

Triona Brading, Lois Bunyan, and Claire Wood

BELONGING



WITHOUT



BARRIERS



BUILDING ACCESSIBLE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

PRAISE FOR BELONGING WITHOUT BARRIERS

'Belonging without Barriers is a deeply insightful and practical resource that speaks to the heart of Christian community. It combines rich theology with compassionate, real-world application, challenging churches to move beyond mere inclusion towards true belonging for every individual. Triona Brading, Lois Bunyan, and Claire Wood write with clarity, warmth, and conviction, offering both biblical foundations and actionable steps for accessibility. It is a timely and essential guide for anyone committed to building communities where every person is valued, honoured, and enabled to flourish.'

Mark Arnold, Additional Needs Ministry Director, Urban Saints

'This is a book that I would have found invaluable when I began ministry with adults with learning disabilities 25 years ago. The content is not only biblically based but also biblically shaped, ensuring that themes of God's image and the value he places on all people are reiterated throughout the book. *Belonging without Barriers* is not a quick read, nor is it so lengthy and complicated that its audience is likely to be limited to professionals and theologians. There is something here for everyone, with plenty of information and advice. I wholeheartedly commend this book to anyone looking to understand and support individuals and families affected by disability.'

Pete Winmill, Founder, Count Everyone In

'Every church needs spiritual and practical help on how to serve those with disabilities in their congregations – and this book is the answer! Every leadership team should appoint someone to read and absorb this excellent and thoughtful resource. The theology is rich, the advice practical, the tone gracious, and the content encyclopaedic. I cannot recommend it highly enough.'

Andy Mason, Mission Director, Co-Mission

‘This beautifully written book invites everyone to reflect on what it truly means to belong in church. As an adoptive and birth parent of two neurodivergent children, for whom church has often been a struggle, I was grateful to find a book that gently weaves biblical principles with real-life stories, helping us to consider and understand what it looks like to create church communities where no barriers exist.’

Louise MacDiarmid, Therapeutic Parenting Coach

‘I wish I had read this book 50 years ago. It is life-changing. It is a handbook for church leaders and those organising any kind of Christian activity – enhancing your understanding of how to include people with all kinds of visible or invisible additional needs (that’s one in three people). This has the potential to hugely increase the scale and fruit of your ministry. In fact, it is a book for every Christian who wants to get inside the head of those in their circle who have any kind of physical, mental, or emotional special need and reach into their heart with the good news.’

Max Sinclair, author of *Halfway to Heaven* and a member of the first Through the Roof Council of Reference

‘When a book contains so much helpful, practical information there is a temptation to skip straight to those chapters. Resist the temptation! The first four chapters challenge our theology and perspective around difference and inclusion, and offer an imperative to be sacrificial in removing the barriers some people encounter as they see to belong within the church.’

Mary Hawes, Former National Children’s Advisor, Archbishops’ Council

‘*Belonging without Barriers* offers churches a clear and compelling vision of what costly, Christ-shaped belonging looks like when it is taken seriously across the whole congregation. Refusing to reduce disability to a niche concern of children’s or seniors’ ministry, the authors address the full spectrum of needs present in a genuinely multigenerational church community. Grounded in scripture and shaped by the pattern of the cross, the book shows that accessibility is not an act of charity but a faithful response to the gospel itself.’

Graham Miller, CEO, London City Mission

'Belonging without Barriers is a comprehensive and practical guide that will help churches reflect more deeply on what it means to be a truly inclusive Christian community. Rooted in scripture and shaped by real pastoral experience, the authors challenge us to move beyond access and attendance towards genuine belonging, where every person is meaningfully welcomed into the family of faith without barrier. The book's theological clarity and practical wisdom make it invaluable not only for church leaders, but also for anyone involved in ministry.'

Paul Cable, Lecturer in Youth and Community Work, Moorlands College

'This book is a goldmine for any church leader or Christian wanting to take the inclusion of *all* of God's people seriously. As a vicar in the Church of England, I haven't thought these issues through nearly as thoroughly as I should have. I have felt both challenged, but more importantly equipped, by this wonderful and compassionate book, full of testimonies and tips that can take any church community forward, even from a standing start. Perhaps the most important takeaway for me was realising that helping people belong is about more than just being good people, it's about being gospel people.'

Pat Allerton, Vicar of St Peter's Notting Hill, author of *A Pocketful of Hope*, @theportablepriest on Instagram

'What a carefully, beautifully written book! Open this book expecting gentleness and care. No question feels too basic. The authors allow us to know how it feels to be in the family who would welcome your love.'

Ed Drew, Director, Faith in Kids

'As a youth pastor and a mother of a young adult with quadriplegic cerebral palsy who also faces physical and learning challenges, I found this book to be both informative and inspiring. My daughter and I have been on a 23-year journey of discovery, exploring how we can use our gifts and abilities to serve God more effectively. The book offers clear insights that combine theological understanding with practical application, emphasising the importance of celebrating and supporting all members of our diverse church communities with unconditional love and encouragement. The message conveyed throughout the book is essential for us as the body of Christ.'

