

# DOING THEOLOGY WITH THE MARGINS: *Persons with Disabilities*<sup>•</sup>

Wati Longchar

## Margins - Can Dry Bones Come Back to Life<sup>1</sup>?

God told the prophet Ezekiel,

*“Tell my people, `God says: I’ll bring your hope back to life – O my people! I have given that responsibility to the people who still have love and compassion in their hearts. When they bring your hopes for justice back to life, you’ll realize that I am God. I’ll breathe life into you, and you’ll live. Then I’ll lead you to straight back to a time of justice, and you’ll realize that I am God. I’ve said it, and I’ll do it – God’s Decree.”*

*“God grabbed me. God’s Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them – a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain – dry bones, bleached with by the sun”*

*“God said to me, `Can these bones live?’*

*“I said, `God, only you know that.’*

*“God said to me, `Prophesy over these bones: “Dry bones, listen to the message of God!” Ezek.37:1-5.*

Dry bones, in the book of Ezekiel, signify utter hopelessness and exclusion. Josef P Widyatmadja<sup>2</sup> compares dry bones with disposable people (“*wong cilik*” in the Indonesian language) in our society. Like a disposable syringe, people are bought and thrown out after use. After use, they have no value. The passage Ezekiel 37: 1-5 reflects not only hopelessness but also the despair of people. The people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. They were put under slavery. They experienced exclusion and discrimination on all fronts and were treated worse than second-class citizens. They were people with no freedom and rights. To avoid discrimination, they opted to learn and speak the oppressor’s language and adopt the oppressor’s cultures, names, and religious practices, thinking that they would be accepted. The process gradually led people to lose their identity and roots. They became like the dry bones. In despair, people sang, “By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.” (Ps. 137:1) God told Ezekiel to go and prophesied among the dry bones. He did as commanded by God, and the dry bone returned to life. The living God

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail, see *Transformative Actions for Common Future: Biblical and Theological Reflections from the Margins*, PTCA Contextual Bible Study, No. 2 (Kolkata: PTCA & DBC, 2020), pp. 1-5

<sup>2</sup> Widyamadja, P. Josef. *Jesus and Wong Cilik: Transformative Diakonia – Theology with the Marginalized Peoples of Asia*, PTCA Study Series No. 10 (Kolkata: PTCA, 2025).

was with them. God is there among marginalized people even today, and if we go and build solidarity, they will come back to life. Commitment to transform the life of the “dry bones to life” is the location of doing theology. “Giving life” is the purpose of doing theology.

### **God among the People in the Margins**

God was and is with the people in the margin. Felix Wilfred<sup>3</sup> says that God chose the ‘margin’ – the people on the underside of history – to inaugurate God’s Kingdom, bringing justice and peace. God was and is encountered among the powerless, in unexpected locations like a manger or in the valley of death, but not in the palace. The Bible testifies that the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus took place in the margins. Jesus was born in a manger, a ragged cowshed, an open and unprotected place. People who gathered around him were people in the margin. They were without any political power nor religious authority, women, children, and poor people like the shepherds who were landless and who did not have any legal protection, and from whom the rich people refused to buy even milk and vegetables. People who welcomed Jesus were thus excluded people. The angel announced the good news “Peace among *you*” were among the excluded people. It means the good news starts from the margin. The Bible testifies that God took sides with the people in the margin. God continues to take sides with the marginalized people even today. Therefore, to hear God’s voice, we must listen to the testimonies, pains, and sufferings of those on the margin.

Wilfred further says that the agenda from the periphery – the longing for justice, peace, identity, and right to resources – is the agenda of God, the voice of God. The real future of humanity comes from here and not from the decisions and deliberations of the people who dominate the world. From the site of God’s visitation – the margins – a new world, a radical transformation, has to take shape.<sup>4</sup>

Today, a group of people who are in the margin are persons with disability (PWD). They are excluded socially, politically, economically and religiously. Globally, they constitute 12-15%. Some of them have visual, hearing, speech, mobility, and mental disabilities. Some have been genetically inherited, some developmentally acquired, some accidentally resulted, and others by violence and wars. The dominant society, the abled people, see them as sinners and cursed by God, and the wrath of God. This kind of biased construct of theology makes them inferior beings and sees them as second-class people, objects of charity, or even abandoned. Their presence is taken as a burden by the dominant society. Abled people exclude them and deny them all privileges and opportunities, including in the church.

