

THESIS ABSTRACT

Master of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies

Adventist University of Africa

Theological Seminary

Title: A THEOLOGY OF DIVERSE ABILITY WITHIN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY MOTIF AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH PRACTICE

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This thesis undertakes an in-depth exploration of the intersectionality of diverse ability theology and the Great Controversy motif, a theological framework emphasizing the cosmic struggle between good and evil. By critically analysing relevant theological literature and ecclesiastical practices, this research investigates how the Great Controversy motif influences church responses to individuals with diverse abilities.

The study's key argument is that a theology of diverse ability informed by the Great Controversy motif can have profoundly positive implications for church practice. Specifically, it can promote inclusive and empowering practices that challenge stigmatizing narratives surrounding diverse ability. By reframing diverse

ability within the Great Controversy narrative, churches can foster a more compassionate and accessible community.

The research's findings underscore the imperative for churches to re-examine their theologies and practices regarding diverse ability. By promoting a more nuanced understanding of diverse ability and its implications for Christian community and witness, churches can better embody the values of inclusivity, compassion, and love.

This thesis contributes to the growing body of literature on diverse ability theology and its practical applications in ecclesiastical settings. Its insights and recommendations have the potential to inform and transform church practices, ultimately enriching the lives of individuals with diverse abilities and the broader church community.

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CONTROVERSY MOTIF AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR CHURCH PRACTICE

A thesis

presented in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies

by

Michael Musagwiza

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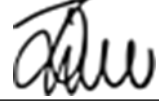
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I dedicate this work to my dear wife, Rosemary, my two sons, Tinashe and Tadiwa, and my only daughter, Theona, notwithstanding the entire Central Zimbabwe Conference, particularly the Gutu, Masvingo South, and Chiredzi North Districts. This is my reciprocal appreciation for their love, time, support, and prayers.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESV	English Standard Version
GC	Great Controversy
KJV	King James Version
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LXX	Septuagint
MAJT	Mid-America Journal of Theology
NICOT	The New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NKJV	New King James Version
NT	New Testament
NDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.
OT	Old Testament
PQ	Philosophical Quarterly
SDA	Seventh-day Adventist

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I would like to express my gratitude for the support throughout this project. This work is dedicated to my dear wife, Rosemary, my two sons, Tinashe and Tadiwa, and my only daughter, Theona, in appreciation of their love, support, and prayers. I am especially thankful for the immeasurable assistance provided by Dr. Josiah Taru, Dr. Clifford Sibanda, Dr. Lulama Tshuma, and Dr. Sikhumbuzo Ndlovu for their unwavering support, theological guidance, and inspiration. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the entire Central Zimbabwe Conference, particularly the Gutu, Masvingo South, and Chiredzi North Districts, for allowing me to implement my findings in diverse ability ministries.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The concept of the Great Controversy forms a central theological theme within Seventh-day Adventist theology, framing the entire narrative of human history as a cosmic conflict between good and evil.¹ Rooted in the biblical narrative, this motif captures the unfolding of God's redemptive plan from the creation of the world, through the fall of humanity, the life and death of Jesus Christ, to the ultimate restoration of the universe in the second coming of Christ.² According to Adventist theology, this great controversy is not confined to historical events but extends into the daily experiences of believers, shaping their understanding of sin, salvation, suffering, and the struggle between good and evil.³

While the Great Controversy motif has been a foundational element in Adventist thought, one area that has received limited attention is the theological

¹ George R. Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1999), 100-102.

² Leonard G. Downs, *The Story of Redemption* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1992), 22. This book traces the unfolding narrative of God's redemptive plan throughout Scripture, emphasizing key events such as creation, the fall of humanity, the atoning work of Jesus Christ, and the ultimate restoration in the second coming. Downs approaches these themes from a Seventh-day Adventist theological perspective, providing a biblical foundation for understanding God's overarching purpose of salvation. The work is particularly valuable for those seeking a comprehensive view of salvation history, with a focus on the continuity between the Old and New Testaments.

³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 9-11. In this work, White explains how the Great Controversy is not limited to historical events, but is an ongoing conflict that influences the lives of believers daily, shaping their understanding of sin, salvation, suffering, and their role in the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

exploration of diverse ability within this framework.⁴ For the reasons of promoting dignity, the term diverse ability is preferred instead of disability.⁵

Diverse abilities have often been addressed in Christian theology, primarily in terms of suffering, sin, and divine healing.⁶ However, within Adventist circles, diverse ability remains an underdeveloped theological category.⁷ Traditionally, suffering, including that which is associated with diverse ability, has been interpreted in terms of the fall of humanity, sin, or even as a result of the cosmic struggle between Christ and Satan.⁸ Such interpretations, while offering partial theological insight, have often neglected the redemptive potential that suffering, including diverse

⁴ Gary Land, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2017), 115-118. Land discusses how the Great Controversy motif has been central to Adventist theology but notes that the topic of diverse ability has not been widely explored within this framework, despite its relevance to the broader narrative of cosmic conflict.

⁵ This term promotes inclusivity by recognizing and valuing diversity in abilities and experiences. It shifts the focus from limitations to individual strengths. While it's hard to pinpoint an exact time and place where "Diverse Ability" replaced "Disability," renowned organizations such as Oxfam, a global organization, have adopted this term in their initiatives, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and supporting people with diverse abilities. In education, the Stigma-Free Society and the Rick Hansen Foundation provide resources and programs focused on "Diverse Abilities" and inclusion, aiming to break down stigmas around disabilities and promote understanding.

⁶ John M. Swinton, *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Reveal His Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 45-47. Swinton explores how diverse ability in Christian theology has often been framed in terms of suffering, sin, and the need for divine healing, focusing on historical perspectives of diverse ability in relation to spiritual brokenness.

⁷ James W. T. Wray, "Disability in the Adventist Church: An Unfinished Mission," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 17, no. 1 (2021): 45-48.

⁸ Walter R. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 81-83. This work is widely regarded as a seminal text in the study of new religious movements and cults, providing comprehensive analysis and critiques of various non-Christian belief systems. Martin, a well-known Christian apologist, categorizes and contrasts these groups against traditional Christian doctrine. The sections on pages 81-83, in particular, delve into the theological differences between orthodox Christianity and certain religious organizations, offering insights into their practices, doctrines, and potential implications for followers. Martin's approach is often criticized for being confrontational and polemical, but his research remains influential in apologetic circles. His emphasis on doctrinal clarity has shaped many evangelical responses to cultic movements. Additionally, readers should be aware that some critics argue that Martin's work sometimes oversimplifies complex religious traditions and groups, and the book should be read with an understanding of its particular theological perspective.

abilities, offers in the context of the Great Controversy.⁹ The need for a more comprehensive theology of diverse ability is evident.¹⁰ Understanding diverse abilities as part of God's cosmic redemption plan offers a redemptive and inclusive perspective.

This theological framework suggests that diverse ability, rather than being a consequence of sin, is part of God's broader narrative of salvation and restoration. It is incorporated into the cosmic conflict between good and evil (the Great Controversy) and has significance in God's ultimate plan to restore and redeem all of creation. Diverse ability, in this theological framework, should not be seen merely as a result of sin but as part of God's cosmic redemption plan that aligns with the restoration of all things in Christ.¹¹ The theological framework that sees diverse ability as part of God's cosmic redemption plan emphasizes dignity, inclusion, and the transformative potential of diverse ability within God's redemptive work. It shifts from seeing diverse ability purely as a consequence of sin to viewing it as an integral part of God's plan for the ultimate restoration of creation. Diverse ability, in this view, is not an aberration but a part of the broken yet redeemable world that will be restored in Christ.

