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Rising Above a Crippling Hermeneutic

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Rising Above a Crippling Hermeneutic

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

I am a man of far too many words. But I am keenly aware of the fact that there are instances in which the presence of many words cheapens the sacrality of gratitude. For this reason I will say only this: gracias, Tamara Thompson por estar siempre conscientes de, pero nunca *realmente ver*, mi discapacidad.

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There are not enough hours in a day for me to thank all the individuals who have sacrificed for my education and to see this project completed. Please keep in mind that the individuals listed here are in no way ordered with respect to influence, title or personal merit.

First, thank you Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Thompson for inviting me into your home and your hearts so many years ago. Thank you for seeing the beauty of suffering righteously and instilling the same value in me. I cannot thank you enough for your numerous sacrifices on my behalf. Nothing is done in vain that is done with a pure heart. I will forever be your grateful son.

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ABSTRACT

Sacred texts authored in antiquity present a challenge for contemporary religious practitioners because there is always a question regarding how to interpret and apply the message today. Prominent Pentecostal theologian and disability theorist Amos Yong faces this challenge concerning the Bible as it relates to disabilities and those who have them. As I argue in this thesis, Yong succeeds in challenging the Pentecostal perceptions of disability without compromising on the over-all Pentecostal view of scripture.

The Hebrew Bible, which, according to Yong, “...serves as the foundation of the Christian scriptures,” contains multiple passages that portray disability in a negative light.¹ For example, the Old Testament contains laws and regulations governing the priestly liturgical cult that place very strict guidelines on who is allowed to fulfill what duties based on one’s lineage and physical condition.² The Old Testament also contains passages in which the God of the Hebrews makes a covenant linking obedience with health and disobedience with sickness.

The second part of the Christian scriptures (the New Testament) also includes multiple narratives that portray disability as (at the very least) an undesirable phenomenon. For example, the healing narrative and miracles attributed to Jesus and his followers are used by Pentecostals to stress the importance of physical healing. Consider also the Pentecostal understanding of the

¹Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: a New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 17.

²Cf. Lev. 21:16-21.

cross event. According to Pentecostal scholar Keith Warrington, the cross is used to emphasize triumph *over* suffering, sin, and the devil.³

The challenge for contemporary religious practitioners, then, is deciding how one is to interpret and apply the message of a given text today. For example, (a) how does a contemporary Pentecostal (that utilizes the Bible as a sacred text) view the phenomenon of disability and passages of scripture that marginalize the differently-able today? Furthermore, (b) how does Yong successfully arrive at non-Pentecostal convictions concerning the differently-able while maintaining his Pentecostal beliefs about scripture?

In order to explain how Yong succeeds in justifying his non-Pentecostal perceptions of the differently-able one must first understand the overall Pentecostal convictions concerning scripture which inform the Pentecostal perception of disability. The authority of, and use for, the Bible as it informs the perception of disability within Pentecostalism (a variant of (a)) will be the focus of Chapter One.

Chapter Two will introduce Yong's theological hermeneutic which articulates his understanding of the purpose of scripture. By examining the hermeneutical approach utilized by Yong in his earlier work *Spirit-Word-Community*, on biblical interpretation, one can gain a clearer picture of how he relates methods of interpretation to his perception of disability in his later work *The Bible, Disability, and the Church* (a variant of (b)).

The final task, then, is to demonstrate how Yong successfully solves the problem of exclusion experienced by the differently-able while maintaining his Pentecostal beliefs about scripture. Chapter Three articulates Yong's hermeneutical solution to the problem of exclusion justified within the Pentecostal understanding of scripture. This is done through understanding

³Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), 303

Yong's 'disability hermeneutic. This chapter explicates Yong's assertion that the way Pentecostals have *misinterpreted* scripture is to blame for exclusive and oppressive perceptions of disability.

CHAPTER ONE:

The Pentecostal Understanding of Scripture and Disability, and Yong's Discontent

Pentecostals affirm the Bible as both infallible and authoritative. Pentecostal scholar Keith Warrington writes in his book, *Pentecostal Theology*, that, for Pentecostals, the Bible is received as infallible and to be taken literally, with a sense of awe. Pentecostals choose to accept any “ambiguities” rather than calling into question the content and/or integrity of Scripture.¹ As a result, the Pentecostal tradition asserts that biblical texts found within the protestant canon are the absolute and final authority on all matters of faith and praxis.² Pentecostal scholar, French Arrington agrees in his 1994 article, “The Use of the Bible by Pentecostals”:

At the heart of classical Pentecostalism is the conviction that the whole Bible is the inspired Word of God. This conviction affirms that the Bible is a reliable revelation of God, and that it states the exact truths the Holy Spirit intends to convey. The writing of Scripture by the prophets and apostles does not detract from the divine origin and authority of Scripture. God joined his Word with the words of men and women in the Scriptures. The starting point and very foundation for Pentecostal faith and praxis has always been the biblical text.³

Both classic Pentecostalism (Arrington) and more contemporary expressions of Pentecostalism (Warrington) agree on the centrality of the biblical text. The content of scripture, because of its divine source, is to be revered instead of questioned.⁴

This authoritative view of biblical texts as infallible, for Pentecostals, means that the Bible *is* and *must be* contemporarily relevant. For Pentecostals, this need for relevance has led to

¹Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), 183, 184-85.

²Ibid., 186.

³French L. Arrington, "The Use of the Bible by Pentecostals." *Pneuma* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 1994): 101.

⁴Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter*, 181.

an elevation of *experience* in the present.⁵ Therefore, the relationship that one has with God is facilitated through the personal application of, and interactive experience with, the biblical text. One's relationship with the divine is viewed as "...a theocracy in which God makes the rules, punishing the disobedient and rewarding the obedient, in ways that are reminiscent of his responses to the Jews, as reflected in the [Old Testament]."⁶ The biblical narratives, promises, and laws as given to the Israelites and early Christians are believed to be applicable to the lives of contemporary Pentecostals. Warrington writes that there is "...no historical gap to be bridged between [contemporary Pentecostals] and the text."⁷ Pentecostal theologian Pamela Holmes agrees by stating that Pentecostals believe it is the same Spirit, "...inspiring both the original writers and current readers"; the gap between past and present is assumed to be bridged.⁸ Therefore, the Bible for Pentecostals is, as Warrington states, "...to be taken at face value...there is little reason to separate that which it said to a previous generation from that which it says now; the message is assumed to be the same."⁹ This is important to note because this understanding of the biblical text (as presently applicable in its entirety) profoundly informs the Pentecostal beliefs concerning sickness and/or suffering and disability.

Well established within Pentecostal theology is the belief that the presence of suffering (sickness or debilitating conditions) may indicate personal sin, symbolize unholiness, or result from demonic influence.¹⁰ The classic Pentecostal belief that there is no reason to separate what the Bible said to a previous generation from what it says to contemporary readers serves as a

⁵Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter*, 188-89.

⁶*Ibid.*, 189.

⁷*Ibid.*, 190.

