Romans 6 to highlight the centrality of anticipation in the baptismal community:

Because Paul links baptism with Christ’s death and burial in 6:3-4a, we might expect him to continue in 6:1-14 by saying that, in baptism, we are also raised with Christ. In 6:4b, however, Paul does not say this, and the reason is that, to his way of thinking, only Christ has been raised. The resurrection of Christians comes at the Parousia, the future Christ-event. Because this is his consistent perspective, Paul intentionally uses the future tense in the verbs of 6:5, 8. This adds a strong note of anticipation to our present, baptism-initiated reality.

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77 Tsui, "Baptized into His Death," 404.

78 Carlson, "The Role of Baptism," 258.
Baptism announces the inaugurated but not yet fully present Reign of God, shaping the baptized Body in practices of hope for the final resurrection.

Baptism as a Bridge: Shared Emphases in Pauline Baptismal Theology and Theological Anthropology

As we have already explored, Paul’s Jesus-oriented, participatory, and communal theological narration of baptism raises interesting considerations for the life of discipleship in the baptized Body. In this section, we more specifically attend to Paul’s narration of personhood and identity in the baptized Body: who and what characterizes those who are “in Christ”? In other words, how might we best understand Paul’s anthropology in the baptized Body? In response to these questions, I argue that Paul’s baptismal theology, particularly in Romans 6, provides a critical foundation for his larger anthropological project. While anachronistic to insist that Paul’s anthropology explicitly considered people with IDD, I gesture toward how Paul’s baptismally-rooted anthropology demonstrates deep concern for “questions of human agency, development, and flourishing,” as suggested by Susan Eastman in *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul’s Anthropology*. Baptism offers a paradigmatic Christian practice that helps us to affirm and embrace Paul’s vision of personhood marked by Jesus, participation, and community.

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79 As construed in contemporary definitions of disability.

Some Frameworks for Paul’s Baptismal Anthropology: A Cognitive Perspective

In his theological reflections on the corpus of Paul’s baptismal thought, Schnackenburg argues, “it can be no accident that the most instructive chapter of Paul’s baptismal theology (Romans 6), containing his most characteristic and deepest thought on the subject, follows immediately on the profound conception of the Adam-Christ parallels (Romans 5:12-21).” Schnackenburg highlights here the clear textual and chronological connection between baptism and anthropology in Paul’s thought. In building both his baptismal logic and rich description of human persons, Paul highlights the “only one source of salvation: the cross of Jesus Christ,” as the rooting reality for both his baptismal and anthropological assertions. Wedderburn also affirms this connection, considering Paul’s engagement of baptism in Romans 6 not as a primarily definitional passage, but rather, a practical theological description of the “meaning of having been baptized” or, in other words, “the nature of Christian existence.” What Wedderburn suggests, and I affirm, is the import of Paul’s baptismal logic for constructing his theological anthropology.

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82 Ibid., 112.

83 Cousar notes a key tension in addressing the question of baptism as related to personhood in Paul, writing, “whereas the contrast between Adam and Christ in [Romans] 5:12-21 is depicted in universal categories that encompass all humanity, union with Christ in 6:1-11 of course limits the matter to the Christian community,” presenting a paradox of “universalism and particularism.” Cousar emphasizes that holding onto this paradox is necessary for a faithful reading of Paul’s gospel. This paradox at the center of Paul’s baptismally illuminated anthropological logic resists a strict reading of the non-baptized as outside of the reign of Christ. In what follows, I intend to hold closely to this paradox, though I do not treat it thoroughly in the scope of this project. Charles B. Cousar, "Continuity and Discontinuity: Reflections on Romans 5-8 (in Conversation with Frank Thielman)," in *Pauline Theology, Volume III: Romans*, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 205.

Siikavirta also identifies the importance of these same connections between anthropology and baptism in Paul’s letter to the Romans. However, Siikavirta specifically focuses on the cognitive aspects of this teaching from Paul, arguing: “the consecrated, dead-and-alive baptismal status in Christ, inseparable from the gift of Christ’s Spirit, is the identity formation to which Paul cognitively appeals in his moral teaching.”

Siikavirta understands Paul’s exhortations to the baptized Body as primarily cognitive: “simply…the mental action of knowing, reasoning, and understanding and things related to such mental processes.”

For Siikavirta, cognitive modes of knowing are the primary modes of thoroughly knowing one’s “baptismal state in Christ.”

Siikavirta understands this Pauline “baptismal state” in two important ways, consisting in identifying baptism as central to identity as well as holding baptism as foundational to one’s own self-understanding. Specifically, Siikavirta notes the importance of the baptized “knowing” that they live in a new baptismal existence initiated by the Spirit, that they have a “baptismal unity with Christ,” and that this knowledge ought to spur their unity with all others in the body of Christ. The category of cognitive knowing, for

86 Ibid., 7.
87 Ibid., 161. Siikavirta supports this argument not only theologically but also by drawing upon Paul’s textual construction of Romans 6, especially the tightly connected grammatical imperatives regarding baptism.
88 Ibid., 5.
89 Ibid., 7.
90 Ibid., 93.
Siikavirta, emphasizes that Paul's baptismal ethics do not offer Christians a “detached moral imperative,” but rather, an “integrated” set of vital cognitive affirmations that sustain a communal life of post-baptismal transformation in the unity established in baptism by the work of the Holy Spirit. The event of baptism calls for a cognitive reckoning and embrace of a God-given identity deeply linked to Jesus’ death and resurrection.91

Though Siikavirta emphasizes cognitive consequences of baptism, such as knowing, remembering, and renewing one's mind toward a baptismal identity, he also asserts that the belonging and remembrance associated with baptism do not only concern realities in the cognitive register. Siikavirta explains,

Baptism is a physical grafting into the likeness of Christ’s death, a co-crucifixion of the old self with him, which gives the trust and assurance of being grated into the likeness of his resurrection also. Being thus one with Christ in such a physical way, continuing to live in the newness of life in Christ also takes place in the physicality of one’s life, in the use of one’s body in the service of Christ. The right kind of knowledge and mind, which ought to lead to the correct use of one’s body, is crucial in Paul’s teaching because of the ‘incompleteness’ of salvation history; the fleshly body has not yet died as it must due to sin, nor has it yet been redeemed and renewed at the second coming of Christ. That is why there remains a real risk of continuing in the old servitude and worship of sin, whose end is death. And that is why Paul’s reminder is constantly needed.92

Siikavirta stresses the need for individual selves to remain cognizant of the threat of death. The faithful response to this looming post-baptismal threat of captivity to sin, in Siikavirta’s

91 Ibid., 116.

92 Ibid., 169.
interpretation of Paul, is an embrace of cognitive practices that lead to transformed life “in Christ.”

While I agree with Siikavirta’s conclusions about the transformational nature of baptism, as well as the implications for the lived practices of the baptized Body, I find his appeal to the cognitive import of Paul’s baptismal teaching a dangerously individualized interpretation, as well as inconsistent with Paul’s core logic for theological anthropology. To illustrate this inconsistency and to further expand upon Siikavirta’s attention to the interconnections between Paul’s account of baptism and the human person, I turn to the work of Susan Eastman. Eastman’s accounting of Paul’s anthropological vision, in addition to its resonance with Paul’s baptismal thought, also offers a convincing reading of Paul that affirms baptismal identity and participation in post-baptismal life among people with cognitive impairments or IDD – a task that Siikavirta’s account fails to address.

An Alternative Framework for Paul’s Baptismal Anthropology: Eastman on the Self-in-Relation

“For Paul the self is always a self-in-relation-to-others.”93 This central assertion grounds Eastman’s work on Paul’s anthropology, and pushes back on accounts of personhood in Paul that prioritize the individualized self. Eastman’s goal in offering a second-person hermeneutic for reading Paul is not only to put forward a new framework for

93 Eastman, Paul and the Person, 9.
Pauline anthropology, but to engage Paul as an important interlocutor for envisioning and enacting new ways of caring for people “in extremis.”\textsuperscript{94} In what follows, I share in Eastman’s goal by engaging her reading of Paul’s anthropology within a Pauline baptismal framework. I demonstrate how reading Eastman in light of Paul’s baptismal commitments provides a convincing framework for imagining and enacting Christian communities that fully affirm the baptismal identity, participation, and discipleship of people with IDD.

In contrast to Siikavirta, Eastman does not affirm cognitive practices as the primary mechanisms for growth in Christian discipleship. Eastman instead centers the continuity of the Christ event as the communal foundation for human personhood:

> Divine continuity and human discontinuity mean that death and resurrection, not development or maturation, are the watchwords of Christian existence. The result is a distinctive picture of the self over time: the embodied individual finds his or her vital existence only in and through the gifts and calling exercised in the body of Christ, which are ‘new every morning’ and not innate or gradually developing.\textsuperscript{95}

In other words, the reality of life “in Christ” depends not on practices of cognitive refinement that support the self’s development as a disciple, but relies on a Spirit-empowered membership in the community of the baptized Body, rooted in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

For Eastman, this membership is characterized by distinctive bodily practices. These practices “are necessary sources of knowledge when it comes to interpreting Paul’s letters. We can grasp this insight particularly because Paul depicts the body as the way in which

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 185. For Eastman, this includes autistic people and people with dementia.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 102.
human beings are enmeshed in larger social and cosmic realities. Baptism, therefore, provides one distinctive and paradigmatic practice of belonging in Jesus’ body. This deeply embodied practice, which unites the baptized with Christ in death and in resurrection hope, witnesses to the larger cosmic reality of the Christ-event, while also emphasizing the primacy of baptismal identity for communal belonging.

The practice of baptism provides an answer to the anthropological plight of human creatures. For Eastman, in Romans 7, "Paul’s dramatic enactment of the plight of the self in the grip of sin and sin’s use of the law is not in the first instance a defense of the law, but rather a preparation for the announcement of the good news in the depths of human despair." The good news, announced in Romans 6, is Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection life in which He assumes the whole of humanity. Baptism, the distinctive Christian performance of this good news, provides a central practice through which Christians resist the despair of the self in the grip of sin - as they live out the already but not yet of God’s coming good future. In other words, baptism serves as a practice which reorients the Christian community toward the source of their personhood - Jesus.

This Jesus-centered personhood is only recognized and realized in the context of community. Reflecting on Paul’s central argument in Galatians 2, Eastman writes:

God’s action in Christ is the only sure foundation for the life of faith, which is lived out in the common life of believers. That divine action takes place in and through the crucifixion and resurrection life of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It gains

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96 Ibid., 184.
97 Ibid., 114.
traction in human lives through a mutually participatory union between Christ and those ‘in Christ,’ of whom Paul is Exhibit A.  

The practice of baptism serves as both initiation into and witness to this mutual, participatory union between Jesus and the baptized Body. Eastman further explores the participatory and Christological contours of personhood in Galatians 2, writing,

The love and self-giving of the Son of God took place through his full immersion in fleshly existence. As we have seen in Romans 8:3 and Philippians 2:7…here in Galatians we see enacted the reconstituting power of this divine participation in the life of the apostle, who uses himself as a paradigm for the Galatians themselves.

This image of “full immersion in fleshly existence” resonates with baptismal immersion - a watery practice that paradigmatically shifts Christian anthropological imagination. In the next section, we turn to a closer look at how Paul’s construction of personhood finds deep resonance with his theological account of baptism. As I will argue, through engagement with both narratives from research participants as well as the work of Pauline scholars, baptism offers one key way to enact and witness to Paul’s vision of human creatures as constituted in relationship to others, sustained by Jesus Christ, and participatory all the way down.

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98 Ibid., 153.

99 Ibid., 158.
exploring these central themes of overlap between the qualitative research participants and Paul’s development of his anthropology, I offer further commentary on how Paul’s anthropology provides an expansive way of considering people with IDD, including those with profound experiences of disability, as whole people and legitimate Christian disciples. In particular, I offer Paul’s focus on “new creation” in 2 Corinthians 5 as a critical illustration of Paul’s baptismal anthropology and its capacity to take seriously the witness of people with IDD.

Personhood and Participation

For Paul, human creatures are those who participate “in Christ” and in whom Christ participates. As a result of the Christ-event, human beings no longer participate in a realm dominated by sin and death, but through the power of the Holy Spirit participate in a realm marked by newness of life (Romans 6:4). Barclay understands participation in Jesus’ “counter-reign” of grace, particularly exemplified in baptism, as a participation which reconstitutes human creatures.100 This reconstituting participation marks personhood not by human

…worth, capacity, or work…the Christ-gift has arisen not in response to human obedience, but out of an avalanche of sin (Romans 5:12-21), and it takes its grip on human lives not by enhancing or supplementing their natural capacities but in an act of burial and new life: the old life is brought to an end and an impossible new life - life out of death - begins.101

100 Barclay, "Under Grace," in Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5-8, 60.
101 Ibid., 64-65.
Barclay’s reading of Paul’s anthropology, vis a vis the baptismal lens of Romans 6, highlights the decentering of human capacity as constitutive for personhood. Instead, Paul’s dramatic description of the work of God in the act of baptism, highlights the divine power that initiates and sustains human creatures’ participation in an “impossible” new life.

Dependency marks this participatory perspective on personhood. As Barclay argues, new life

…is experienced by human beings only inasmuch as they share in, and draw from, a life whose source lies outside of themselves, the life of the risen Christ. Their identity is re-centered, since their life is now wholly dependent on the life of Another, the One who is risen from the dead…this ‘newness of life’ (Romans 6:4; cf. 7:6) is not some reformation of the self, or some newly discovered technique in self-mastery; it is an ectopic phenomenon, drawing on the ‘life from the dead’ that began with Jesus’ resurrection. Believers ‘live to God’ (Romans 6:11) as walking, sleeping, eating, breathing miracles. This new creation life begins, in their case, not the other side, but this side of their mortality.102

Barclay’s argument for Paul’s participatory vision of personhood deconstructs the notion that human beings must possess some kind of particular rationality or skill in order to live to God. A new life of dependency on the risen Christ pushes conversations about identity away from capacity and individualization, opening up a space to consider human creatures as those who are radically dependent upon the Triune God for their communally-constituted existence. This is good news for all people, but perhaps especially for those who experience IDD in contemporary Western contexts that offer a competing vision of personhood that pushes people with IDD to the margins.

102 Ibid., 65.
Jesus as the *imago Dei*: Paul’s Christological View of Personhood

Theological debates about personhood often focus on the notion of creation in the image of God. While the *imago Dei* is foundational for such accounts, in Paul’s argumentation, Christology is the lens through which to view the *imago Dei*. Put differently, in Paul’s hands, the creation narrative limns humanity’s fall more than its divine likeness; rather, Adam is primarily the representative figure through whom sin and death entered the world (Romans 5:14-19; 1 Corinthians 5:47-49). There is a mimetic likeness between human beings and God, but it is fully instantiated through Christ’s assimilation to human dereliction (Phil. 2:7).103

In this critical footnote, Eastman highlights Paul’s central focus on Christology for his vision of participatory personhood - for Paul, Christology provides the proper lens to imagine human beings as those created in God’s image, and also the lens through which “mimetic likeness” or participation in new life, is facilitated. In a similar way to Paul’s baptismal theology, rooted in the reality and not merely the symbol of Jesus’ death and resurrection, Paul’s anthropology is also rooted in Jesus. The starting point for thinking about personhood, and specifically identity as those who constitute Jesus’ baptized Body, is not for Ernst Käsemann “a plurality from which the eye is directed towards the unity which holds it together, Christ...” but “…the exact opposite: the heavenly Christ has a body which fills and embraces the earth.” Käsemann continues, clarifying “we do not partake in Christ because we are members of the church…Christ is there before the church.”104

For Käsemann, this primacy of Christ in Paul’s anthropological thought springs from his reading of Paul’s conception of personhood from Romans 5-8. Käsemann argues that

103 Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, 14n22.

Paul took a radical turn from Jewish theological notions of God’s image, arguing, Paul “never expressed the view that man remained in the image of God, even after the fall. Imago dei is for him Christ and Christ alone.”  

This strong argument regarding Paul’s anthropology gestures particularly toward Paul’s depiction of the relationship between human creatures and sin in Romans 5. Paul’s preamble to his announcement of good news in the baptismal uniting of human creatures with Jesus’ death in Romans 6, a participation that results in a radical transformation to newness of life and participation in the realm of grace, paints the dire situation of human creatures in relation to sin. As Eastman argues, “the system of self-in-relation-to-sin” is characterized as “transactional, competitive, unidirectional, domineering,” and operates within “an economy of lack.”  

In stark contrast, Paul’s account of personhood “in Christ” moves human creatures “into a new identity of self-in-relationship,” reflective of a mutual, loving, non-transactional, non-competitive encounter between humans and the divine, as well as a relationship constitutive of personal agency.

Paul’s emphasis on Jesus as the imago Dei underscores these anthropological descriptions of human creatures “in Christ” as mutual, loving, and non-competitive. As Eastman highlights at the beginning of this section, accounts of the imago Dei rooted only in the Genesis creation account lack Paul’s firm Christological perspective. Without this rooting

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105 Ibid., 22.


107 Ibid., 125.
of the *imago Dei* in Jesus, not only do faulty interpretations of God’s image produce themselves within ecclesial communities, but these images often begin to look less like a mutual “self-in-relationship” between the Triune God and human creatures, and instead, a list of competencies, universal human characteristics, or necessary responsibilities to be enacted upon the non-human created world as evidence of possessing God’s image. As we explored in Chapter 1, these capacity-focused descriptions of God’s image often exclude people with IDD from constructions of personhood and Christian identity. In contrast, Paul firmly roots personhood and the *imago Dei* in Jesus.

For Christian communities, the practice of baptism most strongly demonstrates Paul’s strong Christological rooting of the *imago Dei*. Baptism is the revelatory and participatory site that marks the transformation of the self’s life in sin to life in Christ. As Eastman argues,

...just as the assumed notion of persons in regard to sin is relational and participatory, so the basis of [Paul’s] appeal to the Romans is their shared baptism ‘into’ Christ’s death so that they might also live together with Christ and each other (Romans 6:2-9). Paul conceives of this sharing in Christ’s death as a real event in which ‘the body of sin’ has been destroyed. Metaphorically, this ‘body of sin’ denotes persons’ bodily participation in the relational matrix of sin and death; it has been overthrown by a more powerful relational identity, which also is embodied, being constituted ‘in Christ,’ ‘under grace,’ and through ‘the body of Christ’ (Romans 6:11,14, 7:4).  

Paul’s anthropological claims in Romans highlight the practice of baptism as the practical lynchpin of drastic transformation for those “in Christ.” In other words, Paul’s central focus

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108 Ibid., 133.
on Jesus in his account of baptism not only underscores the Lordship of Christ. In addition, Paul’s crescendo toward baptism in Romans 5, by describing the self-in-relation-to-sin, signals to readers the God-person at the center of this radical transformation of personal constitution - Jesus, God’s image.

As an initiatory practice, baptism serves as not only a one-time anthropological marker. Rather, as William Campbell argues, Paul’s heavy emphasis on Jesus in his anthropological vision, highlights that “Paul and his co-believers live in Christ, die in Christ, their entire life has a Christ focus.” Baptism therefore, the outward and embodied practice of uniting one’s life with Jesus Christ, constantly orients the already baptized Body of Jesus-followers to the Christological center of their identity and life together. Receiving new siblings into the body of Jesus through baptism provides concrete occasions that highlight the centrality of Jesus for identity in the realm of grace.

People who Belong: The Communal Constitution of the Baptized Body

In parallel to the development of Paul’s baptismal logic in Romans 6, we also see a keen focus on community for Paul’s constitution of the human person. For Paul, participation in Christ, and Jesus’ participation among those in Christ, occurs on both an individual and corporate level. Apart from the self-in-relation to Jesus and the community of the baptized there is no coherent sense of the human person in Paul. We see this particular

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emphasis on communal constitution of personhood in Romans 6 - belonging in Christ is not merely an individual affair - it also means belonging in the baptized Body.\textsuperscript{110}

A shared personhood rooted “in Christ,” or in other words, mutuality\textsuperscript{111} “in Christ” among human creatures, constitutes human selves in relationship to Jesus’ body. However, this communal constitution does not presume the flattening of distinctiveness between human creatures. For example, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:20, “there are many parts, yet one body.”\textsuperscript{112} Campbell uses a family metaphor to describe this unity in diversity that marks personhood “in Christ”: “a family, however close, is not a group of identical members, but by definition presupposes diversity of various kinds. Being one in Christ rather demands difference since, if all were identical, there would be no need to seek for oneness or unity.”\textsuperscript{113}

The life source of this communal unity is Jesus. More specifically, as Paul argues in Romans 6, this communal notion of the self is tied to the literal sharing in Jesus’ death in baptism.\textsuperscript{114} Campbell again draws on a helpful family metaphor to underscore the radical nature of the communal constitution in baptism:

\ldots followers in Christ become part of his family and as such are buried together with him. Paul’s point in the metaphor of death is not simply of someone who died but about someone who is buried with someone else. This idea of being buried with someone also points to the fact that they are part of the same family or dynasty. The emphasis is not so much on something that truly arrives at an end (burial as the seal

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{110}Ibid., 163-164.
\item \textsuperscript{111}Ibid., 36.
\item \textsuperscript{112}New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
\item \textsuperscript{113}Campbell, \textit{Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity}, 165.
\item \textsuperscript{114}Ibid., 154.
\end{itemize}
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of death) but on something that starts because of the reality of belonging to the same family.\textsuperscript{115}

For Campbell, this metaphor draws on the ideal (yet often not achieved) intimacy of family relations. Yet this Christocentric family of the baptized is “not simply isolated individuals linked individualistically to Christ but together they now share one corporate life in him…Christological language…is actually used in a corporate and inclusive way.”\textsuperscript{116}

Of course, beyond the metaphor of family, Paul’s chief concept of personhood and ecclesiology lies in the body - the body of Christ, the Church, and the community of the all the baptized. Robinson asserts that “the Body supplies the lynch-pin of Paul’s thought.”\textsuperscript{117} Importantly, Paul’s emphasis on the body is not metaphorical alone. Paul engages the body on multiple planes, including participation and engraftment into the very body of Jesus as well as the embodiment of human creatures, including the importance of participation in embodied practices such as baptism. Käsemann specifically emphasizes the role of bodily participation in baptism as the channel through which human creatures are joined to Jesus’ one body: we are one body in Christ because by one Spirit we were baptized into one body.\textsuperscript{118} For Käsemann, all this talk of the body

\begin{quote}
…is not a metaphorical figure of speech. To deny that these are assertions of identity affects the whole of Pauline theology. For the apostle (as Gal 3:7 shows particularly clearly), [baptism] effects a metamorphosis in which the old man dies and
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.,153.
\textsuperscript{117} Robinson, \textit{The Body}, 48.
\textsuperscript{118} Käsemann, \textit{Perspectives on Paul}, 104; Romans 12:4 and 2 Corinthians 12:12.
\end{flushright}
a new creature comes to life. It is not meant metaphorically when Paul says that baptism and the eucharist involve us in Jesus’ death, incorporate us ‘in Christ’ and allow us to participate in the divine Spirit…the apostle uses the expression ‘the body of Christ’ because he really means to point out the structural characteristics of a body; that is why he makes a detailed comparison in I Cor 12:14.¹¹⁹

As Käsemann beautifully emphasizes here, we see the key elements of Paul’s anthropology coalesce: participation in a Christologically constituted and sustained community. The sacraments, particularly baptism as Käsemann notes, provide a paradigmatic practice to affirm Paul’s vision of identity.

Paul’s use of the body helps concretize his anthropological claims about the communal constitution of human creatures. For example, as Paul explores in 1 Corinthians 12, the body requires each of its constitutive parts to function as a whole - even the parts regarded as weak and least honorable (1 Corinthians 12:21-26). This passage not only makes striking claims about the “non-isolable existence”¹²⁰ of human creatures, but also envisions personhood as “always characterized by membership and participation.”¹²¹ For the Christian community, this aspect of personhood finds perhaps its strongest affirmation in the practice of baptism, the site where human creatures are incorporated into Jesus’ body and bound to

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¹¹⁹ Ibid., 104. Janet Martin Soskice complicates Käsemann’s plain declaration that Paul’s “Body of Christ” is not metaphorical. Soskice argues, “no metaphor is completely reducible to a literal equivalent without consequent loss of content, not even those metaphors for which one can specify an ostensive referent…the relational irreducibility of the metaphor lies in the potentially limitless suggestions that are evoked” by the metaphor itself (Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 94-95). Soskice helpfully opens up the importance of retaining metaphorical interpretations of “the body of Christ,” without negating the non-metaphorical importance of Jesus’ body and embodied human participation in ecclesial communities.


¹²¹ Ibid.
one another. The key responsibility of the baptized Body - the Church - following in a life marked by shared baptismal incorporation into Jesus’ body, consists of transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit to empower the gifts of each of the baptized to witness to God’s ongoing work in the world. This responsibility of the baptized Body proceeds no matter what a person’s gifts might look like, or what other aspects of identity the many members of the baptized Body bring to the living out of God’s initiated yet not yet fully realized reign.

The multiplicity of gifts among the multiplicity of selves that constitute the baptized Body underscores the necessity of human difference for Paul’s anthropology and his connected ecclesiology. Käsemann puts it this way:

People who are the same have nothing to say to one another and cannot help one another…the necessity and blessing of Christian liberty as the state of being in the presence of Christ is not to give everyone the same thing but to give and allow everyone what is his…it is only the priesthood of all believers which manifests the reality of the body of Christ…

This priesthood of all believers entails the acknowledgement of the gifts of all selves in Jesus’ body as necessary for constituting life together - a life of discipleship and transformation. For Käsemann, this reality plays out in the following way:

…every Christian in his own place, in his particular situation, with his specific capacities and weaknesses, may and must be a ‘place holder’ for Christ until death. This does not mean being a substitute, because no one can be a substitute for Christ or even represent him. But the place where we stand is to be kept open for him, and this is the case wherever the spirit makes us obedient and prepared for the waiting of hope, the service of love, the joy of faith.

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122 Ibid., 119.
123 Ibid.
In strong contrast to centering a capacity-based anthropology, Käsemann helps us see how Paul's Jesus-centered and communal view of personhood opens space for people who possess, or do not possess, any range of decipherable capacities. These capacities, however, never establish the basis for personhood. Rather, personhood is rooted in the self-in-relation (both to Christ and to those other selves who constitute the baptized Body), who participate in a life of baptismal discipleship only through empowerment of the Holy Spirit, and only together.

