

Imago Dei in Eastern Orthodox Statements and Implications for Inclusion of People with Disabilities in the Church: A Dissonant Relationship

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In the past two decades, official entities of the Eastern Orthodox Church have released two documents with implications for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the life and educational pursuits of the church. In 2008, the Russian Orthodox Church released a statement whose ambiguous treatment of the doctrine of the imago Dei runs the risk of having an alienating effect upon people with disabilities. In 2009, the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America released a document that honors those with disabilities. This article examines how each document views the image of God and its ramifications for people with disabilities within the church. I argue that the theology of imago Dei in these documents differs, resulting in conflicting views of people with disabilities. To resolve these discrepancies, the Orthodox Church should continue to develop and express its theological arguments regarding the imago Dei and its significance for all people.

Keywords: *imago Dei*, image of God, *theosis*, dignity, disability, inclusion, church education, Eastern Orthodox

BY and large, children and adults with disabilities are less likely to attend a religious service than their peers with no disability.¹ Moreover, children with disabilities are likely to be

¹ Andrew Whitehead found that overall, children with chronic health problems are less likely to attend church services than their peers without chronic health problems.

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excluded at some point from activities in the church.² Though most churches would argue that people with disabilities should be included and welcomed in the church, this is often not the case.³ Many advocates for inclusion of people with disabilities within the Christian tradition base their argument, at least in part, upon secular acts and documents.⁴ For example, in 1986 the delegates of the Eighth All American Council of the Orthodox Church in America passed a resolution to encourage every parish in the Orthodox Church in America to establish a committee for the purposes of making facilities more accessible to the elderly and those with physical disabilities and to develop ways for people with disabilities to more fully participate in the life and educational programs of the parish. Although the delegates may have had theological intentions, none were declared. Rather, the resolution was passed “in cooperation with the Decade of the Disabled, proclaimed by the

More specifically, children with “autism spectrum disorders, developmental delays, learning disabilities, depression, anxiety, speech problems, and conduct disorders are consistently more likely to never attend religious services.” Andrew L. Whitehead, “Religion and Disability: Variation in Religious Service Attendance Rates for Children with Chronic Health Conditions,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 2 (2018): 392. In regard to adults, “The ADA, 20 Years Later” demonstrates that twenty years after the Americans with Disabilities Act, adults with disabilities are less likely than adults without disabilities to attend a religious service at least once per month, with a seven-percentage-point gap separating the two groups. See Humphrey Taylor, David Krane, and Kaylan Orkis, “The ADA, 20 Years Later: Final Report,” *Advancing States* (New York: Harris Interactive, 2010), 17, <http://www.advancingstates.org/hcbs/article/ada-20-years-later-2010-survey-americans-disabilities>.

² Elizabeth O’Hanlon found that 53.3 percent of parents reported that their child with disabilities was excluded from activities in their spiritual community. See Elizabeth E. O’Hanlon, “Religion and Disability: The Experiences of Families with Children of Special Needs,” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 17, no.1 (2013): 52.

³ For an extensive list of resolutions and position statements regarding the integration of people with disabilities into faith communities, see Collaborative on Faith and Disability, “Position Statements from Denominations, Faith Groups, and Other Organizations,” <https://faithanddisability.org/resources/position-statements-from-denominations-faith-groups-and-other-organizations/>.

⁴ Hans Reinders laments that much of the Christian literature on Christian theology and disability “is strongly influenced by the disability-rights approach.” See Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 159. He also references Jane S. Deland, “Breaking Down Barriers So All May Worship,” *Journal of Religion in Disability and Rehabilitation* 2, no. 1 (1995): 5–20, which “presents steps and documents from various churches and their organizations from the 1970s indicating that church initiatives were developing at the same time the disability-rights movement got into gear.” See Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 159–60n.

United Nations to be 1983–1992.”⁵ Such cooperation was the only stated motivation for the resolution.

Similarly, in 2004 the United Methodist Church adopted a resolution titled “United Methodist Implementation of Americans with Disabilities Act,” in which it “[urged] all [their] congregations to implement and enforce the provisions of the ADA and all disability-related programs within every area that members of The United Methodist Church reside with the same vigor and interest as they would any other law affecting their able-bodied constituency.”⁶ Though the statement does have biblical principles sprinkled

⁵ Stephen Plumlee, “The Handicapped and Orthodox Worship,” *Orthodox Church in America* 1 (1986), <https://www.oca.org/parish-ministry/parishdevelopment/the-handicapped-and-orthodox-worship>.

⁶ United Methodist Church, “United Methodist Implementation of Americans with Disabilities Act,” *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church—2004* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist, 2004), <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=4&mid=6558>. This is not a critique of the Orthodox Church nor of the United Methodist Church. Many other examples could be given from various denominations that demonstrate the same tendency. Neither are these examples exhaustive of those statements on disability from the Orthodox Church nor the United Methodist Church. Such examples merely demonstrate that Christians sometimes tend to rely upon secular mandates rather than biblical theology in their statements regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church. It should be noted that the ADA and other secular acts were not the only impetus for churches in the Christian tradition to include individuals with disabilities. Several Christian traditions developed documents regarding the inclusion of individuals with disabilities that predate the “Decade of the Disabled” beginning in 1983 and the ADA of 1990. Most notably, the US Catholic Conference released a specifically theological document advocating for the integration of individuals with disabilities into the life of the church in 1978. See United States Catholic Conference, *Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1978). Other Christian traditions, though they did not develop robust theological documents, released resolutions prior to the “Decade of the Disabled,” which advocate to varying degrees the inclusion of or concern for individuals with disabilities. See, for example, resolutions by the Southern Baptist Convention (1978 and 1981), American Baptists (1978), and the Episcopal Church (1982). Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on the Handicapped,” (adopted at the 1978 Annual Meeting), <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-the-handicapped/>; Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on Ministry to the Developmentally Disabled and Mentally Ill” (adopted at the 1978 Annual Meeting), <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-ministry-to-the-developmentally-disabled-and-mentally-ill/>; Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on the Mentally Handicapped,” (adopted at the 1981 Annual Meeting), <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-the-mentally-handicapped/>; American Baptist Churches, “American Baptist Resolution on the Church and Ministry with Persons with Disabilities,” (adopted by the General Board of the American Baptist Churches, June 1978), <http://www.abc-usa.org/wp-content/>

throughout, the primary basis for such a resolution was an act dictated by the government, namely the ADA.⁷ Although most Christians may likely agree that churches should eagerly comply with such acts as the American with Disabilities Act, a secular foundation or motivation for any action is insufficient for the church.⁸ Additionally, the ADA merely seeks to set guidelines for accessibility of *physical* spaces for people with disabilities. Christians must consider if mere physical accommodation within the church is sufficient.⁹ This is a question that must be answered theologically. Theologian and scholar of ethics Hans Reinders demonstrates that secular mandates and reasoning, which he refers to as the disability-rights approach, serve as an insufficient ground for the church because they pose severe limitations for people with profound disabilities. He argues that the disability-rights approach produces a “hierarchy of disability” based upon self-representation, leaving behind individuals with intellectual disabilities, and challenges the church to consider “what a distinctively theological voice might contribute to the struggle for inclusion.”¹⁰ In their work on curriculum

[uploads/2012/06/Disabilities-The-Church-and-Persons-with.pdf](#); General Convention, “Establish a Task Force on Disabled and Handicapped Persons,” *Journal of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, New Orleans, 1982* (New York: General Convention, 1983), C-142, https://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=1982-D120.

⁷ The body of the text of “United Methodist Implementation of Americans with Disabilities Act” is full of biblical principles. However, these are general Christian principles about love, service, discipleship, growth, and the like and do not specifically address individuals with disabilities nor their inclusion in the church from a theological perspective. Though many could be cited, one such example should suffice. The resolution states, “Showing Christ as being real and important for others, we all must live authentically as our serving Christ gives our hands to Christ by making a friend, being a friend, and introducing our new friend to the friend of all friends—Jesus Christ.” The only section that pertains specifically to individuals with disabilities, namely the conclusion, does so mainly in reference to the ADA.

⁸ For extensive information on the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 as well as the document itself, see US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, “Introduction to the ADA,” https://www.ada.gov/ada_intro.htm.

⁹ Reinders notes that “space is a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition for inclusion” because in order for true inclusion to occur, one must be committed to the other and want that person to be part of their life. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 161. Brian Brock highlights this issue in the introduction to his book *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, noting that “accessibility modifications have made everyone’s lives easier without demanding more substantive change.” Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 1.

¹⁰ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 160. For a more in-depth discussion of how secular disability studies cannot serve as a Christian foundation for the inclusion of

in the church, James Estep, Roger White, and Karen Estep contend that if theology does not provide the foundation for curriculum in the church, “Christian education risks becoming dualistic; advocating goals and objectives that are inconsistent with the church’s theology.”¹¹ Likewise, Stavros S. Fotiou, Eastern Orthodox Professor of Theology and Religious Education, argues that the dogmas of the church should drive both the goals and content of Christian education in order to avoid heresies and distortions.¹² The same could be said for any aspect of function or practice within the church. Even when the church’s goals may align with the world’s goals, “theology must be the compass” for the church’s actions.¹³

The church must lay a robust theological foundation for inclusion in order to truly integrate people with all kinds of disabilities into the life of the church, for the expression of one’s theology will inevitably affect the way that people with disabilities are treated within the church.¹⁴ *Disability in Judaism*,

individuals with disabilities as it creates a “hierarchy of disability,” see Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 49–87. John Swinton also demonstrates the insufficiency of sociology as a starting point for theological engagement with disability. John Swinton, “Disability, Ableism, and Disablism,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Religion, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 446–49.

¹¹ See James Estep, Roger White, and Karen Estep, *Mapping Out Curriculum in Your Church* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2012), 46.

¹² Stavros S. Fotiou, “Christ, the Theanthropos the Christological Dimension of Christian Education,” *Phronema* 16 (2001): 53–54.

¹³ Estep, White, and Estep, *Mapping Out Curriculum in Your Church*, 46.

¹⁴ For the effective inclusion of people with disabilities in the church, both practical and theological resources are needed. As previously discussed, however, praxis must be built upon theology. At this point, it is helpful to distinguish between practical theology and systematic theology. Systematic theology is “the study of Scripture (aided by other disciplines) for the purpose of enabling us to understand the Bible’s holistic teaching on central doctrines of the Christian Faith,” while practical theology is the application of systematic theology. Bruce Ware, email message to author, October 15, 2022. In order to have a biblically faithful practical theology, one must first establish a solid and robust systematic theology for the doctrinal issues related to the topic of practical theology. Beeke and Smalley note that “practical ... theology must never be detached from systematic theology, lest the practice of the church and her ministers be loosed from its moorings in the truth of God’s Word.” Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Revelation and God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 51. Pastavos makes a similar claim regarding the relationship between pastoral ministry and the Orthodox canonical tradition. He argues that one must study the theology of the tradition and “remember that pastoral ministry divorced from theology is reduced to a technique. As such, it differs little from empty moral rules and obligations with no relation to the pastoral theology of the Church, which is always theologically grounded.” Lewis J. Patsavos, “Ecclesiastical Reform: At What Cost?,” *The Greek*

Christianity and Islam demonstrates that varying theologies lead to varying treatment of people with disabilities within the religious community. The issue of disability should not be a minor one in the church, for as religious scholars Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus reflect, “Disability touches directly on the question of a community’s identity, on the meaning of transformation [and] on the very image people have of God.”¹⁵ Yet more importantly, as will be demonstrated, it is the image people have of God that will impact the image they have of people with disabilities. The barriers for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the church are complex, but until church leaders and members alike are convinced theologically of the necessity and the goodness of welcoming people with disabilities into the life and educational pursuits of the church, true integration will remain mere wishful thinking.¹⁶

- Orthodox Theological Review* 40, no. 1–2 (1995): 9. Swinton emphasizes the need in the field of disability theology for practical theologians and systematic theologians to collaborate together in order to “develop a creative interface between academic theology and the practices of church and world.” Swinton, “Disability, Ableism, and Disablism,” 450.
- ¹⁵ Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus, eds., “Editors’ Introduction: Broad Themes and Book Overview,” in *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions, and Social Analysis* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), xviii. For more examples of how varying theologies produce differing views and treatment of people with disabilities, see Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus, eds., *Disability and World Religions: An Introduction*, Studies in Religion, Theology and Disability (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).
- ¹⁶ Erik Carter, Professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University, identifies five barriers to inclusion: architectural, attitudinal, communication, programmatic, and liturgical. Erik W. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes, 2007), 8–16. Vogel and colleagues list similar barriers but add to the list “theological barriers,” citing at length Nancy L. Eiesland’s work *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Jeannine Vogel, Edward A. Polloway and J. David Smith, “Inclusion of People with Mental Retardation and Other Developmental Disabilities in Communities of Faith,” *Mental Retardation* 44, no. 2 (2006): 104–05. Eiesland states that “the emergent experience of people with disabilities ... have wide-ranging implications for theological interpretations of central Christian beliefs and practices” and speaks on behalf of individuals with disabilities, calling upon the church to “take a leading role in promoting our full humanity,” a theme closely aligned to those explored in this article. Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 20. In addition to his highly practical guide to inclusion of people with disabilities into faith communities specifically focused on overcoming the aforementioned barriers, Carter provides ample resources for service providers, families, and congregations from various religious perspectives in Appendix B. Carter, *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities*, 209–28. It should be noted that there are a variety of robust theological defenses for the inclusion of

