

## 5. CREATION, HANDICAPPISM, AND THE COMMUNITY OF DIFFERING ABILITIES

### PRESENTING THE PROBLEM AND THE DOCTRINE

#### Naming the Problem

The problem of handicappism—discrimination against persons on the basis of physical or mental disability—is neither new nor peculiarly North American. Handicappism has existed wherever the “able-bodied” have wielded the power to make laws and organize the structures of social reality. What is new in North America is the refusal of people with disabilities to accept their marginalization with quiescence. Relatively recent congressional legislation, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, represents the culmination of years of political organizing and activism on the part of persons with disabilities.

In Christian communities consciousness about handicappism has slowly been raised through the insistence of members with disabilities, and their families and friends, that they ought to be able to participate fully in the life of the church. In 1975, the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi resolved: “The Church cannot exemplify ‘the full humanity revealed in Christ,’ bear witness to the interdependence of humankind, or achieve unity in diversity if it continues to acquiesce

in the social isolation of disabled persons and to deny them full participation in its life. The unity of the family of God is handicapped where these brothers and sisters are treated as objects of condescending charity. It is broken where they are left out.”<sup>1</sup> More recently, many of the mainline churches have issued policy statements on the church’s ministry to persons with disabilities and on the need for more inclusive forms of worship, architecture, and activities.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, although persons with disabilities have become more visible in society, and although people in and outside the Christian community are beginning to recognize handicappism as a form of discrimination just as unacceptable as racism and sexism, the problem persists: persons with disabilities do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as their “able-bodied” neighbors.

#### Presenting the Doctrine

The doctrine of creation has been used for many purposes in the history of Christian thought. It has been invoked to repudiate metaphysical dualism, to affirm the inherent worth of the natural order, to assert the absolute sovereignty of God or otherwise to characterize the God of Christian faith, to establish the quality of relation between God and God’s creation, to explain the origin of the world, and to give an etiology of human existence. In the modern world, and perhaps more prominently among Protestant than Roman Catholic theologians, the doctrine of creation has often been reduced to the last two of these options: cosmogony and etiology.

This narrow focus of the doctrine of creation on the question of origins should not be surprising, if for no other reason than that the biblical *locus classicus* for the doctrine falls in a

1. Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, ed., *Partners in Life: The Handicapped and the Church*, Faith and Order Paper No. 89 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979), 177.

2. See, for example, *That All May Enter: Responding to People with Disability Concerns* (Louisville: Offices of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1989).

book with the title "Genesis." But at least two developments in modern theology further help to explain the contemporary preoccupation with the question of origins. First, the progress of biblical criticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries raised the question: To what extent may biblical narratives be relied upon to present accurate and true accounts of historical events? The creation narratives of Genesis 1–3 have been subjected to this line of questioning in a variety of ways in the last two hundred years. Some theologians assume that the narratives do intend to give an account of the facts of creation, and thus they ask simply whether the account may be considered to be literally factual. Other theologians argue that the narratives should be taken as belonging to the genre of myth rather than chronicle. Yet even these theologians may question whether the mythical picture of creation given in Genesis is coherent with a particular scientific account of the origins of the universe and of biological life-forms. In short, the questions raised by critical approaches to the text of Scripture have encouraged theologians to focus on the question of origins when speaking about the doctrine of creation.

Second, with the rise of evolutionary biology in the nineteenth century, many Christian theologians were faced with a full frontal attack on the truth of Christianity itself. The doctrine of creation became the place for playing out the battle, even though other doctrines were equally threatened (as was, for example, theological anthropology). The questions posed by the new science were broader than those raised by historical criticism. Now theologians asked not only whether the Genesis narratives were reliable historical sources but also whether Christian beliefs about the kind of world we live in were truthful.