Trish Hahn, Messy Church SEND Co-ordinator



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Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a charity (233280)
and company limited by guarantee (301324),
registered in England and Wales.

EU Authorised Representative: Easy Access System Europe – Mustamäe tee 50,
10621 Tallinn, Estonia, gpsr.requests@easproject.com

ISBN 978 1 80039 420 9
First published 2026
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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This edition © Bible Reading Fellowship 2026
Cover by Ben Bloxham using illustrations by mast3r/stock.adobe.com

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY.

Triona Brading, Lois Bunyan, and Claire Wood

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Ministries



Belonging Without Barriers



@belonging_without_barriers

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*Some names and other details have been changed throughout
to protect people's identities.*

Contents

Foreword	11
Acknowledgements	15
Introduction	17

PART I THEOLOGY

1 The basis for love: image-bearing	22
2 The community of God's people: inclusion	36
3 It seems too hard: sacrifice	47
4 The future of disability: the new creation	57

PART II ACCESSIBILITY IN PRACTICE

Introduction to part II	70
5 Physical disabilities	74
6 Age-related disabilities and impairments	98
7 Learning disabilities	109
8 Specific learning difficulties	133
9 Autism	147
10 Sensory processing disorder	172
11 Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	180
12 Social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) in children	199
Conclusion	219

APPENDICES

1	Glossary	223
2	Accessibility audits.....	226
3	Other organisations offering help in this area.....	227
	Bibliography	229
	Notes.....	241
	About the authors	247

Foreword

This is a book we have been waiting for! A book the UK church needs, to reduce the fear around talking about disability and help people catch the vision for disability inclusion.

There are as many different understandings and experiences of disability as there are people in the church, so you may find that your experience and views differ from those in the book. Yet we hope this book will open up conversations and inspire action in the church to progress disability inclusion.

In recent years, conversations about inclusion and accessibility are moving from the margins to the mainstream. Wider cultural shifts have opened doors for greater understanding of neurodivergence – including autism, ADHD, and sensory processing differences – and the lived realities of those with physical or learning disabilities. Mental health and social well-being are now recognised as integral to human flourishing. Equality, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB) is now high on the agenda in many areas of society, and our ageing UK population means that nearly a quarter of people identify as disabled. These changes present the church with both a challenge and an opportunity: to embody the radical hospitality of Christ in ways that are practical, thoughtful, and rooted in scripture. This book equips us to do that.

Belonging without Barriers is not just another resource on inclusion. It is a call to action. It combines deep theological reflection with practical strategies, making it invaluable for leaders, trustees, children and youth workers, and anyone involved in ministry wanting to love others and create communities where everyone truly belongs. The authors remind us that accessibility is not an optional extra – it is a gospel imperative. When we remove barriers, we reflect the heart of God, who welcomes all people into his family.

At Through the Roof, the Christian disability charity, we have been advocating for disability inclusion in the UK church for over 25 years. Change has come slowly, but it feels like God is really moving in our times! We have just marked a milestone in our 1,000th Roofbreaker disability champion, volunteering

to journey alongside disabled people in their local church. We pray that this movement will grow, so every church will actively welcome disabled people and experience the blessings of knowing their presence.

As I write this (in 2026), the number of UK young people under 18 is about the same as the number of disabled people in the UK. If we think about how much time, resource, and energy goes into children and youth ministry and compare that to disability ministry – there’s a huge difference! That’s why we’re so committed to work together to enable every member of God’s family to experience the true belonging which is theirs in Christ.

The book addresses two essential themes: theology and accessibility in practice.

At its core, accessibility is a theological issue. The church is the body of Christ and every member is an indispensable part of it (1 Corinthians 12). Part I explores what scripture teaches about inclusion, dignity, and (one of Through the Roof’s core values) interdependence. In a world that often prioritises independence and perfection, the gospel offers a different vision: interdependence and grace. Interdependence recognises that we are dependent on God and interdependent upon one another. Arguably it is modelled by God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The authors question assumptions we might make in our churches and show how the Bible gives a mandate to include disabled people: ‘Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the town. Bring in those... who can’t see or walk... I want my house to be full’ (Luke 14:21, 23, NIRV). It challenges us to see accessibility not as charity, but justice. Accessibility is not about doing something ‘extra’ for a few; it is about reshaping our communities so that everyone can participate fully. When we do this, we discover that inclusion enriches the whole body. We learn new ways of worshipping, serving, and loving – expressions of God’s kingdom breaking into the world.

Theology must lead to action, and Part II will help you take practical steps towards becoming a disability-inclusive church. You will find practical tools: a checklist of questions for physical access, multisensory ideas and activities, and strategies for supporting neurodivergent individuals.

One of the strengths of *Belonging without Barriers* is the use of personal stories to ground the writing in real life. Throughout the book, individuals share

first-hand experiences – both the joys of inclusion and the pain of exclusion. These testimonies remind us that accessibility is not abstract; it is about real people longing to encounter God and God’s people without unnecessary obstacles. Their voices call us to listen, learn, and act.