Within the Orthodox Church, disability is not a new topic. Indeed, the integration of people with disabilities has concerned Orthodox Christians since the patristic era. Basil the Great (330–379), Gregory of Nazianzus (330–389), and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), in particular, were concerned

people with disabilities in the church and works that seek to establish a theology of disability more generally from a variety of Christian traditions. However, none address the topic from a specifically Orthodox position. As will be demonstrated, some topics central to Orthodox doctrine, such as image of God and deification, warrant special consideration in light of their implications for individuals with disabilities. Additionally, many of the works in disability theology approach the topic from a progressive Christian stance, which may not be satisfactory for more traditional branches of Christianity such as the Eastern Orthodox Church. For works that seek to establish a theology of disability, see Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*; Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*; Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008); Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*. Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007). A seminal work in the field of disability theology is Eiesland's *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. It is important to note, however, that Eiesland's work is geared toward physical disabilities, not intellectual, social, or emotional disabilities (27–28). Molly Haslam notes that “the bulk of theorizing on disability in Christian theology addresses almost exclusively the concerns of those with physical disabilities, and little attention is given to the concerns of those with intellectual disabilities.” Molly Claire Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 2. Additionally, most works that do address individuals with intellectual disabilities, though seeking to form an inclusive theology that is “life-giving for these individuals ... each in various ways betrays a bias toward a level of intellectual ability unavailable to individuals with profound intellectual disabilities” (3). For Haslam's critique of leading works in disability theology engaging individuals with intellectual disabilities see Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 2–9. Yet even Haslam herself does not base her theology of disability primarily in theology, but rather in phenomenology and dialogical philosophy. *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, though not seeking to establish a comprehensive theology of disability, offers commentary on various biblical texts through the lens of disability from a “variety of methodological approaches and a spectrum of attitudes and assumptions related to the nature and authority of Scripture.” Sarah J. Melcher, “Introduction,” in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability, ed. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 13. For works that focus more on inclusion of people with disabilities in the church from a theological perspective, see Brian Brock, *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body*, Pastoring for Life: Theological Wisdom for Ministering Well (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), and Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011). From an Eastern Catholic perspective, see Myroslaw Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

with integrating people with disabilities and other social outcasts into society.¹⁷ Yet despite the importance these Cappadocian Fathers gave to this topic, it is sorely underrepresented in the official literature of the present-day Orthodox Church. This is not to say that the people of the contemporary Eastern Orthodox Church have completely ignored the topic. Especially in the past decade, laypeople in the church have made significant efforts to speak to the issue of the inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church, both from a theological and a practical perspective.¹⁸ Ministers of the church have done so in some unofficial capacity as well.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Orthodox Church in the United States has provided significant resources for the full inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church.²⁰ However, these resources are largely practical, not

¹⁷ Almut Caspury, “The Patristic Era: Early Christian Attitudes toward the Disfigured Outcast,” in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 29–30. See also Nonna Verna Harrison, “The Human Person as Image and Likeness of God,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, Cambridge Companions to Religion, ed. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 84–86. Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa are considered the “Three Cappadocian Fathers.” John A. McGuckin, “Cappadocian Fathers,” in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 107–08.

¹⁸ Two such examples are Summer Kinard and Charlotte Riggle. Summer Kinard, “Special Needs Resources,” <https://summerkinard.com/special-needs-resources/>; Charlotte Riggle, “Disability and Special Needs,” <https://charlotteriggle.com/disability-and-special-needs/>. The most extensive source of resources from a layperson may very well be the website *Arms Open Wide* by William Gall. *Arms Open Wide—Orthodox Christian Disability Resources*, <https://armsopenwide.wordpress.com/>. See also Christina Lappa, et al., “Teaching the Christian Orthodox Mystery of Baptism to Adults with Moderate or Severe Intellectual Disability,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 7, no.3 (2018): 64–74, for an example of teaching Orthodox doctrine to adults with intellectual disability. Aside from Summer Kinard, *Of Such Is the Kingdom: A Practical Theology of Disability* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2021), which is a practical theology of disability, most of the resources for inclusion of individuals with disability found within the Orthodox tradition do not fall under the category of theology, neither practical nor systematic, but rather are practical in the sense that they address the how of inclusion (praxis), without first thoroughly addressing the why (theological basis).

¹⁹ For example, clergyman, theologian, and author John Chryssavgis authored a small booklet encouraging Eastern Orthodox Christians to welcome people with disabilities into the church. John Chryssavgis, *The Body of Christ: A Place of Welcome for People with Disabilities* (Minneapolis, MN: Light & Life Publishing, 2002).

²⁰ Orthodox Church in America, “Orthodox Perspectives on Disability Focus of International Consultation,” October 16, 2015, <https://www.oca.org/news/headline-news/orthodox-perspectives-on-disability-focus-of-international-consultation>. For resources on disability

theological.²¹ In contrast to the variety of resources offered from a practical standpoint, the Eastern Orthodox Church has released only one major document that directly addresses the inclusion of people with disabilities from a theological perspective, namely, “Disability and Communion” from the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America, and a second that potentially impacts the inclusion of people with disabilities, “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights.”

Though there are a variety of resources from the Eastern Orthodox tradition that address the inclusion of people with disabilities, this article examines only those formal statements given by official Eastern Orthodox entities, not those that have been written by laypeople or church ministers in an unofficial capacity.²²

from the Orthodox Church in America, see Orthodox Church in America, “Parish Development,” <https://www.oca.org/parish-ministry/parishdevelopment>. For a list of resources from the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, see Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, “Families of Children with Special Needs Resource List,” November 15, 2014, <https://www.goarch.org/-/families-of-children-with-special-needs-resource-list>. For resources geared toward youth, see Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of America—Orthodox Youth Directors in North America, “Youth with Disabilities Resources,” <http://www.orthodoxyouth.net/youthworkers/resources/youth-with-disabilities>. The Congregational Accessibility Network has compiled a variety of resources on disability from various Orthodox entities. Congregational Accessibility Network, “Orthodox Disability Resources,” <https://canaccess.org/faith-communities/christianity/orthodox/>. Although many of the resources on these sites overlap, the variety demonstrates that the Eastern Orthodox Church has taken practical steps to include people with disabilities in the church. One inspiring example of an Orthodox Church including and educating people with disabilities is Archangel Michael Church of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, which offers a liturgy designed especially for the “physically and mentally challenged.” Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, “Ministry Profile: Ministering to Those with Special Needs: A Divine Liturgy for Physically and Mentally Challenged Orthodox Christians,” October 14, 2008, <https://www.goarch.org/-/ministry-profile-the-challenge-liturgy?inheritRedirect=true>.

²¹ Makrides has the same observation concerning the Orthodox Church’s lack of official teaching on social issues. Although some individual theologians, clergy, and laypeople have voiced their opinion on such matters, very little has been done in an official capacity by the official entities of the Orthodox Church to express explicit theological teaching on social issues. As is the case with people with disabilities, the Orthodox Church has been somewhat involved pragmatically with the issue, yet there is very little interaction theologically. Makrides argues that this lack of systematic teaching by the Orthodox Church is possibly due to the Orthodox Church’s dislike of systemization and organization of theological matters, though he himself does not find that argument completely convincing. See Vasilios N. Makrides, “Why does the Orthodox Church Lack Systematic Social Teaching?” *Skepsis: A Journal for Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Research* 23 (2013): 281–312.

²² Eastern Orthodox entities have released other statements that address the present topic. Already mentioned is Stephen Plumlee, “The Handicapped and Orthodox Worship.”

Due to the hierarchical structure of the Eastern Orthodox Church, official statements hold more weight than those in a decentralized denomination that has

However, this was only a one-paragraph resolution and included no theological treatment of the topic. In addition, there are other statements that for various reasons will not be discussed in this article. In 2006, the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate released a statement that was received by the Tenth World Russian People's Council titled "The Orthodox Declaration of Human Rights: Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity." It is not being considered in the present discussion because it is a short document and is greatly expanded upon by the document released by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2008. Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate, "The Orthodox Declaration of Human Rights: Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity," April 6, 2006, http://www.pravoslavieto.com/docs/human_rights/declaration_ru_en.htm. In 2016, the Holy and Great Council, a Pan-Orthodox Council, released an official document titled "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World." Although it does not specifically address people with disabilities, it includes a short section titled "The Dignity of the Human Person." It bases human dignity on the creation of humans in the image and likeness of God and contends that on this basis the church should cooperate with the broader Christian community and society at large for the protection of human dignity. However, the subject of human dignity is treated at a very basic level and thus is not useful for the present discussion. Holy and Great Council, "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World," <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>. In addition to the aforementioned statements, the Eastern Orthodox Church has participated in the formation of two other major documents of theological nature regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities in the church through their membership in the ecumenical World Council of Churches. All Eastern Orthodox Churches, apart from the Georgian, Bulgarian, and Estonian churches, are part of the World Council of Churches. World Council of Churches, "Orthodox Churches (Eastern)," <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/Church-families/orthodox-Churches-eastern>. In 2003, the World Council of Churches adopted an interim statement written by the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network titled "A Church for All and of All." This statement addressed major theological themes related to inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church, particularly the *imago Dei* and healing. Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, "Document No. Plen 1.1: A Church of All and for All" (statement delivered at the World Council of Churches meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, August 26–September 2, 2003), <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/ix-other-study-processes/a-church-of-all-and-for-all-an-interim-statement>. In 2016, the World Council of Churches adopted another statement written by the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network titled "The Gift of Being: Called to Be a Church of All and for All." This statement goes beyond the scope of ascribing dignity to people with disabilities through the interpretation of *imago Dei* to basing their value upon a theological interpretation of the act of creation itself. Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, "The Gift of Being: Called to Be a Church of All and for All," *Ecumenical Review* 68, no. 2–3 (November 2016): 316–43. Although these two documents are important treatments of the topic, they cannot be considered purely Orthodox in their theology nor hold the same authority within the Orthodox Church as a statement coming directly from an official entity of the Orthodox Church.

no centralized authority and are used to guide local churches.²³ Although not monadic in structure, an “emphasis on conciliar oversight has been a characteristic of” the organization of the Eastern Orthodox Church “from its earliest days.”²⁴ Within the Eastern Orthodox tradition, dogma and practices are articulated in *sobornost* (community) through councils.²⁵ This does not mean that local bishops or congregations have no authority or place to articulate doctrine, theology, or practice, but rather emphasizes the importance of statements released by official entities of the church. The influence of such documents extends far beyond any single local congregation. However, it is ultimately the decision of each individual congregation how they will implement teachings advanced by statements of official entities of the church.²⁶

²³ The intention of official statements to hold sway over entities within the Eastern Orthodox Church is confirmed by the Russian Orthodox Church’s comments in two major documents: “The Basis of the Social Concept” and “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights.” At the conclusion of “The Basis of the Social Concept,” the Russian Orthodox Church declares that the statement is intended “to serve as a guide for the Synodal institutions, dioceses, monasteries, parishes and other canonical church institutions ... be used by the Church authorities to make decisions ... [and] shall be included in the curriculum of the theological schools of Moscow Patriarchate.” Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, “Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church” (adopted by the Bishop’s Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in August 2000), <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx>. Very similar sentiments are expressed in “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights” (adopted by the Bishop’s Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in June 2008), <http://orthodoxrights.org/documents/russian-church-freedom-and-rights>. According to Saint Basil, the hierarchical structure of the Eastern Orthodox Church is reflective of the Trinity. See Boris Bobrinskoy, “God in Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 60. For the importance of the hierarchy and its role in forming the teaching and theology of the Orthodox Church, see Matthew Steenberg, “The Church,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 123–26. For a description of the hierarchy of the Eastern Orthodox Church, see Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, 3rd ed., trans. Seraphim Rose (Plantina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2009), 251–59.

²⁴ Steenberg, “The Church,” 126.

²⁵ Steenberg goes on to explain that “the articulation of dogma in the Church is conciliar in nature. The ecumenical councils, like the local councils . . . are forums of discussion and discernment amongst hierarchs; while presided over by the highest-ranking bishop of the assembly, they are nonetheless meeting places of canonical equals, determining in *sobornost* the articulations and practices of the Church.” Steenberg, “The Church,” 126. See also Lewis J. Patsavos, *Primacy and Conciliarity: Studies in the Primacy of the See of Constantinople and the Synodical Structure of the Orthodox Church* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1995), 31.

²⁶ See for example John Chryssavgis’s reflection on the balance between ecumenical and synodal authority and the guidance of the Spirit. John Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The*

This article examines how each document views the *imago Dei* and its ramifications for people with disabilities, especially within the life and educational pursuits of the church. When referring to the “life of the church,” I am referring to any activity that may happen in the church or in conjunction with the church. This includes social aspects of the church as well as those that are meant for explicit instruction. It could be argued that all activities of the church are educational, even those seemingly social aspects of the church. Therefore, if one is unable to participate in any type of church activity, one is missing out on the opportunity not only to experience community, but to learn and grow.²⁷ Anton Vrame, director of the Department of Religious Education of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, contends for such a paradigm within the Eastern Orthodox Church, arguing that the curriculum extends “beyond the printed textbook,” such that the life of the community actually becomes the curriculum. Vrame delineates those aspects of the church community that serve an educational purpose as “worship and sacramental life (*leitourgia*), the way we organize ourselves and live among one another (*koinonia*), the way we serve one another (*diakonia*),... the way we ..., witness our faith to one another (*martyria*), and the value we place on learning and teaching (*didache* or *matheteia*).”²⁸

I will first present a brief constructive argument for the interrelation of *imago Dei*, image and likeness, *theosis*, and disability. Based upon this relationship I will examine these themes in “Disability and Communion” and “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights.” I argue that the theology of *imago Dei* in the two documents differs, resulting in conflicting views on people with disabilities, particularly individuals with intellectual disabilities.²⁹ While the statement from the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops honors those with disabilities, the statement by the Russian Orthodox Church runs the risk of having an alienating effect on people with disabilities. In order to resolve these

Art of Spiritual Direction (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), 101–09, esp. 105.