Paul’s communal re-framing of personhood, especially with its retention of human particularity, offers good news for all human creatures, but perhaps especially for people with IDD, who are often marginalized in ecclesial settings due to impairments or a “lack” of cognitive capacity. The baptized Body that together embraces newness of life in Christ does not require the erasure or disregard of other particular human identities, such as social status, intellectual capacity, age, or race. As Campbell argues,

Rather, in Christ there is no fusion of identity. To be united with Christ is not to be fused with Christ - particularity is retained but transformed through relationship, yet only as a transformation of particular identity rather than as a replacement of it. Thus despite the fact that Christian identity is a Christ-defined identity, to be in Christ is to retain one’s particularity whether as Jew or as a gentile, and diversity is thereby demonstrated as normative for the body of Christ.²²⁴

The normative status of diversity in Paul’s vision of new life in Christ rejects baptismal practices that seek to erase particularities, perhaps especially those categorized as

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²²⁴ Campbell, Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity, 156.
undesirable in nature by the dominant milieu. Instead, the particular needs, as well as the particular gifts, of individual human creatures are woven into the fabric of Jesus’ body. As Eastman argues, Paul’s vision of personhood and flourishing

...insists on the mutual dependence of the individual members of the ‘body of Christ’ (1 Cor 12:19-20), who together are ‘the body of Christ’ without erasing their distinctive identities...there is a sense in which ‘in Christ,’ human beings belong to one another and constitute one another’s well-being at a foundational level, a level that also is coconstituted through the Spirit of God dwelling in the midst of the community of faith (Romans 8:9).125

Paul’s understanding of the communal constitution of human creatures both honors “distinctive identities” (such as disability) while also gesturing toward the unity of those inhabiting the baptized Body - a unity established and sustained alone by Jesus. Therefore, those who constitute Jesus’ body - the Church - share unity not in an abstract sense of erasure of undesirable human characteristics, but rather in a shared dependence upon the Triune God. Eastman writes, “everyone is cognitively impaired when it comes to the knowledge of God and self; everyone stands in abject need of God’s grace; ultimately everyone is included in the gift of divine mercy.”126

The Life of the Baptized Body: The Lived Implications of Pauline Anthropology

Christ’s assimilation to the most vulnerable form of human existence suggests that the status of personhood is not attained by any achievement, including participation in Christ: it is granted globally by Christ’s participation in the depths of human life. For this reason, the incarnation affords a radical argument for the validity of every

125 Eastman, Paul and the Person, 81.
126 Ibid., 101.
human body, irrespective of any criteria of rationality, mobility, race, gender, relationality, or any other characteristic. Furthermore, what distinguishes human beings from other animals is not, according to this argument, any innate quality or even the assertion that we possess souls and other animals do not, but rather the theological claim that *Homo sapiens* is the form in which God took flesh.\(^{127}\)

In this striking summary of Paul’s Christological, communal, and participatory account of human creatures, Eastman paints a portrait of personhood that stands in stark contrast to contemporary anthropological imaginations that embrace humans as primarily rational, capacity-based, and individualized. As I have argued above, baptism helps affirm and proclaim Paul’s vision of personhood, a vision that supports the belonging of people with IDD. Rather than requiring a set of anthropological exceptions for the inclusion of people with IDD, Paul’s framing of personhood as constituted and sustained in Christ—through reciprocal participation in the context of community—can help contemporary faith communities seeking to engage people with IDD as disciples to reimagine their anthropological assumptions. Eastman identifies Paul’s theological grounding of the person as essential to support the flourishing of human creatures at “risk,”\(^{128}\) primarily those who experience shame or scorn amidst contemporary anthropological emphases on capacity and individuality, as well as human creatures understood as undesirable or even disposable by virtue of their impairments, limitations, or disabilities. Because for Paul human creatures are not merely passive sites imprinted by the *imago Dei*, but are participatory creatures in a relationship with the Triune God who empowers them through incorporation in Christ and

\(^{127}\) Ibid., 179.

\(^{128}\) Ibid.
an indwelling of the Holy Spirit to live lives of transformation, Paul’s anthropology calls forth lived implications of being in the baptized Body.

Baptism provides a primary practice for proclamation of the good news of our personhood rooted fully in Jesus - non-contingent on disability status or human acceptance into a community of faith. Eastman understands the lived implications of this transformation evident in the baptized Body living in newness of life in deeply communal ways:

If human beings, then, live and move and have their being in complex, often conflicting networks, transformation also happens through those networks. This truth means that, rather than talking about change in individuals in a substantial or linear sense, perhaps it is more accurate and closer to Paul’s thought to describe change rendered effective and visible through the quality of relationships. Change happens ‘between ourselves’ more than within discrete individuals.129

Because people are never baptized for themselves alone, but are publicly baptized into Jesus’ body, realizing the fullest flourishing of the baptized Body requires practices of careful care and attention to each of the newly baptized, not only at the moment of baptism, but throughout a lifetime of joy, struggle, and lament, together in Jesus’ body. Eastman illustrates this communal sense of transformation in the following way:

Insofar as change happens, it happens through the characteristics of communal interaction that mediate Christ. It may be impossible to discern the transforming presence of the Spirit in a dementia victim (although many times the opposite is also the case); but it is possible to see that divine presence in the love extended to her by others…that web of relationships in the body of Christ, not isolated or inward-turned individuals, is the arena in which change happens.130

129 Ibid., 181-182.

130 Ibid., 182.
Though Eastman turns to the community associated with an individual experiencing dementia as a key illustration for what she has in mind for Paul’s movement from individual to communal personhood and transformation, the lives of baptized people with IDD also serve as a salient and often sorely needed witnesses of the living out of Paul’s anthropology. Instead of a community marked by uniformity, built on the rejection of people with IDD from truly belonging in a faith setting, the presence of people with disabilities as natural members of Jesus’ body, who present different dependencies and gifts for the community to receive, also witness to the kind of transformed community of care that Paul encourages.

Throughout the qualitative research for this project, several participants reflected on the implications of baptism for encouraging a community of deep care among people with and without disabilities. Mary reflected on this communal ethic of care, sharing:

“For me, it's [The Gospel of] Matthew, the lilies of the field thing. Because ... baptism is a visible symbol of being brought into that tribe and a part of the tribe. It's like an “I got you” moment. You don't need to worry about things because, you know, this community of people...you little baby or you big person, you don't need to worry about what it is that you're going to be struggling with, because we've got you.”

Mary’s reflections here affirm the communal notion of absorbing struggle and anxiety, in order to live out a life of discipleship together. Her reflections align with the kind of community that exemplifies Paul’s anthropological vision.

Andrew’s reflections on his son’s baptism also underscore the “natural” outflowing of Paul’s anthropological assertions:

“With Al, sometimes people will go out of their way because they want to make sure that, you know, that they’re embracing people with disabilities. But [at Al’s baptism] it was just so natural and so unquestioned. And, I mean, we [Al’s parents] were the ones who were questioning. Nobody else was struggling with this. It was just us.”
The witness of the baptized Body in supporting the “natural” incorporation of people with IDD as members of Jesus’ body to be embraced, illustrates a profound way that the baptized Body might be empowered by the Spirit to affirm their multitude of creaturely dependencies as they together seek transformation into newness of life in Christ.

Yet, the lived implications of Pauline anthropology do not realistically create utopian churches where the baptized Body lives a life of perfected belonging. The already but not yet of God’s coming good future leaves the baptized Body subject to the powers of sin and death still active in the world. Regarding this reality, Eastman writes,

The complex overlapping of relational systems means that social institutions must live with imperfection rather than demanding closure and a resolution of differences that will inevitably benefit some and harm others. One aspect of Christian witness is thus to name the lack of closure and the continued ruptures and suffering in all humanity, including the body of Christ. To fail to do so betrays the bodily interconnectedness that underlies Paul’s thought; when a community claims to have achieved wholeness, one wonders at what expense that ‘integration’ has happened. Rather than pushing for some kind of personal or social perfection, perhaps speaking truthfully about the lack of wholeness most perfectly manifests Paul’s realism about the Christian existence this side of the eschaton.131

Research participants who embraced the baptismal vocation of people with IDD in their churches held up this imperfection as an important aspect for shaping their ecclesial communities. For example, Pastor Soren reflected:

“There is this sense of a casualness, a comfort level, with visible imperfections. And a sense of being okay with things that, you know, just aren’t perfect…[adults with IDD] would sing with joy and beauty and gusto. But it wasn’t precise music. And it wasn’t what a normal choir would do. There would be some moans and there would be some notes that were off key. And there would be those kinds of things. But the church, they weren’t absorbed by that. They were…embracing and appreciating what this group was bringing as their gift to God. And so it became a gift for everyone.”

131 Ibid., 183.
So, I think it helped the church. I just have a greater sense of what’s really important...these are our brothers and sisters, participating in a way that edifies the Body of Christ. And it was - they were edifying the Body of Christ, and I think...there was a mutual edification.”

Pastor Soren’s story highlights an embrace of the Pauline indispensability of all participants in the baptized Body, as well as an openness to shifting priorities with regard to what churches hold as centrally important - instead of perfection, an embrace of the gifts of all parts of the Body that constitute the local community.

Anna also offered a reflection on the gift of dwelling within an unperfected ecclesial community, parallel with Paul’s emphasis about the flourishing of human creatures as they dwell together in the baptized Body.

“Hikare’s presence is, I’m sure, a gift to our whole community. She really has been to me. I mean, I think it connects me back to my experience when I worked in the residential facility, that there was just so many times that people in the community, in the general community, had no idea what the people living in that facility were capable of. With how they could just change your life, by your experience with them. And I think that’s how Hikare is here. She's had all these gifts and now she's flowering in some other ones...this isn’t about perfection. It’s about inclusion and about experience together. And it doesn’t have to be a perfect thing...all of us count the same here. And it was like you don’t have to prove who you are to anybody. It was like, yeah, we all count the same.”

Both Anna and Pastor Soren illustrate what Eastman names as a reshaping of human hope - identity and personal definition no longer rely on one’s limitations, sufferings, or notable achievements. Instead, Paul’s communal and participatory foundation of the constitution of personhood ultimately grounds identity “in relationship with Christ.”

Unity with Jesus in the eschaton serves as the anchor of hope, rather than the strivings of present-day communities to reach an illusionary perfection.

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New Creation in the Baptized Body: An Integrative Proposal

We have already surveyed the strong connections between Paul’s baptismal theology and his anthropological claims. In addition, I have begun to highlight how Paul’s logic with regard to both baptism and personhood offers a powerful framework for the participation of people with IDD within ecclesial communities. In this final section, I offer another key Pauline construction of human identity with regard to baptism - new creation - as an additional example that crystallizes the primacy of participation, Jesus, and community for thinking faithfully about the identities of all the baptized as full disciples.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 provides a central proclamation of Pauline anthropology:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.  

In this reality of new creation, anthropological allegiance to external conditions, perceptible to lenses conditioned by the flesh, no longer establishes a foundation for participation in Christ. Instead, in Christ, through baptism, personhood is no longer conditioned apart from Jesus or the community of participation in Jesus’ body. Connecting Paul’s notion of new creation to his baptismal logic exemplified in Romans 6, Barth argues that “baptism mediates

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133 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
new creation: it is not itself grace, but from first to last a means of grace.” In a similar fashion, Carlson notes that Paul’s engagement of baptism as new creation centers Jesus’ death and resurrection

...as events through which God negates the dominion ruled by sin and death in which we are all enslaved. Simultaneously, they are the events through which God inaugurates the new dominion of Christ in which believers live in a right relationship with God (Rom 3:21-26), live in a new creation reconciled to God (II Cor 5:16-21), and live redeemed from law’s curse (Gal 3:13, 4:4-5). This means, therefore, that Christians now have a new reality.

Within Paul’s larger theological project, this 2 Corinthians 5 notion of “new creation” strongly resonates with his baptismal theology as well as the implications of the communal life of discipleship implied for the baptized Body.

However, before exploring the implications for communities of new creation, it is important to name the realities of limitation and incompleteness that mark the discipleship of those living in the ongoing yet non-ultimate reality of the realm of sin. In other words, I want to guard against the notion that the framework of baptismal anthropology or new creation can create communities of near-perfect unity, where people with IDD (or really any human neighbors) are seamlessly supported in a life that witnesses to the radical difference of Jesus. While I do think the baptized Body offers a radical alternative that witnesses to the lived implications of an anthropological imagination enlivened to the active work of the Spirit in communities drawn primarily together by baptism, and not other kinds of kinship


135 Carlson, "The Role of Baptism," 256.
or affinity, this radical change does not always clearly witness and cannot always overcome (in an acute or temporal sense) the power of sin in the world. Eastman helpfully clarifies this paradox in the community of Jesus’ Body:

The social, intersubjective constitution of the self supports ways of talking about personal transformation that honor Paul’s language of radical change and yet also honor the reality that such transformation seems elusive and fragile at best. I have argued that Romans 7 articulates the slippage between what seems to be an ontological conversion from the flesh to the new creation, absolutely enacted through baptism into Christ’s death (Romans 6:3-4), and the experience of ongoing struggle against sin as a hostile, deceptive, and lethal power.136

Another helpful way to note the fragility of the baptized Body, in the here and now, returns to our earlier reflection on Jesus as the imago Dei. Frances Young writes on how baptism especially emphasizes the communal and Christological contours of God’s image:

Adam is the ‘old man,’ Christ the ‘new man’ (Rom 5; 2 Cor 5:17), and all of us are in Adam and potentially in Christ (Rom 7, 1 Cor 15:22). Both are in some sense corporate figures. In Christ we are a new creation, but as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. In a sense Christ alone is the true image of God - the image of God in Adam (the old humanity) was marred. So we are only in God’s image if we are in Christ, and it is by baptism that we are incorporated into him.137

As Young asserts here, baptism marks an initiation and incorporation as new creation, however, before the fullness of God’s eschatological Reign, human creatures continue to bear the experience and effects of the bondage of sin.

Despite its limitations, in what follows I will highlight how the body of Christ as the baptized Body of new creation can help support ecclesiologies with robust space for people

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136 Eastman, Paul and the Person, 181.

with IDD, working against criteria-based anthropologies and providing an alternative to individualized notions of discipleship.

A “New Creation” in Christ: Baptism and Identity

When the ‘I’ is crucified with Christ, the ego is unmoored from any prior sources of identity, worth, and direction, or conversely, all sources of shame, dishonor, and despair; it is severed from the relational matrix shaped by family of origin, social context, economic status, and so forth. Henceforth all access to such sources of identity passes through union with Christ on the cross.\(^ {138} \)

Eastman’s reflection on the crucifixion with Christ among the baptized, a Pauline emphasis analogous to the realm of new creation where identity is focused no longer through a human perspective, highlights Paul’s radical claims about the root of identity among those baptized. While Paul does not seek to flatten individual differences or particularities (as Käsemann claims, “uniformity is petrified solidarity”)\(^ {139} \) Paul’s reflections on anthropology in light of baptism highlight no simple “annihilation of the old creation,” but rather, “the death of the enfleshed self and the indwelling of Christ in the same flesh; the particular identity of this flesh can be Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. For Paul, the transformation involves the entire person, both body and mind.”\(^ {140} \) In other words, this kind of holistic transformation displaces features of human identity previously thought to be constitutive of the core of personhood - factors such as social status, race, cognitive


\(^ {139} \) Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, 119.

\(^ {140} \) Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity*, 164.
skills, or gender. For Paul, these particularities remain, but are displaced to their rightful location. Campbell nuances this point: individuals’ sub-identities (of which I include disability) are “in a nested hierarchy of identity of which being in Christ is primary.”141 Continuing further, Campbell writes “in Christ, ethnic difference is not transcended but the hostility that accompanies this should be.”142 At the conclusion of his book, Campbell again summarizes this key aspect of Paul’s concept of human identity: “The message of Paul’s gospel is that through Christ the hostility against those who are different is overcome, enabling difference to be accepted and celebrated in anticipation of the coming kingdom of God.”143 In summary, new creation life in the baptized Body has important practical implications: Jesus abolishes the hostilities between humans that often accompany differences in sub-identities. Jesus abolishes the hostilities that sustain patterns of homogenous belonging in ecclesial communities.

In the context of Paul’s talk of new creation in 2 Corinthians 5, “judgment is no longer to be made on the basis of a person’s visible advantages,”144 such as capacities for particular cognitive skills. According to Paul, human capabilities exalted within a particular culture must no longer play a role “in the evaluation of other persons since they certainly

141 Ibid., 157.
142 Ibid., 158.
143 Ibid., 175.
play no role in one’s evaluation of Christ.”145 In striking contrast to suggesting the constitution of human persons on the basis of externally perceptible embodied capacities, “there is no place within the body of Christ for judging other people on the basis of externals.”146 Instead, a baptismal initiation into an identity of new creation forms the basis on which the baptized Body welcomes and embraces those who are baptized as disciples of Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 5:16, notions of human perception of identity experience a radical shift at a point J. Louis Martyn famously described as “the turn of the ages.”147 Martyn highlights Paul’s contextual exhortation to the Corinthians, who live not “entirely in the new age, but rather at the painful and glorious juncture where some are being saved and some are perishing (2 Cor. 2:15).”148 Expanding this notion further, Martyn argues that “the essential failure of the Corinthians consists in their inflexible determination to live either before the cross (the super-apostles of 2 Corinthians) or after the cross (the Gnostics of 1 Corinthians) rather than in the cross.”149 Cruciform identity, rather than identity formed from evaluation


146 Ibid., 329.


148 Ibid., 285.

149 Ibid.
based on a normative hierarchy of human persons, becomes the mode of Christian perception.

As Eastman argues, “Paul no longer sees others or himself on the basis of outward appearances…but rather through the prism of the death and resurrection of Jesus.” Paul J. Sampley affirms Eastman’s position, asserting, “to consider anyone simply from the flesh \((\text{kata} \text{sarka})\) is to view that person as if the fundamentally transformative resurrection of Christ had not taken place – and as if the norms or standards of judgment had not therein been radically altered.” The Christ event radically subverts notions of human knowing, a reality emphasized, performed, and recalled within the Christian community of new creation through the practice of baptism. A striking example of the baptismal affirmation of Christian identity arose among several research participants. James told me that in approaching Pastor Soren to request baptism, “I was just asking Pastor Soren to \(\text{be who I am}\).” Al shared similar reflections on the importance of baptism for his identity: “I told my Dad, yes. I would like to get baptized. It’s truly in God that I become – \(\text{I become who I am}\).” Pastor John beautifully summarizes this notion of baptism proclaiming the identity of those in Jesus’ body:

“I talked about baptism as a sermon and as a story…baptism is one of the sermons that we preach in the church. And it tells a story of how good God is and how much God loves us. And how we belong. And I told them that it tells the story of who they really are.”

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150 Susan Eastman, "Ashes on the Frontal Lobe" (paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature, Chicago, IL, 2012), 13. Eastman goes on to argue that Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 5:16 does not reject embodied knowledge, but rather, rejects knowledge about other persons “unmediated by being ‘in Christ’” (14).

Christian identity, constituted through participation in Christ, encompasses the scope of human experience, regardless of economic status, disability, or age. Identity in new creation leaves no room for evaluation on a basis other than Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, to which each Christian is incorporated in the practice of baptism. And, for Paul, the implications of this new creation life in Jesus are played out only in and through Christ, in the context of the communal baptized Body.

The Christological and Communal Nature of Participation in the New Creation

With the displacement of external characteristics as constitutive of personhood in the new creation, Paul opens up new space to think about participating in Christ through the baptized Body. No longer reliant upon individualized capacities, “believers are enabled through their burial in Christ’s death to ‘walk in newness of life’…a new form of behavior is made possible by God through Christ…it; “‘Newness of life’ echoes Paul’s idea that believers ‘in Christ’ constitute a ‘new creation’ (2 Cor 5:17).”152 As Jewett argues here, participation in the life of the baptized Body is not an individual affair, but rather, is made possible only in Jesus. Jason Whitt argues that a constant and communal return to hope in the coming of God’s good future - a future where the realities of new creation will be fully revealed - allows those baptized in Jesus’ body to take on “the identity of the new creation” in the here and now.153

152 Jewett and Kotansky, Romans, 399.

Paul’s proclamation of “New Creation” in 2 Corinthians 5:17 echoes a proclamation from Isaiah 43:18-19:154 the in-breaking of the Christ act on the cosmic scene creates “a total restructuring of life that alters its whole fabric – thinking, feeling, willing, and acting.”155 Unity and participation156 in Christ now mark a life of transformed discipleship in the baptized Body - not individual skills or development. As Thrall argues, this communal participation in Christ as constitutive of human persons in the new creation “is not conditionally dependent upon the incorporation of individuals in Christ but the essential presupposition of any such incorporation.”157

Though Paul’s language of “new creation” appears only one other time in the New Testament (Galatians 6:15), Paul’s use of discontinuity in 2 Corinthians 5:17 underscores the radical change resultant from participation in Christ,158 paralleling many of his other writings (most markedly Romans 8). The status of baptized believers at the turn of the ages, as “the first fruits of a cosmic renewal yet to come,”159 spring not from volitional and individualized

154 “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (NRSV).


158 Sampley, ”The Second Letter to the Corinthians,” in New Interpreter’s Bible, 94.

actions of particular baptized individuals, but rather, participation in the life of Christ through incarnational exchange of the divine with the plight of humanity. The conception of “life in Christ as involving a radical transformation of one’s whole situation”\(^\text{160}\) finds profound realization through Paul’s emphasis on Christ’s radical exchange with human persons, including his participation even in the realm of sin and death.

Paul’s shocking claim in 5:21, “for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,” “points to the ‘divine interchange’ that occurred in the Christ event...in accordance with God’s will, Christ assumes the sinful condition of humanity so that humanity might assume Christ’s righteousness before God.”\(^\text{161}\) Echoing Galatians 3:13-14, the Christ hymn of Philippians 2, and Romans 8:3-4, divine initiative in God’s incarnational act of exchange to constitute human persons in Christ stands central to Paul’s notions of anthropology. The theme of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:21, extended from 5:18-19,\(^\text{162}\) emphasizes Paul’s insistence that God’s initiative is central to the divine act of exchange, removing space for exaltation of individualized human agency in Christ’s constituting of human persons. Christ being “made sin”\(^\text{163}\) through his incarnational exchange, marked by “personal alienation from

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\(^{160}\) Furnish, "II Corinthians," in The Anchor Bible, 332.


\(^{163}\) See also Isaiah 53, especially verses 3-6, 10-12.
God that has characterized human life from the beginning,"\textsuperscript{164} places in perspective a radically new framework for the life of discipleship and communal transformation. At the turn of the ages, through Christ’s cross and resurrection, Christians in the baptized Body are drawn into a sphere of participation flowing from Christ’s exchange with human plight in the body of sin.

The implications of this communal and Christological participation hold importance for current practices in the church, including the centrality of participation in joyful anticipation of God’s coming future of new creation. In particular, for people with IDD, we see Paul’s theology of New Creation resisting the restriction of participation on the basis of capacity or rationality. Paul’s shift to the primacy of the Christ event in shaping communities in practices of new life offers a radically inclusive suggestion for community composition—all human creatures are drawn into awaiting the coming of God’s new heavens and earth.

During her research interview, Anna spoke beautifully about how this communal and Jesus-centered participation manifested at Holy Angels Episcopal Church, among disabled and nondisabled parishioners. She described the temptation to “just assume maybe somebody’s maybe not going to want to step forward and do something. Or that if they do, it has to be done in a very precise way. And how much we close things off” when churches hold this attitude. Anna reflected that to resist the temptation, time is needed “to explore what somebody’s comfortable with,” or, to simply cultivate comfort with imperfection. Anna

continued “one of the things I do love about this congregation is we’re not into perfection… I think we handle really well when something doesn’t go right.” Anna recognized how this embrace of imperfect participation allows the presence and gifts of all people in her parish, including those with disabilities, to witness to a life of shared baptismal vocation together.

Denial of participation among people with IDD, or any other members of the baptized Body, distorts the witness of the Church and forms the baptized Body in patterns of inhospitality that ultimately skew the gospel proclamation. One way that Paul resists this individualization and human-centered notion of participation in God’s new creation is for the baptized Body to cling to joyful anticipation of God’s eschatological New Creation, and to cultivate, through the Holy Spirit, current communities that actively reflect anticipatory hope.

*Joyfully Anticipating the New Creation: The Baptized Body as Witness*

Embodying the hope of Jesus’ return in the baptized Body relates closely to Paul’s anthropological claims regarding personhood in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. As Martyn claims, Paul’s proclamation in 5:16 points to “not a private event, treasured by Paul as a radical change in his self-understanding,“ but rather, an intimate linking of human ways of knowing and being known with the coming age of God’s Reign. The Christ event, an

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embodied, incarnational exchange, “has supervened on world history,” and reverberates with both cosmic and “inalienably personal”\textsuperscript{166} consequences for Christian identity and participation. Paul’s claims in 5:17-19 point to the cosmos as the stage of God’s reconciling action.\textsuperscript{167} As Sampley argues, the transformation resulting from the reality of new creation, testified to in a partial way through the current witness of the baptized Body, “will be expanded until they encompass the entire universe.”\textsuperscript{168} With the consummation of the cosmos on the future horizon,\textsuperscript{169} notions of present-day transformation, enacted through a community of radical diversity, bonded together through primary identities in Christ named and enacted in baptism, must, for Paul, witness to the world the coming, explosive change of the cosmos.\textsuperscript{170} Allegiance to Paul’s notion of human constitution through embodied participation in Christ points to “the eschatological hour of the world’s destiny and deliverance when in Christ ‘all has become new.’”\textsuperscript{171}

Reflecting on this Pauline anthropological reality, Käsemann writes “man cannot be defined from within his own limits, but he is eschatologically defined in light of the name of


\textsuperscript{170} Martin, "2 Corinthians," in \textit{Word Biblical Commentary}, 152.

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 151.
The non-conditional presence of human limitations for life in Christ resonates with Galatians 3:28 that also proclaims “a new created order…based on the soteriological equality of all humanity.”\textsuperscript{173} Paul’s proclamation of radical interchange in Christ in 2 Corinthians 5:21, resonate with Romans 5:19 and Philippians 2:5-11, establishes a Christological initiation and result of reconciliation.\textsuperscript{174} 2 Corinthians 5:21 stands as a “soteriological credo,”\textsuperscript{175} a point of confession to remind the baptized Body of their common soteriological status, possible only through ongoing participation in the incarnate Christ who was made sin for the sake of all humanity, regardless of disability status or other external characteristic. God as “both the initiator and goal of reconciliation,”\textsuperscript{176} establishes an even playing field for the outworking of the gospel in the body of Christ: an embodied participation of God’s diverse children in the life of the Church and the world. Overall, the message of reconciliation depends not on human possession of particular capacities, but rather, rests “wholly on divine initiative”\textsuperscript{177} that proclaims “the very call and invitation of God”\textsuperscript{178} through communal participation in Christ. Paul does not suggest a passive role for

\textsuperscript{172} Käsemann, Perspectives on Paul, 31.

\textsuperscript{173} Thrall, ”The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,” in The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, 423.

\textsuperscript{174} Martin, ”2 Corinthians,” in Word Biblical Commentary, 144.

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 139.

\textsuperscript{176} Harris, ”The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,” in The New International Greek Testament Commentary, 436.

\textsuperscript{177} Thrall, ”The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,” in The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, 430.

\textsuperscript{178} Martin, ”2 Corinthians,” in Word Biblical Commentary, 156.
human creatures, but rather, suggests that Christ “effected reconciliation in an objective fashion, prior to any consequent human response.”179

The diverse gifts of those who constitute the baptized Body must all work together in a witness to God’s coming good future through transformation in the here and now, exemplified most powerfully through the kinds of communities where baptismal vocations to discipleship are lived out - communities marked not by a pre-occupation with human difference and a focus on individual efforts, but rather, a shared embrace of diverse human limitations and gifts that can imagine all the baptized as disciples and as necessary parts of the witness of the Church here and now. As Pastor John shared during his research interview, “baptism teaches us about the faithfulness of God,” both in the here and now, and in anticipation of the fullness of God's coming Reign. David, another research participant, when asked about how he responds to seeing the baptism of other people, told me “it bring me so much joy.” Cultivating communities marked by joyful engagement in baptismal practices that anticipate the coming of God’s good future relies not only upon liturgical sophistication, but also the taking of responsibility for the flourishing of people with IDD both within and outside the liturgy. The baptized Body witnesses to the coming of Life Everlasting in the here and now by living into communities of mutual care, love, and radical belonging for people across a wide range of various identity markers, such as disability, age, gender, and race. These are the kinds of communities where people with IDD do not sit in

the back row, and only a handful of church members know their names. They are treated in every aspect of the community’s life, from the liturgy to shared meals to times of fellowship, as partners in discipleship.

