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Disability and Sin: A Qualitative Study of the Perspectives of Pastors

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how contemporary pastors understand the relationship between disability and sin. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 pastors serving diverse congregations. Interview prompts addressed a hypothetical vignette of a teenager paralyzed in an automobile accident. Using multi-stage thematic analysis, five themes emerged: (1) most pastors reject a direct connection between disability and divine punishment; (2) many situate disability within the fallen world; (3) some allow for an indirect link between sin and disability when sinful behavior produces foreseeable harm; (4) few raised social or structural accounts of sin; and (5) a minority characterized the relationship as mysterious or theologically misplaced and instead prioritized relational care. Although pastors generally resisted blaming people for their disabilities, prevalent deficit-based framings and a lack of systematized theologies of disability may hinder inclusive practices. We conclude by recommending accessible theological resources and further empirical study.

KEYWORDS

Disability; sin; interviews; qualitative; pastors; religion

What connection, if any, is there between disability and sin? Theological explanations for the existence of characteristics now understood as disabilities have been pervasive within the Christian tradition. Historically, theologians in the Western tradition – from St. Augustine to Martin Luther to Emil Brunner – have associated disabilities with sin. Although Augustine chiefly spoke about disabilities as conditions that occur as a result of humans' collective original sin,[1] he also believed all humans are made in God's image and are counted as good.[2] In contrast, Luther argued that people with intellectual disabilities were not only corrupted by original sin, but they were also less deserving of care and protection. Specifically, Luther reportedly advocated drowning a 'feebleminded' child because his limited mental capacities were evidence of a corrupted reason and soul.[3] For at least some Christian theologians, disability's connection to fallenness and sin can have profound implications for how they believe people with disabilities ought to be treated.

Many disability theologians argue that the assumption – implicit and sometimes explicit – that disability is connected to sin continues to stigmatize people with disabilities and jeopardizes their well-being.[4] While few pastors likely endorse Luther more extreme

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ethical conclusions, the theological linkages between disability, fallenness, and moral status have left an enduring imprint on Christian discourse. In her groundbreaking book, *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland bemoans the 'sin and disability conflation,' which she views as contributing to the idea that disabled people are inherently 'un(w)holy.'[5] According to Eiesland, the belief that disability is the result of sin has resulted in churches shunning and objectifying people with disabilities. Indeed, many churches have yet to consider how to make their physical spaces or their theologies more accommodating and accessible.

Eiesland spoke mainly from her own experiences facing discrimination in the church. In the decades since, researchers have found additional empirical evidence that people with disabilities do not always feel welcome in Christian congregations.[6] When interviewed, people with disabilities and their families frequently describe various barriers they encounter to church attendance.[7] Those barriers can range from architectural to attitudinal. For example, structural barriers, such as a lack of ramps or accessible bathrooms, may prevent people from entering church spaces or attending to basic needs. But the impact of attitudes and theologies can also be profound.[8] The convergence of these factors may contribute to why people with disabilities are significantly less likely than their nondisabled peers to participate in communities of faith.[9] This participation gap negatively impacts people with disabilities and their families, who deeply value their faith,[10] and whose quality of life is enhanced through congregational life.[11] But it also has implications for congregations that miss out on the gifts and leadership that people with disabilities can offer if their faith communities are inaccessible or unwelcoming.

Pastors can have a formative influence on the postures, practices, and policies of the churches they lead. The beliefs these leaders hold, the theologies they teach, and the sermons they preach can all shape how their congregations view and respond to disability. Moreover, pastors also function as primary interpreters of suffering, embodiment, and moral meaning within their congregations. Despite this influence, very few studies have addressed pastors' views in relation to disability. In their interviews with 12 Catholic priests about intellectual disability, Patka and McDonald found that leaders varied in their views concerning disability. Some viewed disability as a deficiency, whereas others regarded it as a valued aspect of human diversity.[12] Similarly, Phil Letizia led focus groups of 11 evangelical pastors asking how they perceive the discipleship of people with profound intellectual disabilities. He found that pastors rarely engaged people with intellectual disabilities, and their understanding of discipleship often required decision-making processes and professions of faith that many people with profound intellectual disabilities cannot perform.[13] In their survey of church leaders, McNair and Sanchez also encountered widely divergent views about why people have disabilities.[14] What remains less well understood is how pastors connect disability and sin, if at all.

The present study explores how pastors understand the relationship between disability and sin. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 25 pastors from diverse denominations and congregational contexts, we examine how they interpret disability in relation to sin and the implications for pastoral care, teaching, and leadership. This analysis is one component of a larger mixed-method project investigating pastoral theologies in relation to different aspects of disability and congregational ministries. Understanding how pastors engage

the disability-sin relationship offers insights into theological frameworks that may either reinforce or disrupt exclusionary practices within Christian churches.