²⁷ Estep, White, and Estep assert that “instruction within the congregation is accomplished by experience within the life of the congregation (socialization) as well as through the intentional instruction provided by the congregation (teaching).” Estep, White, and Estep, *Mapping Out Curriculum in Your Church*, 60.

²⁸ Anton C. Vrame, “The Orthodox Basis of and Perspective on Education,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 49, no. 1–2 (2004): 41–42.

²⁹ Although the expression of *imago Dei* from these two documents carries implications for people with various kinds of disabilities, including but not limited to physical, social, sensory, and developmental, the implications are often most salient for those who have intellectual disabilities.

discrepancies and welcome people with disabilities into every aspect of the church, the Orthodox Church should continue to develop and express in an official capacity its theological arguments concerning the *imago Dei*, specifically in its significance for people with disabilities.³⁰

Imago Dei and Disability

In his work, *On the Making of Man*, Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa asked, “In what then does the greatness of man consist, according to the doctrine of the Church?” to which he responded, “Not in his likeness to the created world, but in his being in the image of the nature of the Creator.”³¹ The concept of *imago Dei* may be the most important and foundational concept in Christian theology (and beyond) for what it means to be human.³² Reinders states that “within the Christian tradition, one cannot address theological anthropology without speaking about the doctrine of *imago dei*.”³³ Similarly, Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky speaks of the importance of the image, stating that “everything which touches the destiny of man—grace, sin, redemption by the Word made man—must also be related to the theology of the image.”³⁴ Due to the paucity of specific

³⁰ It is necessary to clarify that although ample works have been written on disability theology (cited previously) and are valuable for anyone considering issues surrounding disability and theology, the purpose of this article is not to evaluate “Disability and Communion” and “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights” from the perspective of these works. As stated, the purpose of this article is to examine how each statement views *imago Dei* and its implications for individuals with disabilities in the church. Although I may interact with these works insofar as they speak directly to the issues at hand, to interact with these works in an in-depth manner is beyond the scope of this article. Neither do I seek to propose theological solutions to the various views presented in the two Orthodox statements. As will be demonstrated, it is incumbent upon the Orthodox Church to develop its own theology of disability, taking into account the doctrines and dogmas of Orthodox tradition.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVI.2, in *The Patristic Understanding of Creation: An Anthology of Writings from the Church Fathers on Creation and Design*, ed. William A. Dembski, Wayne J. Downs, and Justin B. A. Frederick (Riesel, TX: Erasmus Press, 2008), 348.

³² John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 4–6.

³³ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 227. See also Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 169–70, and Nicolae Răzvan Stan, “Human Person as a Being Created in the Image of God and as the Image of the Son: The Orthodox Christian Perspective,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 2, no. 3 (2011): 122.

³⁴ Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (London: Mowbray Publishing, 1975), 126.

references to *imago Dei* in Scripture and the lack of an explicit explanation of its meaning, various interpretations have been offered throughout history.³⁵ Drawing upon historical examples, John Kilner, distinguished scholar of bioethics and theology, demonstrates that varying understandings of the meaning of *imago Dei* throughout history have produced varying results, both positive and negative for humans.³⁶ Individuals with disabilities have been especially susceptible to the effects of varying interpretations of the image of God.³⁷

Theologian Amos Yong outlines three basic views of the image of God and how each relates to individuals with disabilities. The substantive or structural view identifies the image of God with certain capacities or qualities, with the intellect (“persisting) in the Christian tradition as the primary feature of the *imago Dei*,” which may lead to the exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities and even individuals with physical impairments such as the deaf-mute.³⁸ Secondly, “the functional view holds that the *imago Dei* consists not in what human beings are but in what (they) do,” such as exercising dominion over the created order.³⁹ Again, this understanding of the *imago Dei* can result in the view that individuals with certain intellectual or physical disabilities possess less of the image of God.⁴⁰ Finally, Yong describes the relational view, which, according to Yong, proposes that the *imago Dei* consists in a human’s “relationship with God,... interrelationality with other persons, and ... embodied interdependence with the world.”⁴¹ The relational view, according to Yong, is the most hopeful for individuals with disabilities.⁴²

The doctrine of *imago Dei* is drawn primarily from Genesis 1:26-27 in which God declares to make humanity in his own image and likeness. The distinction between image and likeness has been an important component

³⁵ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 16–17.

³⁶ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 6–37.

³⁷ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 19–21, 101; Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 227–31.

³⁸ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 172.

³⁹ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 173.

⁴⁰ Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras makes similar observations, noting that if the image of God is confined to rationality, free will, or dominion, then those with intellectual disabilities or mental illness do not reflect the image of God but rather are demoted to the status of animal. See Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, trans. Keith Schram (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 57.

⁴¹ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, 174.

⁴² See also Brock, *Disability*, 106–10. My purpose here is not to propose which view is correct, but rather to lay the foundation for how one’s understanding of the image of God can affect one’s understanding of individuals with disabilities, to be examined further in relation to the two documents from the Eastern Orthodox Church.

in Orthodox theological anthropology from the time of the early Church Fathers.⁴³ Although some Christian traditions have not heavily emphasized the distinction between the two, the distinction has been especially prominent in Orthodox theology, and “references to the distinction are ubiquitous throughout the patristic tradition.”⁴⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 120/140–c.200) was “the first Christian writer to comment extensively on the divine image and likeness” and led the way for the common distinction among the Fathers between the image as “an inalienable gift” and the likeness as a “calling to be realized.”⁴⁵ Though the Fathers did not all agree upon the exact meaning of image and likeness, scholars of patristics Mark Edwards and Elena Ene D-Vasilescu note that the “distinction between the abiding image and the forfeited likeness (became) canonical in the eastern church.”⁴⁶ Any serious discussion of *imago Dei* in the context of the Eastern Orthodox tradition necessarily entails, then, a discussion of the meaning of image and likeness.

Reinders argues that to understand what it means to truly be human, one must not only consider origins, but *telos*. That is, what it means to be truly human stems not only from whence we came, but from the “purpose or goal of our existence.”⁴⁷ If *imago Dei* constitutes what it means to be

⁴³ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Dignity: An Orthodox Perspective,” in *Value and Vulnerability: An Interfaith Dialogue on Human Dignity*, ed. Matthew R. Petrussek and Jonathan Rothchild (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 199.

⁴⁴ Papanikolaou, “Dignity,” 199. See also Harrison, “The Human Person as Image and Likeness of God,” 78. Reinders notes that most modern scholars read likeness to be explanatory of image rather than the two terms conveying distinct meanings. Johannes S. Reinders, “*Imago Dei* as a Basic Concept in Christian Ethics,” in *Holy Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Hermeneutics, Values, and Society*, Currents of Encounter 12, ed. Hendrik M. Vroom and Jerald D. Gort (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 191. See also Kilner’s discussion of image-likeness as a single concept, Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 124–33.

⁴⁵ Peter C. Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 80. See also Papanikolaou, “Dignity,” 199, and Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul A. Onica (Anaheim, CA: A & C Press, 2002), 120–24. For a discussion of Basil’s view on the distinction between image and likeness, see Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 137; Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 341–46; Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 210.

⁴⁶ Mark Edwards and Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, “Introduction,” in *Visions of God and Ideas of Deification in Patristic Thought*, ed. Mark Edwards and Elena Ene D-Vasilescu (London: Routledge, 2017), 5.

⁴⁷ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 52.

human in the sense of our origins, then *theosis*, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, constitutes the *telos*, or end goal of life.⁴⁸ According to Eastern Orthodox theology, then, for one's life to be purposeful, one must be able to fulfill or pursue *theosis*. The first definition of *theosis* (also known as deification) was given by Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500), who wrote, "Deification ... is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible."⁴⁹ Thus humanity's origins and purpose are intricately entwined: the *telos*, or goal of existence, is derived from our origins, that is *imago Dei*, as *theosis* is attaining God's likeness.⁵⁰

The meaning and various interpretations of *theosis* will be discussed in greater detail later in this work in relation to the documents examined. Suffice it to say now that as with *imago Dei*, various interpretations of *theosis* carry diverse implications for all people, but especially for individuals with disabilities. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, one's interpretation of *theosis* carries with it the very meaning of life. Thus, if one is unable to obtain *theosis*, one is unable to fulfill life's very purpose. As Clemena Antonova, art historian specializing in iconography, states, "If *theosis* is the goal of human life, then the question of how one achieves likeness to God and union with God becomes of primary significance."⁵¹ This significance is crucial for both one's fulfillment of life's purpose and one's participation in the church. The relationship between the interpretation of *theosis*, participation in the church, and a person's ability to achieve *theosis* are intricately entwined, for as Orthodox theologian and bishop Timothy Ware states, "Deification presupposes life in the Church."⁵² Thus, if one is excluded from the church, they are excluded from *theosis*. Conversely, if one is unable to achieve *theosis* due to their own limitations, then their participation in the church may be questioned.⁵³ Throughout the writings of the Church Fathers, *theosis* is intimately connected to the church. According to

⁴⁸ Clemena Antonova, "The Visual Implications of *Theosis*," in *Visions of God and Ideas on Deification in Patristic Thought*, 208, 216; Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 220; Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 225.

⁴⁹ Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 1, 248.

⁵⁰ Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 233; Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 225. The understanding of deification as the attainment of God's likeness traces back to the Cappadocian Fathers. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 13.

⁵¹ Antonova, "The Visual Implications of *Theosis*," 209.

⁵² Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 231.

⁵³ These limitations will be discussed in further detail in relation to the documents to be examined but are mainly connected to intellectual limitations or limitations of self-agency.

Dionysius, *theosis* is a means of salvation and occurs within the boundaries of the church.⁵⁴ Similarly, for Saint Maximus (c. 580–662), deification is the culmination of an individual's salvation and is "distinctly ecclesial."⁵⁵ According to Gregory of Nazianzus's understanding of deification, "The Liturgy complements the spiritual life ... (and) the priest is a mediator, deified and deifying."⁵⁶ Thus, one's understanding of *theosis* carries with it important implications for individuals both inside and outside of the church, and an individual's participation within the church.

The doctrine of *theosis* is intimately connected to the Eastern Orthodox understanding of *imago Dei*, and together the two constitute what it means to be human and fulfill the goal of life. Although these doctrines hold crucial implications for all humans, the varying understandings of these doctrines can have an even greater impact on individuals with disabilities, especially individuals with intellectual disabilities. The implications of one's interpretation of *imago Dei* and *theosis* may impact the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and their participation in the church. Yong asks the question, "How does our wrestling especially with intellectual disabilities such as Down Syndrome affect the historic view of human beings as created in the image of God?"⁵⁷ More importantly we may ask, what does our view of human beings as created in the image of God mean for persons with disabilities? Is it possible to have an understanding of humanity in the image of God that is both faithful to the Scriptures and honoring to individuals with disabilities? The remainder of this article will examine the first question in the context of "Disability and Communion" and "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights" and challenge the Eastern Orthodox Church to pursue the second.

⁵⁴ Filip Ivanovic, "Union with God and Likeness to God: Deification According to Dionysius the Areopagite," in *Visions of God and Ideas on Deification in Patristic Thought*, 118–19, 127.

⁵⁵ See Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, "Like a Glowing Sword: St. Maximus on Deification," in *Visions of God and Ideas on Deification in Patristic Thought*, 158, 165.

⁵⁶ Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 219. Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa viewed the sacraments as the means by which humans participate in deification. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 229. In their introduction to the English edition of *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*, Kerry Robichaux and Paul Onica note that the connection between the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, and divinization is common and characteristic of the patristic writings. Kerry S. Robichaux and Paul A. Onica, "Introduction to the English Edition," in *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, xii.

⁵⁷ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 157.

The Russian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church is one of the largest autocephalous Orthodox churches, whose jurisdiction extends beyond Russia to Moldova, Ukraine, and Belorussia, among other places, giving it a far-reaching influence.⁵⁸ Among the patriarchal churches, it stands as the fifth most honored and is one of the most important voices in modern Orthodoxy.⁵⁹ On June 26, 2008, the Russian Orthodox Church adopted a statement titled “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights” (hereafter, ROS).⁶⁰ The statement itself was a push against the secular notion of human rights, which often advocates for stances on issues that the Russian Orthodox Church views as sinful and contrary to Christian teaching, such as sexual lechery, violence, and abortion.⁶¹ The document was released at the end of a transition period within the Russian Orthodox Church in which the church shifted from completely rejecting the Western notion of human rights to accepting it as a concept, while repudiating the

⁵⁸ Konstantin Gavrilkin, “Patriarchal Orthodox Church of Russia,” in McGuckin, *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 2: 493. An autocephalous church is a self-governing church that chooses its own head. That does not mean, however, that it is independent of the other churches, “since all canonical churches are in communion with one another and are provisionally responsible to one another in matters of faith.” Michael Prokurat, Alexander Golitzin, and Michael D. Peterson, *Historical Dictionary of the Orthodox Church*, Religions, Philosophies and Movements 9 (London: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 52. In addition to the Russian Orthodox Church’s influence within its own ecclesiastical jurisdiction, it also exerts considerable influence on Russian society and politics. See Zoe Katrina Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism*, BASEES/RoutledgeCurzon Series on Russian and East European Studies (London: Routledge, 2005). However, Nikloday Mitrokhin argues that the Russian Orthodox Church has lost much of its influence in Russian society and politics. See Nikloday Mitrokhin, “The Russian Orthodox Church in Contemporary Russia: Structural Problems and Contradictory Relations with the Government, 2000–2008,” *Social Research* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 289–320.

⁵⁹ See John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to the History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 47. A patriarchal church is one that is both autonomous and autocephalous, “of great antiquity or national importance, [and] headed by a patriarch.” There are currently nine patriarchal churches (440). Prokurat, Golitzin, and Peterson suggest that, though debatable, the patriarch of Moscow is, for all intents and purposes, the leading spokesperson for Orthodox Christianity in the world today, but the most honor is given to the patriarch of Constantinople. Prokurat, Golitzin, and Peterson, *Historical Dictionary of the Orthodox Church*, 5.