*Some Pastoral Implications of the New Creation*

In the new creation, Paul’s anthropological notion that all persons participate in Christ in the same manner holds important implications for ecclesiology and pastoral practice. For example, Christian communities that actively acknowledge and embrace the soteriological equality of all in the baptized Body, as well as affirm personhood as equally established in participation in the life of the Incarnate Christ, establish a framework for embracing and imagining the belonging of those typically marginalized in church communities, including people with IDD. A theological embrace of unconditioned participation in Christ as the primary identification for all the baptized allows for an opening of pathways toward belonging for people with diverse limitations, including disabilities or mental illness, within the life and ministry of the Church. Paul’s Christological anthropology opens space for imaginative reflection on the diverse gifts that all people in Christ offer to the Church, regardless of their possession or lack of exceptional embodied capacities. Paul attempts to illustrate this reality in his own context in 2 Corinthians, redefining his “apostolic work” not in boasting regarding “external advantages”¹⁸⁰ but through the radical rejection of fleshly lenses as a way of perceiving and knowing apostolic legitimacy, claiming instead that

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 414.
participation in Christ alone constitutes the legitimacy of apostolic ministry. In this way, Paul’s sketching of the new creation condemns communities who do not actively work toward the embrace of gifts of people with IDD as well as other people often marginalized in the baptized Body - people with severe and persistent mental illness, children with emotional challenges, homeless neighbors, and elders living with dementia, to name a few groups. As Hope affirmed in her research interview – “it certainly doesn’t matter what level of cognitive ability you have…it’s much more that you are going through a transformation that God and we are all enacting at once.” Actively welcoming and also embracing the gifts of people with IDD helps break down communities of homogenous belonging. As Mary described, baptism provides one occasion (among many) for ecclesial communities to pay attention to the “little cracks” where “God can get it.” Witnessing baptism, baptismal reaffirmation, or the living into a vocation of discipleship, even with a vocation of a wordless presence, changes the whole of the community.

Most baptismal rites affirm the Triune God’s gifting of all persons in their baptisms with a particular vocation to discipleship, by virtue of symbolic and/or effective incorporation into Jesus’ death and resurrection in the baptismal waters. For Paul, baptismally sanctioned vocations are always worked out in community and in the context of human particularity. Paul’s tension that stresses the primacy of identity and participation rooted in Jesus, but this primacy of identity not completely erasing the particularity of human identity markers and abilities, urges communities of the baptized to creatively explore practices that enable them to be with people who the world may consider dispensable or un-
skilled. Paul reminds us of the importance to listen and attune ourselves carefully to the
witness of all the baptized, especially those with IDD for whom many in the church may
need to slow down to be with and receive from in their mutual life of discipleship.

If Christians believe that the Holy Spirit is active in the practice of baptism, and if
church communities affirm alongside Paul that both the strengths and weaknesses of each
baptized child of God are indispensable to the living out of witness to God’s inaugurated yet
not fully realized new creation, churches must find ways to accompany, learn from, and
cultivate the particularities of people with IDD, and all the baptized in their midst, for their
life together. These kinds of practices start with a commitment to be with others despite the
strain of difference, through prayerful, ordinary, and sustained fellowship. Informal practices
such as eating together, accompanying one another on typical errands or to appointments, or
being together in the context of a prayer or worship service, provide some of the best ways
to get to know people with seemingly stark differences and to begin to participate in a
transformation of perceiving people with IDD not from a human point of view, but rather
recognizing how their particular strengths and weaknesses “in Christ” might flourish within
the context of the local Church to teach, lead, and strengthen the holy work of proclaiming
the gospel through radical hospitality to all of God’s children. In Chapter 5, we specifically
attend to how baptismal practices of preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation can shape
communities who faithfully attend to one another.

Beyond radical hospitality toward people with IDD, the Holy Spirit’s work in the
baptized Body, exhorting the Body to sanctification in newness of life, requires a communal
commitment to intentionally engage people with IDD in the Body’s ongoing work of
growth in holiness. The ways the Body receives, learns, and transforms in newness of life as
a result of the gift of presence of people with IDD,\textsuperscript{181} serves as one way to test the body’s
affirmation of the centrality of baptismal identity among all present. The presence or lack of
evidence in a church community of receiving the witness of people with IDD, as well as
patterns of faithful, communal care for people with IDD, serve as another avenue of
accountability to enacting and embracing a community marked primarily by reciprocity in
new creation life, identity, and action.

\textit{Conclusion}

Following the core themes at the intersection of baptism and disability from this
project’s research participants (community, Jesus, and participation), I have suggested
throughout this chapter how various New Testament texts, particularly accounts of Jesus’
baptism in the gospels and Paul’s writings on baptism in his New Testament epistles,
present us with a radically participatory, Christological, and communal sense of personhood
and identity, most clearly performed and affirmed in the Christian practice of baptism. In
particular, Paul’s way of thinking about personhood, in tight connection to baptism, holds
implications for ecclesiology and pastoral ministry that directly apply to the participation and
belonging of people with IDD.

\textsuperscript{181} Among the many other discrete gifts people with IDD may also bring to an ecclesial community.
Transformed life in the baptized Body offers all Christians, regardless of disability experience, an avenue for bodily enactment in a Jesus-rooted reality. This radical centering of Jesus’ body in theologies and practices of baptism places a different emphasis on thinking about discipleship, non-contingent on human capacity and skill, but rather, flowing from the Spirit-empowered baptized Body through and in whom Jesus is made known to the world that the new creation might be lived into and witnessed toward in its full coming.

This Pauline baptismal anthropology provides ample space for the personhood of people with even profound IDD. The dependence evident in baptism - a dependence unto a death, linked with that of Jesus - does not appear as a momentary or merely symbolic feature of the rite. This dependency witnessed to in baptism is central to human identity and ongoing participation in Jesus. The baptized Body lives, moves, and has its being through communal dependence on Jesus. This dependence highlights that baptism does not provide the mechanism to “supersize” one’s Christian identity through the bestowal of new capacities, but rather, highlights humans as radically and centrally dependent creatures on Jesus’ resurrection life. This reality provides a theological means for fully affirming people with even the most profound IDD in a Pauline account of anthropology. People with IDD perhaps serve the baptized Body as the primary witnesses to this baptismally-revealed dependency at the core of human identity.

But where to go from here? It is important to see how Paul’s baptismal and anthropological commitments play out in contemporary theologies and practices of baptism, particularly in shared baptismal rites. How do formalized baptismal rites and liturgies,
particularly in contemporary Western ecclesial contexts, affirm, challenge, deny, or expand the firm assertions of Paul we have explored in this chapter? What resonances exist and where do the inconsistencies lie? And how might these resonances and inconsistencies impact the lives and discipleship of people with IDD? Finally, how have liturgies and rites either enriched or challenged the participation of people with IDD in contemporary faith communities? We turn to these questions in the next chapter.
Chapter 4
The Baptismal Covenant: Critical Theological and Disability Reflection on the Rite of Holy Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer

As we explored in the chapter 3, Paul’s vision of Christian community, the baptized Body, demonstrates the centrality of belonging to Jesus and dependence upon Jesus for the Christian life. Paul envisions participation in baptism as a proclamation and initiation of a communal life marked by transformation in the Holy Spirit. Because the church is the body of Christ, as baptism highlights, the church holds a responsibility to embrace the gifts that each member of the baptized Body brings for a life of holy service to God. As I argued in the past chapter, Paul’s baptismal anthropology and vision of ecclesial community provides a framework for belonging and transformation of people with and without disabilities in a life of discipleship.

In the present chapter, we turn from our emphasis on scripture toward a contemporary liturgical framework for baptism, specifically, the rite of Holy Baptism in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer (BCP). This baptismal liturgy from The Episcopal Church in the United States represents the tradition of roughly half of the research participants as well as my own confessional tradition.

But why turn to a liturgical resource on baptism for guidance on transforming church communities into sites of radical welcome and belonging for people with IDD? Especially when a primary mode for engagement in liturgy seems to be the use of spoken, symbolic language? In this chapter, I first explore the multi-faceted rationale for a turn to the...
baptismal rite in the BCP as a way to uncover and subsequently to re-enliven forms of liturgical participation as critical components of Christian formation, not only for people who can speak the language of the liturgy, but for all disciples across the disability spectrum.

In conversation with scholarship in the field of disability studies, I analyze how the BCP’s baptismal rite may function as a barrier to fully affirming the participation and discipleship of people with IDD. I conclude the chapter with a constructive theological response to the potential barriers for liturgical participation presented in the BCP’s rite of Holy Baptism, drawing primarily upon wisdom from research participants as well as Bonhoeffer’s baptismal theology in *Discipleship*. In this conclusion, I suggest how liturgical resources might serve as faithful companions to the baptized Body in welcoming and the sustaining people with IDD in a life of discipleship.

In summary, I draw on wisdom from my research participants at the intersection of disability and baptism, specifically engaging their insights about the liturgy’s powerful enactment of deliverance from sin, transformation, community, and Jesus. The BCP’s emphasis on these particular themes in the baptismal rite empowers both people with IDD and all baptized disciples for faithful practice of life together. An embrace of the baptismal liturgy creates concrete occasions to proclaim Jesus’ deliverance of the baptized Body from sin, in a way that engages people across the disability spectrum. Engaged in this way, liturgy provides a more theologically and practically faithful avenue of supporting the life of discipleship among people with IDD, in comparison to often superficial commitments to
inclusion and welcome that ultimately perpetuate homogenous belonging within many ecclesial communities.

Why Liturgy?

Just as our practices of interpreting and applying Scripture in Christian faith communities forms our imagination about who belongs in the baptized Body and what disciples look like, our practices of worshipping God also deeply form our patterns of life together. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells put it this way: “worship challenges assumptions about what goodness, truth, and beauty mean in the light of the Gospel. That which might appear to exemplify beauty may look very different in the context of worship.”¹ For Hauerwas and Wells, worship and liturgy, including baptismal practices, are understood as “an ordered series of activities that Christians carry out regularly together in obedience to Jesus’ command, as a way of becoming more like him, and as a witness to God’s world…Christian worship is shaped primarily by instructions and habits of action.”² In other words, liturgy, or more broadly, patterns and practices of worshipping God, teach Christians what it means to be Christian. The bodies involved in worship and those who our liturgies imagine as disciples powerfully shape our imagination about belonging and identity. Worship calls forth embodied participation that can bear witness to a community’s implicit beliefs


² Ibid., 7.
about who God is, who human beings are, and how to live as a baptized Body. Hauerwas and Wells put it this way: liturgy “is the most significant way in which Christianity takes flesh, evolving from a set of ideas and convictions to a set of practices and a way of life.”

But how does the powerful formation of worship and liturgy appear in the specific context of baptism? With nearly half the research participants hailing from churches in the Episcopal tradition, it is perhaps unsurprising that many reflected on the liturgical rite of Holy Baptism in the BCP as centrally meaningful for their life of faith. Participants frequently reflected on the liturgy with a spirit of palpable joy. Sharing about his baptism, Al, a young man with IDD, said, “what always matters is I feel happy because I was baptized.” From this question onward, Al radiated joy throughout our ongoing sharing of stories.

Lea, a lifelong Episcopalian, described baptisms “as moments of joy,” expressing her sense that through the witness of baptism, God invites the church, the baptized Body, “to pass that joy onto others.” Barbara shared repeatedly about the “joyful” character of baptism and the font, and especially the communal commitment accented in the practice of baptism. Barbara elaborated that the joy is not only found in a family or parents committing to a child in baptism, “because it’s not just your family. It’s all these folks…they are saying that they take ownership of this and they’ll be there. They’ll be your village.” Barbara’s response suggests that the responsibility of the whole community gathered together, in their

3 Ibid.
promising to sustain the discipleship of the newly baptized, regardless of disability status, constitutes an occasion of not merely obligation, but joyful commitment.

Other participants accentuated the specific importance of the BCP for their engagement in baptismal liturgies. Steve seriously yet succinctly stated, “the language of the Book of Common Prayer [on baptism] is very hard to beat.” Lea emotionally reflected on the “beauty” and “profound” nature of the BCP’s baptismal liturgy, with specific beauty found for her in the Baptismal Covenant. Lea spoke with me about the affective power of the BCP’s liturgy, naming especially the words immediately following the baptism, where the sign of the cross is traced on the forehead of the baptized, and the newly baptized person is publicly proclaimed as “sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” Parke also shared a connection to this aspect of the BCP baptismal liturgy:

“It always has struck my heart and my mind and my whole being in the service when they say ‘marked as Christ’s own forever’…it warms my heart…it really hits home with me. And so every year when I remind my children on their baptismal day, I send them a note and I always say, ‘this is the day you were marked as Christ’s own forever.’”

Pastor Alicia named the central importance of the 1979 revisions to the BCP, especially in its accentuation of the normative practice of baptism as public and within a Sunday Eucharistic celebration. She envisioned this shift in the prayer book as deeply formational for clergy, whose baptismal imaginations are now tied to a public, Sunday celebration, instead of a commitment to private baptisms that accentuate ties to biological family over ties to Jesus’

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4 The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 308.
body. The 1979 BCP’s explicit exhortation to embrace the public nature of baptism also resonated deeply with Robert, who connected this movement from private to public baptisms as a way of underscoring “truly welcoming new members” to Jesus’ body.

Hikare commented on the beauty of the questions following the Creed in the BCP’s Baptismal Covenant, especially emphasizing the question “that says to respect the dignity of every human being.” As a young woman with IDD, who experienced wounding from other church members in her earlier life that were still painful to recall, Hikare drew comfort from the baptismal rite. She also identified the BCP’s baptismal liturgy as a resource for calling the church to responsibility in their treatment of people with disabilities.

Pastor Paula also reflected on the BCP rite’s emphasis on respecting human dignity, attesting to the baptismal witness of Bob, a man with IDD and a long-time member of Pastor Paula’s church community. “Bob is a delight and a joy and a reminder in our baptism that we are to respect the dignity of every human being. And I believe that the way that we welcome Bob is the way that God welcomes us…” Pastor Paula continued on, detailing how a parishioner had once pulled her aside and asked for her to “do something” about Bob’s “disruptive presence” in church. Pastor Paula’s response to this parishioner was rooted in the BCP’s baptismal liturgy: “as part of our church family, we are called to love one another the way that God loves us. And that love is part of our baptism.” For Pastor Paula, the dignity of all human beings, affirmed in the BCP’s rite of Holy Baptism, provides an ethical framework in which her church continues to exercise love, acceptance, welcome, and belonging for Bob, and ultimately for all church members, regardless of disability.
In addition to the witness of research participants regarding the powerful formation connected to participation in baptismal liturgies, academic theologians also offer insights on the importance of participation in liturgical practices of baptismal formation. Hauerwas and Wells understand baptism as a gift given to the church by God for identity formation, in the sense that baptism embodies and embraces “the whole of God’s story, from the water of creation to the fire of judgment. It enacts the crossing-over from slavery to freedom, darkness to light, death to life, despair to hope. It is the principal way in which those who turn to God are incorporated into Christ’s body. It defines the Church.”5 Kimberly Belcher argues that baptism “is not mere recollection but a living anticipation of our resurrection,” calling forth a baptismal pattern of life in Jesus’ body reflective of radical newness of life.6 As we explored in Chapter 3, this kind of baptismally rooted holiness calls communities to live in a different way: to welcome and embrace the discipleship of people with IDD, and to actively engage their gifts and participation in discipleship, whether through witnesses of wordless joy or lament, gifts of presence, or relationships of sustained, mutual care. Belcher names these communally-oriented and baptismally-rooted gifts as expressions of God’s “extralinguistic grace.”7 These wordless gifts also find expression in sacramental participation: embodied participation in liturgy does not require verbal expression to enact


7 Ibid., 31.
transformation. For Belcher, this participation holds deep ties with identity in community:
“Christian identities are, first and foremost, Christian bodies.”

Belcher sets up this participatory and sacramental framework for Christian identity over and against notions of identity as something primarily cognitive (such as equating Christian identity with holding a particular set of propositions to be intellectually true). Instead, the repeated celebration of baptism and baptismal reaffirmation in Christian communities means that “the ritual process of Christian identity is unending” and therefore, “crucially, a human person need not reach maturity to benefit from it.” For Belcher, identity formation through baptismal practices arises from a different vision of development and maturity – that of “interdependent competencies.” In brief, liturgies of baptism press us to abandon individualized and autonomous structures of belief and confession, instead pushing us toward interdependence on others inside of Jesus’ body for communal proclamations of confession and belief. Baptism changes community and Christian identity not in an insular or bounded sense, instead, it changes identity because it binds us to every other person who is baptized, who has been welcomed into the church as a child of God. It names all the baptized as marked as Jesus’ own forever. Baptism is the event where singular

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8 Ibid., 59.
9 Ibid., 111.
10 Ibid., 124.
11 Ibid., 126.
bodies are joined to the baptized Body, and are thus welcomed into the life of ongoing sanctification through the witness and exercise of gifts through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to Belcher’s focus on identity formation in sacramental participation, other theologians also identify baptismal liturgies as key for cultivating Christian identity. This notion deeply resonates with Paul’s framework for baptismal identity explored in the past chapter. Will Willimon provides one example of a theologian who understands baptismal liturgies as transformative for identity. Willimon pushes against what he understands as an “Enlightenment view of the sacraments,” largely dependent on individualized visions of human persons, conditioned primarily by human merit. Instead, Willimon argues that Christians have long “asserted that God is the actor [in baptism], and we are the recipients of what God does…the efficacy [of baptism] does not entirely depend upon us, upon our ability to love God or to lead holy lives. In his infinite love, God has not left us alone.”

In other words, baptism shifts our identities from places of loneliness and striving, to receiving the gift of being children who are beloved of God and to whom God gives good gifts. In highlighting the communal sense of identity bestowed in baptism, Willimon argues: the “self-giving of God is not only accomplished through symbolic acts and events, but it is also a communal experience. Jesus did not simply bring a message, proclaim a new idea, or urge a new experience. He formed a group.”

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13 Ibid., 151.
The people who are welcomed into a community through the practice of baptism, and who are subsequently supported to live out their baptized life and ministry, have an identity marked by this baptismal belonging. However, as we have already seen, baptismal refusals, as well as the refusal of communities to support people with IDD in their lives of discipleship, sends an opposing message: baptism becomes a boundary that isolates rather than a practice that embraces. These contrasting realities of isolation and embrace, rooted specifically in liturgical practices of baptism and the patterns of the church’s life of worship before God, shape who a community imagines to be a disciple, and in turn, how a community welcomes or excludes those with IDD.

In his book on a liturgical theology of baptism, Alexander Schmemann describes how contemporary churches take “for granted” the baptismal shape of their identity and life together. For Schmemann, the centrality of baptism for Christian identity is taken for granted especially in private baptismal liturgies that negate baptism as a “corporate act in which the whole Church, the entire community, is involved, in which it really participates.” Schmemann voices an additional concern for a decreased sense of baptismal piety among contemporary Christian faith communities, resulting from what Schmemann diagnoses as baptism ceasing “to be a permanent reality and experience illuminating” the whole life of each person that constitutes the baptized Body. Finally, Schmemann laments the lack of


\[15\] Ibid.

\[16\] Ibid., 9.
evidence he sees for baptism shaping a “Christian worldview,” - “our basic attitudes, motivations, and decisions.” Schmemann sees the decentering of baptism in contemporary Christian communities as deeply problematic.

As we have uncovered and explored in the past two chapters, the contemporary church’s disconnection from the radical transformation initiated in baptism, as well as the call to ongoing transformation within the baptized Body, often results in restricted roles for people with IDD in the life of the church, as well as a failure by the church to fully honor the discipleship of people with intellectual limitations. Schmemann’s understanding of baptism as the true “beginning, the foundation and the key,” central for “the whole life of the Church…rooted in the New Life which shone forth from the grave on the first day of the new creation,” emphasizes an urgency in encouraging the church toward renewed liturgical participation in baptismal practices. In order to affirm the radical reality of new creation proclaimed in baptism, Schmemann encourages the church to resist liturgical practices that isolate baptism as a merely sentimental and singular moment in the Christian life. Instead, Schmemann urges the Church to specifically attend to how this baptismal transformation might be frequently emphasized in the context of worship, that the fullness of baptismal identity might be embraced throughout the Christian life of worship and

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 12.
19 Ibid., 151.
service. Of course, the liturgical renewal surrounding baptism ought to find accompaniment in refreshed formation and community action rooted in a baptismal vocation. But, as Schmemann argues, liturgies themselves powerfully shape churches to envision and enact a life characterized by a new creation baptismal identity, both within and beyond the Sunday liturgy.

John Swinton’s work on baptism and people with profound IDD helps to specify Schmemann’s emphasis on the necessity of baptismal renewal in contemporary ecclesial communities. Following the work of Susan Smith in her book *Caring Liturgies: The Pastoral Power of Christian Ritual*, Swinton underscores the importance of maintaining notions of both theological and experiential effectiveness within church communities. For example, Christian churches should simultaneously maintain a robust theology of baptism - “what it means to be ‘in Christ’” from a scriptural and doctrinal point of view, while also actively exploring how that doctrine is experienced in practical and concrete ways within the community. Baptism provides one exemplification of how Swinton encourages communities to closely cultivate and hold together their theological effectiveness and concrete, transformational practices.

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20 Ibid., 152.


22 Ibid.
For Swinton, baptism in its public practice boldly witnesses that people with profound IDD are welcomed into Jesus’ body. Public practices of baptism, and I would add, liturgical expressions of baptismal reaffirmation, offer a liturgical space of belonging for people with and without IDD to be embraced in Jesus’ body. Swinton argues,

As people are accepted into the body of Christ, as they come to know and experience the love of God as it is mediated by their brothers and sisters in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, so people living with this kind of disability come to know and experience Jesus. Baptism is appropriated by faith, but faith (knowing and trusting God) is learned and shared through the faithful loving presence of Spirit-filled fellow disciples. When people are baptized, welcomed, and enabled to come to know and experience Jesus, so the body of Christ comes to recognize and understand the meaning of slow, gentle, and sometimes wordless discipleship.

Here, Swinton directly names the impact of baptismal practices on shaping a community’s relationships with people with IDD, as a means to enable experiential effectiveness of dwelling in the baptized Body. Conversely, we can see how distortions and denials of baptism can also form communities in ways deeply antithetical to the flourishing of people with IDD.

Christian Scharen also highlights how participation in liturgy not only provides a means of concrete engagement in efficacious practical formation of a community, but also how liturgical participation cultivates a strong sense of communal identity. Scharen

23 Ibid., 110.
24 Ibid.
specifically turns to the role of the body in worship to highlight the importance of liturgical participation for Christian identity. Drawing upon the work of David Ford, Scharen commends attending to the specific lived practices and embodiments present in an ecclesial community to best apply Ford’s framework for liturgical formation of Christian identity.

In Ford’s text *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, he argues for baptism as “the archetypal Christian sign of personal identity.” This identity is rooted in an embodied enactment (and a non-identical participation) in Jesus’ own baptism, as well as Jesus’ death and resurrection.\(^{26}\) For Ford, baptism as the paradigmatic sign of Christian identity is enacted upon the body - the self is placed under water (whether by immersion, affusion, or another mode), the forehead is marked with the sign of the cross and, perhaps, the oil of chrism. Baptism, therefore, involves a bodily marking and presentation of one’s self and identity, through embodied enactment of the paradigmatic events of the life of Jesus.\(^{27}\) In this sense, the liturgy helps set the stage for embodied participation in identity formation. And while words are certainly important and formative in the Christian liturgical life, Ford also emphasizes that shared non-verbal practices around the font generate practical knowledge about one’s communal identity of belonging to the church and belonging to Jesus.\(^{28}\) Baptism in particular, therefore, provides an embodied practice in which a church can embrace the “facing” that Ford claims characterizes Christianity: “being faced by God, embodied in the


\(^{27}\) Ibid., 163.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 139, 144.
face of Christ; turning to face Jesus Christ in faith; being members of a community of the face; seeing the face of God reflected in creation and especially in each human face…”

Responding to Ford’s framework of “facing,” embodied in liturgical participation, Scharen suggests that particular communities turn their attention to the ways in which this “facing” is embodied in their particular lived practices. For Scharen, paying attention to the particular bodies and practices present in a concrete ecclesial community serve as a site of creative reflection for how formation in baptismal identity might be deepened through a church’s worship practices. Following Scharen’s emphasis on attending to the specificities of a particular tradition, as well as the wisdom across multiple research participants active in The Episcopal Church, this chapter now turns specifically to the BCP’s baptismal rite, exploring the impact of this particular liturgy on the experiences of participants’ identity, discipleship, and ongoing relationships with people experiencing IDD.

The Rite of Holy Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer: Historical and Contextual Foundations

Before turning further attention to the 1979 BCP’s rite of Holy Baptism as a site of embrace for people with IDD, as well as identifying potential barriers for ecclesial participation among people with IDD in the rite, we will first briefly trace the history of the BCP and the emergence of the contemporary baptismal rite. For the worldwide Anglican

29 Ibid., 24-25.
30 Scharen, "Ecclesiology," in Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography, 70.
Communion, the Book of Common Prayer serves as a key locus for unity and Christian identity. Among the 40 Anglican provinces worldwide, each province finds primary guidance for their worship life from an Anglican style prayer book, with most finding their roots in either the English Book of Common Prayer (1549) or the English Book of 1662. While a singular prayer book does not exist, different collections of prayers find unity within a common Anglican liturgical framework, language patterns, and theological foundations. Here, we will explore the history of the Book of Common Prayer from its Cranmerian roots to its contemporary expression in the United States in The Episcopal Church’s Book of Common Prayer.

In 1549, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer primarily authored and published the first Anglican prayer book in England, amidst both sixteenth century liturgical reform as well as the widespread publishing of the Bible in the vernacular. Cranmer “hoped to gather all people, both nobility and common, learned and unlearned, into the liturgy of Christ,” focusing his composition of the prayer book on scripture, preaching, and the sacraments.


The prayer book intended to guide both clergy and lay people alike,\textsuperscript{36} not only in ordering their worship of God, but also serving as a theological guidepost. For this reason, Cranmer offered an amended second edition of the Prayer Book in 1552, with important theological changes.\textsuperscript{37}

The 1549 prayer book (and its distribution made possible by the introduction of the printing press) offered a common medium for worship between all laity and clergy across England, in contrast from the previous centuries of local development of liturgies.\textsuperscript{38} This shift in the embrace of a common book for worship was also reflected in Cranmer's language choices: “first-person singular pronouns were often replaced by plural ones - O God, make speed to save us; O Lord, make haste to help us - presumably in order to emphasize further the communal nature of the liturgy and to discourage devotional individualism that had been so common in the Middle Ages.”\textsuperscript{39} The Church of England’s 1662 revision of the Book of Common Prayer is considered the definitive guide for Anglican worship, in large part due to its circulation around the globe within the context of Anglican missionary activity.\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{39} Jacobs, \textit{The Book of Common Prayer}, 52.