Method

Participants

Participants were 25 pastors serving churches in central [state masked]. To be included, participants must have (a) been at least 18 years old and (b) held a position as a lead pastor, associate pastor, or equivalent at their church. Most participants were male (92%) and White (72%). The majority ($n = 21$) of participants described their position as Pastor/Senior Pastor or equivalent (84%), two (8%) served in an Associate/Pastoral Care role, one identified as a Transitional Pastor, and one identified as a minister in charge of administration and community outreach. Three-quarters (76%) were full-time paid staff. Among those not full-time paid staff were two who indicated they were in a full-time role at part-time pay, one identified as a full-time volunteer pastor, one as a part-time volunteer pastor, and one who indicated an arrangement other than full or part-time (paid or volunteer) but did not elaborate. These pastors represented twelve different denominations. Fifty-two percent described their congregations as religiously conservative, twenty-eight percent as moderate, and twenty percent as progressive. The churches they pastored ranged in size from fewer than 50 to more than 2,500 congregants. Table 1 displays additional participant demographics, and Table 2 displays church demographics.

Recruitment

To develop our sample, we randomly selected 50 churches from a comprehensive list of 233 churches in a mid-sized county with a population of nearly 250,000. In addition, we used purposive sampling to add six additional congregations known to have established disability ministries. This strategy was used to increase variation in congregational experiences with disability and to ensure that the sample included pastors who had direct exposure to disability-related ministry contexts. The perspectives of pastors leading congregations with and without formal disability ministries contributed to a more diverse sample. Toward the same goal, we prioritized outreach to pastors in a manner that maximized variation in denominational affiliation, church size, and congregational context. Prospective participants were contacted by email and/or phone. All recruitment materials explained the study purpose, its inclusion criteria, the nature of the interview, and the honorarium ($100 USD gift card). Recruitment spanned four months and concluded after 25 interviews, at which point saturation was judged to have been reached with respect to the study's primary research questions. We followed procedures approved by our university's Institutional Review Board.

Interview Procedures

Each of the 25 interviews began with a standardized introduction that reviewed the purpose of the study, emphasized our commitment to confidentiality and transcript

Table 1. Demographics of participating pastors.

Variable	*n*	%
Age		
30–39	5	20%
40–49	4	16%
50–59	10	40%
60–69	3	12%
70 or above	3	12%
Race/ethnicity[a]		
Black or African American	5	20%
Hispanic/Latino	3	12%
White	18	72%
Formal training related to role[a]		
Certificate related to the area of ministry	5	20%
Undergraduate degree related to the area of ministry	10	40%
Seminary degree related to the area of ministry	20	80%
Some other degree related to the area of ministry	6	24%
Prior work experience outside a church is related to the area of ministry	7	28%
Other	3	12%
Years in this role at the current church		
2 years or less	3	12%
3–5 years	7	28%
6–10 years	4	16%
11–15 years	5	20%
16–20 years	2	8%
21–25 years	2	8%
26 years or more	2	8%
Years in this role at any church		
2 years or less	2	8%
3–5 years	1	4%
6–10 years	5	20%
11–15 years	4	16%
16–20 years	3	12%
21–25 years	5	20%
26 years or more	5	20%
Disability-related statements[a]		
I have a disability.	2	8%
I have a child with disabilities.	4	16%
Someone else in my family has a disability.	2	8%
I previously worked in a disability-related profession.	2	8%
None of these are true.	14	56%
Prefer not to answer	1	4%

[a]More than one option could be selected.

de-identification, and encouraged participants to respond candidly.[15] Interviews opened with background questions about pastors' ministries and congregational contexts, followed by open-ended questions designed to elicit how disability features in their pastoral work and how they initially understand disability within their congregations.

We then employed a semi-structured interview protocol centered on seven hypothetical vignettes designed to elicit pastors' theological interpretations and pastoral approaches to disability. Within each vignette, we altered the type of disability (e.g. physical, intellectual, or developmental; acquired or congenital), as well as the age and gender of the person with the disability. Each vignette was written to elicit a particular theological concept; however, pastors' responses often included various doctrines, beliefs, and practices. This vignette-based approach allowed pastors to articulate their theological views within a realistic pastoral context rather than through abstract or doctrinal questioning alone. These scenarios addressed: (1) the relationship between disability and sin,

Table 2. Demographics of churches.

Variable	*n*	%
Estimated church size		
Under 50	2	8%
50–99	6	24%
100–199	4	16%
200–249	3	12%
250–499	4	16%
500–999	1	4%
1,000-2,499	2	8%
2,500 or more	3	12%
Denomination		
Assemblies of God	1	4%
Baptist (Other)	1	4%
Baptist (Southern)	7	28%
Catholic	1	4%
Church of Christ	1	4%
Episcopal	2	8%
Lutheran	2	8%
Mennonite	1	4%
Methodist	2	8%
Metropolitan Community Churches	1	4%
Non-denominational	4	16%
Presbyterian (PCUSA)	1	4%
United Church of Christ	1	4%
Ethnic makeup		
Mostly Black or African American	2	8%
Mostly Hispanic/Latino	1	4%
Mostly White	15	60%
Multiracial	7	28%
Communities served by church[a]		
Rural	7	28%
Suburban	17	68%
Urban	12	48%

[a]More than one option could be selected.