⁸Michael Wilkinson and Steven M. Studebaker, eds., *Pentecostals, Peacemaking, and Social Justice Series*, vol. 2, *A Liberating Spirit: Pentecostals and Social Action in North America* (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 192.

⁹Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter*, 190.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 289-90. Cf. Exod. 9:14; Num. 14:37; 1 Sam. 25:36-39; 1 Kings 13:4-6; Pss. 31:4-5, 37:3; Job 2:7; Luke 11:20-25, 13:11-17; Acts 10:38.

foundation for this belief.¹¹ For example, Warrington states that Pentecostals readily accept Exodus 15:26, a passage of scripture indisputably relating to ancient Jews, linking health with obedience, and sickness with disobedience as evidence for the contemporary normative association of sin with suffering.¹² Passages in Leviticus regarding the physical requirements surrounding the priesthood clearly articulate how important it is that the priests be without “blemish.”¹³ For the priests, any physical defect is said to, “...Profane [God’s] sanctuaries.”¹⁴ Consequently, interpreting the biblical narratives, rules, and laws given to the Israelites as normative determines the amount of theological space suffering and disability are allowed within the Pentecostal communities’ biblical interpretation. Therefore, those who repent (or are truly saved) are believed to be “supernaturally rescued” from suffering through prayer.¹⁵ The Pentecostals view of the Bible supports the Pentecostal view of disability.

There are two central New Testament narratives Pentecostals use to justify the connection between suffering and sin (or the demonic). First are the healings credited to Jesus and his apostles recorded throughout the four Gospels and Acts. Yong states that healing is central to Pentecostal theology.¹⁶ A primary example of this is witnessed within the Fourfold Gospel, “at the heart of Pentecostal theology...” which, according to Yong, declares Jesus to be, “savior, *healer*, baptizer, and coming king.”¹⁷ Pentecostals believe that the healings professed by the first century Christians are intended to be experienced as a contemporary reality for Christians today.

¹¹Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter*, 190.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Cf. Lev. 21:16-21.

¹⁴English Standard Version, Lev. 21:23 (all remaining verse citations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from this translation).

¹⁵Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter*, 303. Cf. James 5:16.

¹⁶Amos Yong, “Many Tongues, Many Senses: Pentecost, the Body Politic, and the Redemption of Dis/Ability”, *Pneuma* 31, no. 2 (November 2009): 169.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

...the Pentecostal hermeneutic...identifies the apostolic experience, especially that recounted by St. Luke in the book of Acts, as normative for the ongoing life of the church. Hence, the healings experienced by the early Christians—for example, that the lame man at the gate [called] beautiful, Aeneas, the crippled man at Lystra, Publius on the isle of Malta (Acts 28), and many others (Acts for example, Acts 5:16, 8:7, 28:9)—are thought to reflect God’s primary intentions for believers.¹⁸

The presence of healings or triumph *over* suffering, rather than, triumph *through* suffering is believed by Pentecostals to be an imitation of the example of Jesus, “...who through the same Spirit ‘went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil’.”¹⁹ This association of oppression, the devil, and suffering is further highlighted by the Pentecostal understanding of the cross.

The second central narrative Pentecostals use to justify the connection between suffering and sin (or the demonic) is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.²⁰ The cross is believed to be the quintessential picture of God’s triumph over sin and evil. Warrington states that the cross event, for Pentecostals, is used to emphasize Jesus’ triumph *over* suffering, sin and the devil.²¹ Pentecostals point to the crucifixion as an event that symbolizes that Jesus suffered so that the believer is not required to. In agreement with this, Warrington asserts that instead of concentrating “...on the suffering of the cross, Pentecostals have preferred to move quickly to the glory associated with it...the victory and glory associated with the cross have been understood in triumphalistic terms.”²²

The Pentecostal interpretation of these two narratives has led many Pentecostals to assert that physical healing is available to everyone as a result of the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. This belief is often supported by referencing Matthew 8:14–17 and claiming that Jesus

¹⁸Amos Yong, “Many Tongues, Many Senses...”: 169.

¹⁹Ibid., 170. Cf. Acts 10:38; Luke 4:18.

²⁰Cf. Matt. 8:14-17; Acts 10:38.

²¹Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter*, 303.

²²Ibid.

“healed all who were sick.” To fulfill Isaiah’s words: “...He took our illness and bore our diseases” (Isaiah 53:4–5).²³ As a result of the author of Mathew’s Gospel linking these two passages, many Pentecostals believe that it is always God’s will to heal. Warrington asserts the following:

... The desire of Jesus remains constant through all eras and his response to those who come for healing is the same as when he was on earth. Thus, at times, the ministry of healing takes place in a verbal context of claiming or commanding healing, in assumed agreement with the procedure of Jesus. Many Pentecostals, however, prefer to believe that it is God’s preference to heal or that it is his normative will [to do so].²⁴

Therefore, Pentecostals assert that healing is to be expected as a result of obedience and faith.²⁵

Yong captures the centrality afforded to healing within Pentecostalism (and the proof of righteousness that it symbolizes) by stating, “In sum, if the ministry of Jesus and the apostles is marked by the healing power of the Holy Spirit, then so will the ministries of the followers of Jesus who are filled with the Spirit.”²⁶

It follows, then, that when healing does not occur or suffering persists, this is not the will of God (for the righteous person); and alternative explanations must be offered. For Pentecostals, these alternative explanations include sin, the devil, a lack of faith, or a divine test of faith.²⁷

The Pentecostal understanding of scripture, paired with an emphasis on physical healing, has perpetuated a negative perception of disability that has caused the differently-able to be marginalized within Pentecostalism. Warrington states, “...for some Christians who suffer physically or mentally, their presence within some Pentecostal environments sits awkwardly in the context of a perceived belief that healing is available to all...”²⁸ Disability scholar Nancy

²³Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter*, 270-273.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 275.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 190.

²⁶Amos Yong, “Many Tongues, Many Senses...”: 170.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Keith Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: a Theology of Encounter*, 276.

Eiesland attests to the truth of Warrington's claim by articulating her own experience growing up as a differently-able Pentecostal:

As a person reared in a Pentecostal church...I, like many people with disabilities, have experienced the negative effects of healing rituals...Failure to be "healed" is often assessed as a personal flaw in the individual, such as unrepentant sin or a selfish desire to remain disabled. Thus for many people with disabilities, laying on of hands [public prayer for healing] is associated with their stigmatization within the church.²⁹

Amos Yong affirms Nancy Eiesland's testament of exclusion by relaying what his family experienced after his brother was born with autism:

...I believe that part of the struggle my parents endured had to do with the culture of shame...the birth of children with disabilities inevitably raised questions about what, if anything, the parents had done to have deserved anything less than a healthy child.³⁰

Yong then recalls that the shame experienced by his family was intensified by the fact that his parents (who were pastors) proclaimed the Pentecostal belief that true faith in God, "inevitably bring[s] about God's blessings and an abundant life."³¹ The presence of autism in the life of his brother caused his parents to question how well this Pentecostal message would be received from their pulpit.