These two developments in modern theology have defined the agenda for the doctrine of creation for a very long time. Creationism, the doctrine that the Genesis narratives are reliable accounts of the origins of the world, is the subject of much theological writing—both for and against. And the dialogue be-

tween theology and the natural sciences has generated a huge literature.<sup>3</sup> I will argue, however, that this identification of the doctrine of creation with the question of origins is something of a modern aberration—a tendency that is neither faithful to Scripture and tradition nor helpful in describing the experience of believing Christians. Moreover, as we shall see below, this approach to the doctrine of creation presents particularly difficult problems for people with disabilities.

The patterns of thought and structures of belief that support handicappism are deeply ingrained in North American culture. Sadly, some experts in the field of disability and rehabilitation studies point to religious beliefs and theologies as prime ideological foundations for the suppression and marginalization of persons with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the Christian doctrine of creation is often used to assert the notion of an originally "perfect" and "normal" world, beside which all impairment and disease are seen as evil deviations—the result of sin.

Must the doctrine of creation be so conceived? And are there other ways in which this fundamental Christian doctrine supports the marginalization of persons with disabilities? Or does the Christian tradition contain within itself a liberating view of the meaning of divine creation for human life in the world—a view that values the inherent worth of the environment and of all persons? These are the questions that we must attempt to address in this chapter. In the following section we will analyze the structures of belief that are used to justify discrimination against persons with disabilities. Next (in the section entitled "Analyz-

3. For an overview of the literature on creationism, see Roger E. Timm, "Scientific Creationism and Biblical Theology," in *Cosmos as Creation*, ed. Ted Peters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 247–64. For a historical account of the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences, see John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), and David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986). Peters's volume *Cosmos as Creation* presents a good summary of the range of theological perspectives on the doctrine of creation and modern science.

4. See, for example, Myron G. Eisenberg, et al., eds., *Disabled People as Second-Class Citizens* (New York: Springer, 1982), 5–6, 10, 35.

ing the Doctrine") we will examine the ways in which Christian beliefs about creation have either supported or challenged the structures of discriminatory thinking. Finally, in the concluding section, we will attempt to reconstruct the doctrine in such a way as to address the problem of handicappism in North America on the eve of the twenty-first century.

## ANALYZING THE PROBLEM AND THE DOCTRINE

### Analyzing the Problem

One need not look long before discovering evidence of rampant handicappism in our culture. A startling article in the *Chicago Tribune* recounted the tale of what happened on the Northwestern University campus after one of the busy cafeterias hired a handicapped woman to check student identification cards at the entrance. The manager at first received quiet complaints: "You know we're all for hiring the handicapped, but she's very slow." But it was not long before the complaints were taken to the student newspaper in astonishing letters to the editor. One blamed the food service for hiring a "token" handicapped employee who was clearly unqualified and inefficient. Another letter suggested that "perhaps some people would like to train parakeets to perform . . . [the employee's job] as well."<sup>5</sup>

What are the structures of belief that allow for this kind of discriminatory discourse? Perhaps one of the most powerful is the tyranny of the "normal." We are a culture almost obsessed with assessing ourselves against standard measures, not only of physical growth and mental capacity but also of developmental stages and skills. Such measurement can serve useful purposes in diagnosing illness and in appropriately challenging people to learn and grow. But often assessment is used to force individuals

5. *Chicago Tribune*, Thursday, February 21, 1991, sec. 2, p. 1. Of course, no one will deny that the initial problem is that people are in a hurry and have a limited period of time in which to have lunch. But the emotive language used and the excessive anger expressed betray handicappism.

into categories that identify what is "normal" and to ostracize those who do not fit. It is precisely persons with disabilities who often suffer from this practice; they are identified, usually from birth, as abnormal people who will always need special help to overcome their "handicaps."<sup>6</sup>

The tyranny of the normal also appears in the fear of difference and intolerance of eccentricity. Not only people with disabilities but also people of color, women, and many other groups are seen as "the other"—something that is alien and dangerous. Even the eccentricities that might be seen as harmless expressions of individuality are rarely accepted in the broad mainstream of North American culture. To be accepted is to conform.<sup>7</sup>