⁹ Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 147-149. Schwarz and Greenleaf provide a detailed overview of how the Seventh-day Adventist Church has historically understood suffering, sin, and the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. In their discussion, they point out that the traditional Adventist view of suffering, including that associated with diverse ability, has often focused on its connection to the Fall and the broader cosmic struggle. While these interpretations offer partial theological insight, they suggest a need for further exploration of the redemptive aspects of suffering, particularly within the context of the Great Controversy.

¹⁰ Barbara M. Lundblad, "Disability and the Church: A Call for Theological Reflection," *Theology Today* 63, no. 4 (2006): 533-535.

¹¹ John R. P. Russell, *Disability and the Church: A Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 120-123.

Justification for Using "Diverse-Ability" Instead of "Disability"

In this thesis, the term "disability" has been consciously replaced with the term "diverse-ability." This decision was made after careful consideration of the language's impact, its implications for individuals, and the desire to promote a more inclusive, respectful, and empowering narrative. Diverse abilities refer to the idea that people possess a wide range of skills, strengths, and challenges, and that all of these abilities are valuable. The examples can include differences in mobility, speech, learning styles, sight, hearing, or mental health. Below are the key reasons for the term substitution:

1. **Emphasizing Strengths Over Limitations:** One of the core reasons for using the term "diverse-ability" is to highlight the unique capabilities and strengths that individuals with diverse abilities possess, rather than focusing solely on the limitations associated with traditional definitions of diverse ability. The term "diverse-ability" suggests that people experience a range of abilities, and their skills and talents should be recognized in their full scope, rather than being reduced to a medical or deficit-based model.
2. **Promoting Inclusion and Empowerment:** Language plays a significant role in shaping perceptions. The term "disability" often carries connotations of helplessness, dependency, and otherness. By substituting it with "diverse-ability," this thesis aims to challenge and shift the narrative towards one that is more inclusive and empowering. "Diverse-ability" affirms that individuals with varying abilities are valued members of society, contributing in meaningful ways to their communities, workplaces, and beyond.

3. **Aligning with the Social Model of Disability:** The use of "diverse-ability" aligns more closely with the social model of disability, which emphasizes that society's barriers, rather than an individual's impairments, are the true source of disability. By adopting this term, the thesis emphasizes the importance of designing inclusive systems that cater to diverse abilities, rather than focusing on the need to "fix" or "cure" individuals. This term helps to reframe the concept of diverse ability as a matter of accessibility and adaptation, rather than a personal deficit.
4. **Reflecting Contemporary Diverse Ability Discourse:** The language surrounding diverse ability has evolved significantly over recent years, with growing calls for the use of more affirming and empowering terminology. The term "diverse-ability" is part of a larger movement within diverse ability advocacy and social justice circles that seeks to move beyond traditional terms like "disability" or "handicap" that have been seen as stigmatizing or limiting. By adopting this term, this thesis acknowledges and contributes to the ongoing efforts to reshape how society talks about and understands human variation.
5. **Personal and Community Preference:** In addition to theoretical and sociocultural reasons, the choice to use "diverse-ability" in this thesis also reflects the personal and community preferences of individuals who identify as disabled or differently-abled. Many advocacy groups, scholars, and activists within the disability rights movement have expressed preference for terms like "diverse-ability," which focus on human diversity and the celebration of different abilities rather than framing the conversation solely around "disability".

6. Cultural Sensitivity: The term "diverse-ability" is also a step towards cultural sensitivity, acknowledging that the concept of "disability" can vary across different cultures, experiences, and contexts. In some cultures, the term "disability" may carry different meanings, and the term "diverse-ability" seeks to create a more universally applicable language that transcends these differences while still celebrating the spectrum of human capabilities.

In summary, the decision to substitute "disability" with "diverse-ability" throughout this thesis is grounded in a commitment to inclusive language, empowerment, and a more holistic understanding of human variation. By adopting this terminology, this thesis seeks to foster a narrative that respects and affirms the value of all individuals, regardless of their abilities, and contributes to an ongoing dialogue about accessibility, inclusion, and social change.

Statement of the Problem

Individuals with “disabilities” often face exclusion and marginalization within church settings, where theological perspectives have historically framed disability as a result of sin or divine punishment. This limited understanding fails to recognize diverse abilities as part of God’s redemptive plan in the Great Controversy motif. There is a significant gap in theological scholarship regarding a comprehensive theology of diverse ability within this cosmic narrative. The church’s lack of a clear theological framework for diverse abilities prevents it from fully embracing and empowering individuals with diverse abilities, thus hindering its mission to reflect God’s inclusive love and justice.

Research Problem

How can the Great Controversy motif, a central theme in Christian theology, be understood and applied in the context of diverse abilities, considering the experiences and perspectives of people with diverse abilities?

Research Questions

1. How does the Great Controversy Motif inform the theological understanding of diverse ability?
2. How will the study impact the understanding of suffering and evil concerning diverse abilities?

Sub-questions

- What are the key theological themes and concepts within the Great Controversy motif that relate to diverse ability?
- What implications does the Great Controversy motif have for the church's understanding and response to diverse ability?

Research Gap

Inadequate exploration of the relationship between sin and diverse ability: The Great Controversy Motif posits a connection between sin and suffering, but the specific relationship between sin and diverse ability is not well understood.

This gap is suitable for several reasons:

Relevance to the research topic. The gap is directly related to the research topic, exploring the intersection of diverse ability theology and the Great Controversy Motif.

Theological significance. The relationship between sin and diverse ability is a crucial theological question that has implications for understanding the nature of God, humanity, and redemption.

Potential for original contribution. Exploring this gap could lead to an original contribution to the field of diverse ability theology and the Great Controversy Motif, providing new insights and perspectives.

Research Objectives

By addressing the stated gap, the research can;

1. Provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between sin and diverse ability, and its implications.
2. To explore the theological themes and concepts within the Great Controversy motif that relate to diverse abilities.
3. To develop a theology of diverse ability that integrates the Great Controversy motif and promotes inclusion and empowerment of people with diverse abilities in the church and society.

Purpose of the Study

To develop a biblical and theological framework for understanding diverse abilities within the Great Controversy motif.

Study Methodology

This study has largely utilized Systematic Theology as its research methodology. It has also applied some principles of documentary analysis within it. This choice stems from the fact that it provides a structured and systematic approach to exploring and understanding Christian doctrine, similar to research in other fields. It involves gathering information, analysing it, and presenting it in a coherent and

organized manner. It begins by examining the Bible, seeking to understand God's revelation through it.

Secondly, it considers the historical development of Christian thought, including theological writings and philosophical contributions. It draws from various sources, including historical-theological texts, philosophical arguments, and insights from other disciplines like the social sciences.

Thirdly, the gathered information is analysed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and connections between different doctrines. It employs logical reasoning and argumentation to develop and defend theological claims, often engaging with counterarguments and alternative perspectives. The goal is not just to understand doctrine but also to apply it in practice.