In the context of economic competition, persons with disabilities experience more discrimination in employment opportunities because employers in both the public and private sectors regard persons with disabilities as weak, helpless, and incompetent to perform work. Market capitalism further makes the situation of the disabled more vulnerable. The economic growth-oriented

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<sup>3</sup> Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11,

approach to development, privatization, and competition, and the emphasis on standardization of labor gives preference to smartness, efficiency, swiftness, beauty, etc. Thus, persons with disabilities are the first to be discharged but the last to be hired in any form of employment. This is why many of them are abandoned, and they are on the street begging without hope. The experience of disabled people testifies powerfully that the world needs change. Hence, the experience of disabled people and their vision for life becomes crucial for building an inclusive society and the church.

### **Margin – The Location of Doing Theology**

The rich people who are protected by an unjust power structure cannot understand the pain and suffering of the people. People who cannot understand the suffering of the people cannot bring solutions to those in pain. Marginalized people, women, persons with disabilities, and other excluded groups have concrete answers to solutions because they bring first-hand knowledge of the suffering imposed by exclusionary practices. In other words, the reality of structural injustices can be understood only from the experience of the oppressed. One must judge the social dynamics from the perspective of people in the margin but not from the centre of power. Charles Kammer said that “All our policies, all our social structures must be first judged by their effects on the poor, the powerless, and minorities.”<sup>5</sup> A Black theologian, James Cone, also said that “the victim of the power alone can suggest how the world ought to be.”<sup>6</sup> Being oppressed, they know what is wrong because they are both the victims of evil and recipients of God’s liberating activity, the Gospel of Christ. Similarly, J.B. Metz said that the inherited structures have to be analyzed from the perspective of the oppressed. “We have to judge ourselves and our history with the eyes of the victims.”<sup>7</sup> The marginalized groups’ suffering thus provides us with criteria to judge the inherited social structures and eventually struggle to humanize the social reality. Change can take place only when we do, like the Good Samaritan who brought a wounded person from near death to life. Therefore, the voices of marginalized people need to be heard, and their vision of life should form the basis of our future.

God has chosen the marginalized and excluded people, not because they are weak, but because they are created in God’s image, and they have the right to celebrate the fullness of life offered by God to all. The marginalized and the poor, thus, should not be seen as those in need of help and support. They have resisted injustice and oppression and continue offering alternative solutions for peace and justice. They challenge us to work towards new patterns of inclusiveness, sharing, and transformative actions. We are challenged to build up persons and communities in ways that help them to experience God’s gift of life.

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<sup>5</sup> C.L. Kammer, *Ethics and Liberation: An Introduction* (New York: Maryknoll, 1988), p. 156.

<sup>66</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Maryknoll, 1988), p. 192.

<sup>7</sup> J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology*, Smith, D, tr. (New York, 1990), p. 105

## **Theology of Ableism and Exclusion**

### ***a) Image of God***

Ableism is an exclusionary and discriminatory ideology/theology. Influenced by Greek thought, ableism advocates a relationship in terms of a hierarchical pattern: God rules over the world; the soul controls the body; men are masters over women, children, and slaves; human beings have the right to dominate animals and other creatures. As images of God, human beings resemble God in exercising power and dominion over the other creatures. In this hierarchical structure, disabled people were seen as imperfect beings and excluded from the power structure.

Ableism further interprets ‘the image of God’ in terms of ‘perfection’ – perfection understood in terms of physical and mental endowment. There is no beauty in the disabled. Any form of disability makes a person less than human since they are not created in the image of God. While some understood this in terms of ‘rationality’, the other focused on the exercise of power. A person who cannot articulate does not represent God’s image; a person who cannot exercise power and have dominion over other God’s creation does not reflect the image of God. Moreover, some theologians interpreted the image of God in relation to the human capacity for creativity and freedom. Since persons with disabilities cannot exercise creativity and freedom fully, they are not counted as full ‘beings’; they are imperfect images of God.