Beginning with the 1549 prayer book, baptism was framed as a public service to be held during a Sunday mass.\textsuperscript{41} For example, in the 1549 baptismal rite, non-public baptisms were to be performed only in emergency situations.\textsuperscript{42} Distinctively Anglican contributions to the baptismal rite included the renunciations of the devil, world, and flesh, as well as the unique responsibility of godparents to teach the baptizand the Nicene Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer.\textsuperscript{43} In the baptismal rite of the 1604 Book of Common Prayer, a “lawful minister” was introduced as a requirement for baptism.\textsuperscript{44} The 1662 edition of England’s Book of Common Prayer outlines three distinct baptismal rites: “The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants to be Used in the Church,” “The Ministration of Private Baptism of Children in Houses,” and the “Ministration of Baptism to Such As Are of Riper Years and Able to Answer for Themselves.” The first rite was normative for Anglicans, and the third rite newly introduced in the 1662 revision in light of the growing number of “believer’s baptism” traditions throughout England.\textsuperscript{45} The second


\textsuperscript{43} Throughout the history of Anglicanism, godparents have never served a merely instrumental role in baptism. Rather, Anglican godparents have always been regarded as those who enter into an intentional and shared process of ongoing Christian formation with the baptized. Wright, "The Book of Common Prayer" in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion, 84.

\textsuperscript{44} James, "Liturgy" in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion, 600.

rite in its provision for private baptism was only included for extenuating circumstances. In the earliest and the 1662 editions of the English prayer book, baptism was considered as only partially constitutive of Christian initiation, with Confirmation expected (with the laying on of hands by a Bishop) in order to become a communicant in the Anglican church.

The Episcopal Church in the United States of America began with the settlement of seventeenth-century Anglicans in the colonies of the present-day United States. The churches among these Anglican settlers typically exhibited a blend of Anglicanism as well as congregationalism common to churches among the colonies in North America. At this time, the diocesan bishop for these Anglicans remained the Bishop of London. In 1783, Samuel Seabury of Connecticut was elected as bishop by his fellow clergy people. The next year, in light of the strains between Britain and the United States in the American Revolution, Seabury travelled to Aberdeen, Scotland where he was consecrated by bishops in the Church of Scotland, becoming the first bishop in The Protestant Episcopal Church in America.

Seabury’s consecration as bishop in Aberdeen in turn influenced the development of the American prayer book (first published in 1789) from the model of the 1637 Scottish


49 Ibid., 511.

50 Ibid.
Prayer Book, which included the erasure of allegiance to the King of England.\textsuperscript{51} Subsequent, official revisions to the American prayer book occurred in 1892, 1928, and 1979,\textsuperscript{52} with the latest version notably re-introducing the celebration of the Great Vigil of Easter, of special importance for its appropriateness as a baptismal feast as well as an occasion for baptismal reaffirmation.\textsuperscript{53} The presence of a single rite of Holy Baptism (for all baptismal candidates, regardless of age) was first introduced in the 1928 American prayer book.\textsuperscript{54}

Revisions for the 1979 prayer book took place from the authorization of General Convention in 1967 until the approval of the new prayer book at the 1976 General Convention.\textsuperscript{55} The baptismal rite in the 1979 revision of the BCP departed from the more formal English of the 1928 version (reminiscent of the King James version of the English Bible).\textsuperscript{56} This shift in language sought to encourage increased engagement and participation in the baptismal rite.\textsuperscript{57} Following Gregory Dix’s reengagement of the liturgical practices of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} James, "Liturgy" in \textit{The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion}, 604.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Meyers, "Rites of Initiation" in \textit{The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey}, 1103.
\item \textsuperscript{57} As well as the rites of ordination and marriage in the 1979 BCP.
\end{itemize}
the early church in his seminal 1945 text, *The Shape of the Liturgy*,\(^{58}\) Dix’s influence on the 1979 rite of Holy Baptism includes the emphasis on returning baptism to its normative place as celebrated publicly within the context of a Sunday mass.\(^{59}\)

Three intentionally prioritized theological themes arose in the 1979 prayer book: creation, redemption, and community. The theme of community, and its particular relevance for the reshaping of the rite of Holy Baptism, accented a commitment to community and the full participation in liturgy among all the gathered, in contrast to pervasive emphases on individualized piety and an individualized, “personal” relationship with God among many Protestant Christians in the twentieth century.\(^{60}\) This theological theme also underscored the introduction of “The Baptismal Covenant” to the 1979 rite, the re-commitment to public celebration of baptism in the context of a Sunday Eucharist,\(^{61}\) as well as a renewed emphasis on baptismal vocation throughout the theology and practice of The Episcopal Church. In addition, the influence of ecumenism throughout the twentieth century’s Liturgical

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Movement led to striking similarities between the rites of many Protestant churches, including The Episcopal Church, with the baptismal rite of the Roman Catholic Church.62

The debates in the 1960s on revisions to the baptismal rite largely revolved around the role of Confirmation - particularly if Confirmation was required to become a full communicant, or, as in the tradition of the early church, if all who were baptized were considered full communicants of the church and therefore could partake in the eucharist.63 The latter option for revision not only resonated with the practices of the early church, but also aligned with a strong emphasis on Eucharistic participation in the Liturgical Movement.64 Following the theological influence of Anglican priest and theologian Geoffrey Lampe’s 1951 book *The Seal of the Spirit*, baptism in the 1979 prayer book was ultimately considered full initiation - inclusive of the seal of the Holy Spirit as well as water baptism, displacing Confirmation as necessary for standing as a communicant in The Episcopal Church.65

The 1979 revisions to the baptismal rite also highlighted new theological emphases within The Episcopal Church. As Lesley Northup argues, the 1979 baptismal rite “clearly

63 Ibid., 411-412.
64 Ibid., 414.
emphasizes Christian commitment and entry into the body of Christ,” with a refreshed theological emphasis on “both spiritual rebirth and the washing away of sin. The focus is on the renewal of our commitment to participate in a covenant relationship with God and on the connection between baptism and the paschal mystery.” These renewed commitments not only emerged in the rite itself, but also found emphasis in the rubrics “Concerning the Service:” “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.”

Following the rubrics, the liturgy of Holy Baptism in the 1979 BCP follows a typical Anglican pattern of a Eucharistic mass: an opening acclamation, offering the Collect of the Day, a reading of the scripture lessons appointed for the day, a sermon, and next, beginning the unique form of the baptismal service, the presentation and examination of the baptismal candidates (with one option for “adults and older children” and one for “infants and younger children”). A threefold renunciation and threefold commitment follow, with the Baptismal Covenant and prayers for the candidates coming next. The bishop or priest next prays the Thanksgiving over the Water, consecrates the chrism, and then “The Baptism” takes place – the baptismal candidate is affused or immersed in the baptismal waters in the

66 Northup, “The Episcopal Church” in The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey, 836. The 1979 Prayer Book notably removed the theologically contentious term “regeneration” in relationship to baptism, a contention so significant that Northup highlights it was the primary source of schism that birthed the Reformed Episcopal Church.

67 The Episcopal Church, The Book of Common Prayer, 298.

68 Ibid., 299-301.

69 Ibid., 302-306.
name of the Holy Trinity, sealed in the Holy Spirit with the imparting of chrism, and welcomed into the community of Jesus’ body with the communal affirmation “we welcome you into the household of God…” The baptismal liturgy is followed by “The Peace” and the Eucharistic celebration.

Within this structure of the 1979 rite of Holy Baptism a number of distinctive features emerge. The first is a threefold renunciation accompanied by a threefold commitment (with godparents and parents responding in the case of an infant or child baptism, as well as active response from the gathered congregation). The rite also includes the Apostles’ Creed as part of the Baptismal Covenant, with an appended “series of questions about future intentions in the Christian life” which are made not only by, with, or on behalf of the candidate for baptism, but by the gathered assembly as a whole. In addition, the 1979 revision emphasizes the seriousness of the promises made among baptismal sponsors (godparents and parents), calling for an explicit and ongoing commitment to pray for the newly baptized and to offer them a lifelong witness of Christian discipleship.

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70 Ibid., 307-308.
71 Ibid., 302-303.
73 Hatchett, Commentary, 270.
For most Anglican scholars and theologians, “The Baptismal Covenant” constitutes the most significant revision to the 1979 rite of Holy Baptism. The covenant includes “an interrogatory form” of the Apostle’s Creed, followed by five distinctive questions posed to not only the baptismal candidates and their sponsors, but all present in the community who reaffirm their baptism. The answer, “I will, with God’s help,” follows each of the five questions about a post-baptismal life of Christian discipleship. The inclusion of the Apostle’s Creed in the Baptismal Covenant harkens back to the earliest Christian introduction of the Creed into liturgical expression, interestingly first introduced in the baptismal liturgy in an interrogatory manner. This Baptismal Covenant replaced the 1928 rite’s interrogation of parents and godparents: “Doth thou believe all the Articles of the Christian Faith, as contained in the Apostles’ Creed?” and “Wilt thou then obediently keep God’s will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of thy life?” It is the first appearance of “covenant” language found in an Anglican prayer book, drawing upon a Reformed theological perspective on baptism.

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75 The Episcopal Church, The Book of Common Prayer, 304-305.

76 Hatchett, Commentary, 273-274.

77 Dix, The Shape, 485.


The Baptismal Covenant in particular, especially the five questions following the creed, underscore the 1979 BCP’s commitment to the theological centrality of ongoing baptismal ministry. In other words, the revised liturgy suggests baptism as a foundation for the ethical praxis of a lifetime of Christian discipleship. The Covenant’s preceding of the actual act of baptism signals toward a re-enlivening of baptismal preparation or the catechumenate, particularly among adult baptizands. Resisting a Pelagian reading of the Covenant’s preceding of the actual act of water baptism, Ruth A. Meyers argues that the questions following the Creed in the Baptismal Covenant

…are directly related to the creedal questions. Viewed from biblical, historical and ecumenical perspective, the Baptismal Covenant is primarily about God and the relationship God establishes with us in baptism. This is why the Creed is so important. It tells us who God is and what God has done for us. It tells us that God loves us and calls us into relationship.

This emphasis on the primacy and sufficiency of divine action in baptism is recalled in the Thanksgiving Over the Water that follows the Baptismal Covenant, especially resonate with God’s leading of the Israelites, God’s covenant people, “out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise.” Meyers also notes the implicit resonances of the Baptismal Covenant with other covenants rooted in God’s initiative, including that with Noah in Genesis 9,

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81 Spinks, Reformation and Modern, 175.


83 The Episcopal Church, The Book of Common Prayer, 306.
Abraham in Genesis 17, Moses and the Israelites in Exodus 19-20, and David in 2 Samuel 7.84

Anglican historian Colin Podmore understands the 1979 BCP’s Baptismal Covenant as “an iconic statement of the Episcopal Church’s commitment to social action and inclusion.”85 For Podmore, the 1979 rite of Holy Baptism newly understood baptism as “constitutive of the Church but also as the fount of all ministry within it, lay and ordained;” in brief, constitutive of a baptismal ecclesiology.86 Both theologically and functionally, this centering of baptism as a hermeneutic for The Episcopal Church’s worship, liturgy, and ministry, seeks to strongly affirm the ministry calling of all the baptized.87 Specifically, by resisting an elevation of ordained vocations above those of the laity, the baptismal liturgy supports the ministry of all the baptized. Meyers summarizes the import of the Baptismal Covenant for The Episcopal Church as follows: it “both expresses and symbolizes a radical reforming of what it means to be Church. Baptism is the foundation of our approach to ministry and church life.”88

84 Meyers, "The Baptismal Covenant," 34.
86 Ibid., 14-15.
87 Ibid., 15.
Key Themes in the BCP Rite

The 1979 BCP baptismal liturgy provides not only a linguistically and theologically compelling rite, but also establishes a practical means for welcoming the participation of people across the disability spectrum. In this section, I reflect on the literary construction of the rite of Holy Baptism in the 1979 BCP, and also attend to issues of liturgical praxis and theological emphasis within the rite. In what follows, I explore some core liturgical themes of the rite, highlighting how they support belonging and participation in the baptized Body among people with IDD. I also raise important critiques from a critical disability perspective.

Sin, Evil, and Renunciation

Ava, a research participant with IDD, emphasized to me the centrality of turning away from sin in baptism. She spoke to me gently, sharing: “baptism means being cleansed from the Holy Spirit to God…redeeming yourself from sin and temptation.” For Ava, throughout our conversation about the story of her baptism and the role of baptism in her faith community, cleansing from sin emerged as an important and consistent aspect of the work of baptism. In my conversation with David, another young adult with IDD, David drew to my attention the connection between baptism and God sending “his Son and the cross for our sins.”

The importance of being cleansed and forgiven from sin, in either the act or symbolism of baptism, also rose as a critical area of importance for Eric, the father to a young man with IDD. Eric assuredly emphasized to me: “baptism is being washed away of
all my sins.” For Eric in his Baptist tradition, this washing away from sins was a theological symbol in baptism. However, Eric stressed to me that all baptismal teaching must include an emphasis on the role of sin and transformative new life in Jesus.

These notions of redemption, cleansing, and being washed of sin, appearing throughout research interviews across participant categories, cultivated an awareness in me to read the BCP rite with an openness to the presence of the role of sin throughout the liturgy. In my subsequent analysis of the baptismal rite, I noted the prominent occurrence of themes of renunciation and deliverance from the power of sin and evil, through baptismal incorporation into Jesus’ body. In his brief definition of baptism, Dix highlights these same themes of renunciation and sin: baptism is redemption, exemplified in “a washing away of sins.”

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The theme of sin first appears in the BCP’s baptismal rite immediately following the presentation, when the Celebrant asks the following three questions of renunciation:

Question Do you renounce Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Answer I renounce them.

Question Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Answer I renounce them.

89 Dix, *The Shape*, 339.

90 Ibid., 260.

Question  Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

Answer  I renounce them.

These three questions, asked either to baptismal candidates “who can speak for themselves,” or “of the parents and godparents who speak on behalf of the infants and younger children,” center the power of God in baptism in confronting the power of sin that holds human creatures captive. The theme continues into the Baptismal Covenant, particularly in the second of the five questions following the Creed, posed to both the candidates for baptism as well as the congregation as a whole:

Celebrant  Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People  I will, with God’s help.

Marion Hatchett argues that post-baptismal communal resistance to sin, embraced through earnest practices of repentance, constitutes a central theological emphasis of the BCP’s baptismal liturgy. This same emphasis continues after the Baptismal Covenant, in the “Prayers for the Candidates,” with the first petition:

Leader  Deliver them, O Lord, from the way of sin and death.

People  Lord, hear our prayer.

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92 Ibid., 301.

93 Ibid., 304.

94 Hatchett, *Commentary*, 274.

95 The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 305.
Finally, the power of Jesus’ Resurrection to free the baptized Body from the power of sin occupies a place of central emphasis in the “Thanksgiving over the Water,”\(^{96}\) and also in the blessing of the baptismal waters:\(^{97}\)

“…In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

“…Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.

To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

In the contemporary ecclesial scene where many lay and clergy leaders avoid any semblance of associating sin and disability - either in resistance to perpetuating damaging hermeneutics of disability as a punishment for sin,\(^{98}\) or in an ultimately harmful shift of conceptualizing people with disabilities, particularly those living with IDD, as somehow sinless “holy innocents” or “angels”\(^{99}\) - the baptismal liturgy confronts us with the bondage to sin among

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 306-307.

\(^{97}\) Ibid.


all human creatures. In this way, the BCP’s baptismal liturgy implicates all human creatures, in systemic and communal ways, in processes of sin that bring death and division to community. Relatedly, the rite also underscores the seriousness and necessary universality of post-baptismal transformation away from a life of sin. The post-baptismal transformation of the whole community, including people with IDD, finds itself established in the logic of the baptismal rite itself.

However, the communal and universal power of sin often finds an individualized interpretation among many participants in the baptismal liturgy. Sin, understood in only an individualized way (where sin consists of volitional actions undertaken by an individual person), removes many people with IDD from the capacity of “sinning” - with the effect that their baptisms are understood more in a sentimental register rather than a fully transformational register of freedom from sin for transformed life in community. In this way, impoverished attention to sin in disability theology, as well as in liturgical application, can place baptized people with IDD within a fringe category, away from central discourses (what Brian Brock calls “best-case anthropologies”) about what it means to be human.100 At the margins, where people with IDD are not considered fully within the realm of those needing deliverance from the bondage of sin, their life of discipleship is also put in a tenuous position.101


101 Dix, The Shape, 356. Dix emphasizes the seriousness of this post-baptismal life of transformation, noting its permanence throughout the early church until the contemporary age. For Dix, baptism constitutes a
The categories of baptismal candidates in the BCP baptismal rite, either those “who can speak for themselves” or those “infants and younger children” for whom “the parents and godparents...speak on behalf,”\textsuperscript{102} creates an additional issue for the participation of some adults or older children with IDD who cannot “speak for themselves.” Though the BCP rite can be lauded for its singular baptismal liturgy, regardless of one’s age, disability disrupts the binary descriptions of who should be expected to speak (or not speak) for themselves. This implicitly ableist division also suggests a conflicting story of individual agency in regard to baptism - those who can speak for themselves make proclamations and promises toward Jesus in an individual posture, whereas those who cannot speak are “spoken for,” presumably by people who rightly possess an individualized agency that distinguishes them from people with IDD unable to participate in the sphere of symbolic language. This heightened emphasis on individualized agency raises potential conflicts with the more communal narration of sin in the baptismal liturgy, as well as posing issues related to a second core theme of the BCP’s baptismal liturgy: the locus of agency for baptismal transformation.

Transformation: The Active Verbs of the Baptismal Rite

Throughout my interview conversations with research participants, stories of what happens in baptism often centered on new beginnings, new life, new birth, or being born

\textsuperscript{“grave step” in the life of discipleship, not to be taken lightly.}

\textsuperscript{102} The Episcopal Church, \textit{The Book of Common Prayer}, 301.
again - an overall sense of transformation. James, a young adult with IDD reflecting on his baptism at St. Matthew’s Baptist Church, intently shared with me that “baptism was a new life for me.” David, another young adult with IDD, relayed to me that in his baptism he became “a new man in Jesus Christ.” In reflecting on his feelings surrounding the baptisms of others, David told me, “I feel like it makes you new.” Hope, a lay leader at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, talked with me about the communal notion of transformation present in baptism: “you are going through a transformation that God and we are all enacting at once.”

Throughout the interviews, it struck me that a life of baptismal transformation not only categorized non-disabled people. Research participants spoke of the baptismal power of new life, often linked with the cleansing or forgiveness of sins, among people both without and people with IDD (including profound IDD). This egalitarian image of post-baptismal transformation, regardless of disability status, seemed to emerge from communities who welcomed the participation of people with IDD in diverse modes of baptismal preparation and formation. These experiences, including preaching as well as informal and formal manifestations of catechetical instruction, cultivated an increased curiosity within me about how liturgical language and praxis might shape understandings and practices of baptism as deeply transformational for the lives of all the baptized, regardless of particular human capacities. In turning to my analysis of the baptismal liturgy, I carried these emphases on transformation from the interviews with me, curious if a similar focus on transformation might be present within the 1979 BCP’s rite of Holy Baptism.
Throughout my analysis the BCP’s baptismal liturgy, active verbs representing powerful transformation arose as a striking theme. These verbs of transformation not only suggest individualized change among the newly baptized, but also place an impetus upon the gathered community, drawing the whole of the baptized Body into sustained practices that cultivate a life of baptismal transformation.\textsuperscript{103} This mutual commitment to transformation is exemplified in the “bidding” to the congregation:\textsuperscript{104}

\begin{verbatim}
Celebrant Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?
People We will.
\end{verbatim}

This serious liturgical commitment, to do “all in your power” to support those baptized, without exception for the capacities or abilities of the baptized for enacting their own transformation, struck me as a particularly salient challenge for churches seeking to support and cultivate the baptismal vocations of people with IDD.

The locus of agency for transformation seems to shift throughout the 1979 BCP baptismal liturgy, moving between individual and communal action, as well as between human and divine agency. Take, for example, the three affirmations\textsuperscript{105} following the opening renunciations of the baptismal rite:

\begin{verbatim}
Question Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?
Answer I do.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{103} Hatchett, \textit{Commentary}, 273.

\textsuperscript{104} The Episcopal Church, \textit{The Book of Common Prayer}, 303.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 302-303.
Question: Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?
Answer: I do.

Question: Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?
Answer: I do.

These active verbs, “turning,” “putting,” and “promising,” carry a valence of individualized human agency - accentuated by both the singular address of the questions and the “I” answer provided by either the candidate or their sponsor/s. As discussed in the previous section, the structure of this portion of the liturgy poses a potential problem for people who do not communicate with words, such as people with profound IDD. However, other aspects of the baptismal liturgy suggest strikingly different forms of agency empowering baptismal transformation: communal and divine.

A sense of communal agency and participation in the liturgy heightens as the rite proceeds. The Baptismal Covenant, following the bidding of the congregation, continues with the singular affirmations of the Apostle’s Creed, however, it is not only the baptismal candidates and their sponsors who speak, but the whole of the gathered church. The covenantal questions following the Creed continue with individual affirmations though they are voiced together communally. These active verbs of transformation, including “persevering,” “repenting,” “returning,” “proclaiming,” “serving,” and “striving,” also find their realization only with divine assistance, suggesting a shift toward cooperative agency.

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106 Ibid, 304-305.
between the baptized and the Triune God. For example, the final two affirmations of the Baptismal Covenant read:107

Celebrant  Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People  I will, with God’s help.

Celebrant  Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People  I will, with God’s help.

As the liturgy proceeds to the Prayers for the Candidates,108 the intensity and directness of the divine and communal agency reach a heightened expression. The active work of transformation - deliverance from sin, opening one’s heart to grace and truth, the filling of the baptized self with the life-giving Holy Spirit, sustaining in the life of the gathered church, receiving teaching to love others in the Holy Spirit, and coming to know the fullness of God’s peace and glory109 - shifts to the work of the Lord who hears the communal prayers offered by the baptized Body. Within each petition, the leader identifies the source of transformation in the agency of the Triune God. In response, after each petition, the gathered church responds communally with “Lord, hear our prayer,” together acknowledging the necessity of God’s agency in sustaining lives of baptismal transformation.

107 Ibid., 305.
108 Ibid., 305-306.
109 Ibid.
In the “Thanksgiving Over the Water,” the celebrant blesses the baptismal waters, seeking cleansing, rebirth, burial, and new life for the community from Jesus Christ alone.\footnote{Hatchett, \textit{Commentary}, 275.}

The verbs of transformation in this portion of the liturgy deeply root the baptismal candidates in the story of Jesus as well as the watery stories of God’s people from the very beginning of creation to the deliverance of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea.\footnote{The Episcopal Church, \textit{The Book of Common Prayer}, 306.} As the celebrant of the baptismal liturgy touches the baptismal waters, they offer the following invocation and blessing:\footnote{Ibid., 307.}

\begin{quote}
Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.

To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and for ever. \textit{Amen}.
\end{quote}

Again, the locus of transformative power rests in the Triune God. And the baptized Body, after witnessing and proclaiming the transformation of the Triune God upon the newly baptized and the community who together reaffirms their own baptismal commitments, communally welcomes those newly baptized in this powerful proclamation:\footnote{Ibid., 308.}

\begin{quote}
We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.
\end{quote}
As explored above, the 1979 BCP’s baptismal liturgy boasts avenues that enable faithful participation in the rite among people with IDD, including those with profound experiences of disability. However, a number of aspects in the rite emphasize individuality and individualized senses of autonomy. In addition, throughout the rite, full liturgical participation seems contingent on the possession of particular capabilities, such as independent command of symbolic language expression that some people experiencing IDD do not possess. These areas of critique, as I have suggested above, raise tensions regarding notions of autonomy and participation, especially as they contrast with aspects of the rite that suggest human dependence on divine agency and a communal sense of participation and post-baptismal transformation.

In his article “Knowledge of Persons,” Timothy Chappell argues for “relationalism” as a guiding framework for personhood and agency. In other words, any notion of individuality of personhood and agency presupposes a foundational relationality at the heart of personhood. Engaging the work of Augustine, Chappell argues for the rootedness of selfhood in relationship to other human creatures and to God. These relations, for Chappell, are constitutive of personhood. Chappell writes, “what is primitive, for Augustine, is never my awareness of myself. What is primitive is the relationship of awareness between me and

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others, and above all, between me and God."\textsuperscript{115} Reflecting specifically on Augustine’s Trinitarian theology, Chappell continues,

…essential sociality of the mind is for Augustine something that arises in each of us only because she starts off in relation with others. Each of us becomes a mind, and a person, only by being ‘always already’ in relation with other persons, both human and divine, as a precondition of her own mindedness. Personhood, in short, is not something I achieve on my own; it is a gift, the gift to me of others.\textsuperscript{116}

Chappell continues to argue that in Augustine’s exemplification of a relationalist position, claims about individuals (whether in relationship to their identity or agency) can only be discovered “within the framework of a pre-existing relatedness to God.”\textsuperscript{117}

Chappell advances his argument not to suggest the disposal of particular capacities that mark the human experience of many people, such as engagement in speech for communication with symbolic language. Rather, Chappell argues that these particular capacities, such as the exercise of rationality in decision-making, should not fundamentally characterize our notion of what it means to be a human. Rather, for Chappell, these characteristics are simply characteristics\textsuperscript{118} - they may or may not comprise what we envision as an “ideal” set of capacities for human creatures. Relationalism, rather than criterialism, establishes the basis for personhood. In response to human beings that do not demonstrate prioritized criteria in a certain cultural context - such as the emphasis on engagement in

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 28.
speech for communication or the appearance of independence and rationality in moral reasoning - Chappell urges that personhood still remains - constituted by other human beings, and, vis a vis Augustine, relationship with the Triune God.

In other words, questioning the full personhood of a human being based on their participation in a discrete activity, such as a baptismal liturgy, constitutes a wholly separate kind of question – that is, what “parts of an ideal personhood” are demonstrated by this particular self? Chappell poses this same issue in a different light: criteria such as symbolic language use and rationality “are dimensions of interpretation of beings that we already take to be persons,” not criteria for personhood in and of itself. In light of the baptismal liturgy, Chappell’s argument critiques the centering of specific cognitive modes of engagement supposed as necessary to fully and properly participate in the baptismal rite. Chappell’s argument can reorient the baptized Body toward a reimagining of the key markers of participation for Christian communities – a reimagination that, like the writings of St. Paul, moves away from individualized and progressive development of cognitive skills, and instead underscores the centrality of mutual, interdependent, and communal participation, sustained by the Holy Spirit. In this way, Chappell’s argument can push the church toward a re-engagement and re-prioritization of Paul’s vision of personhood and participation. In Chappell’s words, a personhood constructed in the framework of

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120 Ibid., 6.
relationalism considers discrete capacities as peripheral rather than constitutive of an individual’s participation in the liturgical community.