In the context of this study, the methodology would involve examining theological texts, historical documents, church writings, and other relevant sources to understand how diverse ability has been framed within Christian theology, particularly in the narrative of the Great Controversy (the cosmic conflict between good and evil).¹²

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to developing a theology of diverse ability within the context of the Great Controversy motif, addressing a significant gap in theological scholarship. It offers new insights into how diverse ability fits into God's redemptive plan, enhancing understanding of inclusion and empowerment within the church. The findings will benefit theologians, church leaders, and individuals with diverse

¹² Udo Middlemann, *The Biblical View of Disability* (Wuppertal, Germany: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1982), 56-70.

abilities, fostering a more inclusive and theologically sound approach to diverse ability in Christian theology and practice.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its scope and methodology. As a documentary analysis, it primarily relies on existing theological texts, which may not fully capture the contemporary lived experiences of individuals with diverse abilities. Additionally, the study is confined to a theological exploration of diverse ability within the Great Controversy motif, excluding practical ministry applications. These limitations will be mitigated by focusing on theological sources and ensuring a comprehensive engagement with key biblical and theological themes related to diverse ability.

Delimitations and Biases of the Study

This study focuses exclusively on a theological examination of diverse ability within the Great Controversy motif, excluding sociological or psychological perspectives. It also limits its scope to biblical texts, which may not fully represent other broader views. Potential biases include a reliance on Adventist theological frameworks and interpretations, which could influence the conclusions drawn. Efforts have been made to ensure objectivity by engaging with diverse scholarly perspectives within the selected framework.

Factors Affecting Perceptions of People with Diverse Abilities

Social factors such as ignorance, superstition, and fear have significantly influenced perceptions of both God's nature and the role of disabled individuals, often leading to their exclusion and stigmatization. In contrast, positive perceptions can foster inclusivity and enhance the social integration of disabled individuals. Their

societal experience is contingent upon various factors, including individual traits, environmental adaptations, social practices, cultural beliefs, and the historical context surrounding diverse abilities. The historical mistakes of the Israelites serve as a cautionary tale for contemporary Christianity. The Israelites' isolationist attitudes prevented them from embodying God's mission effectively. Similarly, the modern Christian church must avoid neglecting the welfare of disabled individuals, as Dybdahl warns that a failure to prioritize mission undermines the church's identity as the remnant of God's people.¹³

Understanding one of the Major Models of Diverse Ability

In Christian theology, the Great Controversy motif frames the narrative of the cosmic battle between good and evil, starting from Lucifer's rebellion in heaven to the ultimate victory of Christ at the end of time. As this study further explores the theology of diverse ability within this framework, it must address the reality of human suffering, the impact of the Fall on creation, and God's redemptive plan for the disabled in His Kingdom. Understanding the major models of diverse ability provides a foundation for reflecting on these themes theologically and biblically.

The Medical Model of Diverse Ability

The Medical Model of diverse ability characterizes diverse ability as a condition or impairment that requires diagnosis, treatment, or management by medical professionals. This model positions the disabled person as the “problem” to be fixed or treated through medical intervention, therapy, or rehabilitation. Diverse ability is thus regarded as a physical, biological, or psychological condition that

¹³ Dybdahl, J. *Mission and Identity in the Church* (Nairobi, Kenya: Adventist Press, 2009), 120-130.

impairs normal functioning. The medical model mirrors a reductionist view of human suffering that aligns with the Fall of humanity in Genesis 3, where death, disease, and impairment enter creation as a result of sin. According to this model, diverse ability becomes a problem in need of restoration and healing. Oliver (1996) points out that theologically, it can be understood as symptomatic of a world subjected to corruption by sin.¹⁴

Jesus' healing miracles, however, challenge this purely medical lens. For instance, when Jesus heals the blind man in John 9:1-3, He emphasizes that the man's blindness was not due to sin but for the glory of God to be revealed (John 9:1-3). Wright states that this exemplifies that diverse ability is not simply an "abnormality" to be cured in a clinical sense, but an opportunity for God's power to be displayed.¹⁵ The ultimate healing will come with the restoration of all things in the New Earth, not just physical healing but spiritual redemption.

The medical model, while focusing on the individual's deficits, falls short of embracing the cosmic dimension of redemption. Within the framework of the Great Controversy, diverse ability, as a form of human suffering, is part of the spiritual warfare where Jesus fights to heal the brokenness caused by the Fall. Oliver (1996) posits that the final victory over sin and evil will encompass a new creation where physical and spiritual restoration are fully realized.¹⁶

¹⁴ Mike Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1996). 276

¹⁵ Nicholas Wright, Thomas. *John for Everyone* (London, UK: SPCK, 2006), 16

¹⁶ Oliver, *Understanding Disability*, 303.

Theological Reflection of Diverse Ability and the Great Controversy

The Great Controversy motif provides an essential theological framework for understanding the existence of diverse abilities and suffering within God's overarching plan. The cosmic struggle between good and evil, which began in Heaven and has unfolded on Earth, explains the presence of suffering and diverse abilities in a world marred by sin. Diverse ability, though not a direct consequence of personal sin, is a part of the suffering that entered the world as a result of the Fall (Genesis 3). The reality of diverse ability in a fallen world requires a theological response that integrates God's grace, redemption, and the promise of future restoration.

The Fall and Diverse Ability

The Fall, as depicted in Genesis 3, marks the introduction of death, disease, and suffering into God's perfect creation. Diverse ability is one of the visible signs of the brokenness of creation, a consequence of humanity's rebellion against God. In a world impacted by sin, people with diverse abilities bear physical manifestations of this fallen state. However, diverse ability should be seen not as a curse but as part of the shared suffering that Christ is redeeming (Gen 3:16-19).

Conclusion

The theology of diverse ability within the Great Controversy motif offers a profound reflection on the intersection of human suffering, divine justice, and redemption. From the medical, social, charity, and affirmation models, diverse ability is not just a physical condition to be solved but a reflection of the cosmic struggle between good and evil. The biblical model of diverse ability points toward a future restoration, where suffering will be healed and all creation will be restored. The

theology of diverse ability offers a transformative perspective on suffering, redemption, and the role of people with diverse abilities in God's mission. It therefore calls for a reimagining of how the church engages with diverse ability, both theologically and practically.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature on diverse ability and theology, focusing on the Great Controversy motif. The literature review is organized into historical, theological, and practical categories, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationship between diverse ability, theology, and church practice.¹ As John Swinton notes, "Diverse ability has been a persistent feature of human experience throughout history, and yet it remains a relatively neglected area of theological reflection."² Despite this neglect, there is a growing body of literature that seeks to explore the intersections between diverse ability, theology, and church practice.³ This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing research in this area, with a particular focus on the Great Controversy motif.

The Great Controversy motif, which posits a cosmic struggle between good and evil, has been a central theme in Christian theology, particularly within the

¹ John Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 1-15. The relationship between diverse ability and theology has been a complex and multifaceted one, spanning centuries and traversing various theological traditions.

² Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 14.

³ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994); Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Essays, 1974-1993* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 37.

Adventist tradition.⁴ However, as Greg Boyd notes, ‘The traditional view of the Great Controversy motif has often been problematic for people with diverse abilities, who may experience God as absent or uncaring.’⁵

This literature review will examine the historical, theological, and practical dimensions of diverse ability and the Great Controversy motif, drawing on the insights of Adventist and non-Adventist theologians alike.⁶ This review explores the complex relationships between diverse ability, theology, and church practice to provide a foundation for a more nuanced understanding of these intersections.