⁶⁰ Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Relations, “Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching.”

⁶¹ See Russian Orthodox Church, “Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights,” sec. III.3.

liberal trends prominent in the international human rights movement.⁶² ROS is the fruit of the Russian Orthodox Church's "[endeavor] to make a contribution to the development of the universal character of human rights" in such a context.⁶³

The present purpose is not to examine every aspect of ROS, but rather those sections that expound upon the theology of *imago Dei* and human dignity. Although the teachings of the statement extend far beyond the scope of people with disabilities, the implications potentially have direct bearing upon the treatment of people with disabilities in the Russian Orthodox Church and beyond. In ROS, the Russian Orthodox Church addresses the subject of human dignity within the context of the aforementioned discussion concerning human rights.⁶⁴ Because the treatment of people with disabilities is intricately tied to the concepts of human dignity

⁶² See Kristina Stoeckl, "The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur," *Religion, State and Society*, 44, no. 2 (2016): 134. In her article, Stoeckl argues that the Russian Orthodox Church, through its influence and participation in the European Court of Human Rights, United Nations Human Rights Council, the Council of Europe, and various nongovernmental organizations, acts as a "moral conservative norm promoter at the international level" in response to the liberal "international human rights system" (136).

⁶³ Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, "The Experience of Viewing the Problems of Human Rights and their Moral Foundations in European Religious Communities: Presentation at the 'Evolution of Moral Values and Human Rights in Multicultural Society' Conference, Strasbourg, 30 October 2006," *Europaica Bulletin*, no. 108 (November 2006), <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/14/108.aspx>. In his presentation to a forum representing the Council of Europe, Kirill gave an introductory statement on the Russian Orthodox Church's view of human rights and announced the decision of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church to "produce a document reflecting its view on human rights and the advocacy of human rights." "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights" is the product of this decision.

⁶⁴ For an in-depth treatment of the Russian Orthodox view of human rights, see Kristina Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2014). Though not an official statement from the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch Kirill of Moscow compiled into a book his thoughts on human rights and human dignity, with "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights" included as an appendix. This work is especially helpful in understanding the Russian Orthodox Church's struggle to reconcile the liberal (Western) view of human rights with Orthodox tradition. See Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, *Freedom and Responsibility: A Search for Harmony, Human Rights and Personal Dignity* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2011). For an examination of human rights from a more general Eastern Orthodox as well as the Russian Orthodox perspective, see Alfons Brüning and Evert van der Zweerde, eds., *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights*, *Eastern Christian Studies* 13 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012).

and human rights, the statement's teaching on human dignity should not be divorced from the conversation of treatment and inclusion of people with disabilities within the Orthodox Church, especially considering that ROS contains "the most sustained Orthodox theological analysis specifically on the word 'dignity.'"⁶⁵ Section V.2 of ROS outlines current "human rights efforts" by the Russian Orthodox Church, among which is "concern for the respect of the dignity and rights of those who are placed in social institutions and penitentiaries with special attention given to the disabled, orphans, the elderly and other powerless people." Though concern for people with disabilities is only one of numerous concerns, a careful examination of the *imago Dei* in ROS reveals that it does not necessarily lead to a theological foundation for such dignity and treatment. The following is not an assessment of the Russian Orthodox Church's attitude toward people with disabilities, but rather an assessment of the potential ramifications for people with disabilities based upon its theology of the *imago Dei* as portrayed in ROS. Though ROS itself claims to be a defense of people with disabilities, I argue that its ambiguous interpretation of *imago Dei* runs the risk of having an alienating effect upon people with disabilities in the church rather than building a theological foundation upon which they should be included in the activities and life of the church.⁶⁶

***Imago Dei* as Qualities**

The first way ROS's view of the *imago Dei* runs the risk of degrading or alienating people with disabilities is its confinement of the *imago Dei* to certain qualities in humans. ROS makes clear that the sole basis for a human person's inherent dignity is humanity's creation in the image and likeness of God, which is described as the endowment of human nature by God "with qualities in His image and after His likeness."⁶⁷ This statement seems to suggest that God's image and likeness are found in certain qualities that God

⁶⁵ Papanikolaou, "Dignity," 207. The World Health Organization views disability as a human rights issue. See World Health Organization, *World Report on Disability 2011* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2011), 9.

⁶⁶ In his assessment of ROS, Papanikolaou makes clear that though it may seem that the Russian Orthodox Church "does not affirm an inherent value to human life," this is not the case. At no point does the Russian Orthodox Church declare that any human may have no worth, and therefore "no entitlement to rights until a certain period of development." Papanikolaou, "Dignity," 197. I too do not make the case that the Russian Orthodox Church, in ROS, does not affirm the inherent value of human life. I am, however, tracing the implications of the claims of ROS regarding *imago Dei* and dignity for individuals with disabilities.

⁶⁷ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. I.1.

has granted to humans rather than being found in the wholeness of one's being. Nicolae Răzvan Stan, Romanian theologian, argues that "nowadays Orthodox theologians unanimously agree upon the belief that man in his perfected entirety (i.e., body and soul) was made in God's image," which stands in contrast to the notion of man merely possessing qualities that bear God's image.⁶⁸ However, ROS seemingly reduces the concept of *imago Dei* to mere qualities.⁶⁹

Though there is no definitive list, Nonna Harrison, Orthodox nun and theologian, summarizes those human characteristics identified by the Fathers as bearing the image and likeness of God to include "freedom and responsibility; spiritual reception and relationship with God and neighbour; excellence of character and holiness; royal dignity; priesthood of the created world; and creativity, rationality, the arts and sciences, and culture."⁷⁰ These qualities, however, are not specified in ROS, nor is clarification given as to what it means for those, such as people with disabilities, who may lack some of these qualities or possess them in a different capacity. Such a lack of clarification on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church may be due to the view that the image cannot be defined, as argued by Lossky and developed by Stan.⁷¹ Regardless of the reason, the reduction of the image to certain qualities carries ambiguous implications for people with disabilities, for if God's image and likeness are found only in certain characteristics, and not the entirety of one's being, one could surmise that those people who lack said qualities do not possess the image or likeness of God, or do so only by

⁶⁸ Stan, "Human Person as a Being Created in the Image of God and as the Image of the Son," 133.

⁶⁹ Throughout the entire document, ROS specifies only two qualities that are manifestations of the image of God: freedom (of choice) and creative ability. "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. II.1 and IV.5. Both of these qualities may be diminished in individuals with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, leading some to conclude that individuals with disabilities do not possess the image of God or possess it to a lesser degree.

⁷⁰ Harrison, "The Human Person as Image and Likeness of God," 81. Harrison contrasts the view of the early Fathers, which emphasized the *imago Dei* as human characteristics with the tendency of modern writers to "underline that the totality of the human being is created in the divine image" and notes that those features of the divine image that she identified are "only a starting point" (89). For a more detailed discussion of the qualities composing the image of God according to the Cappadocian Fathers, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 127–31.

⁷¹ See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 115–16; Stan, "Human Person as a Being Created in the Image of God and as the Image of the Son," 133.

the same measurement with which they possess those qualities.⁷² Kilner also argues that associating the *imago Dei* with particular qualities in humanity leads to the view that people with intellectual disabilities possess less of the image of God.⁷³ Throughout history this has subjected them, at best, to social disadvantage, and at worst, to persecution and violence. Sadly, the church and Christians have not been immune to such theology and its resultant behavior.⁷⁴ Though the Russian Orthodox Church expresses in its statement a desire to help people with disabilities, its ambiguous presentation of the *imago Dei* as qualities allows for the conclusion that people with disabilities do not possess dignity or are of less dignity because they may lack certain qualities that bear the image of God. Such a conclusion could cause people with disabilities to be excluded from the life of the church or disadvantaged in their participation.

Distinction between Image and Likeness

A second understanding of the *imago Dei* presented in ROS that bears a potentially alienating effect on people with disabilities in the life of the church is the distinction between the image and likeness of God in humans. ROS contends that the image and likeness of God are present in humans in distinct ways, yet this distinction is neither entirely clear nor consistent, causing contradictory views on the dignity of humans. According to the Russian Orthodox Church, “The dignity and ultimate worth of every human person are derived from the image of God, while dignified life is related to the notion of God’s likeness achieved through God’s grace by efforts to overcome sin and to seek moral purity and virtue.”⁷⁵ Here a distinction is made between dignity and worth, which is derived from the image of God, and a “dignified life,” which is achieved through conforming to God’s likeness by one’s own effort.⁷⁶ However, the distinction between “dignity”

⁷² In his assessment of ROS, Maican goes so far as to state that “those who do not exhibit these attributes cannot be considered humans.” Petre Maican, “Overcoming Exclusion in Eastern Orthodoxy: Human Dignity and Disability from a Christological Perspective,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33, no. 4 (2020): 501.

⁷³ For a similar argument, see Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 172–73, and Brock, *Disability*, 106–07.

⁷⁴ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 18–21.

⁷⁵ “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights,” sec. I.2.

⁷⁶ Papanikolaou helpfully notes to readers that the concept of dignity did not exist in “Greek patristic tradition, whose texts are authoritative for Orthodox theology.” Papanikolaou, “Dignity,” 198. ROS is thus attempting to use patristic tradition and theology to address a modern concept, especially as it exists within the conversation of

and a “dignified life” is not thoroughly expounded upon in ROS. Though the emphasis moving forward seems to be a “dignified life,” ROS uses the terms “dignified life” and “dignity” almost interchangeably, causing ambiguity.⁷⁷ This ambiguous distinction between image and likeness leads to an unstable relationship between human dignity and the image and likeness of God in humans. Such an interpretation of the distinction between image and likeness could lead some to surmise that people with certain disabilities possess dignity through the image of God, yet are unable to live a dignified life due to their limited ability to intentionally strive for moral virtue and thus attain the likeness of God, bringing into question the validity and purpose of their participation in the life and educational pursuits of the church.

In his work *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Michael Pomazansky directly addresses whether there is a distinction between the image and the likeness of God in humans. He confidently affirms such a distinction, stating that “the majority of the Holy Fathers and teachers of the church reply that there is.” The teaching of the ROS is consistent with Pomazansky’s assessment that “the image of God is in the very *nature* of the soul, and the likeness in the moral *perfecting* of man in virtue and sanctity.” According to Pomazansky, the image of God is granted to humans, while the likeness must be acquired by one’s own doing.⁷⁸ Orthodox theologian Emil Bartos describes the distinction between image and likeness as an “essential [mark] of Orthodox theology,” noting that renowned Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Stăniloae consistently held that “image speaks about man’s dignity, while likeness about his ethical duty.”⁷⁹ Although this same concept is reflected in ROS, complications for people with disabilities arise out of ROS’s interchangeable use of “dignity” and “dignified life,” causing unclarity for the relationship among image, likeness, and dignity.⁸⁰ Maican

human rights. Papanikalaou refers to this as a “clash of civilizations,” elaborating that the Russian Orthodox Church “denies a clash of civilizations by demonstrating that it is not against modern liberal *notions* of human rights and dignity; it affirms a clash of civilizations by rejecting the dominant Western liberal *understandings* of these concepts” (196).

⁷⁷ Brüning also notes this distinction between image and likeness in ROS, as well as the tendency of the document to emphasize the implications of likeness far more than those of image. See Alfons Brüning, “Can *Theosis* Save ‘Human Dignity’? Chapters in Theological Anthropology East and West,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 71, no. 3–4 (2019): 240.

⁷⁸ Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 139.

⁷⁹ Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Stăniloae* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 136.

⁸⁰ Lossky echoes a similar sentiment, stating that “God’s image in man is indestructible,” though he may “stray from God and lose His likeness in his nature.” Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Ian Kesarcodi-Watson and Ihta

argues that ROS “operates with a distinction between what might be called ‘basic’ and ‘full dignity.’ Basic dignity refers to the dignity of origin (*imago dei*), while full dignity describes the actualisation of this basic dignity through freedom (likeness).” He rightly notes that this distinction thus “leaves at its bottom the most vulnerable categories of people (i.e., persons with severe cognitive disabilities or those struggling with various addictions).”⁸¹ Even so, the distinction may not be as clear-cut as Maican argues because ROS seems to use the terms “dignity” and “dignified life” interchangeably, blurring the lines between what Maican labels “basic” and “full” dignity. The difficulty for people with disabilities stems not necessarily from the distinction between image and likeness but more so from the ambiguity of “dignified life” and “dignity.”⁸²

Responsibility for Dignity

As a result of this unstable relationship between dignity and the image and likeness of God, the agent of responsibility for human dignity becomes

Kesarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 128. Although Lossky refrains, at this point, from tying these concepts to dignity, he clearly distinguishes between the image and likeness in humans, emphasizing that one (the image) is irrevocable and the other (likeness) may be lost.

⁸¹ Maican, “Overcoming Exclusion in Eastern Orthodoxy,” 497.