Also included is a helpful glossary of common terms, signposts to access audits, and an appendix of helpful organisations.

Small groups in churches will find the book a good choice for a study text (with discussion questions at the end of every chapter), yet it is also lively and engaging to read for individuals, as well as a practical reference book for pastoral teams to find guidance and insight into a wide range of disabilities.

We may feel burdened by the size of the challenge or lack of resources, but small changes can make a huge difference. Whether you serve in a large urban church or a small rural fellowship, you will find ideas and suggestions which are realistic and adaptable that can be implemented without breaking your budget.

At *Through the Roof*, we see the infinite value and the immense potential of every disabled person. A church without disabled people is an incomplete church – missing potential parts of the body of Christ. We talk about disability inclusion in terms of a journey: from access to belonging to commission (ABC) – working with disabled people to build God’s kingdom and ensuring everyone is encouraged to use their giftings, actively.

As you read, I encourage you to approach this book with an open heart and a willingness to act. Change may require effort, but the reward is immeasurable: a church that reflects the inclusive love of Christ and offers a foretaste of heaven, where everyone will worship together as equals.

May this book inspire you so that, together, we can build communities without barriers – places of belonging where all God’s people can flourish.



Tim Wood
CEO, Through the Roof
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Acknowledgements

Where better to begin a page of thanks than to borrow from Paul's thanks for the church in Rome:

To all... who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.

ROMANS 1:7-8

We are enormously grateful to God for all the supporters he has blessed us with as we have written this book. There are so many people who have supported us with encouragement, with advice, and with direct contributions to this book – so many that we cannot name everyone! We give thanks that he has put us in a church family at St Michael's, who have loved and cared for each of us and have encouraged this project right from the beginning.

First, we want to thank our editor at BRF Ministries, Rachel: we are so grateful to you for taking a chance on three unknown writers with a controversial topic. Our thanks also go to the wider team at BRF Ministries: to Daniele, Felicity, Karen, Tracey, Eley, Josh, and Simon, for their support in getting this book into people's hands.

Next, we want to thank the team at Through the Roof. Your willingness to partner with BRF Ministries in backing this book gave us both confidence and practical support. Through the Roof's support goes back even further than the idea for this book – the Roofbreaker project supported and encouraged us with a vision that extended beyond our church and circumstances.

We would also like to thank Co-Mission, whose early support and encouragement was very significant in our early experiences of disability ministry in churches. We are grateful for your support in enabling us to develop the SEND ministry at Revive, which started us thinking beyond our own church and context.

There are also a huge number of people who have contributed their own stories to this book, without which it would be far less valuable (and readable). Many have been anonymised in the text, but in alphabetical order we would like to thank Alyssa, Ann, Annabelle, Arthur, Bethanie, Carolyn Thomas, Celeste, Chich, Claire, Corrin, DB, Debbie, Dorothy, Graham, Ian, Isla, James, James, Jo, Joe, Lauren, Lis, Louise, Maureen, Merryn, Mike, Miriam, Nat, Paul, Peter, Reuben, Sam, Rod, Rosie, Sarah, Steven, and Wendy.

Very early in writing the book, we knew we wanted to include 'Welcome to Holland'. As a piece of writing, it spoke to us powerfully about both the initial sorrows and subsequent beauty of parenting a child with a disability. We are very grateful to Emily Perl Kingsley for allowing us to use it in our book.

We would like to thank all those who supplied advice, encouragement, and their experience to our early drafts: Ann, Annette, Ed, Elizabeth, Emily, Georgia, Jonny, Louise, Simon, Tim, Travis, and Verity. You each brought your own valuable skills to our early drafts. Thank you for the time, energy, and wit you put into your marginal comments.

We would like to thank our families and housemates, who put up with our endless meetings and late nights as we wrote the book, cheered us on, gave up precious family time at weekends to allow us to go to conferences, and offered sounding boards for our ideas when we were still formulating the exact nuances of what we wanted to say.

Finally, we want to thank you, the reader. Thank you for taking the time to listen to the voices of Christians with different additional needs. Thank you for your desire to love your church family more and grow in understanding about how you can do this. We pray that God would use you for his glory in your church families and communities.

Introduction

We have the privilege of knowing a wonderful family. Their daughter, Sara, is autistic and has ADHD, and she struggles with any kind of ‘demand’ placed on her. When we met them, they were attending an annual Bible festival at which we were supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Sara wouldn’t even leave her room: the noise, the large group, and her fears of instructions, rules, and demands made it impossible for her to attend the children’s activities. There will be many Saras in our local areas: children, or adults, who we may never see at church services, children who won’t attend our midweek groups or holiday clubs. They find the whole thing too hard, too overwhelming, too difficult, or their physical needs mean that they can’t actually get to our church buildings, can’t get through the doors, can’t use our toilets. How can we show love to someone who can’t even access what we’re running? In Sara’s case, her family helped us to get to know her. By the end of the weekend, she was willing to stay with us in the coffee tent while her parents went to one adults’ session.