Closely related to the solitary focus on normality is the myth of an original uniformity that preceded diversity. This myth has been powerfully reinforced by images from the Bible that have been significant in shaping North American consciousness. The myth of original uniformity is often invoked to explain why there is social or political turmoil in our culture. Consider, for example, recent debate about whether English should be the legally

6. One of the most difficult problems in writing on this subject is that of finding an appropriate and acceptable language for persons with disabilities. The word "handicap" is taken from the practice used in racing of equalizing the chances of winning by giving artificial advantages or imposing disadvantages on certain contestants. Therefore, a "handicap" is taken to be a disadvantage that makes achievement unusually difficult. "Disability" implies inability to do something because of physical or mental impairment or limitation. But to call persons "handicapped" or "disabled" is to reduce them to the particular disability they possess. "Handicapped," in any case, is a word laden with hidden assumptions. A particular disability, say blindness, does not necessarily make any achievement unusually difficult. Only in a society designed by and for those who can see will blindness be perceived automatically as a handicap. The currently favored expression "differently abled" well expresses that persons should not be reduced to their disabilities, but it also tends to discount the reality of the specific challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Disabilities to see, to hear, to walk, and so on, do exist, and they need to be acknowledged. But a person who cannot see is not a "disabled person," because he or she will have many other abilities that are potent and effective. It seems best, therefore, to speak of persons with disabilities rather than of "the disabled"; and it certainly is worth noting that the very word "handicapped" used to describe a person is an example of handicappism, in that it presupposes the superior value of a world defined by able-bodied persons. For a fuller discussion of this matter see Stewart D. Govig, *Strong at the Broken Places: Persons with Disabilities and the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 1-4, 120-21.

7. Paul Tillich's description of American culture as "democratic conformism" remains accurate on this point (*The Courage to Be* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1952], 103-12).

binding language of the United States or whether bilingualism is preferable. The proponents of an English-only policy often assert that it is the fault of recent immigrants that the question even arises. In the “good old days” everyone spoke English as a matter of course. This argument, whatever the merits of the position it is intended to support, simply fails to acknowledge the multilingualism of the North American continent from the very beginning of its European colonization; it owes more to the myth of original uniformity than to historical reality.

This myth functions in other subtle ways as well. For example, it paints the picture of the “typical” American—a construct used not only in informal speech and journalism but also in academic and scientific writing and research. This “typical” American has certain characteristics and behaviors, and deviation from these is taken as representative of “otherness.” Perhaps the most striking recent example of this use of the myth of uniformity is the disclosure that the majority of research on cardiovascular disease has been performed on middle-aged white men. Even though this sample represents a relatively small segment of the society, the results of the research have been considered uniformly applicable. And the myth not only provides the most perfect subject of study (that is, the “original” or most basic North American person) but also sets the agenda for the questions or problems that will be investigated (that is, those of this “original” person—the middle-aged white male). Federal dollars are poured disproportionately into medical research on the health problems of this “typical” American, while the challenges of substantial portions of our population are ignored (for example, research on the prevention and treatment of breast cancer). These inequalities in medical research, of course, land us squarely in the midst of issues of classism, racism, and sexism. These, no less than handicappism, are often buttressed by the myth of original uniformity.

A third structure of belief that supports handicappism in North America is what might be called a “subjective idealism” in the moral realm. What I mean by this is the common assumption

that what cannot be seen is not real and thus cannot be a problem (*esse est percipi!*). In passing the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Congress estimated that forty-three million Americans had one disability or more. This is no small minority. In fact, estimates suggest that between 8 and 10 percent of the world population have disabilities.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately for the citizens of this continent who have disabilities, however, the lack of accessible public space has rendered them invisible to many of their neighbors; and this invisibility has, in turn, functioned precisely to convince those neighbors that they do not exist, rather than to persuade them that people with disabilities are the victims of society’s neglect.