(2) God's providence/design and disability, (3) access to the sacraments for persons with disabilities, (4) leadership roles for persons with disabilities, (5) healing and prayer for disability, (6) disability and the afterlife, and (7) desire or vision for disability ministry in the church. Follow-up probes were used to clarify responses and invite elaboration. After responding to all of the vignettes, participants could share additional experiences or reflections related to disability and ministry.

To examine how pastors understood the relationship between disability and sin, we presented the hypothetical scenario involving a teenager who became paralyzed following a car accident:

> Pastors have different views on the relationship between disability and sin. Imagine a couple in your congregation had a teenager who was in a car accident and became paralyzed. They come to you to ask for forgiveness for any sin they or their son may have committed that led to this accident.

We then asked how they would approach the situation, which scripture or theology they would draw upon, and what resources or guidance they would give the couple. We expected this vignette to most clearly bring to light the pastors' theological views on the relationship between disability and sin. However, some pastors' views on sin came up again in our second vignette: 'A couple in your church came to you who were expecting a baby. They did some prenatal testing and found out their child would have Down

syndrome. They are swirling with questions. How could this be? Is this part of God's plan?' We again asked pastors how they would approach this situation, the scripture or theology they would draw on, and the resources or guidance they would give the couple. As with the first vignette, pastors also discussed their theological views on sin when responding to this couple, even though 'sin' was not explicitly mentioned. We indicate below when pastors were responding to the second vignette.

All but one interview was conducted in person, with one interview completed by phone. Interviews ranged from 34 to 85 min in length ($M = 63$ min) and were facilitated by a member of our project team, including a faculty member, program director, senior research associate, and theological graduate student. Our team brought multidisciplinary expertise in organizational leadership, theology, bioethics, and the psychology of religion. Interviews were professionally transcribed, deidentified, and independently reviewed for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Our team-based approach to data analysis involved all four interviewers and one additional graduate student. We employed a multi-stage thematic analysis to address our research questions. In the first stage, two team members independently conducted an initial close reading of each transcript, using descriptive coding to identify pastors' practical responses, theological interpretations, and references to pastoral resources across interview domains. Although most of our coding focused on responses to the first vignette, pastors occasionally expressed their views on the relationship between sin and disability elsewhere in the interview protocol. After comparing these initial codes, the team engaged in a consensus-based process to develop a consolidated coding framework with shared code definitions. The analysis presented in this paper focused on the following research question: *How do pastors talk about the relationship between disability and sin?* In the second stage, team members worked in pairs to independently apply this coding framework to each transcript. Coding pairs then met to compare interpretations, resolve discrepancies, and refine code definitions as needed. Relevant transcript segments were tagged using existing codes, with new codes inductively generated as needed. Following completion of coding across all 25 transcripts, the full team met to review and organize themes, attending carefully to theological nuance and variation in pastors' language and reasoning. We then conducted a final review of all transcripts to confirm that codes were consistently applied and that the thematic structure accurately reflected participants' intended meanings. We used Dedoose as a tool to organize our codes and summarize our findings.

Findings

Five primary themes emerged from these pastors' descriptions of their views on the relationship between disability and sin. First, it was most common for pastors to dismiss any obvious connection between disability and sin. Second, when they did reference a relationship between disability and sin, they tended to root the connection in the general brokenness of creation through the Fall or original sin. Third, some allowed for a link between disability and sin insofar as disabilities could be the indirect result of

personal sin or wrongdoing (i.e. not as a direct punishment, but as a natural consequence of sinful behavior). Fourth, several pastors connected disability and social or structural sin. Finally, a small number of pastors insisted that the relationship between disability and sin was inherently mysterious or was simply the wrong way to frame the issue. Several of the pastors we interviewed had responses that fit into more than one category, representing the complex and at times unsystematic nature of their responses.

Theme 1: Disability and Sin as Unrelated

Most of the pastors in our study ($n = 23$) dismissed any direct connection between disability and sin. Many expressed concern with our first vignette, that a parishioner might frame as a direct result of sin. As Pastor Ervin said, 'It deeply saddens me that somebody would have that perspective [that they were personally responsible for a disability], but I understand it because we've had that in our own church.' Some, like Pastor George, were less familiar with the thinking that would connect sin and disability in the first place. When asked how he would respond to the parents in our first vignette who asked what sin they or their son might have committed, Pastor George responded:

> *Shocked*, I would be shocked. I would try to explain to them that that's not the way God works in our view, and certainly in my view, that God is not a vengeful or punishing God, that crap happens … [and I would] try to keep my level of shock down and be as [*sic*] pastoral and understanding, because that's telling me a whole lot of where they're coming from too.

Regardless of their initial reaction, all participants expressed a desire to meet our hypothetical couple with a level of appropriate pastoral sensitivity. As Pastor Ervin continued, 'I would validate and understand their feelings about 'What [did] we do to deserve this?' That's really normal and really common. But I would seek to hopefully, gently, but clearly say that that's not how God operates.'