Historical Perspectives on Diverse Ability and Theology

Patristic and Medieval Periods

Early Church Fathers, such as Augustine and Aquinas, viewed diverse ability as a result of sin and a manifestation of human fallenness.⁷ Augustine’s writings on

⁴ White, *The Great Controversy*, 11-20. Ellen G. White here references the profound religious movement of the 16th century, the Reformation, which brought a significant shift away from the authority of the Catholic Church. The Reformation not only influenced religious thought but also shaped political and cultural developments across Europe. Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin questioned the existing Church practices and called for a return to Biblical principles, setting the stage for the development of Protestantism. White emphasizes how this movement was part of God’s providential plan to restore true Christianity.

⁵ Greg Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 123-140. This critique highlights how the classical interpretation of the Great Controversy — which portrays a cosmic struggle between good and evil, with God permitting suffering to demonstrate His ultimate victory — can be especially troubling for those who suffer from ongoing physical or mental diverse abilities. For individuals with diverse abilities, the idea that a loving and omnipotent God would allow such persistent suffering in their lives can seem contradictory or even cruel. Boyd’s point raises important theological and pastoral concerns, urging a reconsideration of how God’s presence and care are understood in the context of human suffering, particularly for vulnerable groups. By questioning this traditional view, Boyd invites a more nuanced reflection on God’s character and His relationship with suffering and human frailty." This additional context provides more depth to the critique of the Great Controversy motif in relation to people with diverse abilities, expanding on Boyd’s perspective and the implications for theology.

⁶ Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007); Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 213.

⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, 14.

the corruptibility of the body as a punishment for sin reflect this understanding, emphasizing the connection between human sin and physical suffering.⁸ Aquinas built upon this idea, viewing diverse abilities as inherent consequences of original sin.⁹ This perspective posits that physical afflictions are a result of human disobedience to God's commands, reflecting the broader narrative of the fall of humanity.

This historical perspective has significant implications for understanding diverse abilities in the context of faith. It frames diverse abilities as being the results of human failure rather than an inherent aspect of human experience. This view can lead to stigmatization and marginalization of individuals with diverse abilities, reinforcing the notion that they are somehow less valued or less worthy than those without diverse abilities. However, this perspective also provides a starting point for understanding the complex relationship between faith and diverse ability.

During the medieval period, theologians such as Thomas à Kempis and Julian of Norwich continued to view diverse ability as a spiritual trial or a manifestation of divine judgment.¹⁰ In addition, Bernard of Clairvaux, a prominent Cistercian monk and theologian of the 12th century, emphasized the transformative power of suffering in his sermons. While Bernard did not specifically focus on diverse ability, his writings on the cross and human suffering laid the foundation for understanding all forms of suffering, including physical diverse abilities, as opportunities for spiritual

⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), 94.

¹⁰ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft and Harold Bolton (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 12.

growth and identification with Christ. He wrote, “God does not leave us in our infirmity, but uses it to bring us closer to His perfection.”¹¹

Bonaventure, a Franciscan theologian of the 13th century, further developed the medieval understanding of suffering. In his *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure suggested that bodily afflictions could bring one closer to God’s love, serving as a method of purification for the soul. He argued that, through suffering, individuals could share in the divine life, moving closer to divine perfection. Bonaventure’s theology echoed the belief that the physical limitations of the body were a sign of the fallen nature of creation, but also had the potential for spiritual renewal.¹²

Hildegard of Bingen’s writings also offer a unique perspective on diverse abilities. She portrayed the body and its suffering as integral to God’s divine will, suggesting that physical afflictions can be channels for experiencing divine healing and transformation.¹³ This view underscores the complex relationship between the body and the divine, highlighting how physical suffering can be both a source of pain and a catalyst for spiritual growth.

Anselm of Canterbury, in his famous work *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man), spoke of suffering and diverse ability in the context of the fall of

¹¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Spirituality of Suffering*, trans. G. R. Evans (London, UK: Routledge, 1994), 54.

¹² Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey into God*, trans. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 342. This view reflects the medieval Christian understanding that the material world, including human bodies, is tainted by sin and separation from God, a consequence of the Fall. However, both Aquinas and Bonaventure maintained that the body, despite its imperfections, could serve as a means for spiritual growth and redemption. Bonaventure, in particular, emphasized that suffering, illness, and the body’s limitations could play a role in the soul’s purification and elevation toward God. For him, the human body was not inherently evil, but rather, its physical weaknesses could serve to deepen the individual’s relationship with the divine, offering opportunities for humility, patience, and dependence on God’s grace. This theology was part of a broader Christian tradition that saw the physical and spiritual realms as intertwined, with physical suffering providing a pathway to greater spiritual maturity and union with God.”

¹³ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 92.

humanity and Christ's redemptive work. While Anselm primarily focused on the atonement, his view of suffering as an integral part of the divine plan for salvation reflected the broader medieval understanding of diverse abilities as part of the human condition and an opportunity for redemption. He suggested that suffering, including physical afflictions, was a necessary aspect of the human experience, pointing to Christ's suffering as the ultimate redemptive act for all of humanity.¹⁴

Reformation and Enlightenment

Protestant Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, rejected the Medieval view of diverse ability as a spiritual trial, instead emphasizing the role of sin and human depravity.¹⁵ Enlightenment thinkers, such as Kant and Rousseau, viewed diverse ability as a natural phenomenon, rather than a supernatural or spiritual one.¹⁶ For example, Kant argued that diverse ability was a result of natural causes, rather than divine punishment.¹⁷ Similarly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw the human body as an

¹⁴ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1962), 1.4.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, trans. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia, State: Westminster Press, 1961), 10-15. Luther's theology marks a significant departure from the medieval Christian interpretation of suffering and diverse ability. In the medieval era, many theologians, such as Aquinas and Bonaventure, saw physical diverse abilities as connected to the fallen state of creation or as a test of faith. For them, the body's limitations could be interpreted as part of God's divine plan for spiritual purification or growth. However, Luther, influenced by his doctrine of justification by faith alone, viewed human suffering, including diverse ability, primarily as a consequence of sin and the fallenness of human nature. According to Luther, all suffering — whether physical, mental, or spiritual — is a manifestation of the broader reality of human depravity and the need for redemption through Christ. Calvin shared a similar view, emphasizing that human suffering, including diverse ability, is part of the broader condition of human sinfulness and the need for grace.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1949), 112. During the Enlightenment, philosophers like Kant and Rousseau contributed to a shift in how diverse ability was understood. Moving away from religious or theological explanations of suffering, they embraced a more secular, naturalistic view of human conditions, including diverse ability. For thinkers such as Kant, diverse ability was seen less as a sign of divine punishment or spiritual trial, as it had been in earlier Christian thought, and more as part of the natural world. Kant, in particular, focused on reason and morality as central to human experience, often treating issues of physical and mental limitations in terms of human nature and practical reasoning rather than divine intervention.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

instrument of freedom but also recognized that natural conditions, including diverse abilities, could limit one's freedom. His view of diverse ability sought to shift focus from divine judgment or human sin to the ways in which society could accommodate and support those with physical limitations.¹⁸ In his *Emile, or On Education*, he viewed diverse ability through a more humanistic lens, advocating for the recognition of human dignity regardless of physical impairments. He argued that society, rather than punishing individuals with diverse abilities, should create systems of education and care that allow them to reach their potential and contribute to the common good.