A final structure of belief that supports handicappism is stigmatization. This can occur in relatively benign, as well as more aggressive, modes. The “kind” face of stigmatization is seen in patronizing attitudes and in excessive pity. The *person* is not seen—only the disability counts. And the disability is taken to be *very* disabling. The more malevolent form of stigmatization is seen in the blaming of persons with disabilities for their own and society’s ills and in the avoidance of these persons as if their disabilities were contagious.<sup>9</sup>

### Analyzing the Doctrine

For better or for worse, the doctrine of creation has customarily been developed from an exegesis of Genesis 1–2 and its sequel in chapter 3 (for in practice creation is almost never considered apart from the fall). Whether the narratives are taken to be literally true or whether they are regarded as myths, theologians throughout the history of Christian thought have used this story to derive certain principles about God and God’s relationship to the world. What are some of these principles?

Perhaps most important is that God created the world *ex nihilo*. Ironically, much recent biblical scholarship maintains

8. Müller-Fahrenholz, ed., *Partners in Life*, 6–7.

9. Eisenberg et al., eds., *Disabled People*, 3–12.

that this concept cannot be derived from the biblical account of creation, where God is, rather, one who brings order from chaos.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Christian theologians have insisted that God's creative activity is not like human creativity since God calls something into being from nothing. Thus, while everything that exists is ultimately dependent upon God, God is transcendently free of all God's creatures. And God does not share the status of "Creator" with another: God, the one God, is the source of all that is.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the Genesis narratives suggest that God's way of relating to the world is personal or at least person-like. God is represented as deliberating about what to create and in what order to create. Sharing the human characteristic of aesthetic sense, God takes delight in the created order and pronounces it "good." God is also presented as one who "walks" and "converses" with the human inhabitants of the Garden of Eden. All of these qualities are personal or person-like. Many theologians argue, therefore, that, despite the alleged difference between human and divine creativity, God must be "personal" in some sense. This is true even of theologians who candidly acknowledge the mythical, anthropomorphic quality of the Genesis narratives.

Third, it has been inferred from the story of creation in Genesis 1–2 that the creation is a completed act of God.<sup>12</sup> Of course few present-day theologians would say that the creation occurred in six twenty-four-hour days, as many premodern theologians

10. See Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988). Cf. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 72–92.

11. A powerful twentieth-century argument for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* may be found in Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959). But this doctrine is not without its critics in contemporary theology. See, for example, Michael Welker, "Was ist 'Schöpfung'? Genesis 1 und 2 neu gelesen," *Evangelische Theologie* 51 (1991): 208–24.

12. On this point, as well, contemporary biblical scholarship would demur; see Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*. In addition, the generalization must be tempered by the recognition that the ancient notion of a *creatio continua* has also been significant in the history of Christian thought.

believed. But Christian theology has traditionally distinguished (and still does) between two divine activities in relation to the world: creation and providence. Creation is the act that got things going, so to speak, and providence is the activity that keeps the machinery running—the maintenance operation.<sup>13</sup> The work of creation, understood in this bifurcated scheme, is a completed work, while the doctrine of providence becomes, for many theologians, the way to ensure a continuing relationship between God and the world. For few Christian theologians could tolerate the idea of a God who sets the created order in motion and then withdraws to allow it to run according to its own inner principles.

Fourth, the story of the temptation and fall of the first humans, in Genesis 3, is often used to establish a causal link between sin and evil. Before the fall, it is argued, there was no evil. The created order was free from the flaws, both natural and social, that we term "evil." Harmony and bliss reigned supreme in the primordial paradise. But the sin of Adam and Eve changed all that: evil was introduced, not incidentally, but directly and intentionally by God as a punishment for sin. And in what does this evil consist? Death, first and foremost, followed closely by exhaustion in work and pain in childbirth. Theologians whose reading of the text is literal believe that there was a time when these seemingly natural realities were not a part of human existence. But even theologians who read the text as mythical argue that these evils are not a part of the structure of being but rather a distortion of it.<sup>14</sup> All human beings since the first human pair, then, are born too late, to a world grown weary with the results of sin. We can only mourn the loss of our original perfection.