To explain their perspective, pastors drew upon passages from the Bible. These references included the story of Job and Jesus' reference to the tragedy of the tower of Siloam (Luke 13:4), among others. Notably, nearly all cited the story of Jesus and the man born blind (John 9). For example, Pastor Quentin described this passage as his immediate point of entry into the scenario:

> My initial thought would be to lead them to: 'This reminds me of a story in the Gospel of John where people had similar struggles and questions.' And in time, and it may not be an early part of that conversation, it may take a while to be able to broach that, to take them to, I think it's John 9, with the man born blind where the question that came up was, 'Who sinned? This person or his parents?' And just take them like, 'What do you think about the … fact that Jesus didn't say yes to either of those questions? He went in a different direction where this person who was seen as a sign of problem and sin was in fact someone through whom the power of God was shown … [Jesus] doesn't seem to say this is revenge for your sin or punishment, but instead that this is an opportunity for God's power to be shown through weakness.'

For these pastors, the story of John 9 served as evidence that God does not use disability to punish people for sins committed by them or their family members. As portrayed in the story, God is neither vindictive nor reward-minded or punishment-minded. Rather, God is portrayed as gracious. As Pastor Walter emphasized:

> [I would] always point them to a God of grace. God in the New Testament is a God of discipline—but not a God of wrath, not a God of anger. So [I would] always point them to the graciousness of God, the trustworthiness of God. I'd be very quick to move them away from a bad theology of God striking down their son because of sin or because of poor choices.

Commonly, pastors were concerned that a 'bad theology' of God's character would lead to misplaced feelings of guilt. Indeed, a prominent topic among these pastors emerged from how they imagined a congregant's implicit association of sin and disability might manifest as unnecessary guilt. As Pastor Peter said,

> I'm always happy for someone to make a formal confession of sin, but I would also be really, really clear that, "Look, this might be an opportunity to make a confession. You might have guilt or shame or something that's built up. We can deal with that, but it has nothing to do with what happened to your kid."

Likewise, Pastor Darren said:

> One of the things that I would want to resist is this assumption that the particular suffering that someone experiences is a direct result of their sin … This is not to discourage you from confessing sin, but I don't want you to think that it's because of this particular sin that this particular situation happened. We really have nothing to suggest that that's the case. But know that I, the elders, and deacons are here to support you both in your spiritual and physical and material needs … So I would want them to be comforted in knowing that there's a community that seeks to come alongside them, both spiritually and materially. And I don't want that suffering to be in their minds affiliated with a kind of guilt.

These perspectives highlight the distinction drawn by many pastors between the way they would frame disability and sin conceptually and how they would pastor people through potential feelings of guilt. Although they themselves did not regard disability as a punishment for a person's sin, they recognized the underlying pastoral task as addressing the guilt their congregant may experience in this scenario. Accordingly, their pastoral move was not to discount the importance of appropriate confession and repentance, but to reframe the scenario of acquired disability we presented them as an occasion for grace rather than condemnation.

Theme 2: Disability and Original Sin

Overall, the pastors we interviewed tended to dismiss any connection between disability and sin. However, this did not mean that pastors conceived of disability in positive terms. Nearly all the pastors we interviewed ($n = 23$) framed disability in fundamentally negative terms. One common way in which pastors accounted for the existence of disability was to reference the fallenness of the world as brought about by the Fall or original sin. Thirteen of our twenty-five pastors said disability was a result of the Fall.

As Pastor Israel said, 'Nature is broken and wounded by what we call original sin, generally. So that is why things are not normal. That's why things happen the way they happen.' The notion of a diminished creation, a world that is not 'normal' and does not work as intended, was pervasive. As Pastor Noah stated, 'I would say generally, disabilities are not the way it's supposed to be. I don't think disabilities are intrinsically good, and I think they're a result, generally speaking, of living in a world that because of sin, there are many things that are not the way they're supposed to be, and those are one of them.'

For many pastors, disabilities serve as evidence that creation is imperfect and, in the words of more than one pastor, 'not the way it's supposed to be.' Thus, disabilities were compared to natural disasters (Pastor Tristan) or the fact that animals now eat each other (Pastor Franklin). The existence of disability was, for many of these pastors, yet another example of a broken world. Indeed, it was not uncommon for pastors to frame the existence of disability as *prima facie* evidence of a sinful and marred world. Pastor Oliver articulated this perspective:

> Disability is evidence that there is a broken world around us, and that disability isn't necessarily sinful, it's just evidence that we live in a sinful world … I've heard it said by some pastors, and it kind of just makes my skin crawl when they say it, that 'if you've got a disability, you've been living with some kind of sin.' I mean, that's just … ridiculous. They didn't ask for that. They didn't ask for that disability. They didn't wish for that disability … So yeah, to me, disability is just evidence of living in a broken, sinful world. It's not sin itself necessarily.

According to this perspective, disabilities of all kinds are not only undesirable, but also work against God's intended best for people. When considering our second vignette about whether God might intentionally design some people with disabilities, Pastor Oliver continued with this line of reasoning:

> We know that God's plans are always for good for us, so Down syndrome's not part of his plan. Again, that goes back to the disability as part of a broken world thing … so it's real easy for me to counsel parents that Down syndrome's not part of God's plan. That's part of the broken world thing that's working in there.