In what specific ways do Chappell’s arguments sharpen potential critiques of the 1979 BCP’s rite of Holy Baptism? One primary response is how Chappell helps us to expand what “proper” participation in a baptismal liturgy might look like, disentangled from a strict need for normative, discrete human capacities. Chappell’s argument stretches us to reconsider the core normative modes of participation in baptism - should these be judged on discrete and individual human criteria? Or, as I think Chappell pushes us, should the community be held to a standard of how their life exemplifies and embodies Paul’s cruciform, communal, and participatory anthropology, where all bodies have room for incorporation into the baptized Body, and human identity finds its core meaning in the work of the Triune God in and through a community marked by radical belonging? Chappell also raises questions of what capacities we understand as “ideal” within the baptized Body, challenging a new openness to different modes of participation in the liturgy and a curiosity about how to be with people experiencing significant IDD. In my reading, Chappell does not seek to discount meaningful cognitive engagement with the rite of baptism among some members of the baptized Body, but instead, wishes to place modes of cognitive engagement in their proper place - preferred modes of human participation in a particular cultural milieu. In other words, these cognitive modes of engagement do not present the final word on how a community finds itself constituted and sustained.
An example of Chappell’s critique, as well as a potential new reading of the baptismal rite, applies to the prayer immediately following the baptism of a candidate. The Bishop or priest prays over the newly baptized:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.

Read through Chappell’s arguments about human capacities and participation, this post-baptismal prayer seems to emphasize particular cognitive capacities, including “inquiring” and “discerning,” as well as “knowledge” of God. But instead of seeing these emphases of the prayer as potentially exclusionary, several research participants saw them as an example to refine and strengthen the baptismal community as a whole. Hikare, a young woman with IDD, put it this way:

“I really like the mind that the church wants you to have. A questioning and discerning mind. Which means they want you to ask questions. When I’m in an atmosphere when people don’t want me to question things, I think instantly, okay, what are they trying to hide?”

Lea, Hikare’s mother, and Robert, a lay leader from a different Episcopal Church, both emphasized the importance and the “gift” (as Lea put it), of the post-baptismal prayer for a discerning and inquiring mind. Robert conveyed to me,

“As you know, in the Episcopal Church, one of the prayers is for the person being baptized - they ask the Lord to give him or her an inquiring and discerning mind. And I’m trying to have an inquiring and discerning mind. I question Scripture a lot.”

121 The Episcopal Church, The Book of Common Prayer, 308.
Instead of an exclusionary or unrealistic prayer for some people with IDD, several participants narrated this aspect of the prayer as a gift, not only for themselves, but to encourage and support the baptized Body as a whole - by asking questions, engaging scripture, and countering injustices related to disability. More specifically, they identified this prayer as an invitation for the church to think critically and creatively about how to best support the discipleship of baptized people with IDD. This kind of approach to the post-baptismal prayer, with a desire to create a community of flourishing for all people, resonates with Chappell’s vision of a community of dependency, rooted in the pursuit of the flourishing of all community members. Chappell insists we must give space for all human creatures to “achieve eudaemonia - whether or not they predictably will achieve eudaemonia. To deny this space to any individual human being is to exclude that individual from the moral community of persons. And that is a serious injustice.”

The work around issues of disability and dependency by Eva Feder Kittay helps expand Chappell’s critiques and creates additional generative responses to issues presented for people with IDD and their participation in the baptismal liturgy. Kittay, who is the mother to Sesha (Kittay’s adult daughter with significant IDD), offers philosophical reflections on issues related to justice, personhood, and moral agency, with the experience of her daughter in close view. Kittay argues that if philosophical theories, particularly those of

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justice, fail to accommodate Sesha, the theories require reworking due to their inadequacy to include people with IDD in what Chappell calls “the moral community of persons.”

Kittay’s work on dependency offers a way forward in light of my critiques of overly individualized accounts of agency in the baptismal rite. From a theoretical framework of communal justice, Kittay rejects the “Rawlsian view of justice as fair terms of social cooperation,” as many people with IDD cannot “fit the model of the social cooperator without a lot of distortion, if at all.” This Rawlsian concept of justice, with its accompanying anthropology that prioritizes individualized agency, fails to engage people with IDD in a community oriented toward justice. As an alternative, Kittay proposes the following framework for living justly in community: “justice provides the fair terms of social life given our mutual and inevitable dependency and our inextricable interdependency.”

Kittay describes dependency on other human creatures (as well as non-human animals and the environment) as “ubiquitous” - humans “are inextricably interdependent…interdependence is not a matter of voluntarism.” For Kittay, potential performances of individualized agency, conceived of as fully independent of other creatures, plainly constitute a fiction. Our participation in any kind of social world or relationship,

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124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid., 287.
including the work of the liturgy and worship of God, requires at its very foundation “shared caregiving” and a sharing of both responsibilities and resources.\textsuperscript{127} In this kind of community, justice cannot be enacted apart from the robust care of people with disabilities – for Kittay, to reject disabled people, or curtail their participation, is to renege on the social foundations of community in the very first place.

Appropriately for our application of Kittay’s work to both critique and newly understand the BCP’s rite of Holy Baptism, Kittay frames her understanding of radical dependency through the idea of “covenant.” For Kittay, a covenant functions in two primary ways: first, it assumes a preexisting set of relationships and serves to place appropriate limits within these relational webs to generatively call forth responsibility. Second, the benefits of these covenantal limits and the fruits they bring forth, benefit not only the two parties directly involved in the covenant, but positively affect the wider community.\textsuperscript{128}

In relationship to the baptismal liturgy, Kittay’s covenantal framework for stewarding communities of justice challenges churches to consider the dependency and complexity of communal autonomy already existing when new people are baptized into Jesus’ body. Instead of elevating the fiction of individualized agency, which often has the significant side effect of excluding or diminishing the participation of people with IDD, Kittay demonstrates how a foregrounding of dependency not only benefits those within a covenantal community, but can serve as a witness to those not formally within the community, including those at the

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 288.
community’s periphery. For Christian churches, Kittay’s covenantal vision of justice and dependency can narrate a new way of welcoming diverse forms of participation in the baptismal liturgy, as a witness to the world that Christians are those who fully affirm the personhood and gifts of all the baptized, including people with IDD.

This covenantal vision of dependency also helps navigate and counter over-intellectualized modes of participation in the baptismal liturgy. Kittay notes the difficulty of embracing a counter-cultural paradigm of radical dependence. While the majority of human creatures do not deplore air, on which they are dependent to breath, dependency on other human creatures is often received with great negativity and resistance.129 For Kittay, “it is not the necessity and neediness of dependency that repels us, it is the disadvantages that are a consequence of political, social, and economic arrangements.”130 What the community of the baptized Body offers to this often disdained notion of dependency, is a way of life, in large part sustained by practices of worship, that centers dependency on Jesus’ body as the center of life together, of transformation, of radical belonging, and of communal participation in newness of baptismal life - an ongoing sanctification that witnesses to the world the difference of being “in Christ” as people bound to Jesus’ body in the here and now.

129 Ibid., 290.

130 Ibid.
A Constructive Theological Response: Addressing Liturgical Critiques

In this section, I turn to the theological resources of conversations with research participants as well as the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on baptism, to suggest ways to resist over-individualized and over-intellectualized framings of the baptismal liturgy that restrict the participatory possibilities for people with IDD. I highlight how theological engagement with baptism can support the constructive proposals I suggest above in conversation with the work of Chappell and Kittay, in order to grapple with and rework barriers to liturgical participation among people with IDD. Christian theology possesses the resources needed to reckon with the barriers of ableism present in the 1979 BCP’s baptismal rite, in order to support a robust embrace of the rite among both disabled and non-disabled people.

But why a turn to Bonhoeffer in particular? First, the corpus of Bonhoeffer’s theological writings hold a central concern for ecclesial communities. Tom Greggs asserts that ecclesiology serves as the unifying theological foundation for Bonhoeffer.131 In a parallel manner, a set of ecclesiological questions presses at the heart of this dissertation. In specific relationship to discipleship and baptism, Bonhoeffer expresses a concern with divine agency and the place of the church:

It is within the church that Jesus Christ calls through his word and sacrament. The preaching and sacrament of the church is the place where Jesus Christ is present. To hear Jesus’ call to discipleship, one needs no personal revelation. Listen to the preaching and receive the sacrament! …here he is, the whole Christ, the very same who encountered the disciples.132


132 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Later, Bonhoeffer urges Christians to repent of their neglect to sustain the life of discipleship among all the baptized:

To allow other baptized Christians to participate in worship but to refuse to have community with them in everyday life, and to abuse them and treat them with contempt, is to become guilty against the body of Christ itself. To acknowledge that other baptized Christians have received the gifts of salvation, and then to deny them the provisions necessary for this earthly life, or to leave them unknowingly in affliction and distress, is to make a mockery of the gift of salvation and to behave like a liar...baptism into the body of Christ changes not only a person's personal status with regard to salvation, but also their relationships throughout all of life.133

Bonhoeffer's vision of the radically transformed communal life of the baptized Body, particularly his concern for the church's neglect of people such as those living with IDD, makes his work salient for further theological attention in this project.

Second, Bonhoeffer offers a theological nuancing of operant theological anthropologies in contemporary disability theology. Michael Mawson sees great promise in Bonhoeffer's focus on embodiment as crucial for expanding theological work on disability, within a relational anthropology.134 Mawson's dissatisfaction with relational anthropologies rooted in friendship, the *imago Dei*, and a social understanding of the Trinity, parallel my own critiques from Chapter 1. Mawson turns to Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall* as well as *Ethics* to emphasize embodied responsibility at the heart of Bonhoeffer's applied anthropology:


133 Ibid., 217.

responding to people with IDD requires not an abstracted responsibility, but rather, calls for a response “for this particular other in his or her given situation…we respond to the concrete neighbor as and where we encounter them, and not in terms of their telos towards something higher…this means that our action and responsibility for the other remains limited or bounded.” In other words, in Christ, we are to embrace and attend to the other as a concrete and creaturely limit. This indicates that when Christ overcame sin and the fall, he did so in a way that re-established, rather than displaced or abolished, the creaturely limit that is integral to human beings and all human relationality. 

In summary, within a framework of disability, Mawson understands Bonhoeffer’s theological anthropology as requiring three concrete commitments: taking up the actual situations and needs of people with IDD, acknowledging the “deeply painful aspects of human community” as well as our ultimate inability to “recognize and respond to others in the ways that we should,” and finally, a response to this inability not characterized by abstract theology, but marked by small acts of attending to others in their concrete situations in the here and now, for the long run. Ultimately, Mawson argues that the gift of embracing Bonhoeffer’s anthropology lies in its resistance to “potential idealization or abstracting of the other.” In what follows, I improvise within Mawson’s framework of engagement with

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135 Ibid., 132.
136 Ibid., 133.
137 Ibid., 134-135.
138 Ibid., 135.
Bonhoeffer as a way to generate constructive responses to the key issues raised above by research participants regarding liturgical participation.

Contending with Sin in the Baptismal Rite: Participation in Renunciation and Bonhoeffer’s Doctrine of Sin

The BCP’s emphasis on renunciation of sin, in the powerful opening to the baptismal rite, raises serious questions for people with IDD unable to participate in symbolic language - those not able to begin to “understand” the seriousness of the renunciation or speak for themselves in committing against the forces of evil and sin in the world. This particular issue is made more precarious by the history of what Mawson notes as general inattention to sin within theologies of disability.139 Mawson suggests that without acknowledgement that people with and without disabilities are sinners before God, anthropological accounts that attempt to intentionally include people with disabilities find themselves impoverished.140

While I have already offered (in Chapter 3) an account of sin in Pauline anthropology that encompasses people with IDD, as well as reviewed sin in relationship to the baptismal rite above from the perspective of research participants with IDD, Mawson brings Bonhoeffer’s theological perspective to the conversation as an important interlocutor.


140 Ibid., 99.
Mawson characterizes Bonhoeffer's account of sin not as a force that merely limits human self-perception, but rather a power that “radically disorders what we are and how we relate (and are related) to God and others.” Sin both designates and describes “how human beings have sought (and continue to seek) to reject their creaturely and relational being and instead be autonomous or self-sufficient.” In Bonhoefferian terms, the nature of sin is crystalized in *sicut deus* - the effort to become like God - the pursuit of egocentricity, and a rejection of creaturely limits.

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer explores the implications of becoming Christ's own in baptism for the realities of sin's grip on human creatures. Bonhoeffer writes that baptism…implies a break. Christ invades the realm of Satan and lays hold of those who belong to him, thereby creating his church-community. Past and present are thus torn asunder. The old has passed away, everything has become new. The break does not come about by our breaking our chains out of an unquenchable thirst to see our life and all things ordered in a new and free way. Long ago, Christ himself had already brought about that break. In baptism this break now also takes effect in my own life.

Echoing the Pauline language of new creation, Bonhoeffer roots the importance of the baptized Body’s newness of life in contrast to a life in the realm of sin. Exempting people with IDD from this powerful theological narration of God’s power in Jesus Christ

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141 Ibid.
142 Ibid., 100.
144 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 185.
impoverishes theologies of baptism and also fails to press faith communities into a serious consideration of how people with IDD, including profound disability, must also find a place in the concrete baptismal witness to God’s power over sin.

Inclusive participation in the baptized Body supplies a critical aspect of Bonhoeffer’s own definition of baptism, in response to the seriousness of sin: “baptism thus means to be received into the community of the cross of Jesus Christ…the believer is placed under the cross of Christ. The death of baptism means justification away from sin. In order to be freed from their sin, sinners must die.”

Bonhoeffer continues,

Although baptism requires a passive role on our human part, it must never be understood as a mechanical process…the gift received in baptism is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is Christ Himself dwelling in the hearts of believers…it is through the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ remains present with us, and that we are in community with him.

Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on receiving the Holy Spirit in baptism resonated with a conversation I had with Ava, a young woman with IDD who participated in the research for this study. Not only did Ava emphasize the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in empowering the baptized Body’s life together (“baptism means that for us as people of the church, we’re here to connect with you through a hand given in the Holy Spirit”) but she also raised the important work of the Holy Spirit in baptism in transforming those who are baptized away from a life of sin. When asked what baptism meant to her, Ava responded, “it means that you’re being cleansed by the Holy Spirit to God. But also redeeming yourself from sin and

145 Ibid., 186.

146 Ibid., 186-187.
temptation.” I found myself curious about Ava’s strong emphasis on both sin and the Holy Spirit and asked her to tell me more about what happens in baptism. She responded: “I feel like they’re [people being baptized] not surely knowing what that [baptism] means. But we tell the people this means you’re majorly connected to God spiritually in the mystery of the Holy Trinity.” Ava’s reflections on baptism pushed me to newly consider how a re-centering of sin in baptismal liturgies might not only raise critical questions about the participation of people with IDD in liturgies themselves, but also highlight the importance of seeking evidence of ongoing transformation in the Triune God within the baptized Body.

My conversation with Ava helped me reconsider the practical implications of Mawson’s engagement of Bonhoeffer’s account of sin. Mawson’s work yields three key constructive possibilities for disability theology in general, as well as our specific consideration of engaging the baptismal liturgy for people with IDD. First, Mawson claims that a more robust view of sin, such as that in Bonhoeffer, “militates against potential romanticism or idealization of disability,” including what it means to be in relationship with people with IDD in the baptized Body.147 In other words, people with IDD are not immune from the effects of sin over all humankind. They do not come to our communities as God’s sinless “holy innocents” but instead as human creatures in equal need of renunciation of the power of sin. This reality resonated among multiple research participants with IDD, in addition to their parents, lay leaders, and clergy people.

But how is this kind of renunciation liturgically possible for all people with IDD, especially within a rite that seems to require symbolic language use? Mawson’s two other applications of Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of sin help address this question. Ultimately, Christian disciples must live in constant recognition of their dependence on God’s forgiveness, in the midst of their communal attempts to live a transformed post-baptismal life together - a life marked by faith and hope. Mawson’s interpretive application of Bonhoeffer here suggests a greater embrace of communal agency, including in the baptismal rite, as well as an ultimate acknowledgement of the failure of human creatures, individually and collectively, to overcome the effects of sin on this side of God’s good future.

Applying this concretely to the BCP’s liturgical rite highlights the need for a shift in the language of renunciation, which currently exists in an ableist register, assuming that infants and young children are the only human beings “unable to answer for themselves.” Greater theological attention to sin points to not only the necessity of language revision within the baptismal rite, but also an accompanying theological reinvigoration of the irreducible unit of repentance and renunciation as the baptized Body – the gathered community of all the baptized.

Mawson’s final application of Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of sin resonates strongly with a shift to communal notions of agency, both in the baptismal rite as well as in the ongoing transformative life of the baptized Body. Heightening our attention to the impact of sin

148 Ibid., 100-101.
149 The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 301.
“challenges attempts to make human agency or understanding the center of a Christian theology of disability.”\textsuperscript{150} In other words, prioritizing “understanding” as a criteria for participation in any particular baptismal liturgy does not support a more robust theology of disability. Ava’s reflections in our interview succinctly summarize how we might release a prioritization of understanding: by instead affirming and dwelling in the mysterious work of the Triune God to cleanse us from sin in baptism.

Paralleling Ava’s reflections, Bonhoeffer turns to divine agency in baptism as his rational for disposing of “understanding” as necessary for baptismal participation. As Ava put it, “not surely knowing” the work of the Holy Spirit in baptism does not hamper the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in drawing the community of the baptized together in newness of life. Greggs offers another interesting perspective on Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of sin as thoroughly corporate, marked by “the incapacity of humans to escape sinfulness.”\textsuperscript{151} For Greggs, Bonhoeffer sees the corporate effects of sin as a result of how sin tries to thwart the gathered community.\textsuperscript{152} Greggs argues, “it is only within the corporate context of the church that humanity can know itself as sinful…there is no knowledge of who one is outside of Christ, and outside of the church there is no knowledge of Christ.”\textsuperscript{153} Greggs


\textsuperscript{151}Greggs, "Bearing Sin," in Christ, Church and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics, 80.

\textsuperscript{152}Ibid., 82.

\textsuperscript{153}Ibid., 83.
later continues, “sin is about the alteration of human beings such that we cease to be oriented eccentrically and relationally and become oriented interiorly and individually.” In other words, in Gregg’s reading of Bonhoeffer, sin exists in our failure to be in proper relation with other human beings. The potential for reinforcing this failure exists in liturgical rites that require significant individualized modes of participation, emphasizing not someone’s relational orientation, but rather a falsely individually-centered self.

Pastor John framed the importance of talking about sin, especially in the context of baptism and post-baptismal discipleship, in the following way: “when we talk about sin, actually, it allows us to be really honest about the ways we are deceived about who we are.” In this conversation, Pastor John expressed to me the importance of intentionally engaging sin in preaching, in pastoral care, and in baptismal preparation, in order not to merely convict individuals of past misdeeds, but to alert communities as a whole to the lies of individuality that threaten the fabric of their communal identity and witness together, by driving people apart from one another, often placing people with IDD at particular risk of isolation and rejection.

Attending to confession and renunciation as baptismal practices that refuse to ignore sin, as advised by Pastor John above, Gregg highlights Bonhoeffer’s thoroughly communal conception of these practices. Gregg argues,

The words of forgiveness are proclaimed and heard in the community of faith, that is in the community of Christ. Continuity of human reception of forgiveness does not stem, therefore, from any individual state of faith or existential individualism or

154 Ibid., 85.
subjective identity, but from the word of the gospel addressed to, heard in and proclaimed by the church.  

Although participation in discrete speech acts of confession and renunciation may not be available to people with more significant IDD, these individuals may still participate through their presence (and other gifts) in ecclesial communities that take seriously their renunciation of sin, evidenced in post-baptismal transformation through practices of mutual care involving all those in the baptized Body. Following renunciation and confession of sin, the witness of the gathered church, in its practices of care for one another, including the embrace of people with IDD across all aspects of church life, testify to the life of a body forgiven and freed for joyful discipleship to Jesus. Greggs admits that Bonhoeffer’s account of sin lacks adequate attention to the role of the Holy Spirit\textsuperscript{156} in enabling this work of communal post-baptismal transformation. Perhaps synthesizing Ava’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit working to cleanse those baptized from sin with Bonhoeffer’s gesture toward divine agency and relational personhood in his connections between sin and baptism, we can critique the individualization of the renunciations in the baptismal rite in the BCP. Overall, this critique calls for greater clarity in the rite’s renunciations with regard to divine agency, and specifically, the work of the Holy Spirit.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 92.  
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 95.
Focusing on Jesus

The constructive move toward emphasizing divine agency and the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism resonates with Bonhoeffer’s Jesus-centered definition of baptism. Bonhoeffer argues, “what the Synoptics describe as hearing and following the call to discipleship, Paul expresses with the concept of baptism. Baptism is not something we offer to God. It is, rather, something Jesus Christ offers to us.”\textsuperscript{157} Bonhoeffer later asserts, “in baptism we become Christ’s possession.”\textsuperscript{158} This Jesus-focused practice of baptism accentuates the importance of language of divine agency and transformation in the BCP’s baptismal rite, while also challenging aspects of the rite that appear to require individualized action and cognitive understanding for full participation.

For Bonhoeffer, Jesus’ death and resurrection constitute the divine agency enacted in the practice of baptism. Bonhoeffer argues,

\begin{quote}
What incorporates us into the body of Christ, that is, into his death and resurrection, is the sacrament of baptism. Just as Christ died once and once only, so we are baptized and justified once and for all. Both baptism and justification are unrepeatable events in the strictest sense. What can be repeated is only the recollection of what happened to us once and for all; it is, in fact, not only capable of, but in need of, daily repetition.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

To resist over-intellectualized and over-individualized distortions of the baptismal rite, an emphasis on the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection in baptism helpfully reorients churches to affirm the baptismal identity of all people, including those with IDD.

\textsuperscript{157} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Discipleship}, 184.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 240.
Bonhoeffer’s striking exhortation to practices of baptismal recollection (which we will specifically explore in the next chapter) help to reorient communities to Jesus, versus human understanding, as the locus of baptismal transformation.

Throughout the diversity of denominational and theological representation among research participants, I found myself deeply struck by the shared central meaningfulness of Jesus’ death and resurrection for their accounts of baptism. Rather than allegiance to a “correct” theological understanding of baptism (paralleling liturgical dangers of over-intellectualization), or a primary emphasis on understanding baptism as either a symbol or an ontological change (often tied to liturgical dangers of individualization), what mattered to participants from clergy to people with IDD was Jesus’ death and resurrection. Danny, an older man with IDD, recalled his baptism from just a year prior to our interview, telling me “it felt like Jesus came into my soul.” When I engaged Danny further, asking about what happens in baptism, he responded:

“It shows that Jesus was buried, and that he rose again from the dead. I was buried just like Jesus was. I was buried like Jesus. I was buried like Jesus and rose again. Rose up from the dead.”

While Danny hailed from a Baptist tradition that often emphasizes the symbolic nature of baptism, my conversation with Danny conveyed that the centrality of his experience in baptism was about a deeply embodied connection to Jesus. Though Danny could express with words this center of his baptismal experience, his answer also revealed something beyond words: the efficacy of divine action, specifically, the death and resurrection of Jesus performed on the bodies of all the baptized and the community’s subsequent affirmation of their belonging in Jesus’ body.
This participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection in the practice of baptism, detailed so beautifully by Danny, also finds emphasis in Bonhoeffer’s notion of the baptismal proclamation of Jesus as God’s image. Bonhoeffer alludes to baptism as the means for human creatures to recover God’s image: “no one is able to recover the lost image of God unless they come to participate in the image of the incarnate and crucified Jesus Christ. It is with this image alone that God is well-pleased.” Bonhoeffer continues, specifying his claim about human creatures participating in God’s image:

The image of God is the image of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is into this image that the disciple’s life must be transformed. It is a life in the image and likeness of Christ’s death (Phil. 3:10, Romans 6:4). It is a crucified life (Gal. 2:19). In baptism, Christ engraves the form of death on his own. Having died to flesh and to sin, Christians are now dead to this world, and the world is dead for them (Gal. 6:14). Those who live out of their baptism live out of their death.

Being buried with Jesus in baptism matters for Christian identity. Danny’s proclamation of this identity resonates with how Bonhoeffer conceives of God’s image - not as an abstracted or sentimentalized vision of what it means to be a disciple, but rather, an ongoing, baptismally initiated sharing in Jesus’ death and emerging to a life of ongoing transformation. To emphasize this participation in Jesus’ image in liturgies of baptism calls for a further emphasis on the divine action in the baptismal rite, not only for transformation of life, but a transformation rooted in human creatures’ identification with Jesus in his death.

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160 Ibid., 269.

161 Ibid., 270.
Bonhoeffer also takes up the language of new creation to emphasize incorporation into Jesus’ death in baptism as central to living in God’s image. He writes, “from baptism all the way to martyrdom, it is the same suffering and the same death. It is the new creation of the image of God through the crucified one.”

Bonhoeffer continues,

The incarnate, the crucified, and the transfigured Christ takes on form in individuals because they are members of his body, the church…it now becomes understandable that the New Testament calls us again and again to be ‘like Christ’. We are to be like Christ because we have already been shaped into the image of Christ…since we have been formed in the image of Christ, we can live following his example.

Bonhoeffer’s further exploration of baptismal incorporation into Jesus’ death as identity-forming grounds baptismal identity in the Church. It is through membership in Jesus’ body that individual selves witness to the identity of new creation through baptism into the death of Jesus. The church, therefore, in its liturgies and practices, must account for the inclusion or exclusion of particular people in its life together. In embracing all those who enter Jesus’ body in baptism, including people with IDD, the BCP’s baptismal rite in the questions of the Baptismal Covenant, orients the gathered body not toward intellectual or individual signs of incorporation into Jesus’ image, but rather, a community marked by equality of dignity:

Celebrant       Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People          I will, with God’s help.

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162 Ibid., 271.

163 Ibid., 272.

164 The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 305.
Bonhoeffer, reflecting on communal incorporation into Jesus as God’s image, emphasizes, “there is no community with Jesus Christ other than the community with his body! It is in this body alone that we are accepted and able to find salvation! The way we do gain a share in the community of the body of Christ is through the two sacraments of his body, that is, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”\textsuperscript{165} Bonhoeffer continues, affirming, “the body of Christ is his church-community…to be in Christ means to be in the church-community.”\textsuperscript{166} It is to this Jesus-centered baptized Body that we make our final turn - the community of the church.

Community: The Baptized Body as a Site of Embodied Discipleship

In the opening pages of Discipleship, Bonhoeffer writes, “cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace.”\textsuperscript{167} Bonhoeffer likens cheap grace to “baptism without the discipline of community…grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{168} For Bonhoeffer, private baptisms constitute an “abuse”\textsuperscript{169} of the sacrament, for they negate the public call of all of Jesus’ disciples: “to follow Jesus was a public act. In

\textsuperscript{165} Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, 196.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 198.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 189.
just the same way baptism is a public act, for in baptism we are incorporated into the visible church-community of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{170}

The centrality of community for both baptism and the constitution of baptismal identity offers a significant theological challenge to the individualized aspects of the BCP’s rite of Holy Baptism. As explored in Chapter 2, a baptismal cultivation of community was vital for people with IDD and their families in experiencing authentic belonging in their churches. Reflecting on what happens in baptism, Mary offered the illustration of “joining the fold” - regardless of who someone might be or what experiences of disability they might bring to the community. Mary reflected on the importance of the public nature of baptism for the community in the following way: “it is important because it centers you in that community of people who outwardly say…this is who we are and now you get to be a part of this…baptism sets you up in a community of people who are going to be your tribe.”