13. A notable exception to this way of organizing the system of doctrine is Friedrich Schleiermacher, who argued that the doctrine of providence (or preservation) is the fundamental doctrine describing God's relation to the world and that the doctrine of creation is simply absorbed by it (*The Christian Faith*, trans. of the 2d German edition, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart [1928; reprint, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976], §§33–39).

14. See, for example, Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), 2:29–59.

This brings us to a final inference drawn from the Genesis creation narratives: that is, that the world is profoundly in need of re-creation. The divine pronouncement of goodness was not permitted to stand without challenge: sin, and consequently evil, disrupted the brief period of innocence that the world and its first inhabitants enjoyed. But this distortion of goodness is also not the last word. Christian theologians have used the doctrine of creation, then, as a presupposition of the doctrine of redemption. Creation sets up the conditions for the possibility of the new creation, secured by the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of creation presents the relationship between God and the created order that is presupposed by the doctrine of reconciliation.

Now we must ask what these five very common theological principles drawn from the Genesis narratives have to say to persons with disabilities. The idea of creation *ex nihilo* is, I believe, a helpful one in that it places all creatures in the same relationship to God: namely, that of absolute dependence. In this sense, the Christian doctrine of creation is nonhierarchical. Whatever “orders” of creation there may be, no individual part of the creation can claim ontological superiority. Only God exists *a se*. To this extent, the “able-bodied” cannot claim an elevated status in creation; nor can humans over animals, or animate over inanimate matter. Ultimately, all stand, qua creatures, in the same creaturely relation to God, and all partake of the rights and benefits that belong to creaturehood.

The concepts of divine personality and of creation as a finished act are perhaps best considered together. While there are good reasons for maintaining that God is in some respects person-like (for example, to avoid a mechanistic understanding of ultimate causes), there are also dangers that present problems, especially for persons with disabilities. As noted above, the doctrines involving God’s relation to the world are traditionally separated into the rubrics “creation” and “providence.” And just as the God of creation is seen as person-like, so also the God

is who providentially sustains the world. This means, among other things, that God consciously deliberates about what to do and when to do it. Thus, natural phenomena, such as floods or droughts, famines, blizzards, plagues, and birth defects, may all be said to be the results of ad hoc divine deliberation. God “decides” to do this or that, now or later, here or there. For the person with a disability, this inevitably raises the question of theodicy: Why did a good and omnipotent God choose to do this thing rather than another? And why did God do it to me?<sup>15</sup>

The problem is further complicated by the view of creation as a finished act. The original creation was good, but sin introduced evil into the system. Now the fact that evil is permitted to persist in the created order is, according to this view of divine causality, surely also the result of divine deliberation. The “original perfection” of the created order is lost, and we can only look back wistfully to what might have been. Although we have no experiential knowledge of a world without disability, the view of creation as finished act invites the view that disability is not a part of the essence of God’s creation but rather a perversion of it. Disability, therefore, is either willed or allowed by God, not as a part of the original good plan of creation but rather as the punishment for sinful deeds: disabilities are necessarily evils.

This leads us, of course, to the fourth principle derived from the Genesis narratives: the connection between sin and evil. This is perhaps the most dangerous territory for persons with disabilities, for their disabilities, as we have just seen, are commonly regarded as evils introduced by the fall. Before considering the connection of sin and evil, however, let us look first at the understanding of evil presented in Genesis 3. Pain, exhaustion, and death are seen as the primary evils. But are these things always evils? Must we, that is, assign them no positive, natural function but see them only as divine penalties? Does not pain help a per-

15. For more on problems with the notion of divine personality, see J. M. E. McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906), 186–220, which remains one of the best discussions of this subject.



son to attend to his or her injuries, rather than to ignore them? And does not exhaustion force otherwise driven people to rest? And what of death? Could it not be the height of human presumption to assume that we are not like other living things, for which death is a part of life? Granted there are forms of pain and exhaustion that seem purposeless, and death seems at some times more cruel than at others. But the restrictive definition of evil derived from Genesis 3 is at least open to question.