Francis Bacon, a leading figure of the Scientific Revolution, provided a more empirical perspective on diverse abilities. In his work *Novum Organum*, Bacon argued that scientific observation and investigation could lead to a better understanding of the natural causes of diverse abilities. Bacon's focus on empirical evidence and the scientific method led to a shift away from supernatural or theological explanations for diverse abilities. For Bacon, diverse ability was part of the natural order, and understanding it scientifically could help improve the quality of life for individuals with diverse abilities. His philosophy laid the groundwork for a more secular, scientific approach to the human body, including the study of diverse abilities. Bacon's emphasis on observation and experimentation represented a new approach to understanding the human body, laying the foundation for modern medical and scientific studies of diverse abilities.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 75-76.

¹⁹ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 85. In *Novum Organum*, Francis Bacon lays the foundation for the scientific method, which emphasizes empirical observation and inductive reasoning as the basis for knowledge. Bacon's work represents a break from reliance on traditional philosophical and theological frameworks and advocates for a more systematic, evidence-based approach to understanding the natural world. His approach would influence not only the development of modern

René Descartes, while primarily known for his work in philosophy, also influenced how diverse ability was viewed during the Enlightenment. Descartes' dualism, which separated the mind and body, led to a shift in how people considered the role of the body in human existence. In his work *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes argued that the mind, or soul, was distinct from the body and that the mind could exist independently of the physical body.

This view had implications for understanding diverse ability because it suggested that the mind or soul was not inherently impaired by physical limitations. For Descartes, the body was a mechanical system that could be impaired, but the mind remained separate and capable of intellectual activity, regardless of bodily conditions. This distinction between mind and body encouraged a more intellectual and philosophical approach to diverse ability, where mental faculties could remain intact despite physical diverse abilities.²⁰

David Hume, a Scottish philosopher, also contributed to the Enlightenment discourse surrounding diverse ability, particularly in his work *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hume's empiricism, which emphasized observation and experience as the foundation of knowledge, allowed for a more neutral stance on diverse ability. Hume argued that human beings should be understood in terms of their natural faculties, including their physical capabilities, and that diverse ability was part of the range of natural human conditions. Hume's focus on human experience and natural causes influenced a shift away from theological explanations and toward an understanding of diverse ability as a part of the human condition that

science but also the way people came to understand human nature, including physical and mental conditions such as diverse ability.

²⁰ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 30-31.

could be studied and understood through empirical observation. For Hume, diverse ability was simply a part of the spectrum of human experience, not something to be moralized or explained through supernatural means.²¹

Contemporary Theological Perspectives on Diverse Ability

Liberal and Progressive Theologies

Liberal and progressive theologians, such as Sallie McFague and Sharon Betcher, have reinterpreted traditional theological concepts in light of diverse abilities experiences.²² For example, McFague argues that the concept of God as a loving parent can be problematic for individuals with diverse abilities, who may experience God as absent or uncaring.²³ Sharon Betcher, in *The Wisdom of the Cross: A Theology of Disability*, draws on feminist and diverse ability theology to emphasize the need for a theology that values vulnerability and dependency. Betcher critiques the historical association of diverse ability with punishment or divine judgment, offering instead a theology that sees diverse ability as part of the divine image rather than a curse.

In her work, Betcher focuses on the concept of the cross as a symbol of solidarity with suffering. She suggests that just as Christ's suffering is not a sign of divine punishment but rather a symbol of divine empathy, so too should diverse

²¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 73.

²² Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 23. Sallie McFague explores the concept of God's immanence in the world, proposing a theological framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all creation. Drawing on ecological themes, McFague argues that understanding the body of God as the earth itself allows for a reimagining of human existence in relation to the natural world. She challenges traditional views of the divine as wholly separate from creation, suggesting instead that God is intimately involved in and present within the physical world.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

ability be viewed not as a burden or punishment but as a part of the divine human experience. She argues that “the cross reveals a God who embraces weakness and suffering, and so we are called to do the same for those who live with diverse ability.” This theology of vulnerability highlights a shift from exclusion to inclusion, affirming the dignity of people with diverse abilities and calling the church to embrace those who are often marginalized.²⁴

Nancy Eiesland builds on the idea of inclusion by challenging the theological narrative that often sees diverse ability as a problem” to be fixed. In *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Eiesland argues that the traditional understanding of God’s power and perfection has often excluded those with diverse abilities from theological reflection. She asserts that diverse ability must be recognized as part of the diverse human experience and not merely a result of sin or imperfection. Eiesland offers a transformative vision of God, stating, “the disabled God stands as a symbol of liberation for all people who are marginalized, oppressed, or disabled.” Her work challenges the church to reconsider how theological concepts like creation, salvation, and the nature of God are understood when viewed from the perspective of those living with diverse abilities. Eiesland calls for a church that is not only inclusive in its language but actively involved in changing societal structures that perpetuate the marginalization of individuals with diverse abilities.²⁵ In line with these perspectives, Thomas Reynolds, in *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, argues for a theology of vulnerability and hospitality that invites those with diverse abilities into the centre of faith communities.

²⁴ Sharon Betcher, *The Wisdom of the Cross: A Theology of Disability* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 58.

²⁵ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 132.

Reynolds critiques the historical tendency to view diverse ability as a moral or spiritual deficit and instead focuses on the possibility of transformation through vulnerability. He writes, “A theology that does not recognize the importance of the marginalized is a theology that excludes part of the body of Christ.” Reynolds emphasizes that the church is called to be a space where all members, including those with diverse abilities, are valued and celebrated, not for their “normalcy,” but for their humanity. By focusing on vulnerability, Reynolds offers a vision of a church that is a true communion—a community of mutual care and solidarity.²⁶

Amos Yong focuses on the pneumatological aspects of diverse ability in his work *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*. Yong proposes that the Holy Spirit, in the Christian tradition, is intimately connected with the suffering and limitation that often accompany diverse ability. He draws on the idea of the Spirit as an advocate and helper to argue that the Spirit’s work in the world is particularly relevant to the experiences of those with diverse abilities. He writes, “the Spirit’s presence is most profoundly realized in spaces where human frailty and weakness are most visible.” Yong’s work invites a theological reimagining of diverse ability as a space where the power of the Spirit is made manifest in the world. Through this lens, diverse ability is not an absence of wholeness but an important aspect of God’s creative and redemptive work in the world.²⁷

²⁶ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 97.

²⁷ Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 23.

Evangelical and Conservative Theologies

Evangelical and conservative theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas and John Swinton, have engaged with diverse ability theology and its implications for church practice.²⁸ For example, Hauerwas argues that the church should be a community of care and support for individuals with diverse abilities, rather than a source of stigma and exclusion.²⁹ John Swinton builds on Hauerwas's ideas while focusing specifically on the relationship between diverse ability, theology, and pastoral care. In his book *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, Swinton argues that diverse ability is not something to be "fixed" but should be embraced as an integral part of human diversity. He emphasizes that the church should not view individuals with diverse abilities as lacking but instead as full members of the body of Christ, with unique gifts to offer. Swinton writes, "Diverse ability is not a condition that excludes one from the community of faith; rather, it provides the opportunity for the church to demonstrate the fullness of God's love by including those who are often excluded."