⁸² The notion of a distinction between image and likeness, though characteristic of Eastern Orthodox theology, is not unique to Eastern Orthodox theology. Drawing upon the usage of the two terms in the Old Testament and the ancient Near East, Old Testament scholar Peter Gentry and theologian Stephen Wellum have also noted a distinction between the two terms. See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2018), 226–38. However, the meanings they ascribe to image and likeness differ vastly in their content and resultant consequences for people with disabilities. Gentry and Wellum conclude that likeness describes a relationship between God and humans such that each human is a son of God. This sonship was given to Adam and is subsequently passed down from generation to generation. Image, on the other hand, bestows upon humans a royal status, as a result of which humans rule over creation. Gentry and Wellum describe the *imago Dei* as a covenant relationship “characterized by faithfulness and loyal love, obedience and trust ... between God and humans on the one hand, and between humans and the world on the other” (230). Through this understanding of image and likeness, all humans *are* the divine image; each individual is a son of God and a servant king (236). Therefore, a distinction between image and likeness does not necessarily present difficulties for people with disabilities. The difficulties in ROS arise out of the meaning ascribed to the words “image” and “likeness” and more so, the ambiguity and interchanging of the two terms. Maican seems to agree that a distinction between image and likeness is not necessarily problematic, though deriving human dignity from that distinction is. Maican, “Overcoming Exclusion in Eastern Orthodoxy,” 502.

unclear. ROS seems to contradict itself, at some points stating that human dignity is an irrevocable gift from God dependent upon the *imago Dei*, yet at other times placing the burden of responsibility for dignity upon each individual human. Such ambiguity can be seen in two statements that are presented side by side. Section I.2 states that one's dignity "is not [one's] own achievement but a gift of God," seeming to imply that nothing humans may do or not do can change their dignity. Yet merely two sentences later it states, "Clearly, the idea of responsibility is integral to the very notion of dignity." This is one instance where the authors may be referring to a "dignified life," but have chosen instead to use the term "dignity." We therefore must take the authors at their word and assume they mean exactly what they have said: dignity is tied to responsibility.

If human responsibility is integral to human dignity, then human dignity rests not upon something inherent within humans, but rather something that humans do or do not achieve.⁸³ As a result, then, anyone who does not do these things or fails to achieve these goals does not possess dignity. So then, once again, the notion that one's dignity may be dependent upon the measure to which one possesses certain qualities is reinforced by this treatment of the bearer of responsibility for human dignity. Such a perspective, however, places the responsibility not on God having granted certain qualities to an individual, but rather, on the individual taking responsibility for their own actions. Responsibility, insofar as it relates to dignity, is that of personal, not communal responsibility. ROS clearly states, "Personal dignity implies the assertion of personal responsibility."⁸⁴ People with disabilities, then, may be

⁸³ Matthew Petrussek expresses a similar observation in his response to Papanikolaou's account of dignity, based upon ROS. Reflecting upon the difference between image and likeness, and the meaning of likeness as that which humans are "called to become," Petrussek states that "although God's grace plays an indispensable role in transforming the human being from the image of God, which is disfigured by sin, into Christlikeness, which is liberated from sin, human action, in the form of freely choosing to live according to God's will, is equally indispensable." Matthew R. Petrussek, "Protestant and Orthodox Perspectives on Dignity: A Response," in *Value and Vulnerability: An Interfaith Dialogue on Human Dignity*, 220.

⁸⁴ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. I.5. Though a clear connection is not made in ROS, one may deduce that this personal responsibility is a result of freedom of choice, a quality granted by God. This freedom may be used for good or evil and can only be used for good by God's help and "in close cooperation" with Him (sec. II.1). It may be surmised, then, that personal responsibility is enacted through God's help, and more so in the context of the church. ROS states, "It is impossible to find freedom from sin without the mysterious unity of man with the transfigured nature of Christ that takes place in the Sacrament of Baptism (cf. Rom. 6:3-6; Col. 3:10) and becomes ever stronger through life in the

perceived to have a double disadvantage according to the teachings presented in ROS: they have neither been granted certain qualities by God that bear his image, nor are they able to take the necessary responsibility to achieve the likeness of God and thus maintain their dignity. This is especially salient, as will be demonstrated, for individuals with cognitive or developmental disabilities.

Those responsibilities that humans must take to achieve or maintain dignity, according to the Russian Orthodox Church, are that of morality, self-determination, and deification. ROS repeatedly emphasizes the importance of morality in maintaining one's dignity, so much so that morality constitutes the foundational meaning of dignity. Accordingly, ROS states, "In the Eastern Christian tradition the notion of 'dignity' carries first of all a moral meaning, while the ideas of what is dignified and what is not are bound up with the moral or amoral actions of a person and with the inner state of his soul."⁸⁵ Furthermore, the Russian Orthodox Church contends that without morality, dignity is not attainable, stating, "A human being preserves his God-given dignity and grows in it only if he lives in accordance with moral norms."⁸⁶ Therefore, one's dignity is clearly contingent upon one's morality.

Morality, according to ROS, is not achieved passively, for one must put forth intentional effort to live a moral life. Referring to the link between morality and dignity, the ROS states, "The acknowledgement of personal dignity implies the assertion of personal responsibility."⁸⁷ So then, in order to possess personal dignity, one must assert personal responsibility. If one is unable to assert personal responsibility, one is therefore unable to obtain personal dignity. The dependence of dignity upon an assertion of personal responsibility degrades those who, due to intellectual or developmental disability, are unable to assert personal responsibility.⁸⁸

The Russian Orthodox Church deems not only personal responsibility as necessary for a morally virtuous life, but also self-determination. Self-

Church, the Body of Christ (cf. Col. 1:24)." In this sense, there may be both a communal and divine aspect to personal responsibility. However, the clear emphasis in ROS is that of personal, individual responsibility. The emphasis on self-determination, to be discussed in the following section, strengthens this argument.

⁸⁵ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. I.2.

⁸⁶ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. I.5.

⁸⁷ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. I.5.

⁸⁸ This could also be true for individuals with mental illness who are unable, permanently or temporarily, to exert personal responsibility.

determination implies a level of intentionality and rationality beyond that required by personal responsibility and could prove even more challenging for some people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Self-determination is linked directly to dignity through one's morality in the statement: "The image of God can be either darkened or illumined depending on the self-determination of a free individual, while the natural dignity becomes either more apparent in his life or obliterated by sin. The result is directly dependent on the self-determination of an individual."⁸⁹ Therefore, one's dignity directly corresponds to the level at which one exerts their will to achieve purity. Here again we see the ambiguity of the distinction between the image and likeness and its implications for dignity in humans. Whereas in the statement previously discussed and found in section I.2 of the document, "dignity and ultimate worth" are derived from the image of God, and likeness is that which must be achieved through virtue, this statement from section II.1 states that it is the image of God that is maintained or distorted through virtue or sin. This ambiguity compiles even further the difficulties faced by people with disabilities for it seemingly places upon them the responsibility to maintain both the image of God and the likeness of God, leaving no avenue for dignity for those unable to assert such responsibility. The dependence of dignity upon morality, which in turn is dependent upon personal responsibility and self-determination, poses difficulties for those with cognitive disabilities who may not possess the capacity to assert such intentional "[effort] to overcome sin and to seek moral purity and virtue."⁹⁰ Reinders bluntly states, "If human beings with profound intellectual disabilities are to be dignified, then the ground of their dignity cannot be found in human agency."⁹¹ Placing the responsibility of dignity upon the individual could potentially cause people with disabilities to be viewed as possessing less dignity, resulting in alienation from fellow church members or exclusion from the educational pursuits of the church.⁹²

It should be remembered here that the Russian Orthodox Church is reacting to what they perceive as an incorrect view of human rights, which often advocates for actions contrary to the teaching of Scripture and seeks to

⁸⁹ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. II.1.

⁹⁰ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. I.2.

⁹¹ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 11.

⁹² Brüning identifies the dependence of dignity upon morality as the most "problematic issue" in ROS. Brüning, "Can *Theosis* Save 'Human Dignity'?", 239. He also notes that sin and morality become categories by which to measure one's dignity, or at least "the extent to which it has become manifest and visible" (240).

justify immoral activity by appealing to human dignity. Their argument against a nonreligious understanding of human rights is summarized well in section III.3 paragraph three, of ROS, which states:

It is inadmissible to introduce in the area of human rights the norms that obliterate or altogether cancel both the Gospel and natural morality. The Church sees a great danger in the legislative and public support given to various vices, such as sexual lechery and perversions, the worship of profit and violence. It is equally inadmissible to elevate to a norm such immoral and inhumane actions towards the human being as abortion, euthanasia, use of human embryos in medicine, experiments changing a person's nature and the like.

In an effort to fight against the elevation of immoral norms and inhumane actions in the name of human rights, however, the church has thus implied that morality, based upon responsibility and self-determination, is necessary for dignity.⁹³ Regardless of the reasoning for making such an argument, the fact remains that if one's dignity is dependent upon morality, personal responsibility, and self-determination, then those who lack such abilities, or possess them to a lesser degree, therefore lack dignity or possess it to a lesser degree.⁹⁴

Deification as the Purpose of Life

The Russian Orthodox Church deems the pursuit of morality not only necessary for dignity but as constituting the essential purpose of human life.

⁹³ In this regard, Papanikolaou contends that the Russian Orthodox Church's main mistake is that they are trying to apply the rules of the ecclesial/sacramental domain to the public domain. Papanikolaou, "Dignity," 207–08. Because ROS is written in the context of the public political sphere, it is even more necessary for the Orthodox Church to clarify these matters and their implications for individuals with disabilities for the ecclesial/sacramental space.

⁹⁴ John Slotemaker, scholar of Medieval Christianity, comes to a similar conclusion when discussing the idea that the *imago Dei* belongs to the human intellect, as put forth by Augustine of Hippo (354–430), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and William of Ockham (1287–1347). Slotemaker concludes that if the *imago Dei* is confined to the intellect, rationality, and will, or in acts of understanding and willing, then those who are unable to will and rationalize thus cannot bear the image of God. Such a theology bears "extremely unfortunate [consequences]" for those with cognitive disabilities. John T. Slotemaker, "The *Imago Dei/Trinitatis* and Disabled Persons: The Limitations of Intellectualism in Late Medieval Theology," in *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Scott M. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2020), 121.

Quoting Saint John of Damascus (c. 675–749), ROS states that “human life ... lies in seeking ‘God’s likeness in all virtue so far as it is possible for man.’”⁹⁵ ROS refers to this effort to achieve the likeness of God through moral virtue as the patristic tradition of deification, also known as *theosis*.⁹⁶ The idea that *theosis* is the goal of human life is a common Eastern Orthodox belief, both among the Cappadocian Fathers and modern Orthodox scholars.⁹⁷ Noting that many modern scholars adhere to the dogma of deification, Bartos describes it as “the ultimate and supreme goal for human existence.”⁹⁸

⁹⁵ “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights,” sec. I.3.

⁹⁶ In his introduction to an edited work on *theosis*, Vladimir Kharlamov highlights the importance of the works by Vladimir Lossky and Dumitru Stăniloae and their key contributions to the understanding of deification in “modern Orthodox thought.” See Vladimir Kharlamov, ed., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 3. Kharlamov’s introduction offers a helpful and thorough yet concise review of *theosis* literature. Although this current work cannot offer a complete review of *theosis*, Kharlamov presents a helpful guide. Andrew Louth also identifies Emil Bartos’s work on Dumitru Stăniloae (*Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*) and Norman Russell’s study of deification (*The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*) to be important studies on the doctrine of deification in Orthodox theology, both of which I reference. Andrew Louth, “The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 32.

⁹⁷ Norman Russell states that the Cappadocian Fathers “took for granted that the attainment of likeness to God was the *telos* of human life.” Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 233. Basil put only giving glory to God as pre-eminent above deification. See Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 211. According to Russell, Gregory of Nazianzus viewed deification as “the fundamental purpose of the Christian life.” Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 215, 220. For a more in-depth discussion of Nazianzus’s view of deification as the goal of life, see Donald F. Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus*, Patristic Monograph Series, no.7 (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979), 56–60. Russell notes that “deification became established in the Byzantine monastic tradition as the goal of the spiritual life” through Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 15, 296. Antonova quotes Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662) as stating in epistle 24, “For this is why he made us that we might become partakers of the divine nature and sharers in his eternity, and that we might appear to be like him through deification through grace.” Antonova, “The Visual Implications of *Theosis*,” 209.

⁹⁸ Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 7. Bartos lists the following modern scholars as adhering to the idea of deification as “man’s destiny”: Afanessieff, Bulgakov, Bobrinskoy, Olivier Clément, Evdokimov, Florovsky, Karmiris, Lossky,

Although there is consensus among the Fathers that *theosis* is the goal of life, there is not consensus among them as to its precise meaning. In his analysis of Gregory of Nazianzus, Donald Winslow, scholar of historical theology, concludes that *theosis* “escapes strict definition.”⁹⁹ In a broad sense, *theosis* refers to humankind’s effort and potential to become like God, based upon the *imago Dei*.¹⁰⁰ Beginning with Athanasius the Great (c. 296–373), the Fathers often spoke of *theosis* as God the Word becoming human, “that we might be made God.”¹⁰¹ This is the essence of *theosis* “[which underlies] most Orthodox reflection on the doctrine of deification,” despite the varying approaches to *theosis* among both modern and patristic writings.¹⁰² Orthodox theologian Norman Russell identifies four distinct uses of deification language in the patristic tradition: nominal, analogical, ethical, and realistic. In the nominal usage, the title “gods” is granted to human beings “as a title of honour.” When used analogically, *theosis* refers to humans “[becoming] sons and gods ‘by grace’ in relation to Christ who is Son and God ‘by nature.’” The ethical approach to deification refers to the attainment of the likeness of God through imitation of divine attributes. Finally, in the realistic approach, humans “are in some sense transformed” to participate in God.¹⁰³

Nellas, Nissiotis, Schmemmann, Kallistos Ware, and Yannaras (7). See, for example, Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 98. Of note as well are Michael Pomazansky and George Abbot. Pomazansky argues that “the first purpose of man is the glory of God,” which is achieved through deification. Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 140. Archimandrite George Abbot describes *theosis* as “the ultimate purpose for which our Maker and Creator moulded man.” George Abbot, *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life*, 4th ed. (Mount Athos: Holy Monastery of Saint Gregorios, 2006), 21.