Now the issue of whether disabilities can be defined as evils in themselves is similarly open to debate. While I do not discount the suffering experienced by persons with disabilities, I do wish to question why we automatically define disability as evil. Human beings are an amalgam of thousands of abilities, and each of us has different abilities in different degrees. Often the limitation of abilities in one area contributes to the excellence of abilities in another. Is this perhaps a part of the infinite variety of human life intended and proclaimed good by the deity?<sup>16</sup> If one considers human beings in this way, it is difficult to imagine what would be the definition of a "perfectly normal" human person.

If, nevertheless, we allow that some disabilities are in some sense evils, what of the connection traditionally made with sin? Clearly, much of the stigmatization suffered by persons with disabilities stems from the notion that disability is the punishment for sin. Jesus encounters this problem in the disciples' question regarding the man born blind (John 9:2): Who sinned, this man or his parents? The present-day version of this story is played out in the maternity ward of many a modern hospital: What did the mother do, or what did she ingest, during her pregnancy to make the baby this way? Sometimes, of course, the question is entirely

16. Many persons with disabilities will testify that they have acquired new and important skills precisely because of their disabilities. For an interesting instance of this kind, see Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 3d ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 147-48. In fact, some persons with disabilities argue that the special skills they acquire as a result of their identities outweigh any supposed "disadvantage" they may be assumed to be burdened with. See, for example, the interesting discussion of the Deaf Culture Movement in Edward Dolnick, "Deafness as Culture," *Atlantic Monthly* 272 (September 1993): 37-53.

appropriate, but just as often it expresses what Jesus saw as a false habit of mind (cf. also Luke 13:4). Even the way in which many people avoid persons with disabilities betrays their deep-seated horror at something gone terribly wrong. Seeing a person with a disability calls to mind both one's own vulnerability and one's own culpability. The traditional conception of the connection between sin and evil is particularly problematic for the way in which others see persons with disabilities.

Finally, the notion that the world is in need of re-creation may, at least, be more helpful on the question of handicappism, provided that re-creation is not understood as *merely* the restoration of an original ideal. Re-creation can be seen to stand in tension with the notion of creation as finished act insofar as it suggests that God is not yet finished with the universe and its inhabitants. New developments, fresh insights, unexpected possibilities await the world. Does this mean that we can expect a world free from pain, exhaustion, and death? Perhaps. Does this mean that eventually there will be a world free of disability? Perhaps. We cannot see the telos because we are a part of the web of nature; but we can suspend our judgments about what is "normal" and "original" to this world in the expectation that God's creative work is making everything new. It seems to me that the "new creation" could be understood not in terms of restoration of the "old" order but as the fashioning of a new order in which pain, exhaustion, and death are inducements to a new understanding of community.

#### RECONSTRUCTING THE DOCTRINE AND ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

##### Reconstructing the Doctrine

What must the doctrine of creation look like in order to avoid contributing to the problem of handicappism in North America? Within the limits of the present chapter we can only provide a

brief outline of what the reconstruction might look like. In short, creation must not be taken to be about origins so much as about relationships.<sup>17</sup> Rather than giving an account of how the world came to be or how human beings came to be the kind of beings that they are, the doctrine of creation intends to define the order for which we are called to work while it is day (John 9:4). This just order (1) sees all humans as related to God as their source of being without reducing human diversity to some supposed original uniformity; (2) accepts a connection between sin and evil only as it applies to the entire web of the natural and social orders and refuses to atomize it as an exact and invariable rule in the life of the individual; (3) insists that right relationship with God is integrally connected to right relation to the entire web of created being; and (4) understands creation/providence, or God's work with the world, to be an ongoing process rather than a finished act.