The next year, the family returned to the Bible festival, and we continued to build a relationship with Sara. Eventually, she was happy to sit with a volunteer leader, acting as one-to-one support for her. This allowed both her parents to attend all the main sessions. By the third year, she was excited about using the sensory tent and one-to-one support. We might call this inclusion: she was now part of the children’s stream at the festival. We may think of others whose immediate needs have been met, allowing them to get through the doors of the building – maybe we have already put in a disabled ramp or provided a large-print service sheet to allow people to feel included, despite additional needs. This is a wonderful start, but the metaphors for God’s people in the Bible call for more. We see images of a body, a family, and a household. Our goal is more than attendance and participation. The Bible paints a picture of a body where every member matters, every member serves, every member loves the others. No one is a consumer, just along for the ride.

Sara’s story didn’t end there. Towards the end of that third weekend, we were surprised to see her being a bit secretive and wanting to spend time alone

at the art table. At the end of the session, she excitedly produced a piece of art she had created for us during that time. It had the words ‘Jesus loves you’, surrounded by abstract watercolours, which she explained represented the storms of life. As we received this picture, we were reminded afresh of God’s love for us, of the firm foundation he offers through the storm. We were teaching and supporting her, addressing her needs, and removing barriers. She was then able to teach us as much as we taught her. She is now begging her parents to sign up for the festival the next time it happens! When any individual is given the opportunity to serve and participate fully, they will not just be included – they will belong.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book is for church leaders and trustees, who can make policy decisions or spend money on their buildings – but not only for them. Nor is it only for youth and children’s workers trying to include children with additional needs. This book is for everyone trusting in God, wanting to love God’s people sacrificially, generously – the way Jesus loves the church. The 2014 Church of England diversity audit found that ‘every congregation includes someone with at least one illness, impairment or disability’.¹ This means that on a Sunday morning, there is likely to be someone already at your church with additional needs. Christian life goes beyond Sunday gatherings: we see Christians coming together for prayer groups at work, activity holidays, Christian Unions at school or university, midweek clubs, and much more. There are likely to be settings with much higher numbers of disabled people, like services run in residential homes. The needs of the people in our groups are changing all the time: disability is dynamic, meaning that many ‘able-bodied’ individuals will one day be disabled. Not every need is visible from the outside – we may discover that an individual is experiencing challenges only after we have known them for some time.

In the UK, 13% of young people are diagnosed with special educational needs (SEN).² Almost a quarter (24%) of the UK’s total population have a disability.³ Nearly a third (32%) of households in the UK have at least one disabled family member.⁴ In addition to those declaring themselves disabled in the UK census, there will be many others who experience difficulties due to neuro-cognitive differences but who may not consider themselves disabled. In a world where, wonderfully, medical care is advancing rapidly and

life expectancy is improving, we should expect these statistics to rise. This means that we cannot and should not leave caring for those with additional needs to a small committee of people.

We hope this book will lift your eyes to God's vision for his covenant community, the church, today. We hope this book will increase people's understanding of others' needs, and help us all become more loving. We have certainly found this to be the case ourselves as we have researched some of the areas we were less familiar with.

We have tried throughout to use language which conveys our love and respect for every individual. If anything we have said causes offence, we hope that it will be read in the spirit in which it is intended. There is a wide range of preferred language within the disabled community, which we have tried to reflect in the book. Where there is particular disagreement, we have explained the reasons for our linguistic choices in the practical section of the book.

PART I



THEOLOGY



①

The basis for love: image-bearing

Many additional needs arise out of differences. Why should we go out of our way for people who are not like us? The Bible tells us that we have more in common than we think. We share an identity far more significant than we might guess. We are all made in God's image. When we look at another human being, whether they are in a wheelchair or using augmented or alternative communication, whether they are partially sighted or struggle with chronic pain, we see God's image reflected in them. This identity is fundamental to the value of every human being.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The Greek and Roman world of the early church was one which considered any deviation from physical or intellectual 'norm' to be a sign of divine curse, and one where unwanted babies were routinely exposed at birth to die. People were valued according to their contribution to society, their wealth, and their skills, and therefore babies and children were considered almost worthless. There were no hospitals to care for the sick.

Christians applying the teachings of Jesus on how we should treat others created free healthcare, campaigned against infanticide, and built communities which cared for those with additional needs. Of course, Christians have never got these things perfectly 'right', and one could easily focus on the mistakes made by past Christians. However, a core Christian teaching has always been clear that every human being is worthy of dignity, a dignity founded on bearing God's image. This fundamental understanding of humanity has shaped the way the western world has approached care for those with additional needs.

Over the past couple of centuries, developments in scientific understanding have subtly changed the way many see their fellow human beings. Evolutionary theory sees *Homo sapiens* as a supremely well-adapted ape. This ‘survival of the fittest’ model has been used by some to provide a rationale underpinning our natural tendency to value output, income, and skills more than God’s image in our fellow humans. Although in many ways our culture still values caring for the weak, people with impairments can sometimes be viewed negatively, to be hidden, removed, and, if possible, prevented from occurring through gene selection or abortion. While society has never clamoured louder for the inclusion of those with differences, much of the discussion is around valuing competency and productivity: for example, ‘dyslexic thinking’ being listed as a skillset one can select on LinkedIn, telling autistic children their neurotype is a ‘superpower’, or a focus on the sporting prowess of some physically disabled individuals.