Mary’s sister, Hikare, also chimed in at this point in the conversation: “the part about church that I really truly love is the community…I think the church should be the people. Not the building, not any of the artifacts, but the people.” For Mary and Hikare, who worship at Holy Angels Episcopal Church, this kind of community finds its roots in practices of baptism. Baptism serves as the occasion for public proclamation of the belonging of all people in a church community. And, for these sisters, it reminds the church of the seriousness of their baptismal promises to each other - that the church promises to be “a tribe” to all the baptized, “no matter who they are.”

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 187.
The exclusion of people with IDD from participation in partial aspects or the entirety of the rite of Holy Baptism conflicts theologically with the heart of the baptismal stories about community shared among multiple research participants, as well as with Bonhoeffer’s own theological account of baptism. Bonhoeffer writes,

The body of Christ takes on visible form not only in the preaching of the word but also in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both of which emanate from the true humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. In both, Christ encounters us bodily and makes us participants in the community of his body… in baptism, we are made members of Christ’s body… in receiving the gifts of Christ’s body, we become, thereby, one body with him. Neither the gift of baptism nor the gift of the Lord’s Supper is fully understood if we interpret them only in terms of the forgiveness of sin. The gift of the body conferred in the sacraments present us with the Lord in bodily form dwelling in his church community.\(^{171}\)

Without the embodied participation of people with IDD in baptismal liturgies, the fullness of community finds itself hollow. Churches that resist creating space for people with IDD in baptismal liturgies ultimately neglect a full sense of community and hospitality. As Swinton argues, “baptism opens up a liturgical space wherein people with profound intellectual disabilities can be publicly welcomed into Jesus’ body and provided with a unique place of discipleship and belonging that is carved out within God’s hospitable community.”\(^{172}\) The unique liturgical opportunities for participation among people with profound IDD might include movement throughout the baptismal liturgy (assisted or without assistance), presence and wordless witness during baptismal liturgies, or multi-sensory engagement with the baptismal elements (tactile, visual, and aural engagement of the baptismal waters, olfactory

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\(^{171}\) Ibid., 210-211.

\(^{172}\) Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*, 110.
engagement of the oil of chrism, or aural involvement with the evocative preaching and reading of Scripture offered in the mass).

This emphasis on embodied participation provides pragmatic means through which the importance of community might be enacted within the baptismal liturgy, resisting overly-intellectualized and individualized accounts of the liturgical rite. In addition, these avenues of participation for people with IDD underscore the centrality of embodiment for the baptized Body - the Church. Paul’s theme of the Church as Jesus’ Body throughout his New Testament epistles highlights the theological importance of embodiment. Bonhoeffer draws together this emphasis in Paul with the outworking of baptism in physical communities of Jesus followers:

Through baptism we have become members of the body of Christ...the body of Jesus Christ is the ground of our faith and the source of its certainty; the body of Jesus Christ is the one and perfect gift through which we receive our salvation; the body of Jesus Christ is our new life. It is in the body of Jesus Christ that we are accepted by God from eternity.\(^\text{173}\)

Bonhoeffer not only highlights the theological significance of community for Paul, but also the necessity of embodied participation in this community to sustain discipleship. Bonhoeffer summarizes this as follows: “the bond between Jesus and the disciples who followed him was a bodily bond. This was no accident but a necessary consequence of the incarnation.”\(^\text{174}\) Robert, a research participant, beautifully summarized this embodied belonging - “once you’re welcomed (in baptism), you’re part of it.”

\(^{173}\) Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, 193-194.

\(^{174}\) Ibid., 196.
This kind of unbounded belonging, not conditioned by particular intellectual criteria, or tests of homogeneity within an existing community, underscores what truly matters for liturgical participation. Instead of scrutinizing an individual’s ability to recite all aspects of the liturgical rite, a shift to wonder at the beauty of diverse bodily presences and modes of participation in the liturgy is desperately needed. M. Shawn Copeland speaks of this wonder as the primacy of the baptismal “marking” of the body, particularly the sign of the cross. For Copeland, this marking of the cross in baptism, the mark of Christ, “trumps all other markings” of the body.\textsuperscript{175} Copeland argues,

Jesus of Nazareth, in all his marked particularity of race, gender, sex, culture, and religion, teaches us the universal meaning of being human in the world. In Jesus, God critiques any imperial or ecclesiastical practice of body exclusion and control, sorrows at our obstinacy, and calls us all unceasingly to new practices of body inclusion and liberation. In Jesus, God manifests an eros for us as we are in our marked particularity of race, gender, sex, sexuality, and culture.\textsuperscript{176}

In this list of potential markings, we must also consider disability.

Being baptized, incorporated into Jesus’ body, does not hinge on the particular recitation of a specific rite or liturgical script. As we have explored in this section, a greater attention to embodied participation and welcome into the community of Jesus’ body can help expand and address ableist overtones in liturgical rites of baptism. Ultimately, the community of the baptized brings us back to Jesus’ body, and ongoing participation in the community of Jesus’ body as disciples. As Copeland argues,

\textsuperscript{175} M. Shawn Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 81.

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 80.
The only body capable of taking us all in as we are with all our different body marks...is the body of Christ. This taking us in, this in-corporation, is akin to sublation, not erasure, not uniformity: the basileia praxis of Jesus draws us up to him. Our humble engagement in his praxis revalues our identities and differences, even as it preserves the integrity and significance of our body marks. At the same time, those very particular body marks are relativized, reoriented, and reappropriated under his sign, the sign of the cross. Thus, in solidarity and in love of others and the Other, we are (re)made and (re)marked as the flesh of Christ, as the flesh of his church.  

Conclusions and Next Steps

In the 1979 BCP rite of Holy Baptism, immediately following the candidates’ baptisms, the Bishop or priest offers the following prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.

The final petition in this prayer, that all the baptized may receive the gift of joy and wonder in God’s work, provides an evocative conclusion to this chapter. While I have advanced a few specific constructive theological recommendations in response to critiques of the BCP’s liturgy of baptism, the BCP’s prayer after baptism supplies a fitting conclusion: the proper response to the limitations of over-intellectualized and over-individualized liturgical participation lies in a cultivation of joy and wonder in the good gifts God provides in the context of community and the whole of Creation. Baptismal practices remind us of the importance of embracing a sense of joy and wonder - a perspective from which we might

177 Ibid., 83.
newly perceive our siblings with IDD and their gifts for full participation in the liturgical life of ecclesial communities.

But how might this perspective of baptismal joy lead church communities into a more robust embrace of the discipleship of all the baptized? In the next chapter, we turn to an exploration of three concrete practices: baptismal preparation, baptismal testimony, and baptismal reaffirmation, as three pastoral and pragmatic means of enlivening the baptized Body to a life of fuller discipleship, inclusive of people with IDD. As Hope reflected about the baptized Body in our interview together,

“We're all part of this. We need each other. The one who is baptizing and the one who is being baptized and community that supports it is all one. And that starts very early and it goes all the way through death.”

In our final chapter, we will explore practices beyond the baptismal liturgy itself that support the reality of this communal personhood, sustained by participation in Jesus’ body, by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Chapter 5
Practicing and Proclaiming Baptismal Identity

Building on our explorations of Paul’s anthropology in Chapter 3, as well as the constructive, theological engagement of the Book of Common Prayer’s baptismal liturgy in Chapter 4, we will conclude our exploration of the Christian community as deeply participatory, communal, and Jesus-centered with a careful exploration of three practices that exemplify and affirm the community of the baptized Body: baptismal preparation, baptismal testimony, and baptismal reaffirmation. Drawing upon wisdom from research participants as well as theological voices from across the ecumenical spectrum, I reflect here on the importance of baptismal practices not only for including people with IDD in the life of the baptized Body, but for radically re-shaping imaginations in contemporary Christian churches surrounding identity. I argue here that in both theological traditions of paedobaptism and credobaptism, the baptismal practices of preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation exemplify what it means to be a participatory, Jesus-centered, and communal baptized Body, with engagement from all disciples, including people with profound IDD. We will specifically attend to how these practices break apart modes of belonging that restrict participatory roles of people with IDD, and instead, look to these practices as concrete avenues for affirming the baptismal vocation of God’s children and ways for the church to critically reimagine what it means to be together and to live together across a breadth of abilities, limitations, and gifts.
Embodied Practices and Identity

As we briefly reviewed in the previous chapter, many practical and pastoral theologians emphasize the importance of ecclesial practices for identity formation. Mary McClintock Fulkerson warns of the danger of “obliviousness” in faith communities - habits of “not seeing” realities of injustice – and the power of this obliviousness to reproduce homogeneous communities.1 Fulkerson’s critique specifically regards issues of race within middle and upper middle-class white congregations whose “sacramental enactments of the body of Christ” exist almost exclusively in white bodies.2

Fulkerson claims that the production of homogenous communities occurs primarily among communities with a self-understanding as “welcoming,” with their intentional commitments to inclusiveness evidenced within mission and vision statements.3 “If Christ’s presence has to do with bodies - his and ours as the ‘body of Christ’” argues Fulkerson, “perhaps the bodies at the [Eucharistic] table matter.”4 In other words, if Christians understand liturgy as deeply formative and even constitutive of Christian identity, proclaiming a liturgically informed theology from the pulpit does not suffice to transform communities away from homogenous belonging. To enact diverse belonging and

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.
participation in the baptized Body instead “requires attention to bodily proprieties, communications, and habituations.” For Fulkerson, this requires resistance to patterns of participation in the sacraments that reinforce the dominance of whiteness.

Applying Fulkerson’s critiques to our questions surrounding the belonging and participation of people with IDD in ecclesial communities requires envisioning people with IDD no longer as “exceptions” within the liturgical life of a congregation. Instead, resistance to patterns of homogenous belonging requires people with IDD to be seen as full participants in ecclesial communities, affirmed by their frequent and full participation in the church’s sacramental practices. As I will suggest in this chapter, pastoral engagement of baptismal practices offers a practically promising and theologically rich avenue to support belonging in the baptized Body and through practicing this belonging, form a stronger identity as disciples among all the baptized.

In particular, the repetition and communal orientation inherent in practices of baptismal preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation, support a sacramental life of belonging together in the baptized Body. While people may not “remember” their baptism, because of either cognitive limitation or being baptized at a young age, or, while some people with IDD (and other non-disabled people) may never “understand” the theological underpinnings (what Susan Smith names as “theological effectiveness”) of baptismal practices, these

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5 Ibid., 243.
6 Ibid.
practices nonetheless, through the power of the Holy Spirit, provide an embodied and experienced effectiveness in which people across the disability spectrum might participate.

Alexander Schememann’s understanding of the power of ecclesial practices reinforces this central argument: Schmemann understands lived practices of the liturgy as a connected whole that testify to the church’s doctrine and establish a “rule of prayer” that directs the church’s tradition-rooted “rule of faith.” In this way, intentionally embracing new (or re-enlivened) baptismal practices helps “to clarify and explain the connection between this act and the Church, i.e. to explain how the Church expresses and fulfills herself in this act.” Ultimately, this faithful participation in baptismal practices does not primarily entail human effort, but rather, consists in acknowledging the Church’s dependence on Jesus. With this centering of dependence on Jesus, ecclesial communities trust that through their baptismal practices, God is at work to form communities in God’s story of new creation arising from death.

A Framework for Change

In encouraging the church to renew its life of ecclesial practice together, Gerald Arbuckle commends a process he names “refounding.” Arbuckle envisions this framework of “refounding” as an effective and faithful way for ecclesial communities to respond to the


9 Ibid.
pressing questions in their life together.10 “Refounding” as a framework for change means an intentional response to the complex problems facing contemporary ecclesial communities, such as the ecclesiological issues surrounding the participation of people with IDD, by binding church members “together to live a more authentic Gospel life and struggle to respond to the most urgent, non-ephemeral needs” at the heart of the community, even when some church members may leave the community in disagreement.11 For Arbuckle, refounding assumes that previous practices have not sufficiently attended to the specific needs of a current church community, calling forth creativity and intentionality to embrace new practices, such as those baptismal practices of preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation that we will attend to here. Arbuckle also understands the necessary role of “refounding persons,” particularly those who carry a deep distress in perceiving “the gap between the Gospel and the contemporary world,” often manifested in prejudice, discrimination, and grave justice issues in ecclesial contexts.12 These “refounding” people do not act alone to bring about meaningful change in church communities, but “summon others to faith/justice conversion and to share in the Gospel vision.” Specifically, in our exploration of baptismal practices, leaders in ecclesial change help communities resist patterns of homogenous belonging and move toward a full embrace of people with IDD through an embrace of the good news of Jesus. In Arbuckle’s framework for change, baptismal practices offer patterns

11 Ibid., 142.
12 Ibid., 143.
of life rooted deeply in the Christian tradition that might be freshly embraced to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus within communities empowered by the Holy Spirit to offer mutual edification in their journey of common discipleship.

The Embodied Richness of Baptismal Practices

Attending in particular to baptismal practices, Erik Carter envisions these avenues for multi-sensory liturgical participation\textsuperscript{13} as not only welcoming of people with IDD, but a site for all people in an ecclesial community to more fully experience a liturgical embodiment and affirmation of baptismal identity.\textsuperscript{14} In contrast to medicalized systems of care that people with IDD often inhabit, Christian faith communities hold a unique potential to offer “a stable and long-standing source of support for people living within a service system that usually is fragmented and fractured.”\textsuperscript{15} Fred Edie names the promise of baptismal multi-sensory practices as sites for “robust ritualizing around the font” - touching the baptismal waters, hearing the waters, saying or listening to baptismal prayers and liturgies, engaging Scripture concerning baptism, and soaking in baptismally-oriented preaching.\textsuperscript{16} Edie argues that through an embrace of these multi-sensory practices, the font constitutes “a wellspring”

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 122.
\end{flushleft}
of Christian identity. Louis Weil makes a similar argument to Edie, arguing for the embodied nature of identity formation in the engagement of baptismal practices:

The fullness of their meaning is not contained within neat catechism definitions. Our fundamental engagement with the sacraments is not cerebral; it is visceral...because of our physical nature, all aspects of our lives engage us not only with our minds, but with the whole of that physical nature. We ‘know’ through our senses. This sensual knowing engages us in ways that are much deeper than words alone. As precious as words are, we engage our world with a special intensity through our senses, an engagement which is beyond words.

While Edie and Weil do not specifically consider baptismal practices with regard to discipleship of people with IDD, their commitment to the importance of multi-sensory and wordless engagement of baptismal practices offers a salient foundation for our attention to people with IDD. As Weil concludes his essay, “sacraments must not be only words; they must be embodied so that the physical abundance of the signs will convey to us sensually - touching us in our physical humanity - the awesome abundance of the grace of God.”

**Baptismal Practices as a Part of the Whole**

The practices of baptismal preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation do not provide the totality of a program of Christian transformation for people with and without disabilities. Instead, I highlight these baptismal practices as exemplary and indispensable parts within

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17 Ibid., 240.


19 Ibid., 270.
what Edie calls an “ecological relationship” with other practices of worship and discipleship: reading, interpreting, and preaching Scripture, celebrating the Eucharist, and attending to the rhythms of the liturgical year (bath, book, table, and time). When held together, Edie argues, these multi-sensory practices “draw worshipers into an interpretive web of liturgical life.”

Edie highlights the necessity of repeated reflection and unpacking of baptismal practices in the context of preaching, church formation and education activities, and resonance within other ordinary practices of church life. For Edie, these mutually reinforcing practices create an “evocatively thick environment, one in which connections may readily be drawn between mutually supportive practices.” This integrative vision of baptismal practices as essential and supportive of the everyday rhythm of the baptized Body pushes back against Donald Healy’s notion of baptism as a “spotlight” activity - usually a “one-time event with a smaller number of participants than the worship community at large.” Instead, repeated participation in practices of baptismal preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation, continually forms the fabric of ecclesial life together over time. Maxwell Johnson frames it in this way, baptism itself is the liturgical and sacrament center out of which we live; it is the watery Spirit-filled womb and tomb to which we are called to return time and time again to find a welcome place in our displaced lives...baptism places into the world a community of displaced people, people on a pilgrimage who really belong nowhere except where they are led, a people sure of their identity as the Body of Christ, as those who always walk wet in the baptismal waters of their origin.

20 Edie, Book, Bath, Table, and Time, 187.

21 Ibid., 210.


23 Maxwell Johnson, The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation, Revised and
In support of this baptismally-rooted framework for Christian community, Johnson invites and calls for a recovery of an overarching baptismal spirituality and related practices “for a renewed sense of a foundational ‘baptismal consciousness’ that might guide us ecumenically in the third Christian millennium.”

Baptismally-rooted liturgical practices, for Johnson, supply a welcome place in our constant experience of displacement, inviting us home always, always back home to re-claim, renew, reaffirm, and re-appropriate our baptism so that we might learn again to become who we are, the people God has already made us to be in Jesus Christ by water and the Spirit. Not only can we go home again, we must go home again! Our very identity depends on it.

Baptismal Practices Across Ecumenical Settings: Shared Baptismal Identity

Resonating with Johnson’s exhortation of “baptismal consciousness” as a centerpiece of ecumenical relations, I have suggested throughout this dissertation that the baptized Body as a framework for Christian identity formation does not hold a particular denominational allegiance. In dialogue with research participants from across the ecumenical spectrum, my engagement of Pauline anthropology, liturgical theology, and this final turn to ecclesial practices, hold potential significance for transformation among Christians from a wide variety of confessional standpoints. Johnson writes of baptismal practices as an orientation to the gift of Christian unity: “Christian unity, is, above all, not a demand, not a

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 477.
call, but already a gift of baptism itself to be received and further realized gratefully.”

In exploring the baptismal practices of preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation, I will attend to particular engagements of these practices in both paedobaptism and credobaptism contexts. But first, I want to specifically attend to the ecumenical import of baptismal practices.

The World Council of Churches’ famous “Lima Document,” *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, seeks to shift the normativity of ecclesial practices away from “individual confessional positions,” and instead take up a generous spirit of ecumenism, embraced through “concrete action.” Later, the Lima Document argues: “the need to recover baptismal unity is at the heart of the ecumenical task as it is central for the realization of genuine partnership within the Christian community.”

Within the context of this document, baptismal unity finds its roots “in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection. It is incorporation into Christ…” Across denominations, the Lima Document affirms baptism as “a sign and seal of our common discipleship.” Baptismal practices, among both “believers and infants,” ought to take place “in the Church as the

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28 Ibid., 3.

29 Ibid., 2.

30 Ibid.
community of faith” and declare “Christ's faithfulness unto death.” Foundational practices that reflect the Christian unity witnessed to in baptism include ongoing “responses of faith” in the baptized community, practices of “nurture,” and frequent acts of remembrance and reaffirmation.32

“The Word of God in the Life of the Church,” a report of the 2006-2010 international and ecumenical dialogue among The Roman Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, also demonstrates the important ecumenical implications of baptismal practices. For example, both Catholics and Baptists affirm the necessity of “the faith of the community” in practices of baptism and post-baptismal life,33 exemplified in continued baptismal practices that sustain an ongoing journey of Christian discipleship in Jesus’ body.34 A mutual recognition of the core theological proclamations of baptism - incorporation into Jesus’ death and resurrection, transformation into newness of life, faith in the context of the church, and forgiveness from sin – calls for parallel and mutually-informing baptismal practices across the ecumenical spectrum.

31 Ibid., 4.
32 Ibid., 5.
34 Ibid.
However, embracing practices reflective of an ecumenical unity rooted in baptism can present churches with potential difficulties. While baptism *in theory* provides the basis of Christian unity, Weil questions if

baptism has the significance that is ascribed to it by all Christian liturgical traditions, if it is the embodiment of a fundamental unity that is not destroyed by our denominational barriers, if what unites us in Christ is more fundamental than the issues (albeit often important issues) that divide us, why is it that in the sacramental practices of our churches, Christian initiation seems all too often to take an insignificant place in the lived experience of many Christians? If our churches affirm that baptism is theologically significant, why does our baptismal practice often marginalize - or, at worst, trivialize - this fundamental rite of Christian incorporation?35

Weil’s observations about the frequent insignificance of baptism in contemporary ecclesial life calls for a re-examination of baptismal practices to support the preparation, proclamation, and reaffirmation of not only baptism, but ongoing baptismal identity, discipleship, and vocation among all in the baptized Body. This kind of heightened attention to baptism resists homogenous belonging oriented around non-baptismal identities and also serves as a practice of accountability for the church to live into their post-baptismal newness of life, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As highlighted throughout this dissertation, the centrality of an ecumenical baptismal identity, rooted in Jesus’ body and communal participation in a life of radical belonging, calls forth the necessity of renewed ecclesial practices to support this radical life together. As interview participants remind us, such as James’ desire to be baptized (“I was just asking Pastor Soren to be who I am”) and Al’s reflection on baptismal identity (“I told my Dad, yes, I

would like to get baptized. It’s truly in God that I become - *I become who I am*’), attending to questions of identity and community belonging motivate the church in an embrace of renewed pastoral practices surrounding baptism.

In the Lima Document, the “vivid signs” employed in baptismal practices not only serve to enliven the liturgy itself, but to “declare” the new and central identity of the baptized person - as a child of God, a member of the Church, and called to a vocation of witness to the Good News of the Gospel of Christ. Baptismal practices of preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation serve as a primary mode of Christian identity proclamation and formation. Gordon Lathrop underscores the central importance of this identity proclamation in baptismal practices:

Someone’s station or rank is not the final arrival of God’s intention. Indeed, while such a rank or place may be used as a good tool for work, work that may yield fruits that the assembly itself employs, and while the assembly may pray for people in the work they do, the rank itself stays outside of the meeting and receives no eternal endorsement. The human being is larger, other, waiting for more, than the current social order can assign. There is thus no liturgical role for rich and poor, bosses and workers, professors and students, ethnic insiders and ethnic outsiders, even youth and age, as classes. That is why ‘youth Sundays,’ or the introduction of persons in the liturgy according to their vocations, wealth, or educational status, or a ‘mass of the peasants’ that prays against the ‘bosses’ can all be such profound violations of the sense of the liturgy…no, in the assembly, there is only ‘the people,’ the personal/communal alternative vision of humanity standing together before God, which thoroughly relativizes all other human categories, setting the women and the peasants, but also the bosses and the men, free.

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Lathrop’s vision here for Christian baptismal identity, being before God together as those freed for newness of life, echoes with Edie’s argument about the inextricable connections between baptismal “being and doing.” “Though the logic may seem circular, in fact the Christian baptismal vocation is to embody and practice the fullness of Christian identity. In other words, Christians are called to become who they are through baptism!”

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) document “Invitation to Christ” raises a similar emphasis:

“Our baptismal identity in Jesus Christ unites us as the church: it is the foundation for our communal life and the ground of our ministry in the world. A renewed focus on baptismal identity and sacramental practice will enable us to live together with our differences and enjoy the unity that is Christ’s gift to his church. The church may become better able to recognize this gift as we gather regularly and deliberately around the font…”

“This Isn’t About Perfection”

One compelling approach for embracing practices that affirm baptismal identity and discipleship across the disability spectrum lies in the embodied mutuality and imperfect interdependence required for participation in these very baptismal practices. The baptized Body’s participation in the worship of God serves as a site of what Adam Cooper calls “prophetism” - “the body which is the Church - and specifically the Church at worship…mystically manifests in time and space the invisible reality that is Jesus Christ the Word made flesh, who in his own person embodies and anticipates the spousal union of the

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38 Edie, Book, Bath, Table, and Time, 217.

39 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Invitation to Christ (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2006), 7.
Cooper acknowledges that this mystical manifestation of Jesus in the church’s ecclesial practices does not suggest perfection - “a certain ‘not-yet-ness’” of limitation before the fullness of God’s good future always marks ecclesial practices in the here and now. In research interviews for this project, Anna described her church’s embrace of people with IDD and their involvement in ecclesial practices in this way: “this isn't about perfection. It's about inclusion and about experience together. And it doesn't have to be a perfect thing.” Anna’s frankness in her response surprised me. Many churches that embrace the lives of people with IDD often speak of their “disability ministries” or the participation of people with IDD in idealized ways. Anna centered imperfection both as a mark of authentic community as well as a central feature of her community’s life of transformation. Anna’s embrace of imperfection helps shape an understanding of the witness of the baptized Body through its imperfect yet mutually engaged baptismal practices.

Despite the limits and failures of the church’s concrete actions, practices can still powerfully witness to the presence of Jesus and the transformation of communal life made possible through the Holy Spirit in baptism. Practices that proclaim this good news do not spring from only a few individuals, but most powerfully witness to a radical way of being together in shared mutuality and interdependence. Specifically, the baptismal practices we explore in this chapter do not constitute a set of actions for non-disabled people to “do for” disabled people, nor are they the only practices that constitute the scope of witness for

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people with IDD. Instead, baptismal practices offer sites of interdependence, partnership, and collaboration - places where the baptized Body lives out its radically communal, participatory, and Jesus-rooted constitution. For the World Council of Churches, this affirms that

the Christian community is...the place where cheap pity is transformed into the attitude of being joyful with the joyful and mourning with the mourning (cf. Rom 12:15). Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that disabled people depend on others to assist them, to nurse them and care for them. But this should not lead a congregation to assume mistakenly that disabled people must always be receiving and can never be the givers. Generally, it is not realized that the inclusion of the disabled in the Christian community is of vital importance for all and that it leads to a renewal of congregational life.41

Among some disciples, including some people with IDD, affirming a shared baptismal identity and living into a post-baptismal life of transformation includes intellectual engagement of preaching, serving as a teacher in ecclesial settings, or the practice of bold verbal proclamation. And among some other disciples, including some people with IDD, the fullness of “a prophetic message does not necessarily consist in predictive language expressing new revelation but in embodied reminders of previously revealed truth which has been overlooked or under-emphasized or is particularly pertinent to a current situation or need in the life of an individual, the Church, or society.”42 In other words, the diverse, embodied ecclesial participation of people with and without disabilities presents not an


“abstract or detached” proclamation, but a practical proclamation of the church community’s fellowship of love where each part of the baptized Body serves an indispensable role.

Pastor Daniel helps clarify how an embrace of imperfect baptismal practices might beautifully reflect the church’s Jesus-centered and communal identity. He told me,

“…this is a very Baptist way to put it. God loved you and loved the world enough to take on a body like yours and to be baptized. Your baptism is an affirmation of your belovedness that brought Jesus to us…on the flip side, you are never alone and we affirm that in our incarnational theology. God's always with us. Baptism as an initiation, as a common shared kind of practice with our bodies just reminds us of our connection to one another… it's our common point of connection. And you're not alone because you are part of this family of God. So I would say baptism affirms our belovedness and…we weren't made to be by ourselves. We're not by ourselves. We're part of the community.”

Pastor Daniel’s reflections evoked some new thinking around the power of baptismal practices for me. How might this belovedness Pastor Daniel speaks of be concretely realized, testified to, and repeated as communities learn to follow Jesus in a post-baptismal life of transformation? Hope described it this way: “We’re all part of this. We need each other. The one who is baptizing and the one who is being baptized and community that supports it is all one. And that starts very early and it goes all the way through death.” Concrete yet imperfect practices are desperately needed to accompany theologies that amplify the centrality of interdependence in the baptized Body.