⁹⁹ Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation*, 193. Winslow observes that Gregory was the first of the Fathers to consistently employ the term “*theosis*” and the ideas contained therewithin (179). The concept of *theosis* was so important to Gregory that it appears as a major motif in all types of his writings, “whether theological, christological or soteriological, whether contemplative, pastoral or ascetical” (178).

¹⁰⁰ See Stephen Thomas, “Deification,” in McGuckin, *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 1: 183.

¹⁰¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, article 54, in *Athanasius: On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, trans. T. Herbert Bindley, 2nd ed. (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1903), 142.

¹⁰² Augustine Casiday, “Church Fathers and the Shaping of Orthodox Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 168. See also Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 7.

¹⁰³ Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 1–2. Russell further divides the realistic approach into two aspects: ontological and dynamic. The ontological aspect refers to the transformation of one’s *nature* due to the Incarnation of Christ, whereas the dynamic aspect refers to one’s “appropriation of this deified humanity through the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist” (2–3).

ROS appears to employ the ethical approach to *theosis* by emphasizing the responsibility of each person to seek purity and virtue. ROS states that God's likeness is "achieved through God's grace by efforts to overcome sin and to seek moral purity and virtue."¹⁰⁴ Although God's grace is active, the sustained emphasis throughout the document is upon morality, personal responsibility, and self-determination. Within the ethical paradigm of *theosis*, various explanations are offered by theologians as to the process of *theosis*. However, ROS does not expound upon the intricacies of deification, but only relates it to man's effort to achieve the likeness (or image) of God through the pursuit of moral norms that are "set forth in the divine revelation [and] reveal God's design for human beings and their calling."¹⁰⁵ Some modern theologians, such as Stăniloae, employ a combination of models to describe deification. According to Bartos, Stăniloae "often combines the ethical and realistic models" whereby a person is restored to God then continues to achieve divine likeness through a "renunciation of all that is not of God" and thus participate in the life of God.¹⁰⁶ In his reflection upon the distinction between image and likeness and its ramifications for the dignity of humans, Papanikolaou agrees that "it is not simply by virtue of creation that all humans have equal worth."¹⁰⁷ However, he critiques the notion that one's dignity is tied to the level of one's morality and connects it instead to communion with God, for which all humans were created. He thus contends that *theosis*, and therefore dignity, is available for everyone, no matter their capacities.¹⁰⁸ However, ROC clearly puts emphasis on those qualities such as rationality and intentional pursuit of morality, which may not be available to everyone in the same manner. Though the view of deification as a pursuit of moral norms is valid in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, ROS emphasizes morality to the exclusion of other aspects, causing difficulties for any who may not be able to intentionally pursue moral norms, such as those with intellectual disabilities. If the only path to *theosis* is the pursuit of moral norms, then those people who

¹⁰⁴ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. I.2.

¹⁰⁵ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. I.3. For a comprehensive treatment of deification, see Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*. For a brief description see Stephen Thomas, "Deification," in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 1: 182–87. For a treatment of *theosis* and human dignity, see Brüning, "Can *Theosis* Save 'Human Dignity'?" Brüning also addresses the discrepancies present in "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights" among which is the link between morality and dignity.

¹⁰⁶ Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Papanikolaou, "Dignity," 200.

¹⁰⁸ Papanikolaou, "Dignity," 200, 206.

are unable to intentionally strive toward those norms are left with no avenue by which to achieve *theosis*.

Consistent with patristic ethical usage of deification language, the modern understanding of *theosis* views it as the pursuit of the *likeness* of God. As such, the concept of *theosis* in the Orthodox understanding is dependent upon the distinction between the image and likeness of God in humans. Abbot declares, "Having been endowed 'in His image,' man is called upon to be completed 'in His likeness.' This is Theosis."¹⁰⁹ Likewise, Orthodox theologian Stephen Thomas describes the image as one's potential to become like Christ, the perfect image of God, and likeness as the actualization of that potential.¹¹⁰ In its one explicit reference to deification, however, ROS describes it as an "elicitation of the *image* of God" (italics added), not the *likeness* of God.¹¹¹ Though ROS seems to be referring to the process that it previously described as seeking to achieve the *likeness* of God through moral virtue, such inconsistency further compounds the ambiguity regarding human dignity and its relation to the *imago Dei*. If the image of God must be elicited, it is not indelible. If it is not indelible, dignity is at risk for those who cannot achieve conformity to the image of God because, according to ROS, dignity is derived from the image of God. ROS is not the first to confuse or use interchangeably image and likeness when referring to *theosis*. According to Stăniloae, Gregory of Nyssa also interchanged the two.¹¹² However, if one is tied to man's dignity, and the other is not, as is the case in ROS, using the two alternately inevitably causes confusion and difficulty for those who may not be able to work toward or achieve deification.

Although one intent of the Russian Orthodox Church may have been to advocate for people with disabilities through its teachings on dignity in the statement "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," the implications of these teachings achieve the contrary effect.¹¹³ By attributing the *imago Dei* in humans to mere qualities, those who do not possess such qualities, such as people with disabilities, may be viewed to possess less dignity. The distinction and subsequent

¹⁰⁹ Abbot, *Theosis*, 21.

¹¹⁰ Thomas, "Deification," 183. Bartos describes Stăniloae's view in strikingly similar terms, using the words "potentiality" and "fulfilment." Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 136.

¹¹¹ "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights," sec. I.3.

¹¹² Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 159n193.

¹¹³ For a similar argument regarding the intention of the Russian Orthodox Church and the implications of the teachings in ROS, see Maican, "Overcoming Exclusion in Eastern Orthodoxy," 500, 508.

confusion of image and likeness, and correspondingly, “dignity” and “dignified life,” may lead to the conclusion that people with disabilities lack dignity or are unable to lead a dignified life. In addition, the necessity of morality, personal responsibility, and self-determination to achieve the likeness of God and thus to maintain dignity likewise put at risk the dignity of people with disabilities. Finally, the interchanging of image and likeness in reference to *theosis*, and the emphasis upon the moral aspect of *theosis* to the neglect of other aspects, puts at risk the dignity of those who cannot achieve *theosis* through moral attainment. As a result, people with disabilities may be excluded from the life of the church or be viewed as second-class members of the church.¹¹⁴ Although many of the issues raised here may seem to extend beyond the scope of the purpose of ROS to “recall the basic affirmations of Christian teaching on the human person and to assess the theory of human rights and its implementation,” the views of *imago Dei*, *theosis*, and dignity presented in ROS nonetheless carry implications for individuals with disabilities and potentially their participation in the church, especially considering the close connection between *theosis* and the church.¹¹⁵ It is likely that it was not the intention of the Russian Orthodox Church to portray individuals with disabilities as possessing less dignity than others, nor to exclude them from the life of the church. If so, it is incumbent upon the Russian Orthodox Church, theologians, and local congregations to address these issues theologically and to clarify the ambiguities present in ROS.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ In her article on Christian faith and autism, Olivia Bustion argues against the widely held notion that individuals with autism lack a sense of self, which can lead to the conclusion that individuals with autism cannot have true theistic faith. Though not necessarily in the context of the Eastern Orthodox Church, one man with autism confessed that “because of his intermittent inability to speak,” some members of his church deem him as “unspiritual.” Olivia Bustion, “Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 3 (2017): 19. Other Christians with autism expressed similar feelings of being misunderstood and marginalized in their church (18–19), suggesting that at least some people in their church view them as second-class members or possibly do not see the need or purpose of including them in the life of the church.

¹¹⁵ “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights,” introduction.

¹¹⁶ One movement in this direction is Petre Maican’s interpretation of deification (perfection) as “the moment when someone becomes a vessel of God’s revelation for another person,” thus creating an avenue for individuals with profound disabilities to achieve deification. Petre Maican, “Human Perfection and Profound Cognitive Disability in Eastern Orthodoxy” (paper presented at the Conversation Days organized by the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge, April 2019), 7. Though Maican’s interpretation may not align with traditional Orthodox interpretations of

The Assembly of Bishops

The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America (ACOB), formerly known as the Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA), consists of “all the active, canonical Orthodox bishops of the United States of America, of every jurisdiction” and was formed by a decision of “all the universally-recognized autocephalous Orthodox Churches.” The ACOB exists to “preserve and contribute to the unity of the Orthodox Church by helping to further her spiritual, theological, ecclesiological, canonical, educational, missionary and philanthropic aims.”¹¹⁷ The highest organ of authority within the Orthodox Church is a council of bishops.¹¹⁸ Therefore, any statement proceeding from the ACOB should carry substantial weight in the Orthodox Church, especially within the United States.

deification, it is an important step in opening the conversation among Orthodox theologians. Additionally, in a more recent article titled “Overcoming Exclusion in Eastern Orthodoxy: Human Dignity and Disability from a Christological Perspective,” Maican proposes that Christology, rather than *imago Dei*, serves as the basis for human dignity. Drawing upon the Eastern Orthodox concepts of recapitulation and theology of the icon, Maican argues that “human dignity is the result of the transfer of dignity from Christ to the entire human race, bestowed upon them *despite* their sinfulness or qualities.” Maican, “Overcoming Exclusion in Eastern Orthodoxy,” 502–03. Papanikolaou also offers valuable theological reflections that interpret dignity and *theosis* in ways that are favorable toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Papanikolaou, “Dignity.” In his response to Papanikolaou, however, Petrussek notes that according to Papanikolaou’s interpretation of dignity and *theosis*, “Dignity is not a static gift of the divine; it becomes *more* or *less* depending on how the individual responds to the divinely initiated and sustained relationship that generates it in the first place.” Petrussek, “Protestant and Orthodox Perspectives on Dignity,” 221. Such an interpretation continues to place on unstable ground the dignity of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Despite the commendable efforts of Maican and Papanikolaou, these theological issues warrant further investigation from an Orthodox perspective. Though himself not from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Amos Yong draws upon Gregory of Nyssa’s understanding of *epectasis* (the soul’s perpetual journey) to propose an understanding of deification that is inclusive of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 274–78. This view does not limit the work of deification to this life for in the afterlife the individual undergoes an “unending journey ... as he or she is transformed from perfection to perfection into the glorious knowledge, beauty, truth, and love of God” (277). Such an argument is worth considering on the part of Eastern Orthodox theologians as it draws upon their own patristic tradition.

¹¹⁷ Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America, “About the Assembly of Bishops,” <http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/about/>.

¹¹⁸ Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 257.

On June 25, 2009, the Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops released a document titled “Disability and Communion” (D&C).¹¹⁹ D&C is the only major theological statement to date from an official entity of the Eastern Orthodox Church that is devoted solely to the topic of disability. D&C begins by recognizing that parishes have not consistently fulfilled their calling to welcome in people with disabilities. In order to fulfill the mission of the church as a welcoming place, D&C thus sets forth “fundamental theological principles” to guide the church. After offering a brief overview of disability, D&C examines the image of God, followed by Christ as healer and savior, then goes on to give practical implications for the church on how to include people with disabilities in the life of the church. Though I will briefly touch on several sections, I will focus on D&C’s treatment of the image of God and will demonstrate how its view of the image of God honors people with disabilities and lays a theological foundation to welcome them into the life and educational pursuits of the church.

Image of the Trinitarian God

“Disability and Communion” (hereafter “D&C”) emphasizes that God’s very nature as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is trinitarian and is “characterized and defined by communion or interdependence, not exclusion or independence.”¹²⁰ Therefore, community and interdependence do not simply describe God but are an essential part of God’s very essence. From the time of the Cappadocian Fathers, the concept of the relational nature of God has played a key role in Orthodox theology.¹²¹ Reflecting upon the

¹¹⁹ Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops (SCOBA), “Disability and Communion,” Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America, June 25, 2009, <http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/news/scoba/disability-and-communion>. Although SCOBA authored the statement, I will refer to the ACOB throughout the article because they have essentially replaced SCOBA and the statement is found on the ACOB website.

¹²⁰ SCOBA, “Disability and Communion,” sec. 2.

¹²¹ Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus developed a robust doctrine of the Trinity that articulated the unity and diversity of the Trinity. See Casiday, “Church Fathers and the Shaping of Orthodox Theology,” 169; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100–600* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 211–25. Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn state, “We probably owe the greatest debt to the Cappadocians (Macrina the Younger [330–379], Basil the Great [330–379], Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) for articulating what today is regarded as the orthodox teaching on the Trinity.” Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability*, 62. John Zizioulas writes, “There seems to be an exact

patristic doctrine of the being of God, influential Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas describes the relational nature of God as so integral to his being that “without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God.”¹²² Because humanity is created in the image and likeness of God, D&C reflects, then humanity is also characterized and defined by communion and interdependence. D&C thus describes the image of God in humans as a reflection of the Trinity, which leads to the view that people with disabilities are a valued and integral part of humanity.

Although the idea of humankind as the image of the Trinity finds its foundation in the patristic tradition,¹²³ Orthodox theologian Aristotle

correspondence, particularly by the Cappadocian Fathers—especially St. Basil—and Orthodox ecclesiology.... Instead of speaking of the unity of God in terms of His one nature, he prefers to speak of it in terms of *communion of persons*: communion is for Basil an ontological category. The *nature* of God is communion.” John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians 4 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 134. For a more detailed account of the Cappadocian Fathers’ articulation of the Trinity, see “The One and the Three” in Pelikan, *Christianity and Culture*, 231–47.

¹²² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17. Zizioulas goes on to say that “the substance of God, ‘God,’ has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion” (17).