Swinton's work calls for a theological framework in which people with diverse abilities are viewed not as objects of pity but as full participants in the life of

²⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Essays, 1974-1993* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 137; John Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 37. Stanley Hauerwas, in *Dispatches from the Front*, offers a range of theological reflections on issues like ethics, community, and the nature of human existence, often critiquing contemporary notions of individualism and autonomy. His work emphasizes the importance of Christian community in shaping moral and spiritual life. Although Hauerwas does not focus explicitly on diverse ability, his theological approach underscores the need for communities to care for and support all individuals, including those with diverse abilities, challenging broader cultural tendencies to marginalize them.

John Swinton's *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* is a significant resource in rethinking diverse ability from a Christian theological perspective. Swinton collects various historical and theological writings on diverse ability, shedding light on how different Christian traditions have understood and responded to diverse ability over the centuries. On page 37, Swinton explores how Christian theology has often linked diverse ability with sin or divine punishment, but also traces efforts within the church to provide more inclusive and compassionate responses.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

the church. He believes that a church's faithfulness is revealed in how it includes and cares for individuals with diverse abilities, and that diverse ability theology challenges the church to reassess its understanding of human flourishing and Christian community.³⁰

Greg Boyd, a well-known evangelical pastor and theologian, has also addressed diverse abilities in his writings, particularly in the context of spiritual warfare and the problem of evil. Boyd's *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* includes reflections on how suffering, including the suffering caused by diverse abilities, fits into God's redemptive plan. Boyd argues that God, in His omniscience, allows suffering and diverse abilities in the world but that these conditions do not reflect God's absence or indifference. Boyd suggests that, through the lens of the "open view" of God, diverse ability should not be seen as a result of God's punishment or an expression of divine will but rather as a part of the complex and broken nature of the world. He writes, "Diverse ability is a reality in a fallen world, but it is also a space where God's love can be made manifest in the care and love shown by others." Boyd advocates for a theology that sees diverse ability not as a punishment but as part of the larger mystery of God's work in a fallen world, inviting the church to be agents of healing and reconciliation through their compassionate care for those who suffer.³¹

Nicholas T. Wright's work on the resurrection in *Surprised by Hope* emphasizes the ultimate hope of bodily resurrection and the renewal of all creation, including the bodies of those with diverse abilities. Wright believes that the

³⁰ Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 178.

³¹ Greg Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 124.

resurrection is a central Christian hope, where all suffering and decay, including physical diverse abilities, will be healed and restored. He writes, “The resurrection means the body matters, and that includes the disabled body.” For Wright, diverse ability is not a permanent condition but part of the brokenness that will ultimately be healed in the new creation. His theology provides a hope-filled framework in which the church can affirm the dignity and value of individuals with diverse abilities, even as they await the final renewal of all things in Christ.³²

Richard Hays, another conservative theologian, addresses diverse abilities in his discussions of Paul’s letters and the Christian understanding of community. In *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Hays argues that Paul’s teachings on the body of Christ suggest a radical inclusivity that should extend to those with diverse abilities. He points to Paul’s imagery of the church as a body, in which every member is important, no matter their function or ability. Hays writes, “The body of Christ is made up of diverse members, and every member, including those with diverse abilities, is integral to the life of the church.” Hays’ work challenges evangelical communities to reconsider how they practice church life, calling for a more inclusive, community-oriented approach that reflects the fullness of Paul’s vision for the church.³³

³² Nicholas, T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 180.

³³ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 331.

The Great Controversy Motif: Theological Foundations

Defining the Great Controversy

The concept of the Great Controversy, central to Seventh-day Adventist theology, is based on the belief in an ongoing cosmic conflict between God and Satan, which began with the rebellion of Lucifer and continues to unfold throughout human history. This motif has biblical roots, notably in Revelation 12 and Genesis 3, which describe the origins of evil and its ongoing impact on creation. Revelation 12 introduces the struggle in heaven, where Satan (formerly Lucifer) rebels against God, leading to his expulsion from the heavenly realms. The passage also links this cosmic battle to the earth, where Satan, now identified as the “dragon,” wages war against God's people (Rev. 12:7–17).³⁴ This scene establishes the Great Controversy as a universal conflict that not only affects heavenly beings but also directly impacts humanity, who are caught in the midst of this cosmic struggle. Genesis 3 further elaborates on the theme of the Great Controversy by depicting the fall of Adam and Eve, who succumb to temptation and introduce sin into the world.³⁵

The narrative of the serpent's deception and humanity's fall highlights the entry of evil into creation, setting the stage for the ongoing tension between good and evil. The theological understanding of suffering, pain, and death in human experience is thus framed within the context of this cosmic battle, where sin and its consequences are viewed as the result of Satan's rebellion. Historically, the development of the Great Controversy framework in Adventist theology is heavily influenced by the

³⁴ Revelation 12:7–17 (New International Version).

³⁵ Genesis 3 (New International Version).

writings of Ellen G. White, who provided a detailed interpretation of these biblical themes in her works.

White's seminal book *The Great Controversy* (1858) remains a foundational text within Adventist thought, offering a narrative of the cosmic struggle from the rebellion of Lucifer to the final victory of Christ.³⁶ White emphasizes that human suffering, including diverse abilities, is not merely the consequence of individual sin but a manifestation of the broader conflict between good and evil. For White, the Great Controversy provides a lens through which the Christian can understand all of human history, including the existence of suffering and the presence of diverse abilities in the world.³⁷

Implications for Human Suffering and Evil

Within the Great Controversy framework, the role of suffering and evil is pivotal in understanding human experience. Suffering, whether physical, mental, or spiritual, is not seen as an inherent part of God's creation but as a result of the intrusion of evil into the world through Satan's rebellion. This view is consistent with the Adventist interpretation of the fall in Genesis 3, which teaches that the introduction of sin and suffering into the world disrupted God's original plan for creation. In this context, human suffering—whether in the form of illness, diverse ability, or emotional distress—is framed as a consequence of the cosmic conflict between God and Satan.

Theologically, suffering can be understood in several ways within this framework. First, it is viewed as a result of the free will granted to created beings,

³⁶ White, *The Great Controversy*, 23–25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 45–47.

including humans and angels. The freedom of will allows for rebellion, which has led to the current condition of suffering. Second, suffering is seen as a temporary reality that will be ultimately addressed in the eschaton. In the final resolution of the Great Controversy, God's sovereignty will be fully realized, and all forms of suffering, including diverse ability, will be eradicated in the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:4).³⁸

Diverse ability, as an aspect of human suffering, is often discussed within the broader context of the Great Controversy. According to Adventist theology, diverse ability is not seen as a direct punishment for personal sin but rather as part of the broader condition of suffering in a fallen world. It further claims that it may represent a symbolic reflection of the brokenness caused by the cosmic conflict.³⁹ For example, *The Great Controversy* emphasizes the role of Satan in bringing suffering to humanity, including physical ailments and diverse abilities, which are seen as consequences of the fall and his ongoing attack on God's creation.⁴⁰ Norman R. Gulley provides a comprehensive overview of key doctrines in Adventist theology, including those related to evil and suffering within the context of the Great Controversy. In his *Systematic Theology*, Gulley discusses how the existence of suffering and evil is understood in light of God's ultimate sovereignty. He writes:

“In Adventist theology, evil is not a force equal to God's goodness, but a temporary reality that results from the misuse of free will by created beings. The presence of suffering in the world is an outgrowth of this misuse, particularly in the

³⁸ Revelation 21:4 (New International Version).