Each of these points, I believe, not only helps to address the issue of handicappism but also retains or recovers the best of the Christian tradition. The first point captures the radical meaning of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*: that in relation to God we are all alike God's creatures, even though we are all very different in relation to each other. The faithful response to this doctrine is an attitude of humility, in which we recognize that we are bound together with all other creatures in our utter dependence on God.

The second point acknowledges that there is often a connection between sin and evil but sees it on a structural, rather than a personal and individual, level. This approach does not exacerbate the theodicy question for the individual; it condemns the practice of stigmatizing or scapegoating those who suffer from evil.

The third point retains the idea that creation provides the vi-

sion of a just order to be achieved by reconciliation. This just order includes not only humanity's relationship with God but also humans' relations with their fellows and with nature, as well as nature's own inner relations. Reconciliation, then, cannot by definition be otherworldly. It is precisely this world and this humanity that God is reconciling to Godself. And humans can participate in God's reconciling work insofar as they work to realize the vision of a just order in their own lives.

The fourth point recovers the biblical view of creation as process. God's work with the created order is ongoing, and perfection stands ahead of us as the telos of creation. The old dogmatic division of creation and providence, therefore, seems no longer helpful.

#### Addressing the Problem

When the doctrine of creation is constructed in the way I have outlined above, it can address the structures of belief that lead to handicappism. It undercuts the tyranny of the normal by questioning the very existence of a "normal" human being. Similarly, it deflates the myth of original uniformity. Creation is in process; if one wishes to project a concept of "original perfection," then one must see it in the future and not in the distant past. "Subjective idealism" in the moral realm is ruled out by the normative relations that the doctrine of creation establishes. Inattention to any of God's creatures is tantamount to inattention to the Creator: the neglect of neighbor or of the environment is rebellion against God.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the stigmatization of persons with disabilities cannot be supported by a doctrine of creation that refuses to atomize the sin/evil connection. The pressing moral issue is not to locate the blame for sin but to participate in God's act of taming

18. John Calvin says this well: "Therefore... let all readers know that they have with true faith apprehended what it is for God to be Creator of heaven and earth, if they first of all follow the universal rule, not to pass over in ungrateful thoughtlessness or forgetfulness those conspicuous powers which God shows forth in his creatures, and then learn so to apply it to themselves that their very hearts are touched" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977], 1.14.21 [p. 181]).

17. See Janet Martin Soskice, "Creation and Relation," *Theology* 94 (1991): 31-39; cf. B. A. Gerrish, "Nature and the Theater of Redemption: Schleiermacher on Christian Dogmatics and the Creation Story," in *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 196-216.



chaos, destroying evil, and reconciling the world to Godself. The new order that comes into existence through reconciliation is a community of interdependent persons, *all* of whom are differently abled: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . . God has so adjusted the body . . . that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:12, 24b-26).

## 6. HUMAN BEINGS, EMBODIMENT, AND OUR HOME THE EARTH

Traditional Christian theology, including North American theology, has not taken the body seriously: Christianity has focused on saving souls, not on ministering to bodies. And yet Christianity is the religion of the incarnation, the religion of embodiment, as proclaimed in its central doctrines of Christology (the Word made flesh), the Eucharist (the body and blood of Christ), and the church (the body of Christ). The refusal of Christianity to take seriously its own proclaimed incarnationalism—and even worse, its historical disparagement of bodies, especially the bodies of women, as well as the natural world—has contributed to our present ecological crisis.<sup>1</sup> Christian hierarchical dualism of spirit over flesh, male over female, and human beings over the natural world has been a factor in the Western utilitarian and imperialistic attitude toward the earth.<sup>2</sup> This attitude says: it is here for our use and subject to our control. To be sure, Christianity is not alone responsible for the deterioration and destruction of our planet, and there are traditions within Christianity that sup-

1. See the work of Margaret Miles, especially *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), and *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

2. Lynn White in his famous essay entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" puts this case strongly, though others have qualified it (White's essay can be found in *Ecology and Life: Accepting Our Environmental Responsibility*, ed. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1988]).