Motivated in part by his childhood experiences, Yong seeks to understand disabilities as an integral part of the religious community, part of God's divine design for the Church, rather than as a sign of divine retribution to be eradicated from communal life as a sign of God's favor. But Yong seeks to present this new understanding of disabilities (and those who have them) within an interpretive framework that maintains his own Pentecostal convictions concerning the Bible.

²⁹Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 116-17.

³⁰Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: a New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 2.

³¹Ibid.

How, then, does disability theorist Amos Yong, who identifies with Pentecostal convictions concerning scripture, justify non-Pentecostal convictions concerning the differently-able? For Yong, as a Pentecostal, the Bible must be upheld as both contemporarily relevant and infallible. Therefore, Yong is not willing to compromise on the text's infallibility, nor does he reject the normativity of the controversial passages. Yong holds firmly to the belief that scripture is applicable to, and redemptive for, the experience of the differently-able in the twenty-first century.³² Therefore, neither the content of the Bible, nor the relevance of that content, is up for debate within Yong's Pentecostal hermeneutic. Yong is calling attention to what French Arrington highlights as the long-standing "real issue in Pentecostalism" and this issue is, "hermeneutics."³³ In other words, Yong calls into question, not the text itself, but rather *how* the text is read.

Within disability scholarship, as Yong states, "at the interface of disability studies and biblical studies...;" there have been a variety of interpretive approaches adopted in an effort to address the question of the relevance of controversial texts to the experiences of the differently-able.³⁴ According to Religious Studies scholar and disability theorist Hector Avalos, these approaches include the following: Rejectionist, Redemptionist, and Historicist.³⁵

For Yong there is absolutely no need to adopt a "rejectionist" approach to biblical interpretation.³⁶ A rejectionist approach and its variants simply argue that one "...should not use any ancient text...to provide normative values for today."³⁷ Avalos states that various disability

³²Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 6-7.

³³French L. Arrington, "The Use of the Bible by Pentecostals." *Pneuma* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 1994):101.

³⁴Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 7.

³⁵Hector Avalos, "Redemptionism, rejectionism, and historicism as emerging approaches in disability studies." *Perspectives In Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (March 2007): 91-92.

³⁶Hector Avalos, "Redemptionism, rejectionism, and historicism...": 91.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 92.

theorists have utilized this method because “the Bible has negative portrayals of disability that should be rejected in modern society.”³⁸

Yong rejects the “rejectionist” approach because, as Avalos articulates, “the aim of such an approach is not to recontextualize [the text], but to repudiate [it].”³⁹ Accepting the rejectionist approach would be to renege on the Pentecostal claim that the whole of scripture “...remains applicable to our modern lives.”⁴⁰ Therefore, the problem for Yong is not what the text says (negative things about disabilities). Rather, the problem—the stigma attached to disability—resides in the *interpretation* of the text.

For Yong, cultural misinterpretations applied to the biblical texts (not the message of the text itself) can account for the marginalization of the differently-able. Yong makes this assertion explicit in the introduction to his book, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*:

What this book provides is an honest discussion on the many text that have been read as stigmatizing disabilities so that we can become more aware of how our biases and discriminatory attitudes have been historically justified, and how these prejudices remain, to this day, based both implicitly and explicitly on such misconstruals of the Bible...The task before us, then, is to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion not necessarily to the biblical text but to our own traditions of interpretation that have taught us how to read it.⁴¹

According to Avalos, the historicist approach to biblical interpretation is simply for the purpose of “historical inquiry.”⁴² One may examine disability within a particular period of antiquity (e.g. the presence of disability within the first century church), but there is little to no overt effort to apply the conclusions drawn to any contemporary action.⁴³ Yong is, “ambivalent about the historicist view, since such is also inevitably informed by [an] ableist bias.”⁴⁴

³⁸Hector Avalos, “Redemptionism, rejectionism, and historicism...”: 91.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 7.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 8, 12.

⁴²Hector Avalos, “Redemptionism, rejectionism, and historicism...”: 96.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁴Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 7.

Yong adopts a variant of what Avalos calls a, “redemptionist approach” to scripture. This approach to the text, “seeks to redeem the biblical text, despite any negative stance on disabilities, by recontextualizing it for modern application...[seeking] to rescue the text from the misinterpretation of modern scholars with normative views.”⁴⁵ Yong calls his redemptionist hermeneutical method a, “disability hermeneutic” in which he tries to “distinguish what the Bible says [concerning disability] from how the Bible has been received [on the subject].”⁴⁶ Instead of choosing to reject the portions of scripture that have historically casted disabilities in a negative light, Yong chooses to redeem these texts by re-interpreting them in a way that is, “...informed by the experiences of disability...from the perspective of people with disabilities.”⁴⁷ Thereby, Yong is able to maintain his Pentecostal convictions concerning the presently applicable nature of the Bible (over and against Rejectionism). Yong is also able to uphold the Bible as an infallible text by calling *interpretive methods* into question rather than the biblical text.

⁴⁵Hector Avalos, “Redemptionism, rejectionism, and historicism...”: 91.

⁴⁶Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 12, 13.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 13.

CHAPTER TWO:

Paving the way for a Disability Hermeneutic: *Spirit-Word-Community*

Spirit-Word-Community articulates Yong's approach to biblical interpretation and thus sheds light on the particular hermeneutic that informs his work on disability theory. According to Yong the hermeneutical approach proposed therein is distinct from both biblical (historical-critical) and canonical hermeneutics.⁴⁸ In the former case the goal is exegesis in order to arrive at the original meaning of the text.⁴⁹ In the latter case, emphasis is placed on the act of "...interpreting the scriptures as a Christian text, gathered together by the Church and for the Church."⁵⁰ These two hermeneutical categories are primarily concerned with interpreting the *text itself* within a given framework.

Yong's proposed "theological hermeneutic" seeks to interpret the whole of human experience vis-à-vis the divine.⁵¹ This includes a close examination of God, God's relationship with humanity, and God's relationship to the world. In other words, Yong attempts to utilize the act of textual interpretation (seen within both biblical and canonical hermeneutics) but proposes an approach to textual interpretation that functions in conjunction with an examination of the world of the contemporary reader: "...interpreting both interpreters themselves and the realities that interpreted objects and interpreters find themselves in."⁵²

⁴⁸Amos Yong, *Spirit, Word, Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Burlington: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2006), 3. All remaining citations in this chapter are from this text and will be cited with the page number only.

⁴⁹3.

⁵⁰3.

⁵¹6.

⁵²6.

Yong asserts that the Biblical text is *one* aspect of, or the primary avenue through which, the divine is to be understood, rather than the only object to be taken into account when undertaking the task of interpretation. Yong articulates theological hermeneutics as, “the activity of reading or interpreting things related to the divine...” that must be understood as a “...robustly trinitarian trialectic” consisting of an interaction between the Holy Spirit, the Word (Spoken, living and written), and one’s interpretive context or community.⁵³

The Spirit

For Yong the activity of the Spirit is to be an ongoing and ever present reality rather than a static occurrence. This activity precedes creation and stretches to the fulfillment of what Pentecostals call the “eschatological event” or the second coming of Jesus. Yong articulates this understanding of the activity of the Spirit in the following way: “The Spirit who breathed life at the beginning is the same Spirit who continues to renew life in the world, and who will someday re-create it completely...”⁵⁴ It is this understanding of the active role of the Spirit that causes Yong to assert that all present work of the Holy Spirit points to this restorative event.