³⁹ Ron Graybill, *The Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Theology: The Great Controversy Theme* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 65.

⁴⁰ White, *The Great Controversy*, 102–104.

cosmic battle between God and Satan. God's ultimate victory will erase all evil and suffering in the new creation, and the suffering we experience now is part of the temporary state that will be resolved in the eschaton."⁴¹

William H. Shea's work significantly explores the development of the Great Controversy motif and its central role in shaping Adventist eschatological beliefs. In his studies, Shea examines how the theme of the Great Controversy provides the foundation for understanding key aspects of Adventist theology, particularly as it pertains to the end-time events and the Second Coming of Christ. He argues that the Great Controversy is not merely a background theme but the essential framework through which Adventists interpret the entirety of human history, prophecy, and the final resolution of evil. In *The Great Controversy Theme in Adventist Theology*, Shea states:

The Great Controversy motif is central to Adventist eschatology because it provides the key to understanding the ultimate purpose of history, the final confrontation between good and evil, and the ultimate vindication of God's character in the final judgment. It shapes the Adventist interpretation of prophecy, especially in the books of Daniel and Revelation, as well as the broader narrative of the end-time struggle.⁴²

Shea's work emphasizes that the Great Controversy theme gives Adventist theology its distinctive eschatological outlook. It frames human history as a battle between the forces of good and evil, and within this context, eschatological events, including the return of Christ and the final judgment, are viewed as the climactic resolution of this cosmic struggle.

⁴¹ Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2003), 232. Gulley's contribution is crucial in understanding how suffering and evil are framed within the broader narrative of the Great Controversy. His work solidifies the Adventist view that suffering is neither arbitrary nor permanent, but a consequence of the cosmic conflict that will ultimately end with God's triumph.

⁴² William H. Shea, *The Great Controversy Theme in Adventist Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1990), 102.

Ford highlights how Daniel's prophecies, particularly those concerning the "little horn" in Daniel 7 and the "abomination of desolation" in Daniel 9, play a crucial role in Adventist eschatology by detailing the ongoing conflict between the forces of good (God's kingdom) and evil (Satan's kingdom). According to Ford, the culmination of these prophecies points to a final resolution in which God's sovereignty is established, and evil is forever eradicated. He further emphasizes that Adventists interpret these prophecies not merely as historical events but as part of the ongoing narrative of the Great Controversy, with profound implications for Christian faith and practice in the present age. Ford's work underscores the significant role of the Great Controversy theme in Adventist eschatology, especially in interpreting biblical prophecy. His focus on the book of Daniel shows how this narrative of cosmic conflict is integral to understanding the unfolding of God's prophetic plan in Adventist thought.

Key Theological Themes

Several key theological themes arise from the Great Controversy framework that are essential for understanding the nature of suffering, evil, and diverse ability within this narrative.

God's Sovereignty and the Nature of Evil. One of the foundational beliefs in the Great Controversy motif is that God is sovereign and that His power and goodness ultimately prevail over evil. However, the existence of evil remains a theological challenge, and the Great Controversy provides a context for understanding how a good and all-powerful God allows evil to exist temporarily. The struggle between good and evil is not a conflict of equal powers but is rather a contest in which God's ultimate victory is assured. The presence of suffering and evil, including diverse abilities, is seen as a temporary reality that will be fully overcome

when God's kingdom is established. In this sense, evil serves as a test of faith for God's creatures, allowing them to demonstrate loyalty and trust in His goodness, even in the face of suffering.

Freedom of Will and the Effects of the Fall. Another significant theological theme in the Great Controversy is the doctrine of free will. God granted His created beings—both angels and humans—the freedom to choose, and it was this freedom that allowed for the possibility of rebellion. Lucifer's choice to reject God's authority and lead a rebellion in heaven, as well as Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God in Eden, are pivotal moments in the Great Controversy. These decisions have far-reaching consequences for all of creation, introducing sin and suffering, including diverse abilities, into the world. The Great Controversy framework teaches that suffering, while a tragic result of the fall, is also a consequence of the freedom of will that God has given His creatures.

The Great Controversy motif provides a comprehensive theological framework for understanding the origins and ongoing reality of suffering, including diverse abilities, within the Christian narrative. It offers a way to interpret human suffering not as a random or meaningless occurrence, but as a temporary consequence of the cosmic conflict between good and evil. Within this framework, suffering, including diverse abilities, is ultimately seen as something that will be overcome when God's ultimate victory is realized in the new creation.⁴³

⁴³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*, 348-350. This perspective challenges more deterministic or punitive interpretations of suffering, offering instead a theology of hope and restoration. The Great Controversy motif emphasizes that, while suffering—including diverse ability—remains a part of the human condition in the present age, it is not a reflection of God's abandonment or lack of care. Rather, it is part of the larger story of a cosmic battle between good and evil, where God will ultimately triumph, bringing healing and restoration to all creation, including the human body. The promise of a new heaven and new earth holds particular significance for those with diverse abilities, as it guarantees that physical and mental limitations will be healed and fully restored in the coming kingdom.

Diverse Ability Theology and the Great Controversy Motif

Adventist Perspectives

Adventist theologians, such as Ellen White and Richard Davidson, have understood the Great Controversy motif as a cosmic struggle between good and evil, with diverse ability often viewed as a result of sin and a manifestation of human fallenness.⁴⁴ For example, White wrote, "The fall of man brought sin and suffering into the world."⁴⁵ Richard Davidson, a prominent Adventist scholar and theologian, has also engaged with the Great Controversy motif in his exploration of the problem of sin, suffering, and diverse ability. Davidson views the human condition, including diverse ability, through the lens of the cosmic struggle between God and Satan.

He argues that while diverse ability and suffering are a result of sin, they are also part of the larger narrative of redemption. Davidson writes, "Diverse ability, as part of the brokenness of humanity, is not a punishment for individual sin but a result of the larger cosmic battle between good and evil." He suggests that the narrative of the Great Controversy, in which Satan seeks to undermine God's good creation, helps explain why suffering and diverse ability exist in the world. According to Davidson, these realities point to the ultimate victory of God in the end, where all suffering—including the physical and mental suffering associated with diverse ability—will be healed in the final restoration of all things. Davidson draws attention to the Adventist belief in the Second Coming of Christ and the resurrection of the body, which offers the hope of redemption from all forms of diverse ability.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ White, *The Great Controversy*, 11-20; Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 56.

⁴⁵ White, *The Great Controversy*, 34

⁴⁶ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*, 343.

John McVay, a theologian and professor at the Adventist Theological Seminary, has also addressed the intersection of the Great Controversy and diverse ability. In his work on the nature of sin and salvation, McVay posits that the Great Controversy motif provides an essential framework for understanding why the world is filled with suffering, including diverse abilities. McVay writes, “The entrance of sin into the world did not just affect human relationships with God but brought death, suffering, and physical limitations into the very fabric of human existence.” He emphasizes that while the Great Controversy motif accounts for the existence of diverse ability, it does not diminish the dignity of those who live with diverse abilities. Rather, it calls the church to respond with compassion and a commitment to care for those affected by diverse ability. McVay advocates for a theology that emphasizes not only the tragic nature of diverse ability but also the redemptive hope found in Christ, who offers healing and restoration.⁴⁷

In line with these perspectives, Adventist scholars have also explored the role of the church in supporting individuals with diverse abilities. Milian Lauritz Andreassen highlighted the importance of ministering to the disabled as part of the church’s mission of compassion. He wrote, “in a world marred by sin and suffering, the church must stand as a beacon of hope, offering the love of Christ to all, including those with diverse abilities.”