All those theologies are able people’s interpretations and do not respect life, especially those who live a healthy life despite physical impairments. History shows that ableism justified the extermination of people born with physical impairments because disabled people do not reflect the image of God. In other words, a person does not commit a crime by killing a disabled person because they are imperfect image of God. Ableism thus denies the diversity of human creation. It is a wrong interpretation and is a denial of God’s purpose for the creation of human beings.

### ***b) Wrong perception of God and healing***

We conceive God as an all-powerful like a ‘super-magician’. We want God to perform miracles instantly. We imagine that there is nothing that God cannot do. Everything is possible if we have faith in God. God has the power to heal even terminal diseases like cancer and raise people from death. Yes, God is all-powerful, and nothing is impossible for him. But the danger is the delusion that those who are not healed are considered faithless and branded as sinners.

Abled people often think that persons with disabilities are sick; we want to heal them from their disabilities. This is a wrong assumption of the purpose of God’s creation. Jesus himself suffered pain and died on the cross. Suffering and death are part of God’s creation. No human person can escape death and suffering. Even the innocent suffer, e.g. Job. This expectation of God’s miraculous healing leads to the belief that our prayers are not answered due to lack of faith, and this brings more pain, anxiety, and psychological crisis to people who are already experiencing physical pain and suffering in life. People die or suffer not because of sin or punishment from God; suffering is the will of God. We misread biblical teaching if we narrowly interpret healing and

faith as miraculous ‘CURE’ alone. Such one-sided interpretations of God’s work will reinforce the denial, exclusion, and stigmatization of people with disabilities.

*c) Doctrine of holiness and exclusion*

Affirming the holiness doctrine, the Church assumed that “blemish” recorded in Leviticus speaks about the exclusion of persons with disabilities and women from temple service (Lev. 21:16-24). The Jewish believed that disability was a sign of sinfulness and women’s monthly menstrual period was unclean and unholy. Does this Leviticus text suggest disqualification and exclusion of disabled people from the temple service? Walis Ukan,<sup>8</sup> a Taiwanese OT scholar refuted this interpretation. He underlined three arguments: The text is speaking about (a) *To relieve but not to exclude* – According to the Jewish offering practice, the priest had to offer two bullocks, one ram, seven male lambs without blemish, and a lamb as a burnt offering for God. Besides, some grains, oil, and wine had to be offered daily (*minchah*). It was a laborious and arduous duty. According to the ritual, every day and night, the priest had to make an offering of animals, the smoke of flesh and incense, and the fire of the altar was to be always maintained. God’s commandment to Moses, “None of your offspring’s come near to offer the food of his God,” (v. 21) needs to be seen in terms of “the laborious and arduous process of the ritual”. A disabled priest could not undertake this hard duty. This verse does not imply denial or exclusion of the disabled person from serving God. On the contrary, it demands the able priest to give physical relief to the disabled priest from the daily laborious duty. (ii) *To support but not to dissociate* – After commanding disabled priests to be relieved from laborious duty, it says, “the food of his God, from the holiest and the holy, he shall eat.”(V. 22). It has a profound social and religious meaning. It also expresses God’s abundant richness and grace upon disabled persons. The disabled person is not excluded from receiving the “food of his God.” This affirms the inclusion and support of disabled persons, and the able people should offer them the resources they need to lead a dignified and good life. The challenge is that we need to create a social, religious, and cultural system that incorporates and supports disabled people. Though disabled priests were incapable of performing the duty of offering, they still deserved the portion of the food of God that is the most holy of holy, just as the normal priests enjoyed. (iii) *To honor but not to marginalize* – “Because I am the Lord who sanctify them” (v 24). It challenges the traditional stereotype understanding that disability is a manifestation of sin and that persons with disability are cursed and hated by God. This verse affirms that there is no room for contempt, discredit, or marginalization of the disabled priest. God says, “I am the Lord who sanctifies them.” The passage further reaffirms that persons with disabilities are created in God’s image. Every disabled person deserves acceptance and entry into the Kingdom of God, and disability should not be the reason to exclude them from ministry. In the eyes of God, the disabled priest is also sanctified by God.

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<sup>8</sup> Walis Ukan, a Bible study on “Misleading Text to Disability” (Lev, 21: 16-24 and Mark 9:43-47) at Asia-Pacific Consultation on “A just and Life-affirming Church and Society: Persons with Disability Perspective” at Yushan Theological College and Seminary, Hualien, Taiwan, December 11-14, 2016.