In anticipation of this eschatological breath of life, the present work of the Spirit is to be the healing force and agent of what is concretely manifest in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus [the] Spirit’s own mission is to heal the sick, the hurt, the wounded; to reconcile those who are alienated and estranged; to make whole that which is shattered, fragmented, and broken; to bring back into relationship those who are separated; to restore that which is lost; to provide meaning to the experience of the absurd, of apparently gratuitous evil and irredeemable suffering, of life in what might otherwise be a fortuitous universe; to complete that which is incomplete and longing for completion.⁵⁵

This vision of the overall mission of the Holy Spirit lends itself to a rather sympathetic reading of scripture that reflects this ongoing restorative and order-affirming activity of the Holy Spirit.

⁵³14, 220.

⁵⁴47.

⁵⁵Ibid.

Yong asserts that Biblical interpretation as carried out by the contemporary reader is a result of the activity of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ Therefore, just as the activity of the Holy Spirit is ongoing, so is the act of interpretation. Furthermore, the text (or interpretive object) is an objective fact while the act of interpretation is subjectively understood. Yong succinctly articulates biblical interpretation as "...a subjective reading of an objective fact."⁵⁷

Yong states that the subjective act of interpretation always seeks to generate ideas that are true to the experiences of the reader.⁵⁸ For example, an interpreter faces a given problematic, the goal of interpretation, then, is to arrive at a solution or answer (perhaps, "...provide meaning to the experience of the absurd...").⁵⁹ Yong asserts that these moments when novel interpretations are needed bring about the illumination of the scriptures by the Holy Spirit in the form of the, "pneumatological imagination."⁶⁰ The role of the (post conversion) pneumatological imagination in the interpretive act is best understood in the following way:

...What is emergent [as a result of the pneumatological imagination] should be understood across the spectrum. On the one side is the work of the Spirit in our hearts and minds that remind us of what has been previously deposited and perhaps neglected (John 14:26b). In this case, there is an imaginative retrieval and reappropriation of familiar truths and convictions. What would otherwise be dead letters of the law is vivified by the Spirit and applied in fresh ways (cf. 2Cor. 3:6). On the other side of the spectrum is the work of the spirit that not only leads us into *all* truth (John 16:13; 1John 2:26), but, arguably, into new significations and appropriations of the truth...the work of the Spirit includes the new things of creation, redemption, and the eschaton.⁶¹

Yong believes that the Holy Spirit is active in the imagination of the interpreter as a result of the conversion experience and thus, aids the interpreter by illuminating scripture in ways that advance the ongoing work of the Spirit.

⁵⁶222.

⁵⁷221.

⁵⁸221.

⁵⁹47.

⁶⁰223.

⁶¹223.

Yong asserts that humanity will strain towards freedom and liberation because pneumatologically illuminated interpretations of scripture feed the eschatological thrust of the Spirit.⁶² It is this yearning, suffering, straining and resistance that gives way to new readings of familiar texts, or the seeking of new texts all together. Because Yong holds the Holy Spirit's ultimate goal to be the restoration of humanity and the cosmos, Yong articulates the process of arriving at novel interpretations through suffering in the following way:

Ultimately, such acts may be best understood as expressions of the human response to the experiences of alienation that are connected somehow to the ways in which the received canon is perceived to be oppressive. The quest for liberation achieved in part by knowledge of the truth (John 8:32), and in part through the work of the Spirit of truth (John 14:17, 15:26, 16: 13; 1 John 4: 6) is directed toward enabling the life of freedom (Gal. 5:3–26).⁶³

The Spirit, for Yong, is always moving towards the restoration of freedom (both presently and eschatologically) and that forward thrust towards freedom, when met with resistance or oppression, allows for new readings of familiar texts to emerge.⁶⁴ The question follows, then: does Yong's theological hermeneutic address the possibility of error in the process of interpretation?

Yong's subjective understanding of the role of the "pneumatological imagination" in the interpretive act does leave one open to errors in interpretation (the tendency to misapply passages of scripture).⁶⁵ For Yong, misinterpretation of scripture is evident when scripture is used to, "...persist in activity which is morally, legally, or otherwise wrong in pursuit of what [one] conceive[s] as greater self-satisfaction [or freedoms]."⁶⁶ In keeping with Yong's Pentecostal convictions concerning the authority of the Bible he states that the text *is* the final authority and must be objectively accepted as "...the primary means through which the Holy Spirit's liberative

⁶²225-26.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴225.

⁶⁵245.

⁶⁶226.

activity is accomplished.”⁶⁷ Any interpretive conclusion that results in one justifying activity that enslaves one to, rather than frees one from, sin has misunderstood the pneumatological imagination. Therefore, the subjective aspects of the Holy Spirit’s role in interpretation, in order for it to be correctly discerned, must be examined against the rest of scripture while interpreting it in light of the reader’s greater communal context. One’s interpretation must be held with humility and open to the correction of the community and the “...Johannine insight that the Spirit ‘will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears’ (John 16:13)” (the Word).⁶⁸ Yong proposes that this is the reason why one cannot exercise appropriate theological hermeneutic and separate the role of the Spirit from the other two parts of the trinitarian hermeneutic (Word and Community).

The Word

Yong asserts that the Word of God is three fold: the spoken word of God, the living Word of God in Jesus, and the written word of God (the Bible). The focus of what follows will primarily be Yong’s understanding of the written word as communicated through the protestant canon. However, for Yong, the written word of God cannot be correctly engaged or interpreted apart from factoring in experiential givens and the impact this has on one’s interpretive context.

Yong asserts that “...experience is both phenomenologically and logically prior to reflection...as such experiential norms override whatever else we may be confronted with. Thus, we neglect consideration of our experience as a given for theological reflection.”⁶⁹ In other words, Yong calls attention to the neglected consideration of experience as a reality that precedes interpretation and therefore, must be acknowledged as playing a part (whether consciously or

⁶⁷226.

⁶⁸226-27.