There is much in this to celebrate, but as Christians, we can go much further and deeper and address some of the uncomfortable topics left unsaid by the modern discourse in this area. To do this, we need to drill down deeper into what it means to be made in the image of God, and what the Bible has to say about humanity.

THE IMAGE FORMED: GENESIS 1

Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’

Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground – everything

that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.’ And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day.

GENESIS 1:26–31

The very first chapter of the Bible lays the foundations of how we should see humanity. In it we see identity, purpose, and blessing for humanity, all culminating in God’s appreciation of all that he has made as ‘very good’: the pinnacle of creation. These all fit together to shape our understanding of what it means to be human, which in turn can inform how, why, and whether we relate to those who have disabilities or additional needs.

IDENTITY

Our society is obsessed with creating our own identity: self-expression is one of the gods of our age. We see it in the groups we make for ourselves: seven-year-old Claire starting the ‘August birthdays club’ at school with a couple of friends, or the caricatured cliques in the canteen in *High School Musical*. For people with additional needs, there can be great value in getting a formal diagnosis and recognising what this adds to our identity. But beneath these identities is an unchanging foundation – the identity God has already given to us, better than anything we could promote on social media or copy from our favourite celebrity.

God says, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness’ (Genesis 1:26). God, as Trinity, uses a different formula from that used up to this point in creation. No longer does he say, ‘Let there be’, or, ‘Let the land produce’, but, ‘Let us make’. In this act of creating humanity, God expresses his intimate involvement, his divine intervention into the natural order. If all of creation is made by God, brought into being by his words alone, humanity is somehow an even more personal act of creation. We see the plural forms used: ‘Let us make... in our image’, expressing something of the intimacy of the Trinity itself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the creation of humanity.

Adam and Eve are made to reflect God to the world around them, to bear his likeness, as nothing else in creation does. We get a hint of this from the fact that God describes creation as ‘good’ until he makes humanity, after which it is ‘very good’.

In verse 28, all the creatures are explicitly placed under humanity's rule. In Genesis 2, we see Adam naming the animals, but unable to find a suitable helper among them. Yet again, we see humanity as set apart and distinct from other living beings, the only beings made in God's image. Our dignity, our value, our worth as human beings is not something we have to create for ourselves. It is not something which can be increased by our ability to make choices for ourselves or decreased by becoming physically incapacitated. Our value comes from outside ourselves, from the God in whose image we are made.

Part of this identity as image-bearers, it would seem, involves diversity. Just as God is Father, Son, and Spirit, humanity is 'male and female' (Genesis 1:27). From the very beginning, before the divine image is marred by human sin and God's curse on creation, equality and difference are enshrined within God's chosen image-bearers. However, the focus is not so much on difference as on equality: our identity as humans should be found first and foremost in what we share – God's image.

This is a wonderful, and yet hard-to-remember, truth. Every single human being, whether disabled or not, is made to reflect God to his world. They are the pinnacle of God's creation. They are of great worth in God's eyes, and therefore should be in ours as well.

PURPOSE

Unlike Claire's founding membership of the 'August birthdays club', this identity comes with a purpose: 'so that they may rule' (Genesis 1:26). God directly instructs them: 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it' (v. 28). God makes humanity in his image so that they can act, under him, as rulers of the world he has made. They are uniquely fitted to do so by being made in his image, bearing his likeness.

What does this tell us about the nature of God's image in humanity? We can get some hints from what we've already been told about God. God's character in creation has been emphasised by the way the narrative has been told: he creates order out of chaos, forms spaces and fills them. One way God's image is reflected in humanity is through the work he has given us. As humans create order, as they are creative and inventive, they reflect God's nature. We share this responsibility collectively. Even if someone is not able, because

of physical or cognitive impairments, to exercise creativity, bring order out of chaos, or exercise responsibility for creation, they are still ‘in the image of God, in his likeness’. This passage does not set out particular capabilities as being markers of God’s image in humanity, but rather a shared purpose and responsibility. We can also see many of these capabilities in the most unlikely places, when we take the time to look. The wonderful dancing of the adult with learning disabilities shows great creativity, even if it doesn’t conform to any sets of rules we might want to apply!

BLESSING

Finally, God gives the man and woman all seed-bearing plants to eat. We see God’s generosity in providing enjoyable and bountiful food. While Adam and Eve do work in the garden, there is (at this point) no barrier to their full enjoyment of everything God has made. The repetition inherent in ‘every seed-bearing plant on the face of the *whole* earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it’ (v. 29, emphasis added) points to the generosity of God. We are told in Genesis 2 that these trees ‘were pleasing to the eye and good for food’ (v. 9). It is clear that God made the world perfect, without any of the hardship we associate with disability and additional needs.