#### ***d) Sabbath Observance and Saving Lives***

*<sup>7</sup>Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. <sup>8</sup>When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. <sup>9</sup>Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. <sup>10</sup>For he had healed many so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. <sup>11</sup>Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." <sup>12</sup>But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him. (Mark 3:1-12).*

For Jewish religious leaders, rituals, formalities, and legal matters were more important than saving lives. For instance, Jesus' act of healing a shriveled man on the Sabbath. Jewish leaders did not want the shriveled man to be healed in the Synagogue on the Sabbath because, for them, the observance of the Sabbath was more important than saving a life. It appears that they were afraid that this man would enter the Synagogue with an ailment that would defile the holy place. Religious rituals, laws, and finding fault were more important than saving a life. But for Jesus, life was more important. Jesus broke the religious rituals. Against their ritualism, Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath". Jesus healed that disabled person despite all the religious restrictions. The Pharisees were watching him to find fault in him. In Jesus' view, care and healing are of prime importance, more so than religious practices. Jesus stood for the cause of the sick and the disabled. He defended them against the prevailing attitude that suffering and physical impairment is due to sin. Jesus touched them to bring healing to the sick and disabled. Jesus not only healed them of their physical infirmities but also restored them to their rightful place in society. Because of his compassionate love for the disabled and sick, Jesus did not hesitate to break the Sabbath law (Mk 3:1-6). Jesus' whole motive behind his healing ministry was not to present himself as a kind of healer or super-magician but to start a movement of hope for the hopeless, from being a nobody to being somebody. On encountering Jesus, the sick and disabled experienced the worth and dignity of life. In the Kingdom of God, nothing such as unclean or sinner cannot be made clean again. Protecting life is prime important and all are equally valued and included.

#### **A Call for an Inclusive Church**

*<sup>1</sup>Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. <sup>2</sup>Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. <sup>3</sup>Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."*

*<sup>4</sup>Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.*

*<sup>5</sup>He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely*

*restored. <sup>6</sup>Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*

The passage explains Jesus's position on the nature of inclusive community. Someone hosted a great dinner and invited many, but they all began to make excuses. Then the master got angry and said to the slave, "Go out at once to the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (v.21). Earlier, Jesus had said the same thing to the Pharisee, who had invited him to celebrate Sabbath in his house. Jesus brought people with disabilities, the poor, and the rejected ones into the center of God's Kingdom, challenging the discriminatory practices and the callous attitude of able rich people.

For many years, disability was seen as a medical issue. Churches also pursued a charitable approach, assuming that they were incapable, weak, and needed help. They were seen as objects needing care for rather than people with many gifts and potentialities. They were never considered equal in the churches; some considered them less than fully human. While some people see disabled people as a medical issue, a kind of disease to be cured/corrected medically, others see them from a religious perspective – a manifestation of sin and faithlessness that requires repentance. This exclusive attitude was nurtured and justified by a wrong biblical interpretation. Even today, the churches' attitudes towards persons with disabilities are negative.

The Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN), the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA), the Council for World Mission (CWM), CCA, and the NCCs have drawn our attention to the fact that without the inclusion of the gifts of persons with disabilities, we cannot talk about the unity of the church. There is no unity of the churches without acknowledging the gifts of persons with disabilities. All people with or without disabilities are created in the image of God and called to an inclusive community in which they are empowered to use their gifts.

Today, we need to address disability issues as structural injustice. It is a justice issue, a theological issue, and thus, a community-oriented transformative *Diakonia* (service) is required. Churches' ministry to disabled people needs to address the social dimension of inclusivity and the attitudinal change of able people towards persons with disabilities. To remove barriers, we need to equip our congregation to build an inclusive society. Let us stand united towards helping society end discrimination, isolation, and denial of opportunities to persons with disabilities. Let us affirm that persons with disabilities are not just a gift for the family and society, but they are also an opportunity for growth in love, mutual aid, and unity as we are all called to be a gift to one other, to be Christ to our neighbors and to see Christ in our neighbors. Allow persons with disabilities to grow and contribute their gifts to the church and society. Let us make the Church a sanctuary, a safe place, a refuge, a shelter for the stigmatized and the excluded.