⁶⁹246.

otherwise) in one's interpretive activity. Thinking (or reflecting) for Yong, is a "...a second-order activity that grasps by way of abstractions our experiences which are continuous and dynamic. All thought and reflection, in this sense, emerge out of experience."⁷⁰ Therefore, thinking and reflection are one step removed from experience itself and as such, already involve a certain degree of interpretation. Yong also asserts that all theological reflection and scripture itself is second order in the same way—as interpreted experience—pointing to the, "...genre of narrative and testimony that fills its pages as most indicative of this."⁷¹ It follows, then, that as Yong asserts, one does not interpret scripture directly but rather, one's experience of reading scripture.⁷²

According to Yong, not only does all interpretive action seek to produce an interpretation that is true to experience (as previously stated) but, experience is allowed to play an active part in one's interpretation of scripture. This is because the act of thinking and doing theology all the way down (biblical narratives of experience, give way to material for theological reflection and interpretation) proceeds from experience. "Human beings do not come to scripture with a blank slate...norms [born out of diverse] human experience[s] cannot be overlooked or 'trumped' simply by 'declaring what the Bible says'."⁷³

Understanding of scripture as interpreted experience allows Yong to state that just as everyday experiences are understood and reflected upon differently based upon the type (or genre) of experience, so is scripture. For example, one may reflect upon a dream and interpret details or recollected happenings differently than one would reflect on the details or recollected

⁷⁰246.

⁷¹247.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³263.

happenings of a historical event. In a similar manner, Yong interprets and reflects upon scripture differently depending upon the genre with which he is dealing.⁷⁴

There are historical narratives, literary texts, wisdom traditions, socio-political tracts for the times, letters, prophecies (both of the forthtelling as well as the foretelling types), gospel accounts, and so on...The fact is that each of these genres along with the pluralism that reigns in each category require a diversity of interpretations, a diversity of methods, a diversity of perspectives of approach...⁷⁵

Yong joins his understanding of scripture as interpreted experience that has been recorded in a variety of genres to his beliefs concerning the intended use for scripture.

Yong points to the written word of God as only one dimension of the Word because, “the written word...was never meant only to be read.”⁷⁶ The primary use for scripture, as Yong understands it, reflects both a written and oral (experiential) tradition like the Torah. Yong argues that the Word of God has always been meant to be experienced as something spoken, proclaimed, memorized and obeyed.⁷⁷ Therefore, it is a grave error, according to Yong, to limit the Word of God (only) to the textually located object because that “...would be to deny access to the divine Word for most Christians in history and many (who are illiterate) today.”⁷⁸ The written word of God is understood within Yong’s hermeneutic to be something that *points to* the active and present Word of God rather than contains it.⁷⁹ Therefore, scripture, like the Spirit as previously mentioned, points in the direction of the eschaton, “...opening up possibilities for life, pointing to the world in front of, or beyond the text.”⁸⁰ The world that resides *beyond* the text results from the transformative work *of* the text but is only correctly exercised when applied within a particular communal context.

⁷⁴259.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶260.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸260-61.

⁷⁹261.

⁸⁰Ibid.

The Community

For Yong, the creative work of the Holy Spirit begun while she hovered over the shapeless void has always operated within a communal context within the trinity and has thus, “...created *homo sapien[s]* for community...”⁸¹ Yong claims that this same Spirit is present within the spoken word of God to the Hebrew prophets who pointed to the incarnated and living presence of the Spirit of God in Jesus. This same Spirit continues to carry out the divine mission. Yong articulates the Spirit’s ongoing work in the following way:

The spirit who breathed life at the beginning is the same Spirit who continues to [renew] life in the world, and who will someday re-create it completely. In anticipation of that eschatological breath of life, the present work of the Spirit is to be the healing force and agent of what is concretely manifest in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus [the Holy] Spirit’s own mission is to heal the sick, the hurt, the wounded; to reconcile those who are alienated and estranged; to make whole that which is shattered, fragmented, and broken; to bring back into relationship those who are separated; to restore that which is lost; to provide meaning to the experience of the absurd, of apparently gratuitous evil and irredeemable suffering, of life in what might otherwise be a fortuitous universe; to complete that which is incomplete and longing for completion. Her work in Jesus the Christ is thus proleptic in that it anticipates the eschatological event consummating the purposes of God.⁸²

This ongoing work of the Spirit is always active on a global scale pointing to the eschaton as a communally and globally restorative event. Yong asserts that the communal nature of the mission of God, as seen through the work of the Spirit, requires that scripture be read and interpreted within a communal context as well, “because community provides the context for the activity of the Spirit and the presence of the Word.”⁸³

According to Yong’s theological hermeneutic, the written word cannot be separated from the communal realities reflected therein. The Bible was conceived within a particular communal context and so is theology and interpretation. Thus far, Yong has articulated the work of

⁸¹46.
⁸²47.
⁸³275.

interpretation as being the work of the Spirit that empowers humanity through the work of the “pneumatological imagination” to aspire towards greater freedoms.⁸⁴ However, according to Yong, this freedom must have (at least in part) a communal dynamic. Yong asserts that liberation theology serves as a great example of the communal dynamic through utilizing the narrative of the exodus.⁸⁵

Yong applies his theological hermeneutic to bring the ongoing mission of the Spirit (freedom and restoration) to the fore by interpreting a given passage, in this case the exodus.⁸⁶ Then, he proceeds to relate this exodus motif to the whole of scripture by calling attention to the presence of the motif elsewhere in scripture (Acts 7 and 13:17; Hebrews, *passim*; Jude 5).⁸⁷ Finally, Yong proceeds to assert that the overwhelming thrust of the Christian tradition declares that while, “the whole world lies under the power of the evil one’ (1 John 5:19b), God’s work through his Spirit and Word (spoken, living and written) is ‘to bring good news to the poor,...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind...’⁸⁸ Through this one example of Yong articulating the contextualization method utilized within liberation theology one can observe Yong exercising his own pneumatological method of interpretation. He begins with the Spirit’s goal for the Hebrew nation (to bring freedom from Egypt) and arrives at a contextualized understanding of the text for a given community in light of the ongoing work of the Spirit pointing towards the eschatological event.

Yong’s overall hermeneutic moves forward from an ultimately pneumatological starting point. From this vantage point he lays the foundation by explaining that the Spirit, believed to be present by Pentecostal Christians, in the absence of Jesus is the same Spirit that hovered over the

⁸⁴225-26.

⁸⁵279-80.

⁸⁶280.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

formless deep preceding creation. And, it is, as it always has been, the mission of this Spirit to create, heal, free, redeem, and restore. This drives the divine thrust towards the eschaton and it is through this lens that Yong believes all activity related to the divine should be interpreted. Yong is, then, able to interpret controversial passages of scripture for the differently-able positively because he asserts that, in light of the ongoing restorative work of the Spirit, interpretation, contextualization, and application are fluid and forward moving (towards the eschatological event). As this thesis progresses, it becomes clear that this pneumatological starting point is carried into Yong's work on disability theory. Chapter III (Reconstructing Disability: Rejecting a Crippling Hermeneutic) will relate Yong's, "disability hermeneutic" to the overall, "theological hermeneutic" discussed here.