¹²³ Harrison notes that the Fathers, especially Basil, connect the activity of the Trinity with “the creation of the human person,” and it is this connection that “provides a patristic foundation for twentieth-century reflections about humankind as image of the Trinity.” Harrison, “The Human Person,” 79. It does not seem, however, that the Fathers themselves, though recognizing the activity of the Trinity in creation of the human person, specifically connected the Trinity with the image of God in humans. Rather, when discussing the image of God in humanity, the Fathers seemed to focus on specific qualities. See, for example, Pelikan’s discussion of the view of the image of God by the Cappadocian Fathers in Pelikan, *Christianity and Culture*, 120–35. Winslow counters the argument by Lossky that the Greek Fathers did not identify the image of God with specific qualities, emphatically stating that Gregory of Nazianzus clearly identifies the image of God with the rational soul or mind. See Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation*, 51. However, Gabrielle Thomas argues that Gregory of Nazianzus seems to put less emphasis on specific qualities and approaches the image of God functionally, ontologically, relationally, and ethically, and views the image of God as encompassing the “whole human person, including the flesh.” Gabrielle Thomas, *The Image of God in the Theology of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 57. This argument is developed throughout Gabrielle’s entire book, but see especially pages 66–68 regarding the entirety of the person as imaging God. Additionally, she notes that Gregory of Nazianzus focuses on Christ as the true image of God (*Eikon*), with the human person being the image (*eikon*) of Christ and “does not infer that the human person is the *eikon* of the Trinity” (41). Khaled Anatolios recognizes that the modern attempt to derive a theology of being from patristic trinitarian theology is not without its dissenters. However, he argues that such a “tendency of modern Eastern Orthodox theology to invoke categories of personhood and personal

Papanikolaou claims that it wasn't until the twentieth century that "human 'personhood' [came to] be defined in terms of relationality and communion" due to humanity's creation in the image of the triune God.¹²⁴ In that spirit, the late French Orthodox theologian Boris Bobrinsky describes human beings, created in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God, as "a trinitarian communion ... who are by nature and vocation beings of communion."¹²⁵ D&C thus depicts humanity as "comprising an icon of Trinitarian communion."¹²⁶ In Eastern Orthodox theology, an icon typically refers to a physical image such as a wooden panel or a fresco that serves as a "window of eternal meaning" into that which it represents.¹²⁷ Taken figuratively, then, humanity is an image that reflects the community of the eternal Trinitarian God. According to traditional Orthodox theology, the church is an icon of the Trinity, not humanity as a whole.¹²⁸ Although the notion of the church as the living expression of the Trinity is also expressed in D&C, the document refers only to all of humanity as an icon. The view presented in D&C of humanity as an "icon of Trinitarian communion," then, is much broader than the traditional Orthodox view. If, however, the concept of icon simply refers to a reflection of some greater reality, then humanity could be considered an icon of the Trinity, though theologians may not have employed that specific terminology. As it has already been demonstrated, though not a part of traditional Orthodox theology, humanity was seen to ontologically reflect the communion of the Trinity, beginning in the twentieth century. D&C highlights that as a reflection of this community, humanity is enriched by the unique gifts of each person, including people with disabilities. More so, our differences and our community together define humanity, just as God's Trinitarian community defines him. Through this view, then, people with disabilities become an integral part of the very definition of humanity.

communion in trinitarian theology is fundamentally sound but requires more solid ground in claiming to base itself on the legacy of patristic theology." Khaled Anatolios, "Personhood, Communion, and the Trinity in Some Patristic Texts," in *The Holy Trinity in the Life of the Church*, ed. Khaled Anatolios (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 163.

¹²⁴ Papanikolaou, "Personhood and Its Exponents in Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 232. See also Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 99.

¹²⁵ Bobrinsky, *God in Trinity*, 59.

¹²⁶ SCOBA, "Disability and Communion," sec. 2.

¹²⁷ Mariamna Fortounatto and Mary B. Cunningham, "Theology of the Icon," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 136.

¹²⁸ See McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 241; Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 254.

Though D&C depicts all of humanity as reflecting the Trinity, its focus is the church as the image of the Trinity, which serves as the theological basis for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church. D&C calls the church “to become the image of the Trinity” by living in communion and unity with one another and by welcoming everyone.¹²⁹ As the Trinitarian God is not characterized by exclusion, neither should the church be characterized by exclusion, reasons D&C. While D&C describes humanity, in its essence, as reflecting the Trinity due to its creation in the image and likeness of God, the church is “called to *become* the image of the Trinity” (italics mine) through welcoming others and living in community. The notion that the church is called to *become* the image of the Trinity is not without warrant among Orthodox theologians. In some sense, Stăniloae regards the church as both *being* and *becoming* a reflection of the Trinity. He views the church in its essence as “[reflecting] the perfect reciprocity within the Holy Trinity,” yet also deems it a responsibility of the church to reflect the Trinity. According to Stăniloae, the church becomes the “depiction of trinitarian relationships” by reflecting the truth of unity in diversity within the life of the church.¹³⁰ Similarly, D&C deems inclusion as so central to the identity of the church that to exclude any who are a part of the church would be to “inflict injury on the very structure of the Church.”¹³¹ Such a perspective suggests that for the church to fulfill its calling to become the image of the Trinity it is necessary that the church intentionally includes people with disabilities in the life of the church.

Although D&C is careful to honor those with disabilities through its interpretation of the image of God, it fails to address the meaning of the *imago Dei* beyond the assertion that the image and likeness of God in humanity reflect the Trinity. D&C addresses the creation of humanity as a whole in the image and likeness of God yet makes no effort to explain how the image of God applies to individuals. From the limited reflection provided in D&C, one may conclude that it is only as a whole that humanity reflects the image of God, but that each person individually does not.¹³² This would bear implications not only for people with disabilities, but for all people, and such a

¹²⁹ SCOBA, “Disability and Communion,” sec. 2.

¹³⁰ Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 254–55.

¹³¹ SCOBA, “Disability and Communion,” sec. 2.

¹³² Kilner notes that image of God language used in Genesis 1 uses both the singular and plural pronouns, demonstrating that the image of God has implications for both individuals and humanity as a whole. He also points out that “New Testament passages connecting people with the image of Christ also tend to have a corporate entity (group) in view rather than just separate human beings.” Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 86.

discussion lies beyond the scope of this article.¹³³ In addition, D&C neglects to address an essential mark of Orthodox theology related to the image of God: the distinction between the image and likeness of God in humans. By essentially ignoring these matters, D&C avoids the complications encountered by the Russian Orthodox Church discussed previously; by maintaining the focus of the *imago Dei* on community and inclusion based on the Trinity, D&C clearly honors people with disabilities.

Theosis as Communal

Community also serves as the basis for *theosis* in D&C. Rather than viewing *theosis* as an individual responsibility, D&C frames it within the context of community, that being the body of Christ. Though each person within the body strives for perfection, perfection is not viewed as an individual accomplishment, but rather as a communal accomplishment, with each member making an important contribution. The Body of Christ values each member and views each member as a means through which the other may achieve deification so that together all may become like Christ. Such a view of *theosis* honors people with disabilities and opens for them an avenue by which they too may participate in deification.

Various Orthodox theologians echo similar, though not identical, sentiments as those put forth in D&C regarding the communal nature of *theosis*. Matthew Steenberg, scholar of patristics and early church history, views *theosis* as both “intensely *personal*” and communal. The communal element of *theosis*, according to Steenberg, is based upon the relational being of the divine. Accordingly, the work of the church is that of transfiguration and deification, and is the realm where the personal and relational elements of *theosis* merge.¹³⁴ Likewise, according to Bartos, Stăniloae

¹³³ Kilner directly addresses the understanding of relationship as the constitution of God’s image in humans, labeling it a “misconception.” Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 210–26. He argues that most “relationship-oriented concepts of creation in God’s image” tend to reduce the concept to a human’s actual relationships or the capacity to have relationship, which itself can cause problems (216). Moreover, Kilner contends that “focusing exclusively on community rather than also on the members of that community ... undermines the appreciation for and protection of each human being that the status of being in God’s image explicitly provides” (217). D&C somewhat, though arguably not completely, avoids this pitfall by esteeming each member, including those with disabilities, as essential members of the Body of Christ.

¹³⁴ Steenberg, “The Church,” 129. Steenberg specifically relates the communal aspect of *theosis* in the church to the relational nature of the sacraments of the Eucharist, confession, baptism, chrismation (“anointing with the ‘seal of the Holy Spirit’”), unction (“anointing of the sick”), marriage, and ordination (129). However, he goes on to

contends that deification is “man’s personal communion with God,” while the church is the “*locus* of [one’s] deification.”¹³⁵ It is within the church that “the communion of love transforms the essence of our natural love by deifying it.”¹³⁶ So then, according to Steenberg and Stăniloae, each individual must attain *theosis*, though it cannot be accomplished isolated from others; *theosis* is only possible within the community of the church. D&C, however, overlooks the individual component of *theosis*, focusing only on the communal element. In addition, its treatment of *theosis* lacks considerable depth and is unsustainable without further elaboration.

Zizioulas’s views may be considered most closely in line with those expressed in D&C regarding the communal nature of *theosis*. Though not speaking explicitly of *theosis*, Zizioulas expresses the idea that a human being can only become like God in the context of the community of the church. He writes that when a human being joins the church, “he takes on God’s ‘way of being.’ This way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man *accomplishes*. It is a way of *relationship* with the world, with other people and with God, an event of *communion*, and that is why it cannot be realized as the achievement of an *individual*, but only as an *ecclesial fact*” (italics original).¹³⁷ Similar to D&C, according to this statement expressed by Zizioulas, *theosis* is not only attained within the community of the church, but as a community of the church; *theosis* is a communal achievement. Regarding *theosis* as a communal achievement differs vastly from the view expressed in ROS, which emphasizes the individual accomplishment of each individual to achieve *theosis* and presents fewer barriers to people with disabilities.

In the same vein, according to D&C, the Body of Christ serves as an equalizer, for only together as one unit, the body, is everyone made equal and valuable. In the Body of Christ, all live in dependence upon one another, both those with disabilities and those without, for all “bring specific and special talents to the Church.”¹³⁸ In addition, everyone is dependent upon one another so that each member’s gifts may be revealed. Therefore, as members of the Body of Christ, people with disabilities, just as every other member, have something valuable to offer to the Body of Christ, both in

argue that “the whole of [the Church’s] work, and not only certain acts, [are] deifying and transfiguring” (130).

¹³⁵ Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 252.

¹³⁶ Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 258.

¹³⁷ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 15. For a reflection upon and development of Zizioulas’s work as it pertains to individuals with disabilities, see Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 248–75, and to a lesser extent Papanikolaou, “Dignity,” 204–06.

¹³⁸ SCOPA, “Disability and Communion,” sec. 2.

their giving and receiving.¹³⁹ Without the inclusion and contributions of people with disabilities, “the entire body is incomplete.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, people with disabilities are an integral part not only of humanity, but of the church.¹⁴¹ This emphasis upon community, both through the image of the Trinity and the Body of Christ, honors people with disabilities by esteeming them as valuable and equal contributors to the life of the church. In addition, through community, people with disabilities take part in achieving *theosis*. Such a view invites them to fully participate in the life of the church and places the responsibility not solely on themselves but on the community.

Full Participation in the Church

Upon this theological foundation of community, section 4 of D&C offers concrete ways to accommodate and include people with disabilities into the life of the church. Practical steps such as modifying facilities to make them accessible, using inclusive language, and “relating to people with disabilities” in a spirit of “communion and openness” rather than “mere compassion or pity” serve as a starting point for true integration. However, inclusion of people with disabilities must go beyond these basic steps to enable “every baptized Orthodox Christian,” no matter their condition, to live a “full life of faith and ministry, including worship, leadership, education, and service.” Therefore, people with disabilities should be included in the church’s education through “liturgical occasions and catechetical classes,” should be ministered to through the pastoral ministry of fellowship and visitation, and should be given opportunities to serve others

¹³⁹ This perspective echoes that of Amos Yong in his explanation of reading 1 Corinthians 12 toward a disability-inclusive theology of the church. See Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 90–96. Such a reading demonstrates that people with disabilities are not “weaker, less respectable, or less-than-necessary members of the church with little to contribute,” but rather are “considered necessary” (93) and that the “one body of Christ is centrally constituted by people across the spectrum of dis/abilities” (94). From this perspective, “people with disabilities are by definition embraced as central and essential to a fully healthy and functioning congregation in particular, and to the ecclesial body in general” (95). For another in-depth treatment of 1 Corinthians 12 from a disability perspective, see Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 201–24. From 1 Corinthians 1, Brock argues that the church should be a place that is “beyond’ disability” (218).

¹⁴⁰ SCOPA, “Disability and Communion,” sec. 2.

¹⁴¹ For a similar argument concerning the necessity of the contributions and presence of individuals with disabilities in the church, see Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 218–22, especially 222.

through participation in ministries, administration, and leadership as they are able.

The primary way in which people with disabilities should be included in the church is through “the common worship of the congregation.” D&C instructs local parishes to make necessary accommodations and to encourage people with disabilities to “participate in [the] services, in [the] choirs, or in the many non-verbal elements of [the] worship.” It also highlights those non-verbal elements common in the Eastern Orthodox liturgy that may be particularly appealing to people with disabilities, such as the “rich ... [colors], [sounds], [smells] and [movements] which appeal to all [the] senses.”¹⁴² Most importantly, churches must ensure that all necessary accommodations are made so that people with disabilities can readily participate in Holy Communion (Eucharist).