Likewise, Pastor Vance found it hard to imagine an intellectual disability such as Down syndrome factoring into God's good design. He explained, 'I think that that person with Down syndrome or any type of cognitive intellectual challenge that has had in life, I believe was because of brokenness of the world and sinfulness of the world. I don't think it was because of God's original plan that that child would be that way.'

To account for the existence of disabilities, these pastors identified 'the brokenness of the world and the sinfulness of the world' as the culprit. Because sin entered the world, brokenness entered the world. According to this reasoning, disabilities – – which here are framed as a way of being human that is different from the way being human is 'supposed to be' – – are an unfortunate, but unsurprising, result of the Fall.

None of the pastors we interviewed believed that the fallen world – – that is, a world in which disabilities exist – – is caused by God per se. Yet God does relate to this fallen creation in some way. Referencing the book of Job, Pastor Lewis said:

> Sometimes chaos exists, and sometimes bad things happen, and … we could spend our whole lives asking *What if*? But awful things happen. Christ goes to the cross despite being the perfect human. And so it is my sense that [disability] is not a punishment from God, but rather the chaos of living in a chaotic and sinful world.

Disabilities, then, emerge from a fallen world. The same world in which Christ went to the cross and died, despite his perfection (e.g. lack of culpability for sin), is the same world in which people experience disability (which is similarly unrelated to a person's culpability for sin). But, according to this thinking, drawing a straight causal line between an individual's particular sin and their disability would be improper. In the words of Pastor Kelly:

> To equate an accident [and resulting disability] as a divine retribution from God I would say is a misapplication of Scripture … If sin didn't exist in the world, then these things wouldn't happen, but that doesn't mean you did something … It's not X equals Y, right? But [we can say that] because sin does exist, these things happen in the world, and we struggle through this life.

Many of the other pastors we interviewed similarly resisted the idea of a causal link between sin and disability. Yet, as part of a fallen creation, people's sinful actions still may lead to a person becoming disabled. This would not, in the words of Pastor Kelly, be an instance of direct 'X equals Y' causation. Rather, many of these pastors remained open to a less direct connection between personal sin and disability.

Theme 3: Disability as an Indirect Result of Personal Sin

Along these lines, it was not uncommon for pastors to explore the possibility of disability *indirectly* resulting from personal sin. Thirteen pastors explored this possibility. Explaining this indirect connection between one's personal sin and disability within our second vignette, Pastor Jaime said, 'I see some individuals who are addicted to drugs and alcohol, and then their children come out with some type of disability. Now that's a consequence … of their actions. Was it a sin of what they were doing? Well, perhaps in the eyes of God, not taking care of their child while it was in the womb [was a sin].' Thus, while not punitive, disabilities might result as unintended yet natural consequences from a person's sin or wrongdoing. Pastor Kelly made this distinction, saying:

> Disability is not the direct result of one person's sin. Although … Let's just say, in that scenario, the teenager is drunk and driving, and that's what causes the accident. I think you can point to that and say, 'Well, you were sinning, which led to this thing, which led to the disability,' but that's different than saying, 'You sinned, and so then God made you get in this accident.' I would say those are two different things.

Pastor Franklin similarly allowed for a possible indirect connection between personal sin and disability in our vignette, saying, 'There's no relation between the son's accident unless there was drinking and driving involved. That would be a sin because you're allowing your actions to endanger the lives of other people.' Pastor Quentin referred to these as the 'real life consequences' of sin. According to this perspective, although disabilities do not arise directly from sin (and therefore do not require repentance, forgiveness, or absolution for guilt), the fact of a fallen and sinful world creates a context in which disabilities can and do result indirectly from sinful behaviors. Endangering lives through drinking and driving was one frequently imagined example.

We observed that no pastors expressed the view that disability can indirectly be caused by sin in their initial response to the hypothetical vignette. Instead, it emerged as pastors talked through the possible ways they might think theologically and respond pastorally to our vignette. Pastor Harris was an example:

> I really don't [see any relationship between sin and disability]. Except for in the instance of your example from this young man who was paralyzed in a car wreck, depending on what he may have been doing, if there's drinking involved and he gets in a car and he drives … But did God, because this young man chose to do these things and act this way, did God then punish him? And I'd have to say no, that's not the way that that works, but there's always a consequence.

Pastors who articulated the possibility of disability being caused indirectly by sin often initially dismissed any connection between sin and disability. It was only upon reflection that they found such a connection. The common formula for such responses was, *Disability is not a result of sin. Unless, of course, we are talking about the natural consequences of sinful behavior X leading to a disability. In which case, yes, disability can be said to result from sin. Otherwise, it is not.* As one example, Pastor Lewis entertained particularly exceptional situations in which one's sinful behavior could lead to disability:

> We are all sinners [and we] all live in a fallen world. But I would say unless maybe you are blind because you instigated a gunfight and someone shot your eye out, unless there is an obvious point A-point B connection, I would say in general I would not connect sin with disability because differing abilities reveal the grace and glory of God to us in really unique and interesting and cool ways that we wouldn't know otherwise. And so I would say I'm generally pretty disability-positive. That's not to say that you cannot, through your own sinfulness or mistakes, cause a disability. But yeah, if you choose to jump off a building, you might break your arm, yeah. But I would say extending beyond an obvious A to B, I probably wouldn't [connect sin and disability].