RELATIONSHIPS

We also see humanity created with a series of special relationships. Adam and Eve rule over the earth, working in the garden and taking responsibility for everything in it. They walk with God, and they live under his rule as they follow his commands and live within the limits he has placed on them. Eve is a ‘helper’ for Adam, the only being suitable to join Adam in his work. Community and companionship are assumed from the outset: ‘It is not good for the man to be alone’ (Genesis 2:18). They are able to be naked without feeling shame, illustrating their unbroken relationship with one another (v. 25). From the beginning, we see that humanity is created for mutual service – to help one another do the work God has given them. When we come later to consider what it means for someone to ‘belong’ in the church, we will see that true belonging includes the opportunity to serve – sometimes in unexpected ways.

It is good to take some time to see God’s image the way it was originally intended – humanity living perfectly under God’s rule, relating perfectly to

one another, and lovingly ruling God's world as God's representatives. We see in creation the first instance of God's people, in God's place, with God's presence, which we see worked out imperfectly again and again through the rest of the Bible. Humanity experiences true belonging and inclusion within God's perfect world, and nothing hinders their access to God or their ability to live in community together. For those living with disabilities and for those of us experiencing the challenges and struggles associated with others' disabilities, it is important to spend some time dwelling on God's 'very good' creation. The challenges we will encounter later in this book can certainly be used by God, and we will explore his sovereignty over them, but this suffering was not part of the world God created.

THE IMAGE MARRED: GENESIS 3

Yet these blessings have a counterpart in God's curses on humanity following Adam and Eve's rebellion, as we read in Genesis 3:

So the Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this,

 'Cursed are you above all livestock
 and all wild animals!

 You will crawl on your belly
 and you will eat dust
 all the days of your life.

 And I will put enmity
 between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and hers;
 he will crush your head,
 and you will strike his heel.'

To the woman he said,

 'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
 with painful labour you will give birth to children.
 Your desire will be for your husband,
 and he will rule over you.'

To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, "You must not eat from it,"

‘Cursed is the ground because of you;
 through painful toil you will eat food from it
 all the days of your life.
 It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
 and you will eat the plants of the field.
 By the sweat of your brow
 you will eat your food
 until you return to the ground,
 since from it you were taken;
 for dust you are
 and to dust you will return.’

GENESIS 3:14–19

Adam and Eve’s role in ruling over the animals is spoiled, with ‘enmity’ between them and the serpent (v. 15). Their role in filling the earth is marred by ‘pains in childbearing’. The relationship between the man and his wife is spoiled, with each vying for supremacy (v. 16). The plentiful fruit will now only be produced by ‘painful toil’ (v. 17). Finally, death and decay become part of their existence (v. 19). Yet at no point does God rescind their identity as image-bearers. Despite their sin, despite their decaying bodies, despite their marred relationships with the world and their creator, their identity remains.

This is underlined in Genesis 9:6, when God says: ‘Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.’ Here, an explicit link is drawn between humanity’s ongoing image-bearing and its inherent dignity and worth, rooted in God’s own nature. This means every person, whatever their physical or neurological differences, is in God’s image, valuable and precious to him.

This passage provides an important foundation for understanding the origins of disability. While this book is not intended to be a book on suffering (there are some excellent ones listed at the end of the book), we must pause for a moment on this. God did not create a world with suffering and frailty. That came as a direct result of humanity’s choice to disobey God. In their disobedience, humanity sought to be ‘like God’ (Genesis 3:5, 22), rejecting the created order and choosing to rule for themselves. This attitude of rebellion is what we call ‘sin’, symptoms of which we see in thousands of individual choices every day. God does not allow Adam and Eve to reinvent themselves as gods, but instead emphasises their physical, created existence: ‘Dust you are, and to dust you will return’ (v. 19). Their choice shuts them off from the

source of life, and so their physical bodies begin to decay. In Romans 8:21, Paul describes the result of this choice – all creation being in bondage to decay. Disability and disease are part of the physical degeneration of our bodies; errors in cell division leading to chromosomal abnormalities and the suffering experienced by individuals and their loved ones are all the result of the fall – humanity’s choice to mar the beautiful, perfect image of God in their disobedience and selfishness.

Disability often makes our world feel uncomfortable, because it reminds us of what we’d rather forget: we are fragile beings, and one day we will die. The brokenness of our bodies or minds is a result of the fall, but disabled people are not uniquely or specially fallen. Each of us shares fully in this weakness and frailty, regardless of whether it is yet visible on the outside. It is hard to be reminded that we are weak, that humanity cannot be its own saviour. But deep down we know it to be true of ourselves, whether we are disabled or not. Our bodies are dust, and to dust they will return.

PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF SIN AND THE CURSE

We must pause and weep with those who weep here. The Bible is full of laments for suffering – God did not originally create it to be this way. However, he is not without rule or authority over suffering. Even over horrific acts of evil by humanity, where we can directly see the spiralling effects of sin on many people’s lives, God is sovereign. Even over random accidents with devastating consequences, God is sovereign.

This is a hard truth, as from our perspective, it is impossible to comprehend fully why God allows such suffering to continue. However, the alternative, a God without power or authority, is surely worse. And the cross gives us a clear example of how human responsibility for evil and God’s divine sovereignty can go gloriously hand in hand.