Though D&C does not expound upon the importance of the Eucharist as a theological basis for the inclusion of people with disabilities, further elaboration is warranted, as the Eucharist is of supreme importance in Orthodox theology and richly adds to the current discussion. Influential Greek philosopher and Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras defines the church by the Eucharist; without the eucharistic meal, there is no church.¹⁴³ Thus, to

¹⁴² In his reflection on why he chose Orthodox Christianity, Michael Robert, on the autism spectrum, echoes this sentiment of the appealing nature of the sensory rich elements of the Orthodox liturgy. Michael Robert, “How My Faith and Autism Activism Go Hand in Hand,” *The Mighty*, February 21, 2018, <https://themighty.com/2018/02/autistic-and-eastern-orthodox/>. It should be noted, however, this may not be the case for everyone with autism or other disabilities that may cause sensory overload. In her reflection as an Orthodox Christian on the autism spectrum, Monica Spoor reports that sensory overload is common among people with autism in the Orthodox Church. See Monica Spoor, *Spirituality on the Spectrum: Having Autism in the Orthodox Church* (Brave New Books, 2017), 7. For similar sentiments expressed by Christians with autism, see Bustion, “Autism and Christianity,” 18. Sensory processing issues are especially prevalent in children with autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit disorder, attention hyperactivity deficit disorder, and cognitive disorders. See Catharine Critz, Kiegan Blake, and Ellen Nogueira, “Sensory Processing Challenges in Children,” *Journal for Nurse Practitioners* 11, no. 7 (2015): 711. It is estimated that between 40 and 88 percent of children with disabilities have sensory processing challenges. See Roianne R. Ahn, Lucy Jane Miller, Sharon Milberger, and Daniel N. McIntosh, “Prevalence of Parents’ Perceptions of Sensory Processing Disorders among Kindergarten Children,” *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 58, no. 3 (2004): 287.

¹⁴³ See Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, 122. This view is reflective of the late Russian Orthodox theologian Nicolas Afanasiev’s “eucharistic ecclesiology.” He states, “As the body of Christ, the Church manifests herself in all her fullness in the eucharistic assembly of the local church, because Christ is present in the Eucharist in the fullness of his body.... Where the Eucharist is, there is the Church of God, and where the Church of

exclude people with disabilities from the Eucharist would be to exclude them from the church itself. Conversely, to include people with disabilities in the Eucharist is to include them in the church. More so, in Orthodox theology, the Eucharist exemplifies what D&C has highlighted as the theological basis for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the church. That is, the Eucharist is the manifestation of “the mystical communion of the individual believer with God, of believers with one another, and of the unity of the Church.”¹⁴⁴ Yannaras describes the sharing of the Eucharist as “communion with our brothers and with God” and “an image and manifestation of the triadic mode of existence.”¹⁴⁵ D&C is right, therefore, to highlight the necessity of making any necessary accommodations for people with disabilities to participate in Holy Communion, for if they were to be excluded, the church would not fulfill its calling to become an image of the Trinity; rather, the church would exclude people during the very act which is meant to unite.¹⁴⁶ In addition, the Eucharist “[serves] as the highest point of union” between God and humanity, and according to some theologians, is a means of deification.¹⁴⁷ This view traces its origins back to the Cappadocian Fathers, such as Gregory of Nazianzus.¹⁴⁸ Likewise, Dionysius the Areopagite, the first to define deification, views a moral life as complementary to deification; deification itself, contends Dionysius, is effected by God through the Eucharist.¹⁴⁹ The view of the Eucharist as the effectual means of deification finds support in modern theologians as well. Stăniloae

God is, there is the Eucharist.” Nicolas Afanasiev, “Una Sancta,” in *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time: Readings from the Eastern Church*, ed. Michael Plekon, trans. Michael Plekon (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 14.

¹⁴⁴ Prokurat, Golitzin, and Peterson, *Historical Dictionary of the Orthodox Church*, 122.

¹⁴⁵ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, 125. Zizioulas also views the Eucharist as the incarnation of the communion of the Trinity. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 114.

¹⁴⁶ It is important to reiterate that D&C itself does not address the Eucharist as a *theological basis* for including individuals with disabilities in the church, but rather commends accessibility of the Eucharist to individuals with disabilities as a necessary practical *implication* of the theological foundation of humanity in the image of God. I am arguing, however, that within the Orthodox tradition, the meaning of the Eucharist holds potential for a theological basis of full inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the life and liturgical aspects of the church. Based upon an Orthodox understanding of the Eucharist, to exclude individuals with disabilities from the Eucharist would violate a theological foundation already laid in D&C, that is, that the church is called to become an image of the Trinity.

¹⁴⁷ See M. C. Steenberg, “Eucharist,” in McGuckin, *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 1:230, 1:235.

¹⁴⁸ Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 222.

¹⁴⁹ See Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 248, 252, 255.

maintains that through participation in the eucharistic meal, communicants are transformed with the deifying energies of God and thus experience a “mystical union with Christ.”¹⁵⁰ A similar sentiment is echoed by Yannaras, who contends that through the Eucharist individuals experience an existential change by which they participate “in the triadic fullness of life.”¹⁵¹ Through sharing in the Eucharist, then, people with disabilities are welcomed into the church and participate in deification.

D&C lays a theological foundation for inclusion of people with disabilities into the life of the church and offers practical suggestions that local parishes should implement to welcome them into the community. The theological foundation is based upon humanity and the church as the image of the Trinitarian God, whose very nature is communal, and upon the foundation of the church as the Body of Christ, which together as one unit achieves *theosis* through the important contribution of every member, including people with disabilities. Upon these theological foundations, people with disabilities are honored and welcomed into every facet of the life of the church. The final words of D&C summarize its message well: “Our mission is, in humble cooperation with the Holy Spirit, to render the Church as a whole body, a human reflection of Trinitarian communion, an earthly image of the heavenly kingdom. Let it be so among us.”¹⁵²

Looking Ahead

In order to ensure the continuation of the values of inclusion and communion and future implementation of the suggested steps, D&C recommends that those clergy studying in seminaries be trained “regarding aspects of inclusion for people with disabilities.”¹⁵³ The theological teachings laid forth in D&C are a useful starting point for such training but represent a shallow reflection rather than a well-developed theology. A more robust theology is needed to effectively train clergy. As demonstrated, the foundation of D&C’s teaching for the inclusion of people with disabilities is largely based upon the Trinity. If further developed, the theology of the Trinity has the potential to serve as a distinctly Orthodox basis for inclusion in the church.¹⁵⁴ More so, Lossky contends that the Trinity is the basis for all

¹⁵⁰ Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 302.

¹⁵¹ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, 129.

¹⁵² SCOBA, “Disability and Communion,” sec. 5.

¹⁵³ SCOBA, “Disability and Communion,” sec. 4.

¹⁵⁴ Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn develop a theology of disability based on the Trinity in their book, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference*, written from an Eastern Christian perspective. Though not explicitly Orthodox, given

Christian theology.¹⁵⁵ In his article on Eastern Orthodox ethics, theologian Richard Gaillardetz demonstrates how the Trinity lays the foundation of the just treatment of marginalized people and social justice. According to Gaillardetz, the Trinity serves as a framework for Orthodox ethics by illuminating “(1) the nature of *love* in human relationship, (2) the *communal structure* of human relationships, and (3) the character of *human personhood*.”¹⁵⁶ D&C loosely bases its argument for inclusion upon the first two of the three, yet further depth is needed for a more comprehensive theology.

Additionally, the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the Eucharist may serve as a robust theological basis for inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the church. Though D&C touches on the Eucharist and other important issues and lays a basic theological foundation for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the church, it avoids many topics that are central to Eastern Orthodox theology and bear directly on people with disabilities, namely the distinction between image and likeness and the meaning of *theosis* for individuals. The late Nancy Eiesland, professor of sociology and religion, traces how a resolution adopted by the General Convention of the American Lutheran Church failed to fulfill its purpose of inclusion of individuals with disabilities and actually resulted in their exclusion, specifically from ministerial roles. One of the reasons she lists for the failure of this document to fulfill its purpose in the life of the Lutheran Church was “a restricted theological focus that (failed) adequately to address the fundamentals of Lutheran theology, that is, ministry, Word, and Sacraments.”¹⁵⁷ In order to effectively include individuals with disabilities in the church, the topics of the Eucharist, image and likeness, and *theosis*, central to Eastern Orthodox theology, should not be ignored, but rather delved into so as to develop a distinctly Eastern Orthodox theology of disability to train clergy and guide churches.

The Russian Orthodox Church is also concerned with the equipping of its people and intends for the document “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights” to be studied in its theological institutions and to guide clergy and local churches. In speaking of the ability of the church to live a life according to the faith and tradition while still remaining meaningful to the community and simultaneously provide answers

Tataryn is a Ukrainian Catholic priest, it draws from the Eastern Orthodox tradition and many similarities shared by the two Eastern Christian traditions, such as the Cappadocian Fathers, deification, and iconography. See Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability*.

¹⁵⁵ See Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 67.

¹⁵⁶ See Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Can Orthodox Ethics Liberate? A Test Case for the Adequacy of an Eastern Ethic,” *Horizons* 17, no. 1 (1990), 66.

¹⁵⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 77. For the full discussion of the resolution, see 75–86.

to contemporary problems, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, a leading figure in the formation of ROS states, “The most important theological task in this regard is the development of the social teaching of the Orthodox Church, which, rooted in tradition and responding to the issues facing modern society, will serve as a guide for priests and laity, and will give the outside world a clear idea of the Church’s position on the most important issues of our time.”¹⁵⁸ However, the ambiguous nature of the theological teachings regarding *imago Dei* and human dignity presented in ROS do not provide a clear path for people with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, to be included in the life of the church. Further theological clarification is needed for the benefit of clergy, people with disabilities, and the church as a whole. This challenge is not unique to the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Haslam recognizes that most attempts to form a theology of being that is inclusive of individuals with intellectual disabilities fail to truly meet that goal.¹⁵⁹ Christians of all traditions must continue to wrestle with these issues. The Eastern Orthodox tradition has a unique contribution to make in this area, both for themselves and to the wider Christian community. The challenge for Christians is to remain faithful to their Christian faith traditions while also seeking to include individuals with disabilities.¹⁶⁰

Reverend Leonid Kishkovsky speaks of the need for the Russian Orthodox Church, “after decades of state atheism and the oppression and suppression of religious faith,” to develop its theology so that it might be “fully adequate in its inner life and in its public witness.”¹⁶¹ The theology of *imago Dei* and its implications for people with disabilities is one of many areas that the Russian Orthodox Church may need to address. The Russian Orthodox

¹⁵⁸ Kirill, *Freedom and Responsibility*, 14.

¹⁵⁹ Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 2–9.

¹⁶⁰ This challenge is one that likely resonates within the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Theodore Stylianopoulos outlines the Orthodox approach to Scripture, based upon the patristic tradition, and notes that “the chief concern is how to be faithful to the revelatory witness of scripture, and its authentic application in the life of the Church, in harmony with the scripture’s own purpose, nature and saving message.” Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, “Scripture and Tradition in the Church,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 30. Stylianopoulos goes on to state that modern Orthodox theologians have been faithful to the patristic hermeneutical principles but that “the challenge has been how to reclaim the patristic heritage effectively in the context of modern culture in order to advance the mission of the Church” (31). One challenge that Orthodox theologians must continue to grapple with are the issues of *imago Dei*, image and likeness, and *theosis* and their implications for individuals with disabilities and their inclusion in the church.

¹⁶¹ Leonid Kishkovsky, “Russian Theology after Totalitarianism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, 273.

Church is indeed making efforts toward this end. On March 11, 2020, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church met. During this meeting they approved an agenda for the Commissions of the Inter-Council Presence in 2020–2022. The Commissions of the Inter-Council Presence, which is led by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and consists of “bishops, clergy, religious and laity of the Russian Orthodox Church,” conducts preliminary studies on crucial issues in the church life and its relations to entities outside of the church, in order to assist the Russian Orthodox Church in decisions concerning these issues.¹⁶² One of the topics listed for discussion by the commissions is the “organization of educational and catechetical work among people with disabilities.”¹⁶³ Such an agenda is the ideal opportunity for the Russian Orthodox Church to lay a clear theological foundation for the inclusion of people with disabilities into the life and educational opportunities of the church, then to build upon that foundation a practical framework to do so.

The Eastern Orthodox Church has within its rich tradition the belief that all people are equally created in the image of God. Speaking of the sick and disabled, Gregory of Nazianzus writes that they have “the same portion as [*sic*] the image of God as we do ... whose inner nature has put on the same Christ and who have been entrusted with the same guarantee of the Spirit; who have been given to share with us the same ... liturgies, sacraments, hopes ... who are fellow heirs of the life in heaven.”¹⁶⁴ Careful thought must be given to the way in which the contemporary Eastern Orthodox Church expresses its theology to support such a view. When done so thoughtfully and carefully, people with disabilities can fully participate in the life of the church and share with the Body of Christ the same liturgies, sacraments, and hopes.

Summary

“The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights” and “Disability and Communion” are the two major documents released by official entities of the Eastern Orthodox Church that significantly address those theological issues that potentially affect the

¹⁶² Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate, “Regulation on the Inter-Council Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church (from 11.03.20),” <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5605826.html>.

¹⁶³ Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate, “Topics for Consideration by the Commissions of the Inter-Council Presence,” <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/intersobor/temy/>.

¹⁶⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 14.14, in *Select Orations*, The Fathers of the Church, trans. Martha Vinson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 49.

inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church. Although ROS is broader in its scope, D&C directly addresses the topic of inclusion of people with disabilities in the church. This article examined each document's view of the *imago Dei* and the ramifications of that view for people with disabilities. It demonstrated that although both claim to hold a positive stance toward people with disabilities, the two documents stand in dissonance with each other. The teachings found in "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights" are ambiguous and can lead to the exclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church, whereas "Disability and Communion" lays a theological foundation for the full inclusion of people with disabilities in the life of the church. D&C, though presenting a positive theological stance toward people with disabilities, requires additional elaboration. Likewise, ROS, due to its ambiguities, needs further clarification. In order to resolve these discrepancies and welcome people with disabilities into every aspect of the church, the Orthodox Church should continue to develop and express in an official capacity its theological arguments regarding *imago Dei* and its significance for all people, especially those with disabilities.