In these pastors' thinking, personal sin can indirectly lead to disability, but only in these seemingly narrow situations.

Pastor Peter equivocated when explaining the relationship between sin and disability:

> God's not a vending machine in the sky that gives blessings and curses just based on the buttons you push. Now, if you drank a bottle of wine every day you were pregnant and your kid has some disabilities, that's a different kind of causation than God causing something to happen because … yeah. I don't know. Is that making sense?

Other pastors in our study shared Pastor Peter's uncertainty. Twenty-three of our twenty-five pastors resisted the immediate association of disability with personal sin or wrongdoing, many allowed for the possibility of an indirect relationship as a natural outcome of that wrongdoing. As Pastor Peter said, such an outcome may constitute 'a different kind of causation than God causing [a disability].'

Among these circuitous connections of personal sin and disability, there were only two occasions when a pastor appeared willing to entertain even the possibility of sin directly causing a disability, in the sense of divine punishment. The clearest example of these was Pastor Lewis, who said, 'We do all choose to sin, and those sins do impact the world around us. But I wouldn't say that our disabilities, whether we're born with them or gain them over time, are always necessarily the direct result of our sinfulness. They can be, but I don't assume that.'

Although reluctant to frame disability as a direct result of or punishment for sin, these pastors tended to conceive of disabilities in terms of the fallenness of creation. Some allowed for the role of sinful human action in causing disabilities (with the caveat that such instances should largely be free from personal blame or guilt). Others believed that disabilities themselves evidenced the reality of a broken, suboptimal world. Nevertheless, whether the indirect result of wrongdoing (i.e. fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, car accidents) or the natural result of a fallen world (i.e. Down syndrome), these pastors portrayed a negative theological explanation for the existence of disabilities.

Theme 4: Disability and Social Sin

Only three pastors we interviewed discussed social sin as an explanation for disability, or the idea that society itself can disable people. As in the cases of personal sin, these instances occurred only after sustained processing and reflection on the scenario we presented. Pastor Peter said, 'I think probably if I was pushed, I would want to say the reason people suffer from their disabilities is because of sin. Not because of their sin, but just in general, we live in a world that disables people. So there is suffering layered onto the normal pains of a disabled body.' This reference to disability arising from 'a world that disables people' also surfaced in the interview with Pastor George, who, in responding to the couple expecting a child with Down syndrome, said:

> I don't think the problem's with [the person with a disability]. The problem is with a society that tries to pigeonhole a person. And I think society puts its stamp on people with mental disabilities, and if we just allowed them to be who they are, we might learn a whole lot from them. Well, I don't think there's any might about it. We would learn a whole lot if we were open to it.

In Pastor George's account, personal sin is not the action that leads to a disability. Rather, the society that 'pigeonholes' and 'puts its stamp on people with mental disabilities' is the sinful entity through which the harmful effects of disability are exacerbated or created in the first place.

Theme 5: Disability and Sin – Mystery and the Wrong Question

Five of the pastors we interviewed insisted that, even if they were willing to explore avenues through which sin and disability might relate, to do so would be asking a fundamentally wrong question about a mysterious reality. As Pastor Skyler explained, 'We just live in a world where [disabilities] happen to people, and instead of trying to explain why, let's say, "This is what we can do about it. We can live the best life we can".' These pastors tended to focus less on explaining the connection (or lack thereof) between disability and sin, and more on the relational and pastoral task of caring for the individuals in our case scenario. Pastor Vance offered one such response, saying:

> In my mind, I visualize someone that needs pastoral care and love, and the realization that, 'Hey, you're still here. God still has a plan for your life. God still loves you. I do not have the answer for why this happened, perhaps one day we will, perhaps not, but we need to go past … first of all, love on you, help you get well, get better.'

Taking a different approach, Pastor Richard made it clear that he did not consider the question we posed to be of primary concern in his pastoral work. He explained:

> Jesus talks more about the danger of wealth than he does about being a leper. So the point of that … so it's kind of flat for me where I don't treat anybody differently just because they look like they're healthy 'cause I think we're all messed up so much. So I don't really have a cogent way of saying, 'This is how I deal with it theologically,' as much as I do relationally.

Whether because they perceived the question to be improperly framed or simply 'beyond their pay grade,' these pastors appeared to be comfortable with their lack of a

straightforward accounting for the relationship between disability and sin. In Pastor Richard's words, these pastors wanted to reflect less 'theologically' and more 'relationally' on the vignette we posed.