Attending to Accessibility in Baptismal Practices

A framework of “accessible care” can help clarify how churches might embrace baptismal practices as a way of proclaiming the communal, participatory, and Jesus-centered
identity of all disciples. By accessible care, I follow Christine Kelly in noting the necessity of “tangible environmental changes” alongside “critical reflection on how environments reflect underlying, often unquestioned social assumptions about disability.” In previous chapters, we have already uncovered some theological and anthropological assumptions that restrict people with IDD from full ecclesial participation. Here, I suggest that in our exploration of concrete baptismal practices, we must attend to “the intersectional nature of support interactions,” with particular attention to “the value of embodied, personal accounts that emphasize the agency of people with disabilities.” In this chapter, the stories of research participants in relationship to baptismal practices of preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation, provide generative starting places to reflect on facilitating accessible participation in the full life of the church among people with IDD. The contours of specific church communities necessitate attending to different “physical starting points” and pragmatic considerations (for example, accessibility for participation in baptismal practices in a specific church building), as well as clarifying the “intent or purpose” of baptismal practices (engaging communities in rich baptismal formation).

For Smith, the responsibility for these considerations should not fall to a single person such as a lead pastor or a family member of someone living with IDD. Instead, she

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43 Christine Kelly, "Building Bridges with Accessible Care: Disability Studies, Feminist Care Scholarship, and Beyond," *Hypatia* 28, no. 4 (2013): 789.

44 Ibid., 791.

45 Smith, *Caring Liturgies*, 37.
encourages a communal, creative, and compassionate approach to collaboratively assessing the ritual needs of a community.\textsuperscript{46} This kind of communal embrace of accessibility changes related to baptismal practices closely aligns with Arbuckle’s framework of “refounding,” especially when the work of attending to accessibility can be conducted as a practice of discipleship, rather than an undesirable duty. Attending to practices of “accessible care” as a theological vocation within the baptized Body resonates with Susan Eastman’s reflections on the Jesus-centered life of ecclesial communities:

God’s action in Christ is the only sure foundation for the life of faith, which is lived out in the common life of believers. That divine action takes place in and through the crucifixion and resurrection life of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It gains traction in human lives through a mutually participatory union between Christ and those “in Christ…”\textsuperscript{47}

Let us now turn to the specific practices of preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation that gather us “in Christ” around the font, affirm our baptismal identities, and empower the baptized Body in its communal life of radical witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ through its participatory life together, no longer bound to patterns of homogeneity, but to Jesus’ body in the Holy Spirit.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 43.

Baptismal Preparation

Practices of baptismal preparation provide one key way to re-enliven the life of the baptized Body, emphasizing the Jesus-centered, communal, and participatory identity of disciples who follow Jesus, regardless of disability. Intentional engagement in practices of baptismal preparation help church communities move away from overly passive, sentimental, and individualized practices of baptism that fail to grasp the radical affirmation of identity in Christ, whether in paedobaptism or credobaptism traditions. Baptismal preparation provides communally-oriented opportunities for formation away from homogenous belonging, by joining together intergenerational groups of people, those who are baptized and those yet to be baptized, to explore what this act of initiation into Jesus’ Body means for their life together.

In the World Council of Churches study text *One Baptism*, practices of baptismal preparation, including the recovery of the catechumenate among various Christian denominations, provide one sign that “churches have begun to take positive, practical steps to nurture and express mutual recognition.” The World Council of Churches therefore recommends practices of baptismal preparation as a site of ecumenical collaboration within local geographical communities. For example, they suggest gathering several local churches to train catechists in a shared ecumenical setting. In addition to other unifying practices such as issuing common baptismal certificates that affirm the mutual recognition of baptism

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49 Ibid.
among different ecumenical bodies, the World Council of Churches also urges local faith communities to consider how baptismal preparation might be a multi-church effort as a means of not only enhancing the preparation experience among baptismal candidates, but also as a sign of Christian unity.\(^50\)

But what general form might these acts of preparatory unity take? I am partial to Alexander Schmemann’s argument that preparation for baptism comprises a constant and essential aspect of the Church’s worship as a whole. Schmemann argues,

\[\text{it is impossible to enter into the spirit of liturgy, to understand its meaning and truly to participate in it without first understanding that it is built primarily on the double rhythm of preparation and fulfillment, and that this rhythm is essential to the Church’s liturgy because it reveals and indeed fulfills the double nature and function of the Church herself.}\(^51\)

This movement between preparation and fulfillment manifests in the following way for the practice of baptism:

\[\text{It requires preparation even if the human being to be baptized is only a few days old and is unable to understand that which will happen to him. The Orthodox Church, radically different from some ‘rationalistic’ sects, has never posited ‘understanding’ as the condition for Baptism. She would rather say that true ‘understanding’ is made possible by Baptism, is its result and fruit, rather than its condition. We are very far from the flat idea that Baptism cannot be received unless it is ‘understood’ and ‘accepted,’ and therefore is to be given only to ‘adults.’ Maybe the ultimate grace of Baptism is indeed that it makes us children, restores in us that ‘childhood’ without which, in the words of Christ Himself, it is impossible to receive the Kingdom of God. What preparation means therefore is a total act of the Church, the recapitulation by her of all that makes baptismal regeneration possible. For the whole}\]

\(^50\) Ibid., 16.

Church is changed, enriched and fulfilled when another child of God is integrated into her life and becomes a member of Christ's body.  

Though Schmemann’s logic here regarding both “understanding” and “baptismal regeneration” run counter to many Christian theologies and practices of baptism, his final assertion about the work of the whole Church in baptismal preparation, in anticipation of integrating and celebrating a new member of Jesus’ body, serves as the foundational assumption I work from in this section. I want to imagine practices that draw in not only those preparing to be baptized, but practices that draw upon all those present in the gathered community, to enter a continual process of preparation and fulfillment, in an intentional and multi-sensory way filled with wonder.

Practices of baptismal preparation include “reading and teaching about the faith of the church…experiences of hearing, learning, and doing…intended to lead to conversion, appropriate of the faith in heart and mind, trust in the triune God, and baptism.” To imagine how these practices might be cultivated within both paedobaptism and believer’s baptism traditions, including both communities who practice a more formal catechumenate and communities that boast no formal processes of baptismal preparation, we will turn to stories from research participants that exemplify three core themes of baptismal preparation: anticipation, nurture, and embracing universal design for learning.

52 Ibid., 18.

53 World Council of Churches, One Baptism, 9.
Anticipating Baptism: Embracing the Practice of Preparation

“And I’m telling you that almost every night for two months, but not every night, but almost every night, she would call me on my phone and she would say, “when am I going to get baptized?” And I would tell her the date, we’re going to baptize you then. And she would say, “okay.” But she just wanted to stay right on top of that. And every night, or almost every night, she would call me and ask about her baptism.”

- Pastor Soren

I could sense the excitement of the woman with IDD in this story Pastor Soren recounted to me, even though it was nearly two decades since the date of her baptism. In Pastor Soren’s telling of this story, I sensed not only this particular individual’s anticipation of her baptism, but also how her anticipation facilitated an anticipatory posture within St. Matthew’s Baptist Church as a whole. Pastor Soren further elaborated on the role of anticipation in his church community, specifically as it related to the participation of people with IDD, recalling to me a semi-regular service where adults at the church with IDD would participate in musical leadership for a particular Sunday:

“...you know, it’s sort of like the lady anticipated her baptism...it gave them something to look forward to. And they would sing with joy and beauty and gusto. But it wasn’t precise music. And it wasn’t what a normal choir would do. There would be some moans and there would be some notes that were off key. And there would be those kinds of things. But the church, they weren’t absorbed by that...the congregation was embracing and appreciating what this group was bringing as their gift to God. And so it became a gift for everyone. So, I think it helped the church. I just have a greater sense of what’s really important. And it’s not so much is every note right. Or is the sound something that would be recorded and sent out all over the world. But it is contextual. Are these, our brothers and sisters, participating in a way that edifies the Body of Christ? And it was - they were edifying the Body of Christ, and I think the congregation, there was a mutual edification.”

Practices of baptismal participation that anticipate the full and joyful participation of people with IDD in the life of the Christian community provide one such poignant site of “mutual edification.” Preparatory activities, from formal weeks of consecutive catechesis to pragmatic
rehearsals of the baptismal service itself, provide spaces for formation of the importance of baptismal identity, not only on the day of one’s baptism, but for the whole life of the church.

Randy described another experience of significant anticipation in relationship to baptism. He recalled a series of conversations that he and Pastor John had with a small group of young adults with IDD who were preparing to be baptized. Randy told me about a young man named Dennis who excitedly proclaimed after one of these conversations: “I cannot wait to be baptized!” Randy went on, saying “what [Dennis] was saying was I can't wait to say this to my church, that I belong to God and I belong to you…they all [Dennis, Ava, and others] just left that meeting just like sort of giddy and excited.” Randy’s story illustrates not only the key role of anticipation in baptismal preparation for cultivating an excitement surrounding baptism, but also the positive impact of intentional pastoral presence for this group of adults with IDD.

Randy also told me about a weekly Bible Study group that met among adults with and without IDD preparing for baptism in his church: “there was just so much formation that was happening…they talked about baptism a lot during the Bible study…and this discernment doesn't happen - often doesn't happen in like flashes or in like moments of clarity. It happens over time and in prayer.” The extended, intentional practices of baptismal formation for people with and without IDD at Christ Church attuned me to the particular practice of coming alongside those to be baptized, no matter what their limitations, and engaging them in a personalized and communal way - with others who are already baptized
in the community - in practices of sustained time together in specific preparation for baptism.

From the perspective of believer’s baptism traditions, Stanley Fowler offers the following theological insight in support of baptismal preparation, particularly among people with IDD, whose need for baptism may often be challenged in credobaptism contexts as a result of their lack of “understanding” or status as non-speakers. Fowler argues for a sacramental approach within a Baptist credobaptism framework, drawing primarily on mainstream British Baptists as well as the early history of the emerging Baptist movement.54

Baptist sacramentalists would contend that to ask whether baptism is necessary is to ask the wrong question. If the question is pursued to the end and the answer is that baptism is not absolutely necessary, then what is gained by the discovery? To assert that spiritual benefit can be obtained apart from baptism is not to say that there is no spiritual benefit in baptism. Baptist sacramentalists would not assert that God is gracious to sinners only in baptism, but rather that one may expect him to be gracious in baptism. Their theology represents a positive statement of what may be normatively expected in baptism, not a negative statement of what may not be obtained in any other way.55

This normative expectation of God’s gracious regard of human creatures in baptism provides a helpful frame for practices of baptismal preparation among people with IDD - expecting and wondering about how God might be gracious, perhaps in imperceptible or unexpected ways, provides an onus for the importance of ushering in a communal posture of expectancy and anticipation of welcoming those to be newly baptized across many kinds of Christian traditions.


55 Ibid., 234.
Baptismal Preparation as a Practice of Nurture

“The church is, among other things, the place where we grow in our awareness…of our belovedness and of our calling as disciples to be transformed by renewing our minds, by living our lives according to the way of Jesus and following after Jesus. And baptism marks our discipleship. Go forth into all nations and baptizing, and making disciples, baptizing them. And so it's kind of a starter pistol, as it were. Or at least the way of marking our lives as disciples. And the church is the kind of place where discipleship is nurtured and cultivated and shepherded.” - Pastor Daniel

Pastor Daniel’s reflections on the church as a community of nurture spurred my thinking about the nurture of faith and discipleship in practices of baptismal preparation. Finding particular ways to support people with IDD in baptismal preparation practices provides one distinct way of caring for people with IDD in church communities, attending to how they might best learn, or for people with more profound disabilities, how they might most fully receive the love and presence of the community to which they will be joined by baptism.

The World Council of Churches’ Lima Document emphasizes that denominations with vastly different baptismal theologies “require a similar and responsible attitude towards Christian nurture,” composed of practices of care in both pre-baptismal and post-baptismal contexts. The Lima Document also exhorts practices of nurture specifically rooted in baptism as anchors for ecumenical collaboration as well as the “mutual acceptance” of differing baptismal theologies and practices, rooted in a common commitment to support the baptized life and identity of all God’s children. Pastor Paula reflected on the importance of this notion of nurture related to baptism throughout the lifespan, telling me:


57 Ibid.
“What I understand through our catechism is that when a person who is of an age that cannot speak for themselves - and we do believe in infant baptism...the baptism happens to the child but it really also happens for those who surround the child. Because the promises that we make on behalf of the child, we also make for ourselves in our journey, in our faith development. So, I was baptized at four months in age. I have no recollection of it. I know I have a baptismal candle. And I encourage parents to light that candle every year on the anniversary and to remind the child of what happened on that day. But my godparents were an active part of my life. And so I believe in being baptized I was fully adopted in the body of Christ. In the process of baptism, the gifts that God has given me - and I continue to figure out - were enacted through the act of baptism. That they just weren't shelved. That they were given liberty and life to be a part of my own journey in faith. And I believe that to be the case when we baptize anyone, regardless of where they are in their life.”

Pastor Paula’s reflection on the roles of godparents and parents reflected to me the important role of the particular individuals who nurture the baptismal identity and life of each newly baptized person within a church, as well as the importance of drawing these individuals into practices of baptismal preparation to support their vocation to nurture particular members of Jesus’ body in their role as a baptismal sponsor.

Also reflecting on baptismal preparation, Pastor Alicia described to me a shift among Episcopal clergy in assuming greater responsibility for facilitating practices of baptismal preparation and nurture in the Episcopal Church, especially since the 1979 revisions of the American prayer book. She underscored a rising dissatisfaction among many of her clergy colleagues, particularly when interacting with godparents or adults preparing for baptism who wish to eschew practices of baptismal participation. Pastor Alicia expressed,

“"I think that's actually good that this is something that is frustrating to clergy, like it's good - it would be better, obviously, if they were more enthusiastic about coming for millions of hours of baptismal preparation. But, I think that it suggests that baptismal preparation is important in and of itself, and is important in Christian formation. And that it's sad and frustrating when it doesn't happen.”"
Universal Design for Learning: Applying the Paradigm to Baptismal Preparation

“Universal Design for Learning” (UDL) refers to overlapping principles that seek hybridity and transformation in learning through accessible delivery of information, active and interactive learning by students, facilitated by diverse course materials and mediums, as well as “multiple options for student design, delivery, and expression.” In seeking maximal avenues for participation among people with IDD, and all those preparing for their baptism or the baptism of another, applying UDL offers one pragmatic approach to re-enlivening practices of baptismal preparation to support the flourishing of Jesus’ gathered body.

The physical elements of the sacrament of baptism, namely the water, the kinesthetic movements in the rite or ordinance or liturgy, and the use of additional modalities for participation such as music, preaching, candles, special clothing, and anointing oil, serve as modalities for learning through all the senses. Lathrop exhorts contemporary Christians to embrace baptismal practices with “intensity” - “let them be done with focused intensity, not ignored. But let them be used to speak the holiness of the triune God and so be made a source of meaning for our world.” Lathrop goes on to emphasize the importance of visitation and collaboration among ecumenical communities to renew the engagement of the full scope of baptismal themed avenues of participation.

Pastor Ambrose shared with me a strikingly unique and practical story of engaging UDL in his encouragement to a family preparing for their son Eli’s baptism:

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“We [Pastor Ambrose and Eli’s parents] just chatted about baptism and Eli and the work that God was doing in Eli’s life. And basically I sent them away with some homework. Eli’s homework was to watch some YouTube videos of baptism, sprinkling, pouring and immersing. And see which ones he kind of, you know, connected with, because...in United Methodism we’re supposed to at least offer all three modes and let the person chose for themselves. So, I said you go check on some baptism videos and see what you connect with. You know, I didn’t want to make any assumptions about, you know, what mode he would be willing to participate in or not. So, I said, go check it out, see what you think.”

While remaining true to his tradition’s rubrics for preparing to celebrate baptism, Pastor Ambrose also exhibited practical wisdom for how to engage Eli, who did not communicate with spoken language, in a process of baptismal preparation. Pastor Ambrose later told me more about Eli and his family’s preparation for baptism:

“In the United Methodist Church in the hymnal, there are a couple different baptism rites. And they are actually worded very interestingly. They’re not necessarily worded as this one is for adults and this one is for kids. One of them is called the baptism ritual for those who can answer for themselves. And the other is the baptism ritual for those who can’t answer or can’t speak for themselves. And so basically I said to Eli’s parents, that honestly as the pastor in this scenario, I’m going to follow y’alls lead. So, take a look at those rites. And come back and tell me which one we’re doing. If you think, because you know Eli better than I do, take a look at the rites, take a look at the logic within the rites, and then, you know, talk to us about which one we’re going to go with. So, they came back. They had read By Water and the Spirit, which was awesome. We talked about that. Eli had so loved his YouTube research that he…got in the bathtub and practiced immersing because that’s what he decided on doing.”

Eli’s story illustrates the powerful avenues for participation that open up with creative and accessible engagement of baptismal preparation materials. Though in this particular story, the materials were engaged by Eli and his family in their home context, other churches gather larger groups together to participate in multi-sensory practices of

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baptismal preparation, engaging and interacting with the baptismal waters, reading through the liturgy, repeatedly singing familiar songs about baptism, and hearing one or two familiar Scripture passages together week after week. Together, some participants engage sight, and others hearing, most participate in touch, and smell, and movement, alongside more “traditional” forms of didactic curriculum for catechesis. These kinds of practices for baptismal preparation draw in participants who cannot communicate with symbolic language or have learning differences, not by making sure they are merely in the room, but instead creatively engaging multiple forms of sensory engagement directly related to baptism, in the spirit of UDL.

Mary Therese Harrington, S.H., reflects on the importance of “the role of affectivity in catechesis and the need to develop a symbolic consciousness” in practices of baptismal preparation. Harrington’s reflections arise out of her role as a catechist among children, adolescents, and adults with significant IDD in the Roman Catholic Church. Harrington first argues for a vision of catechesis as formation beyond intellectual knowing and the “transmission of knowledge” - highlighting the important aspect of affectivity in baptismal preparation, in other words, engaging in practices (much like Eli’s watching of YouTube videos) that evoke feeling and the expressing of emotion. For Harrington, affectivity should be attended to carefully by leaders in baptismal preparation contexts, and engaged

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62 Ibid., 117.
across multi-sensory modes to support the engagement of different learners and their needs in the process of baptismal preparation. Harrington suggests that affectivity is always and already present, and therefore, the quality of it depends on the intentionality of leaders in baptismal preparation.

In an effort to support maximal communal participation in practices of baptismal formation, as well as intentionally meet the needs of learners with IDD, Harrington recommends that individual sponsors for each baptismal candidate attend baptismal preparation with them. Though Harrington has in mind the baptism of adolescents and adults, rather than infants, her suggestion offers an important consideration for baptismal preparation within infant baptism traditions, where godparents or other sponsors might participate in a multi-sensory experience to prepare for the celebration of baptism of their loved one. Expanding Harrington’s suggestion here beyond just people with IDD suggests that all people may benefit from intentional accompaniment in their journeys of baptismal preparation. This model of facilitating a preparation partner for each baptismal candidate provides a pragmatic means of meeting the specific needs of each baptismal candidate, as well as a natural way to draw more people from the church community into the process of preparation. Overall, Harrington points to the importance of “abundance” of time, people,

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 118-119.
65 Ibid., 122.
space, and process\textsuperscript{66} - a commitment to the intentionality of engaging UDL in baptismal preparation practices.

\textit{Practices of Baptismal Testimony: Proclaiming Joyful Vocation}

Alongside practices of baptismal preparation, the practice of baptismal testimony, both in instances of discrete spoken testimony, as well as in cases of testimony proclaimed by the wordless living out of a baptismal vocation of joyful discipleship, creates space for participation among people with IDD, including those people with profound experiences of disability. Understanding testimony as a communal practice returns the focus to divine action. In the words of the World Council of Churches’ Lima Document, both infant baptism and believer’s baptism traditions “embody God’s own initiative in Christ and express a response of faith made within the believing community.”\textsuperscript{67} Baptismal testimony, as I will illustrate here, provides one striking and faithful way of proclaiming this response of faith. It also calls communities to cultivate sustained practices of presence, listening, and attending to the witness of people with IDD, in order that they might faithfully proclaim, together, the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling newness of life within the community.

From both an infant baptism and believer’s baptism framework, incorporating practices of baptismal testimony resists “mechanical” celebrations of baptism that neglect

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 128.

\textsuperscript{67} World Council of Churches, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, 5.
accounts of ongoing communal transformation in the Holy Spirit. For example, Fowler suggests that Baptists ought to conceive of baptism as an act of commitment that strengthens discipleship.  

How is this discipleship evaluated? Fowler suggests, amid the complex dynamics within Baptist communities regarding the relationship of church membership and baptism, that “membership in the church is for all who give evidence of being in the Church, and that such evidence is located in visible discipleship, i.e., a lifestyle which is oriented toward obedience to Christ according to one’s understanding of his commands.” Baptismal testimony provides one concrete practice to highlight the visible discipleship of people with IDD.

At St. Matthew’s Baptist Church, Pastor Soren reflected on the importance of witness and testimony in the context of baptism, telling me: “…a tradition that we had at St. Matthew’s that I’ve done at every church I’ve been in, I’ve sort of initiated this, which I think is an ancient tradition and one I wish would be done more often in the modern church, is the practice of letting people share testimonies.” Pastor Soren described to me the importance of those preparing for baptism, including people with IDD, to either write down or express to someone their own meaning of baptism. On the occasion of the person’s baptism, a loved one would read this testimony of discipleship - a declaration of witness to

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68 Fowler, More Than a Symbol, 100.

69 For example, some Baptist communities see baptism as a prerequisite to church membership, rather than constitutive of it.

70 Fowler, More Than a Symbol, 225.
the power of God in shaping their life of discipleship. As Pastor Soren described to me, this was one of the most powerful aspects in his church’s baptismal practices.

James talked to me about the process of preparing his own baptismal testimony as a meaningful act of preparation: “I was preparing with my Mom. And she helped me to tell my testimony to my sister.” The work of testimony for James came from an interdependent effort with his mother and sister, with their voices added to fill out James’ witness and testimony to life as a disciple. James’s mother, Elisabeth, reflected on this practice of baptismal testimony as her favorite aspect of James’s baptism: “my favorite part was probably his sister- and they have a wonderful relationship - reading his testimony…just the feeling of knowing the church was celebrating with us.” James’s father, Eric, similarly reflected on the celebratory and communal aspects of James’s baptismal testimony: “well, for me it was just a very special moment…not only were we as a family celebrating it, but it was a church celebration too. They, you know, appreciated that and it was just a great testimony to the church of the value of every person, which St. Matthew’s has always valued anyway. It was just… a celebration.”

The communal celebration of James’s baptism and the proclamation of his baptismal testimony, read by his sister, provides a striking example of how churches might lift up the witness of people with IDD. James’s testimony resonates with the World Council of Churches’ affirmation of the provision of spaces “where candidates offer a personal testimony at the time of their baptism…as a powerful sign of the working of the Holy Spirit
in their lives, thus revealing God’s power to convert and save.” However, this practice, at least in the present example, seems to require baptism in a believer’s tradition where the person to be baptized can express their faith in a written or verbal manner. What about people with IDD who do not communicate with spoken or written words? And what about paedobaptism traditions?

In my conversation with Anna, a lay leader at Holy Angels Episcopal Church, she wondered out loud how baptismal celebrations might make space for the testimony of people with more significant IDD. Anna expressed her question to me in this way:

“I really struggled sometimes about how our church holds people up…. there are some kids that don’t have those cultural successes, you know, that they’re living their lives and they’re good people and they’re not academically stars. I think in church, it’s hard to celebrate with the kids that have been baptized and grow up here, and at the same time recognize somebody that’s maybe not having those kinds of hallmarks in their lives… how do we make sure… that all are celebrated (“super high achievers, academically, in sports, win scholarships, all this stuff,”) and also those you’re sitting with where there’s none of that going on. It’s a question for me I never solved.”

Anna presented me with this conundrum, sharing her deeply unsettled feelings about the church celebrating the academic, career, and social successes of its members, which most often exclude people with IDD. These “cultural successes,” as Anna understood them, threaten to displace the primacy of baptismal identity at the heart of the church’s life together and practices of belonging among the diversity of the baptized.

Anna’s question and desire for insights spurred my thinking about how practices of baptismal testimony might serve as a powerful witness among people with IDD without words. As I ruminated with Anna’s struggles, two potential practices of testimony struck me

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as appropriate among those to be baptized without words. The first, that of baptism itself as a wordless testimony, and the second, a communal composition of testimony on the occasion of baptism among people across the lifespan, on baptismal anniversaries, and during practices of baptismal reaffirmation.

Embodied participation in baptism itself served as a central witness across communities of faith among both infant baptism and believer’s baptism confessional standpoints. Pastor Soren reflected on this within his Baptist context:

“I’m a very traditional Baptist in a sense. And so my theological answer is that baptism is going to be a visible expression of an inward grace. And so for me it’s not a sacramental act. It’s a symbolic act…it really has to do with a witness. It’s a way of bearing witness of this person, that they are giving physical and visible witness of the gospel. And it goes to Romans 6. And it is about sharing in Christ’s death and sharing in Christ’s resurrection. In fact, sometimes I will talk about this in the baptismal pool. And tell people and read them Romans 6 from 6:3 and 6:4. And tell people that going into the water is a way of symbolizing and showing - or sharing in the death of Christ and coming up out of the water is symbolizing and giving a visible expression to our sharing in Christ’s resurrection. And so we are sharing in what Christ has done for us. So, that’s a very traditional view of Baptist baptism…and you know that they are bearing witness to their faith. Baptists are big on witnessing. And sharing their faith. And so baptism becomes a wonderful way to let people bear witness to their faith. And you do it in a public way. And there’s nothing private about it. Anybody who shows up can see it. And it’s not done anywhere in secret. So, it’s a very public witness. And I think most Baptist ministers love the fact that it’s a kind of public witness.”

Elisabeth reflected on how this commitment to baptismal witness extended into her sense of vocation as a nurse:

“Baptism is the point in time where we begin our ministry as believers and follow Christ’s example on a day-to-day basis. I don’t have the power to heal, but as a nurse, I participate in healing. I don’t have the words to preach, but through the testimony of my life and through the testimony of my baptism, I have become a preacher, a teacher…and I may not do things as well as Jesus did on a day-to-day basis. I promise you I don’t. But for me the baptism that Jesus did is the first step in the beginning of our ministries.”
In Elisabeth’s reflections, I came to more clearly see baptism as a strong reminder for the baptized Body to look and listen carefully for the signs of ministry and discipleship in their midst, across a wide variety of abilities and vocations.

Pastor Daniel, another pastor at St. Matthew’s Baptist Church, reflected on his practice at baptisms:

“Even before their testimony is read, what I’ll say partly to lighten the mood and warm up the room a little bit, but then partly because I think it’s true… I’ll say, ‘most folks are not going to remember what I preached about today. But they will never forget what they see you preach in your actions today. You know, the very core of our faith is that in being buried with Jesus we are raised with him to a life like his. You are preaching this in what you do today.’ So, in a sense, it’s a proclamation of our salvation and what that means. It’s a recitation of it and it’s not for a candidate now, but again it’s for the whole community.”