The Bible is also full of God’s compassion for those who are weak and suffering. Isaiah 40, after many chapters explaining God’s judgement on both his people and the nations, offers comfort to God’s people. They have been suffering the consequences of their sin in exile, and can be seen as a picture of all humanity, exiled from God as a result of their sin. The passage opens:

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

ISAIAH 40:1

The same chapter explores God's power and sovereignty, and the relative inability of humanity to comprehend God's actions. It closes with a crescendo of wonderful promises, which give great hope to all who trust God, and can feel especially powerful for those feeling the disabling effects of disease, disability, or cognitive impairment.

Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
'My way is hidden from the Lord;
my cause is disregarded by my God?'
Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

ISAIAH 40:27-31

For all those feeling their weakness or grappling with the challenges of a loved one suffering as a result of disability, we are called to contemplate the creator God, who 'will not grow tired or weary'. For those struggling, feeling that no one understands the way they think or behave, who fight for accommodations to be made for them or those they love, we know we have a God 'whose understanding no one can fathom'. Our way is not hidden from him; our cause is not disregarded.

In relating human disability and suffering to sin, we must also be clear here that the Bible does not say that disability is the result of an individual's sin. While it is possible for sickness to be a means of discipline pointing to a particular sin which needs to be addressed (1 Corinthians 11:30), the vast majority of disability in the Bible is related to the effects of the curse on all of creation generally, not a specific punishment for an individual's sin. Jesus makes this very clear in John 9, to which we will return later in the book.

However, it is clear in the Bible that sinful, selfish hearts have a real impact on how disabling a particular condition can be. When we are talking about 'disability', there are two important facets: an individual's physical reality – whether that is a broken bone, an extra chromosome, or a brain with different prevailing neural pathways – and their environmental reality. The extent to which they will feel the disabling effects of their physical reality will depend hugely on their environment. For example, someone with a hearing impairment in the developed world in the 21st century will be hugely less 'disabled' – that is, made 'less able' – as a result of cochlear implants or hearing-aid technology available to them.¹

For this reason, many people talking about disability distinguish between 'medical' and 'social' models of disability. One model (medical) sees the individual primarily in terms of their medical diagnosis and tends to focus on impairments. The other (social) focuses heavily on environment and the impact of other people's choices on how an individual experiences their physical or neurological differences.

The Bible does not privilege either of these models. As we have seen, the physical effects of the fall are made abundantly clear from Genesis 3 onwards. Creation is cursed, in bondage to decay, not as it should be. We cannot describe every physical impairment as 'difference' and deny that reality. However, the Bible is also clear that, following the fall, the perfect relationships experienced by Adam and Eve in the Bible are spoiled. Humans act selfishly, both wilfully and thoughtlessly. The choice in the garden set humanity on a pathway towards evil thoughts and actions. We look at those who are different from us – cognitively, physically, or in some other way – and our human pride naturally seeks our own superiority. We oppress those who are 'weak', either deliberately or by not using our strengths to serve others. Ensuring that everyone's needs are met is the result of hard, painful toil, which we are more willing to exert on our own behalf or for our close friends and family members, than for those who we don't know so well.

The results of human rebellion are seen as much in our treatment of those who are different, as in disability and difference itself. There are many aspects of disability which make life harder for the individual, but many of these are not so much the result of their own physical or cognitive difference as of the unwillingness of society to bend or adapt to their needs. When a wheelchair user struggles to access all aspects of the service because we haven't thought about how to allow them to come up for Communion, when we roll our eyes because an autistic child is having a noisy meltdown during the service, when we choose not to engage the person with Down syndrome in conversation because we'd rather speak to our friends, we see the fall at work. We see it not only in the limitations of the disabled individual, but also in our own sinful tendency to think of ourselves first. When we know the good we ought to do and fail to do it, we sin (James 4:17). Of course, there is complexity and often conflicting needs at work, and sometimes we are genuinely doing our best with what we have. However, we can acknowledge that our own tendency to be 'bent in on ourselves'² leads us to make choices which hurt others.

James, in his letter to Jewish Christians, picks up on behaviour stemming from the same selfish motives:

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

JAMES 2:1-5

Although James is speaking of material wealth in these verses, the same root lies at the heart of much of the suffering experienced by those who are physically or cognitively different from us. We naturally want to discriminate, to judge, to look for those who can do us a favour. We fail to remember that the kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom, where those who are 'last' will be 'first' (e.g. Matthew 20:16).

We do not want to deny or diminish the suffering that results simply from the curse on creation – it is clear that we should expect physical pain and suffering, not only as a result of sinful decisions by other people, but also from the fall (e.g. Romans 8:22). This should not excuse us from examining our own hearts and identifying our own sin as part of the cause of others' suffering. We do not need to see all aspects of difference as something broken and in need of fixing. More nuance and thought will lead us to see beauty and diversity within the (inevitably marred) image of God in humanity.