CHAPTER THREE:

Reconstructing Disability: Rejecting a Crippling Hermeneutic

For Yong, the act of interpreting scripture must also account for cultural influences that come to bear upon one's method of interpretation. This is a primary assertion that lies behind Yong's theological hermeneutic discussed in Chapter two. A central aim of Yong's theological hermeneutic is to include the act of interpreting the *world* (culture, surrounding, communal context and traditions) of the contemporary reader into the act of biblical interpretation itself.⁸⁹ Yong asserts that one's communal context affects the way in which scripture is interpreted.⁹⁰ Liberation theology, according to Yong, is a clear example of how one's cultural and communal context influences how the scripture is interpreted.⁹¹ In this same way, Yong states that normative culture has allowed scripture to be read in a way that reinforces a negative view of disability.⁹² Therefore, according to Yong, scripture does not need to be questioned, changed, neglected or adjusted. Scripture is not to blame for negative perceptions of disability within Pentecostalism; rather, it is the normative way in which scripture is being *read* that is at fault.

The primary focus of Yong's inclusive hermeneutic is to stand in direct opposition to the Pentecostal "traditions of interpretation that have taught [Pentecostals] how to read [biblical texts]."⁹³ This focus is motivated by Yong's desire to correct what he calls a normative bias that is

⁸⁹Amos Yong, *Spirit, Word, Community*, 6.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 246.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 275-280.

⁹²Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 8.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 12.

subconsciously present within the current modes of biblical interpretation. Yong articulates this normate bias in the following way:

...the unexamined prejudices that non-disabled people have toward disability and toward people who have them. These assumptions function normatively so that the inferior status of people with disabilities is inscribed into our consciousness. Note, for example, how the rhetoric functions to describe people with impairments as *dis*-abled, *in*-capacitated, *in*-capable, *ab*-normal, and so on. In other words, non-disabled people take their experiences of the world as normal, thereby marginalizing and excluding the experiences of people with disabilities as not normal.⁹⁴

The normate bias is perpetuated by a “surface reading” of biblical texts from the vantage point of the temporarily-able person which “has resulted in an ableist worldview...”⁹⁵ When this surface level reading of scripture—allowing it to be read from a position of privilege—is then applied to the act of interpreting scripture, the interpretive lens of Pentecostals has distorted what the Bible has to say regarding disabilities. According to Yong, in order to expose and correct this normate bias one must take on the difficult task of trying to distinguish “...what the Bible says from how the Bible has been received.”⁹⁶

Yong’s solution to “misconstruals” of the Bible—a negative perception of the differently-able—is a new hermeneutic.⁹⁷ Yong’s new hermeneutic asserts that a negative portrayal of disability is caused by one’s inability to question the (cultural and communal) context within which an interpretive method is being applied. In other words, Yong assumes that the Bible has been *read* in ways that have portrayed disabilities negatively because it is interpreted from a position of privilege. But the Bible, according to Yong, “can and should be redemptive for

⁹⁴Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 10-11.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 12.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 8.

people with disabilities today.”⁹⁸ For Yong, the Bible does not legitimate marginalization of the differently-able; nor does the Bible justify a negative perception of debilitating conditions. Therefore, scripture that has been misused to, “stigmatize, marginalize and exclude [the differently-able]” must be *re*-read with a new hermeneutic: a disability hermeneutic.⁹⁹

The disability hermeneutic is based upon the following two assertions that challenge the Pentecostal understanding of disability: (1) the differently-able person is created in the image of God as measured by the person of Jesus. Therefore, people with disabilities are *people* first who should not be defined solely by their conditions.¹⁰⁰ (2) Debilitating conditions are not necessarily evils to be eliminated.¹⁰¹

Yong challenges the Pentecostal notion of disability by asserting that the differently-able are created in the image of God (conditions included). Even though Jesus is upheld within Yong’s hermeneutic as the model for Christian life and practice (as is the case within Pentecostalism), this is understood differently by Yong. As opposed to the Pentecostal ideal Christ as triumphant (physical) healer (discussed in Chapter 1), Yong highlights the “marks of impairment” maintained within the resurrected and perfected body of Jesus. Yong asserts that these marks should serve as cause for pause when assuming the ideal form (and Christian) is one void of physical deformity.¹⁰² In *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, Yong states that a disability hermeneutic applied to the cross event reveals this (impaired) human ideal:

...a disability Christology makes two observations... (1) that a risen Christ bears the marks of the cross, and in that form “did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb. 9:24); and (2) that is precisely the impaired Christ who overcomes the chasm that threatens to exclude people with disabilities...

⁹⁸Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 17.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 13.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Amos Yong, “Many Tongues, Many Senses...”: 171.

For Yong, Jesus calling attention to the holes in his hands, feet and side (post resurrection) while interacting with Thomas, clearly indicates that physical imperfection is not to be equated with an imperfect image of God. Disability, for Yong, is reflected in and through the person, work and life of Jesus and is therefore, “reflective of the image of God.”¹⁰³

As discussed in Chapter one, the belief that there is a clear association between unholiness and disability is well entrenched within Pentecostal theology. Within Pentecostalism, this is legitimated by referencing biblical passages such as Leviticus 21:16-23 and arguing that physical imperfections on the part of the priests “...profane [God’s] sanctuaries.”¹⁰⁴ Yong states that these passages concerning the physical condition of the priesthood “taken in their plain and literal sense...have functioned to stigmatize disability...even today.”¹⁰⁵ However, a closer reading of the text through the lens of Yong’s disability hermeneutic challenges the normative interpretation.

To reveal a more disability-inclusive reading of this passage in Leviticus, Yong chooses to read this passage through a Christological lens. Yong’s disability hermeneutic points to Jesus as the perfect high priest (cf. Heb. 4:14-5:10; 7:11-26) and perfect sacrifice (Heb. 10:1-18). But, instead of choosing to emphasize the, “perfection, purity, and beauty of Christ,” Yong sees Christ as an impaired-yet-perfect high priest. In other words, Yong highlights how Jesus operates in the office of High Priest, and accomplishes his task as a spotless sacrifice with an “impaired” (disabled or deformed) body.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 103.

¹⁰⁴English Standard Version, Lev. 21:23 (all remaining verse citations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from this translation).

¹⁰⁵Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 18.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 29.

Yong asserts that the cross event (and the Jesus associated with it) reveals God's power in and *through* weakness (or suffering).¹⁰⁷ The cross is not to be understood in the triumphalistic terms common within Pentecostalism. Rather, the cross event is better understood through the lens of the Apostle Paul's theology of weakness. For Yong, Paul stresses the defective character of the cross.¹⁰⁸ Paul asserts that the cross is associated with foolishness in the eyes of society, but is the ultimate expression of power and wisdom in the eyes of God; weakness is to be equated with the perfection of divine power.¹⁰⁹ Yong states that the cross is the ultimate example of weakness (and disability). For Yong, this is apparent because the act of crucifixion removes one's ability to be independent and is accompanied by extreme social stigma.¹¹⁰

Connecting Paul's theology of weakness with Yong's disability perspective yields an interpretation of the crucifixion that highlights power *through* suffering, rather than the power *over* suffering normative within the Pentecostal theology discussed in chapter one. Yong states that a disability hermeneutic highlights the following truths within the cross event: "...the weakness of God manifest in Christ and the cross becomes central to our right-standing (our incapacity to justify ourselves), our holiness (our inability to sanctify ourselves), and our redemption (our powerlessness to save ourselves)."¹¹¹ Jesus subjecting himself to helplessness, *dis-ability* and suffering is what allowed for the redemption of humanity. In other words, the cross event (and the example of Jesus) demonstrates God's power *through* suffering. For Yong, the cross understood in this way allows one to see disability "reflected in and through the face, person and work of Christ and thus reflective of the image of God."¹¹² Therefore, for Yong,

¹⁰⁷ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 103.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. 1 Cor. Chapter 1; 2 Cor. 12:9.