Pastor Daniel also reflected on the nature of the wordless witness of baptism while conveying to me a story of watching the baptism of a woman with IDD who was very resistant to getting wet:

“If you have an absolute in your practice, they’re [people with IDD] going to challenge it. And you have to decide, you know, pretty quickly…what’s at stake in modifying the practice. Versus excluding or holding this person back from a gesture of authentic faith. She really wanted to be baptized. She just didn’t want to get wet…so, there’s always a way. And those are the things again that people remember. I don’t remember what he preached. I don’t remember what he preached about. But I remember the sermon that she preached.”

From a paedobaptism context, Mary reflected on baptism as a witness to the gathered community:

“To me it’s just one of those moments where you can see God entering that person who’s being baptized. Like I said, it’s like a little crack so God can get in. Cracks you open a little bit. Whether you know it’s happening or not. It’s happening. And then for the people around your experience in that baptism, it is also just another little crack for them as well. And, you know… I think it changes the person who’s being baptized. And I think it also changes the people who are there supporting you, witnessing that.”
Pastor John and lay leader Randy also spoke of the powerful testimony present in the wordless witness of baptism, specifically among people with IDD. Pastor John recalled,

“We talked about baptism...as a sermon and a story. Because all of them know what a sermon is. I said a sermon is a way that we talk about how good God is. And how much God loves us. And baptism is one of the sermons that we preach in the church. And it tells a story about how good God is and how much God loves us. And how we belong. And I told them that it tells the story of who they really are.”

Randy reflected on the meaningfulness of Pastor John’s framing of baptismal testimony among people with IDD preparing for baptism:

“And what Pastor John said was baptism is a way for you to preach to the church. To say without words that you - to affirm - for everyone without words, that you belong to God. And to remind others that they belong to God...so you’re preaching when you’re being baptized. And I remember that being actually impactful for me and also for them [friends with IDD]. For many of these friends...words are the not primary means that they use to communicate...words are always inadequate. And I think that’s because like the Word is God. And we are not God. And so words have always been inadequate.”

This wordless power of witness through participation in baptism, among all the baptized, is also accompanied by ongoing joyous witness in the transformed life of the baptized Body. Becoming re-attuned to an ongoing process of transformation in practices of baptismal preparation and fulfillment not only helps churches affirm the testimony enacted in baptism itself, but also provides practices that help communities cultivate an ability to accompany one another, to attend to the gifts of each individual member, and to testify to these gifts as sites of baptismal discipleship. This communal attention to the gifts of each particular member, especially people with profound IDD, can lead to communal testimony of their baptismal identity and discipleship.
For example, imagine a person with profound IDD who does not communicate with words and has been a part of a particular church community for a long time. Though they have no words to request baptism, the community sees their presence as indispensable to their life together. The practice of a community coming together to write a testimony of discipleship for someone who cannot express it in their own words strikes me as a key way for the church to take seriously the belonging, gifts, and discipleship of people with profound IDD. This kind of practice not only applies to credobaptism contexts in which those to be baptized are older, but might also be cultivated within paedobaptism settings - writing a testimony or letter on the occasion of the baptism of an infant or small child with significant impairments, as an additional sign of the community’s promises to support this person throughout their baptismal life and vocation. This kind of testimony might be written anew each year, as the community comes to know someone more deeply, becoming more closely attuned to their gifts and needs in the church, and wishes not only to reaffirm the centrality of the person’s baptismal identity, but to also remember their promises to love and support the discipleship of all the baptized.

This practice of testimony also serves as a way to reaffirm baptismal vocation in a sustainable and ongoing sense. John Swinton puts it this way:

Within Jesus’ body diversity has become the new norm, and living faithfully in the midst of diversity is the expected way of being in the world. As people are baptized into the body of Christ, so they enter into a space of deep and radical belonging. Within the body of Christ, every body has a place, and every body is recognized as a disciple with a call from Jesus and a vocation that the church needs if it is truly to be the body of Jesus. Such vocations stretch our ecclesial imaginations in powerful and deeply healing ways. Doing nothing can be an act of discipleship. Being cared for can be a fulfillment of one’s humanness. The truth of who we are is held and hidden in
Christ…if the only norm is Jesus, then our task is to live well and to live faithfully with our differences. If difference cannot separate us from Jesus, then it should not separate us from one another.72

Testifying to the baptismal vocation of discipleship among all the baptized, whether it is wordless presence, being cared for, or making a joyful noise in worship, often requires a reframing of perception. For Swinton, this renewal of perspective, by the welcoming of moments to encounter the gifts and visible discipleship of people with profound IDD, occurs in the holy space of “the sacrament of the present moment.”73 In this space of “soulful companioning,” Swinton argues that people encounter the opportunity and “epistemological awareness to allow people to notice things that they never could have noticed before and, in noticing them, to see and respond differently. To be with someone in the moment is to be open to surprise, new possibilities…”74 Schmemann argues that in accompanying both non-disabled and disabled people in the present moment, we must shift our perception toward openness to be surprised by the joyful inbreaking of God: “no matter what our vocation, calling or occupation is - glorious or humble, meaningful or insignificant by the standards of ‘this world’ - it acquires a meaning, becomes a joy and a source of joy,


74 Ibid., 255.
for we begin to perceive and to experience it not in itself but in God and as a sign of His Kingdom.⁷⁵

Before turning our attention to practices of baptismal reaffirmation, I want to first suggest a few examples of practices of testimony to baptismal vocation among people with IDD. Reminding me of the concluding prayer in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer’s rite of Holy Baptism, where the gathered community prays that the newly baptized might be given “the gift of joy and wonder” in all of God’s works,⁷⁶ Elisabeth shared with me about her son James’s spirituality:

“James and I'll be driving down the road and I'll have the radio on and he'll be looking out the window. And he starts talking and he says, “my Master.” And seeing Jesus in the clouds. I don't know whether he sees a physical being or not. But he'll start talking about “my Master. My Master. Oh, my Master.” And he'll just start talking to God.”

In these moments, James’s discipleship and relationship with God testify to his mother in a profound way.

For Frances Young, her son Arthur (who lives with multiple, severe disabilities) offers a wordless testimony to his vocation of discipleship. Young reflects on Arthur’s participation in the liturgy, through his silence, his rapture during music, and his vivid facial expressions.⁷⁷ In this liturgical context, Young illustrates how Arthur witnesses to the reality

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⁷⁵ Schmemann, Of Water and the Spirit, 93.

⁷⁶ The Episcopal Church, The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 308.

that we may receive grace without being aware. The baptismal vocation that Arthur expresses through his participation in the liturgy, for Young, is being loved - and an exercise of this vocation does not require words or intellectual assent. In her memoirs and other theological writings, Young writes a testimony of Arthur's joyful vocation of wordless discipleship.

In a similar way, Swinton writes about the vocation and contribution of a young adult with multiple disabilities named Stephen to one of his faith communities:

If we take seriously Stephen's contribution to our understanding of the worshipping community we find that the perspective he brings opens up a whole new dimension on what worship is and what it means to be a worshipping community. In the music, in the dance, in the bread and in the wine he encounters a joy and evokes a sense of celebration that surpasses rational understanding and deeply challenges a church that equates faith and knowledge of God solely with intellectual comprehension.

The work of proclaiming these testimonies of baptismal vocation, of discipleship, and of Christian identity, fall as a responsibility upon the baptized Body as a whole. And it is through practices of proclaiming the visible discipleship of all the baptized that churches can come to more carefully attend to all who gather to worship God, more keenly listen and perceive the movement of the Spirit, and more readily proclaim the good news of radically transformed life in Jesus Christ, enacted in the community of the baptized Body.

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78 Ibid.

Baptismal Reaffirmation

What incorporates us into the body of Christ, that is, into his death and resurrection, is the sacrament of baptism. Just as Christ died once and once only, so we are baptized and justified once and for all. Both baptism and justification are unrepeatable events in the strictest sense. What can be repeated is only the recollection of what happened to us once and for all; it is, in fact, not only capable of, but in need of, daily repetition.\(^8\)

As we explored in the last chapter, Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes the necessity of practicing baptismal reaffirmation, so much that he commends it as a daily practice! In this final section, we engage the varied practices of remembrance and reaffirmation across different Christian traditions, as a central way to enact belonging in Jesus as the core of baptismal identity. Practices of baptismal reaffirmation, participated in by individuals and communities together, resist baptism as a single and sentimentalized ecclesial occurrence. Instead, these practices of reaffirmation push the baptized Body to reconsider the shared baptismal identity among all the gathered, call for communal repentance, and invite intentionality and renewal in the living out of newness of life in the Holy Spirit, drawing upon the gifts of all the baptized.

Practices of remembering, or more broadly, reaffirming baptism and baptismal identity occur among both infant and believer’s baptism traditions. Throughout research interviews, a variety of participants spoke about the importance of a range of baptismal reaffirmation practices in the life of their faith communities. Ava recounted to me, “we have a little small bowl so you can remember your baptism.” Dipping her fingers in the baptismal

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waters at Sunday services was a practice of great importance for Ava - especially because she had so loved her baptism - “I kept telling Pastor John I want to do it again! …if I could relive it again, that would be awesome. Just to have that feeling, knowing that you're with God and you're connected with God and the church.” For Ava, a bowl of baptismal water provided one means of connection to the occasion of her baptism as an adult, a reaffirmation of her belonging in the church and to Jesus’ body.

Others reflected on the importance of baptismal reaffirmation practices on the occasion of the baptism of others. Parke noted the liturgy in her tradition as a key site of baptismal remembrance and reaffirmation: “you know, in the Episcopal Church, we renew our baptismal vows every time someone is baptized. So it's a significant reminder of our own baptism when we see other people be baptized.” Hope also reflected on the importance and joy of baptismal remembrance at the occasion of the baptism of new members of Jesus’ body:

“Some kids were on their parent's shoulders so that everybody could see. That was a wonderful tradition. It made me feel really good. And it was a way of bringing out children, you know, remembrance of their own baptisms, which they wouldn't have as a memory…essentially part of formation, letting them know that this was an important part of our church and why.”

Pastor John, whose United Methodist Church commonly baptizes both infants and adults, spoke about it like this:

“We frame remembrance of baptism for everyone at the beginning of a baptism service. Because we always do a congregational remembrance of baptism when we baptize. So we say to everyone here who has been baptized, we’re telling your story right now. So we’re inviting everyone as participants…we don’t talk about remembrance of baptism as the memory of you being baptized. But the remembrance that you have that you were baptized. That you’ve been cleaned. That you have had this truth told over you countless times.”
Pastor John’s reflections on baptismal reaffirmation in his ecclesial context highlight the importance of communal acknowledgement and reaffirmation of the baptismal identity of all the gathered.

Barbara, a member at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, specifically reflected with me on liturgies of baptismal remembrance, and in particular, the practice of the priest sprinkling baptismal water on everyone gathered for the liturgy. Barbara’s son Bob, who does not communicate with words, always enjoys this time of reaffirmation: “it seems about three or four times a year that we do it. Enough that Bob is familiar with it. He knows he is going to get water sprinkled on him!” Though at first Barbara found this practice somewhat strange, she communicated to me how meaningful it had become:

“The first time I went through that, I thought this is the craziest thing. It was just funny. And sometimes it still can be funny. But it is meaningful. And it is just the liturgy of it…this is what we do…this is like when you go to the altar, it’s just that experience over and over again. And for Bob, he thinks it’s great [baptismal remembrance]. And they always sprinkle right on him.”

Ava, Parke, Hope, and Barbara’s reflections on baptismal reaffirmation highlight the embodied and multi-sensory points of engagement in this practice - feeling the water, seeing the baptism of others, hearing a familiar liturgy. The wide-ranging opportunities for multi-sensory engagement in practices of baptismal reaffirmation make them particularly suited for resonance across a wide range of embodied experiences. Pastor Daniel spoke about this reality in the following way: “being in an ecumenical seminary really shaped my appreciation for seeing baptism not as an act that had to be performed ‘just so.’ But instead, as a kind of a centerpiece of visually, sensory, bodily, connected centerpiece of the witness of the church to what God has done through Jesus Christ and what the church is doing through Jesus
Christ.” The centrality of embodied and multi-sensory avenues of participation in acts of baptismal reaffirmation heighten the salience of this ecclesial practice among people with IDD.

David Goode, speaking out of experience as an ethnographer among children with profound disabilities who are also born deaf and blind, highlights modes of engagement apart from symbolic language use, like many of the practices of baptismal reaffirmation highlighted above. Goode notes the possibility of “rich, complex, multifaceted, and maturing social relations…without shared symbolic language,” and argues “that language is not a necessary precondition for thought and reflection (although the quality or character of that reflection may not be available to us).” Goode sees language as one of “many human faculties that allow us to experience and participate” within communities. This potential for powerful formation across multi-sensory practices underscores the importance of frequent practices of baptismal reaffirmation for the formation of the gathered baptized Body, especially among those who experience life outside of the use of symbolic language.

Providing an example of this rich, multi-sensory engagement in practices of baptismal reaffirmation, Bryan Spinks challenges churches to maximize the primary symbol of baptism…the font is often so small as to preclude dipping an infant in the water. Often the baptistery area is dull and without ornamentation, or tucked with pews, or so small as to be unnoticeable. It is little

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82 Ibid.
wonder that baptism has been undervalued if its symbolism and place of celebration is muted.\textsuperscript{83}

Spinks laments the under-engagement of opportunities for embracing baptismal themes and practices in both credobaptism and paedobaptism contexts, encouraging churches to re-discover “the multi-layered significance of baptism. Thus at Epiphany new birth/womb imagery, and at Easter paschal imagery, but other emphases at other times of the liturgical year” through icons, banners, paintings, or projected images on baptistery walls.\textsuperscript{84}

The Lima Document also urges Christian faith communities to rediscover the “vivid signs” of the gift of the Spirit in baptism as a means to “enrich the liturgy.”\textsuperscript{85} These “vivid signs” help congregations respond to the Lima Document’s affirmation that “baptism needs to be constantly reaffirmed.”\textsuperscript{86} Drawing from beyond baptism alone, the Lima Document affirms “the most obvious form of such reaffirmation is the celebration of the eucharist. The renewal of baptismal vows may also take place during such occasions as the annual celebration of the paschal mystery or during the baptism of others.”\textsuperscript{87}

Weil speaks to the power of engaging the physical elements of baptism within practices of baptismal reaffirmation. Weil writes, “I have pleaded for an abundance in the

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\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 211.

\textsuperscript{85} World Council of Churches, \textit{Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry}, 6.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
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signification, an abundance of the signs, because I believe that through that abundance, the signs speak with particular power to our physical humanity. Weil continues with a story of abundance in relationship to the oil of chrism at a baptism:

I had a small pitcher filled with consecrated chrism, and I poured the oil upon the crown of the child’s head and then took both hands and spread the oil over his head. As I poured the oil, some people who were there gasped: they were accustomed to a bit of oil in a pyx on a piece of cotton, of which perhaps a drop would be signed upon the head - hence, the gasp. But as I spread the oil, the fragrance of the balsam permeated the chapel. Not a word of explanation was needed: the entire community smelled the fragrance of Christ.

These examples of multi-sensory practices of baptismal reaffirmation provide diverse avenues for reinforcing the centrality of baptismal identity. These practices train the community to remember the primacy of belonging in Jesus’ body among all the baptized, regardless of disability. They also serve as a reminder of the radical call for the baptized Body - to live lives transformed and continually renewed in the Holy Spirit. In this sense, practices of baptismal reaffirmation may also call communities to confession - highlighting their failure to affirm and support the discipleship of all the baptized, particularly people with IDD, and failing to cultivate belonging in Jesus’ body for all the baptized.

The potential for practices of baptismal remembrance to shape identity were most profoundly revealed to me in my conversations with James. James, who was baptized at St. Matthew’s Baptist Church, has an audio-visual recording of his baptism, which he has watched frequently (at least one time a week) for nearly 10 years. As a result, James saw his

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88 Weil, "Baptism as the Model," 269.

89 Ibid., 269-270.
baptism as central to who he was. He reflected to me, after we had watched the video of his baptism together: “It makes me a very important person. When I want to learn about Jesus…I watch my movie again.” James’s participation in re-watching his baptism, an obvious practice of baptismal remembrance and reaffirmation, shaped his vision of identity as primarily rooted in baptism.

This returning to affirm a sense of liturgical self among members of a gathered community may not be possible or appropriate through a video or audio recording in all Christian denominations. More liturgical traditions may find resonances throughout the liturgical year and feast celebrations as important occasions to reaffirm baptismal identity. Johnson expands upon this possibility, writing, “another way to expand our appreciation for the richness of baptismal imagery is to pay attention to the entire liturgical year itself as the hermeneutical key for ongoing liturgical catechesis, ongoing mystagogy in the meaning and significance of our initiation.”90 Later, Johnson continues, “the recovery of a baptismal spirituality calls us to the liturgical year itself as the ongoing celebration and continued formation in our baptismal identity.”91 Pastor John described the importance of encouraging active community participation in practices of baptismal remembrance in order to emphasize the core identity proclamation occurring in these practices:

“\textit{We also say, you know, pastors don’t baptize. The church baptizes. We are baptizing. We are the body of Christ. We are the incarnate presence of Jesus in this moment, that is immersing these folks in the truth of their identity. And so we frame it as the church - God’s work through the church...it’s the iterative declaration of who God is and therefore who we are.}\”

90 Johnson, \textit{The Rites of Christian Initiation}, 469.

91 Ibid., 471.
For churches who do not live primarily within the rhythms of the liturgical year, occasions such as homecoming celebrations, founders’ days, or celebrations of the baptisms of others, constitute appropriate occasions for the reaffirming of baptismal identity through practices of baptismal reaffirmation, ideally supplemented by preaching, service, and formation practices in the church that reinforce the deep theological wells of meaning surrounding baptismal identity and participation in the community of the baptized Body.

Practices of reaffirming baptism not only testify to a shared identity as it relates to the work and declaration of God, but also provide a means for calling the community to responsibility and repentance, particularly in relationship to church communities’ responses to people with IDD. In this way, practices of baptismal reaffirmation provide what Lathrop envisions as “a place of alternative imagination about the structures of the world,” constituting practices that provide a source of hope - practices that “speak the meaning of Jesus Christ that all things may live.”

Swinton describes this process of re-imagining as uncomfortable yet necessary:

God is with [Stephen] in a way that transcends my intellectualized worldview, and makes me ashamed of the deep questions I ask of the theological implications of his situation. God is with him in the bread and in the wine, but not in any way that I have experienced or that all of my arduous theological training can explain or legitimize. In fact, my hopeless dependence on my intellect for making sense of the world actually prevents me from even beginning to understand how God might be with him in any kind of meaningful sense. The truth is that God is more mysterious and unpredictable than I am comfortable with imagining.

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As Swinton describes here, witnessing the participation of people with IDD in ecclesial practices can offer a platform of confession for people who do not live with IDD in the baptized Body. In this practice of confession, the baptized Body seeks to re-open itself to the work of God in the lives of baptismal discipleship exemplified among people with IDD.

In the context of his research interview, Andrew described to me the sense of communal responsibility welling up within him during his practices of baptismal reaffirmation:

“Most of the baptisms that I’ve seen at St. Barnabas are children. What I experienced is the choice of the body to embrace and to take responsibility for the child…it’s quite wonderful. I mean…certainly I believe that the choice [for the baptismal candidate] can be important, but the choice can’t be made unless the church embraces and supports and commits…so that means a lot to see that it happens. And also to be reminded that that support and commitment of other people is critical, I would say for my own baptism.”

Andrew’s reflections on the importance of the communal responsibility evoked in practices of baptismal reaffirmation serves as a call to repentance within communities seeking to support the baptismal identities and vocations of people with IDD. As individuals remember their own baptisms, might they survey their community and wonder who is missing from this affirmation? Where have promises of baptismal support been broken? Where have identities of baptism been exchanged for the facade of a homogenous community where discomforts associated with human differences have seemingly been erased? Where has the church failed to remember the baptism of people with IDD, or even failed to baptize them at all? And in remembering the baptismal identity of those gathered, might these practices of remembrance constitute an opportunity to seek out those who have yet to be gathered into the baptized Body?
Frequent and multi-sensory practices of baptismal reaffirmation remind church communities that belonging to Jesus constitutes their core identity. These practices of reaffirmation can serve as a primary source of re-orientation and confession within the baptized Body, calling for humility before the Triune God, confessing failures to affirm and support the baptismal identity of people with IDD, and asking the Holy Spirit for guidance and newness of life in embracing the discipleship of all the baptized.

**Concluding with Practices: Proclaiming Discipleship and Belonging**

Toward the end of our interview, Steve and I began talking about the place of baptismal remembrance and other baptismal practices in the landscape of Christian life together. Steve reflected,

“…every time we baptize the priest comes through the congregation and sprinkles the water. And you remember your baptism. I think it’s partly hard to remember our baptisms because we’re not threatened right now…but we may be getting closer and closer to the time when just to survive as Christians we’ll need to remember our baptism.”

Steve’s reflections on the lack of threat perceived by Christians in the context of the contemporary United States perhaps rings true. But in the context of this work, we have sought to resist the threats of homogenous belonging within ecclesial communities, particularly in the ways that they reproduce patterns of marginalization, rejection, and discrimination against people with IDD. Returning to the place of baptism in the Christian church helps us to resist patterns of bounded, homogenous belonging, and instead return to a communal task of discipleship marked by radical hospitality and belonging. Baptism and baptismal practices provide key sites to help churches return to their identities in Jesus,
through confession, renewal, and ongoing transformation in newness of life, sustained by the Holy Spirit. Multi-sensory baptismal practices provide avenues where all people, whether those we describe as living with profound IDD, or those who are non-disabled, testify to the basis of Christian identity and life together - Jesus Christ.

Participation in baptismal practices affirms and renews the life of discipleship among the whole baptized Body - not only among the theologically educated, the socially mobile, and the liturgically savvy. An intentional and enlivened embrace of baptismal preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation opens the floodgates to people across the spectrum of human limitations and disabilities, radically and robustly affirming their communal, participatory, and Jesus-centered identity. It is through these practices that communities of baptismal belonging might live into newness of life, sustained by the Holy Spirit, to be for each other and for the world the baptized Body of Jesus.
Conclusion

Becoming the Baptized Body

It was a sunny day, and as we sipped lemonade in the shade, I asked Ava what baptism shows us about being human. She squinted a bit and then began to slowly nod, sharing the following: “I think as a human being we can be steady, but still and gentle, knowing who you are, where you belong with Christ.”

Ava’s expression of baptismal identity – a gentle assurance of belonging with Jesus – seems a fitting summary of the work of this dissertation. Engaging with Ava and others with IDD shaped my questions about how anthropological imaginations become incarnate in ecclesial contexts and about the adequacy of existing theological models to describe these incarnate expressions and spur communities on in their lives of transformative discipleship. The imaginations of my research participants around the centrality of Jesus, community, and participation encouraged me to newly explore scripture, liturgy, and baptismal practices as gifts to ecclesial communities, that through the power of the Holy Spirit, lead to radical transformation for all the baptized.

Baptism is the church’s ancient practice of making Christians, of initiation into the ecclesial community, making and marking members of the body of Jesus. In baptism, the power of the Holy Spirit joins the baptized to Jesus, as they share in his death and
resurrection. Those baptized are marked as Christ’s own forever\(^1\) and as people given by the Holy Spirit to a communal vocation of discipleship in newness of life. Baptismal practices are ritual reminders of what Paul names “new creation:” an identity rooted in Jesus, non-contingent on human skill and capacity, and primary over all particularities of gender, race, age, class, or disability.

All too often, baptism has become the site of marginalization or even rejection of people with IDD from ecclesial communities, either by baptismal refusal or by refusing true belonging and support in a community of post-baptismal nurture. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, however, baptismal practices offer significant and central ways for the Church to welcome the belonging, participation, and gifts of all the baptized, including people with even the most profound expressions of IDD. For church communities marked primarily by homogenous belonging, reconsidering baptismal theologies and practices offers avenues for ecclesial transformation.

Instead of addressing ecclesial questions of belonging through popular disability theology frameworks of friendship, God’s image, or inclusion, baptism opens up more profound pragmatic, scriptural, pastoral, and participatory possibilities for communal transformation of anthropological imagination. Baptism also points the way to practices that sustain the belonging and discipleship among all the baptized. The research participants for this project identified the participatory, Jesus-centered, and communal features of baptism as

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\(^1\) The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 308.
especially salient for drawing all in the baptized Body together in communities of radical belonging. In particular, the baptismal practices of preparation, testimony, and reaffirmation are sites in which communities may be drawn more closely to scripture, to one another, and to the Triune God. These baptismal practices also suppose a radical transformation of communal life, offering sites for challenge, repentance, and renewal of ecclesial communities in their imaginations and practices of life together.

As contemporary churches increasingly seek wisdom for ways to foster Jesus-centered belonging for people with IDD, and new ways to embrace the gifts and discipleship of all in the baptized Body, the work of this dissertation provides theological, scriptural, and practical answers to these questions, informed by not only scholarship, but the experiences of people with IDD, their loved ones, clergy, and faith communities. The work of this dissertation at the intersection of disability and baptism opens new avenues for future inquiry across a variety of registers, including further theological engagement of qualitative research exploring how baptismal practices shape ecclesial communities of belonging. Additional sites for further research raised in this dissertation include further critical disability engagement with Pauline literature and anthropology, the synthesis of disability studies, disability theology, and ritual studies scholarship, renewed engagement with historical theological texts and archival resources documenting the experiences of people with IDD, and attention to how a baptismal hermeneutic might continue to inform and expand existing arguments within the field of disability theology.
Baptism is a site of critical transformation of theological anthropologies in contemporary ecclesial communities. Baptismal theologies and practices invite the Church into a Jesus-centered, communal, and participatory account of all human creatures, and they also point to concrete avenues of participation in this process of renewal. May the whole baptized Body, empowered by the Holy Spirit, find new depths of belonging, discipleship, and newness of life.
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Biography

Sarah Jean Barton was born in Salem, Oregon on October 18, 1986. She holds a B.S. in Biology from Seattle Pacific University (2009), an M.S. in Occupational Therapy from Boston University (2012), and an M.T.S. from Duke Divinity School (2014). She is a registered and licensed Occupational Therapist, with board certification in pediatrics. Barton’s published work includes “Theologising Disability: The Future of Critique and Collaboration at the Intersections of Theology and Disability” in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability: Looking Towards the Future* (Ashgate, 2019); “Availability of Post-Hospital Services Supporting Community Reintegration for Children with Identified Surgical Need in Uganda” (*BMC Health Services Research*, 2018); “A Critical Approach to Integrating Christian Disability Theology in Clinical Rehabilitation” (*The Journal of Religion and Disability*, 2017); and “Religion and Spirituality in Pediatrics” in *Spirituality and Religion Within the Culture of Medicine: From Evidence to Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

Since 2011, Barton has achieved the following distinctions: Member of Pi Theta Epsilon (2011-Present), Patient Service Champion Awards at Duke University Health System (2013, 2014), Doctoral Fellow (2015-2017) and Honorary Dissertation Fellow (2018-2019) with The Louisville Institute, Graduate Student Fellow at The Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University (2017-2018), Award for Outstanding Mentorship in The Bass Connections Program at Duke University (2018), and an Academic Fellow through The Episcopal Church Foundation’s Fellowship Partners Program (2018-Present). In 2018, Barton began serving as a Henri Nouwen Fellow at Western Theological Seminary.