As we come to practical suggestions for our churches and other Christian groups in the second half of this book, it will be important to hold all these truths together: that *all* people are made in God's image and derive worth and dignity from that identity, not from their capabilities or lack thereof; that the suffering that comes from the disabling effects of difference is real and should be seen as part of the curse resulting from humanity's sin; and that human selfishness has an important role to play in the experience of disability alongside physical conditions. Wonderfully, we have a good and glorious God who can redeem and bring beauty out of the tragedy and sorrow, and use the very differences which caused us pain to build his church. If we need evidence of this, we need only look to Jesus.

THE PERFECT IMAGE OF GOD: THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

As we rightly mourn the effects of the fall both in our broken world and in humanity's broken hearts, we can be driven in two directions – to hopelessness and despair or to energetic campaigning. The Bible calls us to start somewhere else: with the true and perfect image of God.

The language of 'God's image' doesn't crop up a lot in the rest of the Old Testament, but it is picked up again in the New Testament. If the image of God in all humanity is a reason to treat all humanity with dignity, we also see a means and a hope in Christ. In Jesus we see a 'new Adam'. He is the perfect image of God: 'The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation' (Colossians 1:15). Because of his life, death, and resurrection, death no longer reigns: 'If the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!' (Romans 5:15). This offers hope both for the physical, broken creation and for our own sinful hearts.

Paul continues: ‘Just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Romans 5:21). We will return to this aspect of Jesus as the perfect image of God in chapter 4. We also see hope right now for our sinful hearts: that ‘those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son’ (Romans 8:29) and that those in Christ ‘have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator’ (Colossians 3:10). The language of being in God’s image is used again, focused particularly on Christians. We *are* being sanctified, made more like Jesus and therefore renewed in the image of God.

Jesus, the perfect image of God, offers us a radically different vision of love and other-centredness. Humanity was dead in sins (Ephesians 2:1), objects of wrath, without hope and without God. We weren’t just spiritually blind; we were utterly incapacitated by sin. Jesus didn’t just pity from afar or settle for a half-hearted solution. He was willing to incapacitate himself, becoming fully man (Philippians 2:6–8) and limiting himself in ways we cannot comprehend. In this, we are not claiming that Jesus at any point set aside his divine nature to become man, but that he chose to take on a human nature in addition to his divine nature, meaning that he entered into our experience of human frailty (for example, we see the God who created food experiencing hunger in the wilderness). Not only this, but he suffered further pain and degradation at the cross. Jesus experienced spiritual torment, and his resurrection body still bears physical scars (John 20:27).

Jesus becoming a man sets us the ultimate example of what it looks like to love those who are different, those who are in need. He does not consider it too much effort or unworthy of his time to act on behalf of humanity. His sacrificial service, his willingness to become lower than the lowest, weaker than the weakest, is an example of how the church must be ready to exert itself on behalf of those who do not look impressive, but who deeply need our love and care. Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, we see him pouring himself out for the needs of others, paying particular attention to those rejected and on the edges of society, as we will see in the next chapter.

Jesus also offers us a glimpse of beauty to be found within pain, sorrow, and weakness:

[Jesus] did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

PHILIPPIANS 2:6–8

In weakness, God's strength is most clearly seen. In the same way, in weakness and disability, even in death, God's love and power is made manifest. When the risen Jesus appears to his disciples and tells Thomas to place his hands on his wounds, Jesus' resurrection scars are glorious, as they point to his love and self-sacrifice. If physical brokenness and self-limitation were possible for the full and perfect image of God, then we certainly should not see them as barriers to seeing God's image in our fellow humans.

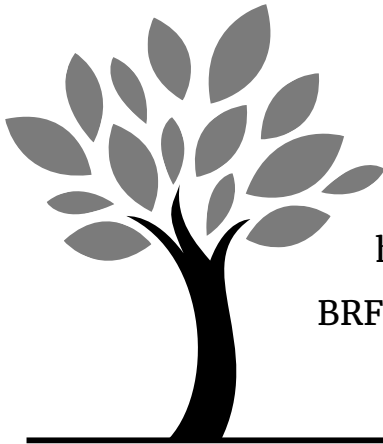
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ① How does knowing they are made in God's image affect the way we see people with additional needs?
- ② What are the problems with putting abilities and competence at the centre of how we see other people?
- ③ Where do you experience frailty and brokenness in your own life?
- ④ How do you see sinful choices affecting the lives of people around you?
- ⑤ How does Jesus offer us hope?



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**BELONGING WITHOUT BARRIERS casts a vision of inclusion and full belonging
within our churches and other Christian communities
for those with additional needs.**

Brading, Bunyan, and Wood begin by exploring the theological basis for this vision, aiming to inspire the reader with God's love for the weak and marginalised in society. They then move into a practical section outlining a range of different experiences we are likely to encounter, including autism, learning disabilities, and physical disabilities. Each chapter contains up-to-date research, personal accounts, interviews, and a range of specific, actionable ideas, including changes that any individual within the church could make. This book shares a vision not just for inclusion, but for full integration and belonging for those with additional needs. Throughout, the emphasis is that this is an 'every believer ministry' as we all grow in love together as Christ's disciples wherever he has put us.

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