¹¹⁰ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 101.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 103.

holiness, perfection, and one's ability to bear the image of God are not in any way associated with one's physical condition. Suffering and disability can, and often does, reflect the image of God.¹¹³ One's identity is, then, first and foremost, one of agency and human freedom; rather than, one's identity being inexplicably tied up with one's bodily condition.¹¹⁴

As an image bearer of God, one's pneumatological imagination will search out biblical interpretations that are true to experience as explained in Chapter two. Yong's disability hermeneutic interprets scripture in a way that proves true to experience. The emphasis is not placed upon physical healing because of the reality of the rarity of physical healing. Yong states the following:

Unfortunately, the Pentecostal and charismatic renewal movements have resulted in just as many if not more disappointments and negative experiences than healings for people with disabilities... Many who experience the onset of disability later in life are initially drawn to the Pentecostal charismatic healing revivals, have [had hands laid on them in prayer], but leave disillusioned if not crushed that God has not healed.¹¹⁵

Therefore, the only way to reconcile the persistence of disability with the Christian life, the overall mission of the Spirit (as discussed in chapter two), and the example of Jesus, is to re-examine how disability is being received in light of scripture.

According to Yong, arriving at new readings of familiar texts is a divine right that is expressed through the Spirit's thrust towards freedom (both presently and eschatologically). The pneumatological imagination's forward trajectory, when met with resistance or oppression, allows for new readings of familiar texts to emerge.¹¹⁶ This is consistent with Yong's claim in Chapter two that one's "pneumatological imagination" gives way to proper scriptural

¹¹³Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 103.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹⁵Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 242.

¹¹⁶Amos Yong, *Spirit, Word, Community*, 225.

interpretation, when motivated by the divine mission.¹¹⁷ For Yong, the divine mission has been, is currently, and will continue to be, restoration, freedom, and community. A normative reading of scripture perpetuates the marginalization of the differently-able and thus, does not aid in restoration or community formation. Therefore, Yong cannot accept this as consistent with his understanding of the Holy Spirit's intention for the message of Scripture.

This leads finally, to Yong challenging the Pentecostal understanding of disability as a phenomenon to be eliminated.¹¹⁸ Pentecostalism points to the miracles attributed to Jesus and the cross event; the miracles present in the four gospels and Acts, as the measure of what is to be normative for the contemporary Christian.¹¹⁹ Yong challenges the need for healing by re-reading the narratives of individuals (within these books) who received salvation while retaining their physical imperfections. Yong draws attention to the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). The disability hermeneutic leaves space for one to embrace disabilities and those who have them, both within biblical narratives and today.

Zacchaeus is recorded to have been, "...small in stature."¹²⁰ Lukan scholar, Mikeal Parsons states that Zacchaeus' physical state (though perhaps aggravated by the fact that he was a tax collector) would have resulted in society perceiving him as, "small in spirit," shrewd, greedy, and unintelligent.¹²¹

Luke spares no insulting image to portray Zacchaeus as a pathetic even despicable character. He paints a derisive and mocking picture of a traitorous, small minded, greedy, physically deformed tax collector sprinting awkwardly ahead of the crowd and climbing a Sycamore tree like an ape...¹²²

¹¹⁷Amos Yong, *Spirit, Word, Community*, 47.

¹¹⁸Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 13.

¹¹⁹Amos Yong, "Many Tongues, Many Senses...": 169-170.

¹²⁰Cf. Acts 19:3.

¹²¹Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: the Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 99, 107.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 107.

However, Jesus chooses to, “[challenge] the predominant prejudice of his day that predetermines one’s place in the body Politic by the shape of one’s body.”¹²³ Furthermore, Jesus does not choose to dine with Zacchaeus to draw attention to his short stature; but rather, to bring salvation to his home.¹²⁴ Yong agrees with Parsons stating that this narrative, “...may be as close as we get in the Gospels to finding a [differently-able] person legitimated as a Christ follower.”¹²⁵ Following this affirmation, Yong reiterates the fact that Zacchaeus’ physical condition remained after his repentance and reception of Jesus. “Jesus didn’t treat Zacchaeus as if something was wrong with him that wasn’t wrong with others. Zacchaeus was on an equal par with everyone else: he had to repent — rather than be made taller — in order to be [saved].”¹²⁶

The Ethiopian eunuch is crucial for Yong for the following two reasons: (1) eunuchs are named among the individuals to be excluded from participating in the liturgical cult and worship;¹²⁷ and yet (2), the eunuch was sought out by God (through Philip’s vision), told the good news, and baptized into the faith in his current physical state.¹²⁸ Yong argues that this is a clear example of the cultural exclusions of the Old Testament era being reversed.¹²⁹ Therefore, the redemption of the people of God, according to Yong, should include those with physical deformities, “... not ‘fixed’ so that they can conform to our social standards of beauty and desirability, but just as they are...”¹³⁰

The stories of the eunuch and Zacchaeus demonstrate a different kind of healing: social and communal healing. Yong states this in the following way:

¹²³Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 107.

¹²⁴Cf. Luke 19:9.

¹²⁵Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 67.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*

¹²⁷Cf. Lev. 21:17-23; Deut. 23:1.

¹²⁸Cf. Acts 8:26-40.

¹²⁹Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 68.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, 69.

Just as Jesus accepted the socially despised and short-statured (physically defective) Zacchaeus, so the early church accepted the physically impaired eunuch [demonstrating that]... The redemption of disability doesn't necessarily consist in the healing of disabilities but involves the removal of those barriers — social, structural, economic, political, and religious/theological — which hinder those people with temporarily able bodies from welcoming and being hospitable to people with disabilities!¹³¹

Therefore, according to Yong, the miracle is not that the differently-able become “normal,” rather the miracle is the demonstration of God’s power to, “save all of us ‘normal’ folk from our discriminatory attitudes, inhospitable actions, and exclusionary social and political forms of life.”¹³²

This socio-political, religious and theological healing that Yong proposes is agreeable with his theological hermeneutic because, for Yong, this reflects movement towards the eschatological event. Reading scripture through the lens of the disability hermeneutic points to the active and present Word of God by, “...opening up possibilities for life...in front of, or beyond the text.” A key purpose behind the Spirit being active in the present is, “...to reconcile those who are alienated and estranged; to make whole that which is shattered... [and] to restore that which is lost...”¹³³ Yong’s disability hermeneutic, like his theological hermeneutic, is based upon what he believes to be the over-all purpose motivating the Holy Spirit since the beginning of time: transformative restoration. “From this perspective, it is not people with disabilities that need healing, but people without disabilities who need to be transformed.”¹³⁴

As has already been demonstrated by Yong’s treatment of the resurrected Christ, “restoration” does not need to include physical healing. However, what about in the case of intellectual impairment? Physical impairments, in the rare case that they are removed, do not necessarily alter one’s internal person (identity) directly. However, in the case of individuals

¹³¹ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 69.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Amos Yong, *Spirit, Word, Community*, 47.