Discussion

Disability theologians have long worried that sin and disability are linked in many pastors' theological imaginations, which leads to negative views about disability.[16] This study mostly validated that concern. Most pastors in our study framed disability as a tragic consequence of the fall or a harm brought on directly or indirectly through sinful behavior. There was a relative absence of theological perspectives that framed disability as a positive form of human diversity or as a source of distinctive gifts to the church.

Moreover, very few pastors we interviewed were content to leave the existence of disability as a theological mystery. Four of the five who said that the connection between disability and sin was a mystery or the wrong question to ask also said that disability was a result of the Fall. Of the seven pastors who initially stated that there was no relationship between disability and sin, all but three later noted that disability could be the result of the Fall or a direct or indirect result of personal sin.

The connections pastors described between disability and sin were complex and sometimes contradictory. Overall, only six of our twenty-five participants had responses that fit only into one of our five themes. Pastors never explicitly endorsed punitive accounts wherein God punished people with disabilities; instead, pastors tended to link disability to fallenness/original sin, or to the indirect consequences of individual behavior. The relative absence of social/structural accounts is notable given disability theologians' emphasis on the social accounts of disability.[17] Pastors in this sample were less likely to name systemic or institutional sin as contributing to disabled people's marginalization.

Four key points emerged from our interviews that have both theoretical and practical implications for pastoral ministry. First, pastors reflexively rejected blaming disabled people or their parents for disabilities. This 'no' to the question of whether disability and sin are connected was deeply pragmatic and pastoral – they wanted to ease the guilt and suffering our hypothetical parents expressed over their son's accident. Many pastors referred to or alluded to John 9 when explaining their response. This was not altogether surprising, as we wrote the vignette to parallel this passage. Here, Jesus explains to his disciples that the blind man they have encountered was not born blind because he or his parents sinned; 'he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him' (John 9:3 NRSVue).

Contemporary disability theologians have noted that in this passage, Jesus dismantles any simple connection between disability and sin. Bethany Fox, for example, writes,

> The disciples see two choices for why the man was born blind: his sin or his parents' sin. But Jesus reveals their worldview as too small and expands their perspective as he shows them another possibility—the blindness is present so that God's works might be revealed in him.[18]

Jesus goes on to tell the Pharisees in the story, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see," your sin remains' (John 9:41 NRSVue). Here, Jesus overturns common associations and stereotypes – sin is now associated with sightedness

rather than blindness. Pastors' refusal to place blame for disability is a strength that could be leveraged in educational efforts that seek to counter disability stigma within congregations. A subsequent step in their theological thinking could follow the story in John 9 to its conclusion, wherein the healing narrative not only disentangles sin and disability but locates sin with those who understand disability primarily as a deficit to be overcome.

Second, the prominence of the 'fallen world' account indicates that pastors often preserve a negative theological explanation for disability while avoiding individualized blame. While such an explanation may be more pastorally sensitive than direct blame for disability, it nevertheless frames disability as 'not the way it is supposed to be.' This can implicitly support deficit-based attitudes wherein disability is seen as an inherent lack or flaw rather than a form of diversity that can strengthen the church. Various disability theologians have offered alternative understandings of disability's relationship to the Fall that pastors might be encouraged to consider. Disability theologian Deborah Creamer argues that disability ought to be understood as an ordinary embodied experience within the frame of human limitations. Limits are not necessarily evil or fallen, but are the way God designs bodies to inhabit the world.[19] In her book, *Disability's Challenge to Theology*, Devan Stahl offers an account of the doctrine of Creation that positions disabilities as manifestations of God's love of diversity rather than natural evils that are the result of the Fall.[20] Of course, pastors may view disability as a 'bad thing,' while still supporting and welcoming people with disabilities within the church. Indeed, many who believed that disability was a product of the Fall still viewed disabled people as necessary in the life of their church. Further research is needed to see how beliefs about disability and fallenness are linked to practices of inclusion and belonging.

Third, despite disability theologians' interest in social/structural understandings of sin in disability theology, very few of the pastors in our study brought up this connection. This may partly owe to the fact that we framed the first scenario as a car accident leading to a physical disability, spurring feelings of guilt. We intended the scenario to evoke questions of personal sin and wrongdoing, which it certainly did. However, when we asked directly about the connection between disability and sin in later vignettes, such as the one focused on Down syndrome, with only a few exceptions, pastors in our study still did not mention social or structural issues in framing their responses. Combined with a lack of attention to the social dimensions of sin and disability, this individualized and negative framing of disability may hinder pastors from seeing the need to change their own practices to better include people with disabilities in their congregations. There is ample work in disability theology connecting disability with social sin (sins that stem from social and structural systems) and ableism (the systematic discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities) rather than personal or original sin. In her book, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request*, Amy Kenny describes how the worst ableism she has experienced has been within churches, which have refused to accommodate her wheelchair and perpetuate the notion that disability is a defect that will be fixed in this life or the next.[21] Again, however, further research into the links between formal theology and pastoral practice is necessary.

Finally, the frequent circuitousness and internal inconsistencies in pastors' responses suggest that pastoral beliefs about disability are not strongly systematized. It was not uncommon for pastors to produce an initial, definitive response to our scenario, only

to then backtrack as they considered additional nuances that complicated their first impulse. Rather than reflecting a lack of thoughtfulness, we believe this finding indicates a complex set of factors influencing these pastors as they considered how to respond. The pastors we interviewed tended to draw on multiple resources (e.g. biblical texts, pastoral intuition, personal experience, common-sense causality) rather than on coherent disability-theological frameworks. And while there are disability theologians writing on nearly every theological doctrine within the Christian tradition, there are few systematic theologies of disability.

Our pastors' non-systematized responses reflected the inherent complexity of the case we presented to them. We sensed that they desired to pastor effectively and with sensitivity, recognizing the severity of our hypothetical scenarios, even if they did not have a consistent framework to draw on for response. Educational resources designed for pastors may help many align their pastoral practices with their theological beliefs and refine their conceptual understanding.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study involved interviews with 25 pastors serving churches located within a single county in one U.S. state. Although the sample included pastors from multiple denominations and congregations of varying sizes, it cannot be assumed to represent the perspectives of pastors more broadly. Second, the demographic composition of the sample – predominantly male and White – reflects the composition of many pastoral leadership contexts but nonetheless limits the diversity of perspectives captured. Third, a small number of churches with existing disability ministries were purposively included to ensure variation in exposure to disability-related ministry. Pastors in such contexts may be more familiar with disability issues than pastors in congregations without such ministries.

Future research could extend these findings in several ways. Larger studies drawing on pastors from multiple regions and denominational traditions could examine whether the theological patterns identified here appear across broader pastoral populations. Researchers could also vary the vignettes, asking follow-up questions, such as 'what if the teenager had been driving drunk,' or what the mother's actions contributed to a congenital disability, to see if pastors' responses would change with this new information. Survey-based research could also build on the themes identified in these interviews to examine the prevalence of different theological framings of disability and sin. Finally, future work might compare pastors serving congregations with established disability ministries to those without such ministries in order to examine how exposure to disability-related ministry shapes theological reflection and pastoral practice.

Implications

Sin and disability are linked in the minds of many Christian pastors. Although most of the pastors in our study rejected punitive understandings of disability, most nonetheless framed disability as brokenness – proof of the residual effects of the Fall on creation. Whether disabilities were seen as direct evidence of the Fall or an unfortunate effect of

humanity's sinfulness, disability was rarely portrayed positively. Still, pastors expressed sympathy and sensitivity toward disabled people and their families, as well as an openness to including disabled people within congregational life. Beyond references to John 9, few pastors knew where to turn to think theologically about disability, biblically or otherwise. This suggests a need to develop accessible, theologically grounded educational resources for pastors that (1) move beyond deficit models of disability, (2) highlight social and structural dimensions of disability, and (3) translate theological commitments into concrete practices of disability inclusion and belonging. The absence of substantive attention to these issues in seminaries further emphasizes the need for such tools.[22] Additional research is also needed to examine how pastors' beliefs map onto their congregational practices, how the laity's beliefs map onto those of their pastors, and how additional education for both pastors and laity can improve the congregational experiences of people with disabilities and their families.

Notes

1. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, 12.
2. Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, 5.
3. Luther, *Colloquia Mensalis*, 57.
4. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*; Gosbell, "Space, Place, and the Ordering of Materiality in Disability Theology".
   Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*.
5. Eiesland, *The Disabled God,* 93.
6. See Carter, "Research on Disability and Congregational Inclusion"; and Sango and Forrester-Jones, "Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Spirituality, and Religion".
7. See Carter et al., "Toward Accessible Worship"; Carter et al., "Barriers to Belonging"; McMahon-Panther and Bornman, "The Perceptions of Persons with Disabilities, Primary Caregivers, and Church Leaders".
8. See Carter et al., "Barriers to Belonging"; Patka and McDonald, "Intellectual Disability and Faith Communities".
9. See Kessler Foundation and National Organization on Disability, *2010 Survey of Americans with Disabilities*; Landes and Mueller, "Differences in Religious Attendance"; Whitehead, "Religion and Disability".
10. See Carter, "Spirituality and Supports"; Carter et al., "Toward Accessible Worship"; Liu et al., "In Their Own Words"; Turner et al., "Religious Expression Amongst Adults With Intellectual Disabilities".
11. See Boehm and Carter, "Family Quality of Life and its Correlates"; Sullivan and Aramini, "Religion and Positive Youth Development".
12. Patka and McDonald, "Intellectual Disability and Faith Communities".
13. Letizia, *Held in the Love of God*.
14. McNair and Sanchez, "Christian Social Constructions of Disability".
15. This study was pre-registered with OSF here: https://osf.io/chukt/.
16. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*; Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*.
17. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*; Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*; Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*.
18. Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus*, 137.
19. Creamer, *Disabilty and Christian Theology*.
20. Stahl, *Disability's Challenge to Theology*, 135–142.
21. Kenny, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request*, 20–36.
22. Annandale and Carter, "Disability and Theological Education"; Webb, "Integrating Disability Perspectives into Theological Education".

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