¹³⁴ Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 243.

with intellectual impairments (like Yong's brother, Mark), to remove the intellectual impairment is to profoundly alter the individual's identity, DNA and person. The line between one's condition and one's identity is much thinner.

For Yong, the intellectually impaired are to be embraced in the present because it reflects what will be in the fulfillment of the eschaton. As Yong asserts, it is a mistake to assume having a 'perfected body' means one void of any distinct features common to those with Down syndrome. To assume that one's heavenly body will be, "normal" is to depend upon "...some able-bodied ideal of perfection" to define normal.¹³⁵ It is much more miraculous, for Yong, to believe that a perfected, redeemed and heavenly ideal is one that is wholly transformed but not in any way erased.¹³⁶

...[P]eople with intellectual or developmental disabilities, such as, those with Down Syndrome or triplicate chromosome 21 — will also retain their phenotypical features in their resurrection bodies. There will be sufficient continuity to ensure recognizability as well as self-identity. Thus, the redemption of those with Down syndrome, for example, would consist not in some magical fix of the twenty-first chromosome but in the recognition of their central roles both in the communion of saints and in the divine scheme of things.¹³⁷

Thus, allowing for the restoration of community by fully including those with congenital and intellectual disabilities into "the communion of saints."¹³⁸

Yong's assertion that congenital and intellectual disabilities need not be eliminated is based upon a re-interpretation of a normative theology of the cross. Yong describes the intellectually impaired as often perceived to be the, "...lowliest and most despised of the world..."¹³⁹ Fortunately, according to Yong, this can, and should, be redeemed by examining the cross through the disability hermeneutic. Just as the cross is seen as foolish or folly to the world

¹³⁵ Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 282.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 101.

but wisdom and power to the Christian (1 Cor. 1:18); so, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...”¹⁴⁰ Therefore, according to Yong, The cross re-evaluated from a vantage point free from a normative bias reveals the following:

...the cross of Christ which reveals God’s power in weakness and God’s wisdom in foolishness allows us to see disability in general and intellectual disability in particular reflected in and through the face, person, and work of Christ and thus as reflective of the image of God... Disability in general is thus also redeemed, not because it is excised or exorcised, but because it is now understood to be at the heart of God’s scale of values. Thus people with intellectual disabilities are redeemed not by being cured of Down syndrome or other congenital conditions but by being just as they are, like Zacchaeus and the Ethiopian eunuch.¹⁴¹

A close examination of the cross event and the symbols associated with it suggest to Yong that the cross permits a disability hermeneutic. But, more importantly for Yong, a disability hermeneutic allows for readers to gain a clearer picture of the heart of God (the over-all mission of the Holy Spirit).

¹⁴⁰Cf. 1 Cor. 1: 27.

¹⁴¹Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 103.

CONCLUSION

Pentecostals have often associated the phenomenon of disability with sin, divine disfavor, the demonic, or a lack of faith. However, this leaves little room for the presence of suffering or sickness within Pentecostal theology or biblical interpretation.¹⁴² One may recall Yong's articulation of his family's experience after his brother was born with autism:

...I believe that part of the struggle my parents endured had to do with the culture of shame...the birth of children with disabilities inevitably raised questions about what, if anything, the parents had done to have deserved anything less than a healthy child.¹⁴³

Yong states that the shame his family experienced was intensified by the fact that his parents were Pentecostal pastors who preached the Pentecostal belief that true faith in God, "inevitably bring[s] about God's blessings and an abundant life."¹⁴⁴ How, then, is Amos Yong able to see the Bible as truly, "redemptive for the experience of [the differently-able]" while maintaining his Pentecostal convictions concerning scripture?¹⁴⁵

The Bible does contain passages that portray disability negatively. This is particularly noticeable within the priestly liturgical cult of the Old Testament, the healing narratives present in the New Testament, the Pentecostal understanding of the cross event, and sins association with suffering found in Exodus. However, Yong does not want to reject controversial passages of scripture because of his views on the authority and infallibility of scripture. Instead, Yong places the blame upon the inability of the interpreter to filter out 'normate biases' prior to interpreting biblical texts. The main task for Yong, then, is not to challenge the Bible, but rather, "...to

¹⁴²Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 23.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 6.

distinguish what the Bible says from how the Bible has been received, what our religious traditions say about it, and how we have been taught to interpret it.”¹⁴⁶ Because of Yong’s view of the Spirit’s mission (discussed in chapter two), the Pentecostal way of seeing disability cannot be, “...exactly what the biblical authors intended to communicate to us.”¹⁴⁷

Yong’s disability hermeneutic maintains his Pentecostal convictions while challenging the normate Pentecostal perceptions of disability. Yong repeatedly asserts that scripture is infallible and authoritative. In Yong’s over-all hermeneutic the Bible is the final authority and primary medium through which the Holy Spirit’s restorative work is accomplished.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, Yong’s solution to the Pentecostal notions of disability that exclude the differently-able is to call into question the way that scripture is *being interpreted*.¹⁴⁹

Normate methods of interpretation have led to readings that do not fit into Yong’s (inclusive and restorative) eschatological understanding of scripture. In Yong’s book, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, Yong explains the motivation behind the disability hermeneutic in the following way:

The motivation behind this book has been to confront the negative interpretations of biblical and theological images that have become embedded in Judeo-Christian culture and that have led to the disparagement of people with disabilities. Here we’ve attempted a redemptive reading of the Bible, looking for positive understandings of disability through which to fully value the lives and experiences of all people.¹⁵⁰

The disability hermeneutic maintains both the authority and contemporary relevance of the Bible by questioning the current *methods* of interpretation.

Interpretation, for Yong, is an ongoing activity that is the result of the Pneumatological imagination (discussed in Chapter two). Just as the Spirit continues to restore, re-create and

¹⁴⁶Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 12.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸Amos Yong, *Spirit, Word, Community*, 226.

¹⁴⁹Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 8.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 145.

reconcile the cosmos in anticipation of the eschatological event, so are new interpretations given in order to move humanity toward this end.¹⁵¹ For Yong, the message of scripture, revealed through the pneumatological imagination, must point towards unity, community, freedom and the eschaton.¹⁵²

Yong's disability hermeneutic successfully reinterprets disability within the biblical narratives in a way that is consistent with his theological hermeneutic. Therefore, the authority and message of the Bible are not called into question and Yong's Pentecostal convictions are upheld. Instead, Yong reconstructs disability by calling contemporary readers to rise above the normative bias and *reread* scripture with fresh eyes and an inclusive mindset.

¹⁵¹Amos Yong, *Spirit, Word, Community*, 47, 222.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, 223.

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