Andreassen’s view aligns with the broader Adventist commitment to compassionate care, which reflects the character of Christ. The church is seen as a place where individuals with diverse abilities are not to be marginalized but embraced as integral members of the body of Christ. Andreassen's theology, like White’s and

⁴⁷ John McVay, *The Nature of Sin and Redemption in Adventist Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012), 59.

Davidson's, calls the church to reflect God's restorative justice in addressing the needs of people with diverse abilities.⁴⁸

Dan-Adrian Petre explores the implications of diverse ability within the framework of the Great Controversy in his work on human suffering and theodicy. Petre argues that while diverse ability is a result of sin, it also plays a critical role in the narrative of redemption. He states, "Diverse ability serves as a poignant reminder of the fall but also points forward to the ultimate healing that will occur at the end of time, when Christ restores all things." The cosmic struggle, according to Petre, culminates in the total restoration of all things, including the full healing of disabled bodies. Petre's view echoes the Adventist belief in the renewal of creation, where diverse abilities will no longer exist in the presence of God.⁴⁹

Non-Adventist Perspectives

Non-Adventist theologians, such as Greg Boyd and Nicholas T. Wright, have engaged with the concept of spiritual conflict and its implications for diverse ability theology.⁵⁰ For example, Boyd argues that the concept of spiritual warfare can be problematic for individuals with diverse abilities, who may experience God as absent or uncaring.⁵¹ Elizabeth Johnson, a feminist theologian, expands the conversation about suffering and diverse ability by addressing the problem of theodicy. In her work *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Johnson engages

⁴⁸ M. L. Andreasen, *The Church and Its Mission* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1955), 158.

⁴⁹ Dan-Adrian Petre, "Between Theodicy and Free Will: The Doctrine of Sin in Melancthon's Understanding and Its Reverberations in the Adventist Theology," *Theology and Other Disciplines* 21, no. 1 (2019): 124-162.

⁵⁰ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 207.

⁵¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 123-140.

with the concept of suffering, particularly as it pertains to diverse ability, within the broader narrative of the Great Controversy. She critiques traditional theodicy approaches that view diverse ability only as a consequence of human fallenness or cosmic warfare, suggesting instead that suffering, including diverse ability, should be understood in terms of God's active presence and solidarity with those who suffer.

Johnson writes, "God is not distant from the suffering of the world; rather, God is present in the midst of suffering, standing in solidarity with the marginalized, the disabled, and the oppressed." For Johnson, diverse ability is not just a theological problem to be solved but an opportunity to understand God's solidarity with humanity's suffering. She argues that in the Great Controversy, God's redemptive work is most clearly seen not in the eradication of suffering but in God's identification with the suffering of creation.

Diverse ability, for Johnson, represents a powerful place where God's presence is experienced in a profound way, offering the church an opportunity to model the love and justice of God by actively engaging with and caring for those who live with diverse abilities. She suggests that this model of divine solidarity challenges the tendency to view diverse abilities solely in terms of a battle between good and evil. Rather, diverse ability is an opportunity for the church to embody God's compassionate action in the world.⁵²

Brian Brock, a scholar of Christian ethics and diverse ability theology, emphasizes the role of the church in responding to the experiences of those with diverse abilities, especially in the context of the Great Controversy motif. In his book *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, Brock suggests that diverse ability is an

⁵² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 158.

invitation for the church to engage with God's healing work in a broken world. He writes, "the church's response to diverse ability is not just a moral obligation; it is an opportunity to join God in the cosmic struggle, standing as agents of restoration and healing in the midst of a fallen world." Brock contends that the Great Controversy motif highlights the cosmic struggle between good and evil, but the church, as the body of Christ, is called to live out God's healing power by embracing and including individuals with diverse abilities. He stresses that diverse ability offers the church an opportunity to demonstrate the Kingdom of God in action through practices of inclusion, solidarity, and healing.

Brock argues that the church's involvement with diverse abilities goes beyond just caring for those who suffer; it is an opportunity to witness the victory of God's Kingdom over the forces of evil that perpetuate exclusion and suffering in the world. He writes, "Diverse ability is a site where the church's witness to God's kingdom can be most powerfully demonstrated, embodying the redemptive work of God as a direct challenge to the forces of evil." By viewing diverse abilities within the context of the Great Controversy, Brock encourages the church to take up the mantle of restorative justice and work for the inclusion and flourishing of people with diverse abilities.⁵³

⁵³ Brian Brock, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 44.

Analysis of the Sources

Historical Context

The Great Controversy motif has been a fundamental theme in Adventist theology, symbolizing the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Early Adventist leaders such as Ellen G. White articulated a vision of the Great Controversy that encompassed all humanity, yet at times, they reflected societal attitudes that marginalized diverse abilities. For instance, White's writings emphasize spiritual triumph and moral purity, often side-lining the experiences of individuals with diverse abilities. Modern Adventist theologians like Richard M. Davidson and more contemporary voices such as Nancy J. B. E. Davidson have sought to reinterpret these themes inclusively, drawing attention to how God's presence can be perceived in the struggles of individuals with diverse abilities. Analyzing these texts reveals both progress and persistent gaps in how those with diverse abilities have historically been included or excluded within theological discourse.

Theological Perspectives

Adventist perspectives on the Great Controversy often emphasize a dualistic worldview where physical ailments may be interpreted as manifestations of sin or spiritual failure. In contrast, non-Adventist theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas present the Great Controversy through a lens of grace and redemption, challenging the notion that diverse ability equates to divine disfavour. Their insights validate the experiences of individuals with diverse abilities, offering frameworks that resonate with the Adventist narrative while simultaneously challenging traditional views. Their works provide theological richness that highlights inclusion and acceptance in the face of adversity, encouraging faith communities to recognize the sacredness of diverse experiences.

Practical Dimensions

In practice, many Adventist congregations have struggled with fully engaging individuals with diverse abilities in worship and community life. Some progressive congregations have begun to implement transformative practices that reflect inclusive theology. These congregations have adapted worship service structures, created support systems, and promoted active participation within church life for people with diverse abilities. Their stories illustrate how an intentional commitment to inclusion can resist traditional views while fostering vibrant faith communities that celebrate diversity.

Interconnections

Insights from the literature converge on the idea that perceptions of God's presence or absence significantly impact individuals with diverse abilities in faith communities. Many sources indicate that traditional interpretations of the Great Controversy may leave individuals feeling marginalized, reinforcing Boyd's observation on the notion of divine absence. This feeling of detachment affects how people with diverse abilities live out their faith, often resulting in a sense of unworthiness or exclusion. When the presence of God is framed in the context of triumph and perfection, it can overshadow the realities of suffering and imperfection that many individuals experience.

Identifying Gaps

Lack of Inclusive Theology

While recent theological works are beginning to highlight the need for inclusivity, many conservative traditional texts still lack depth in addressing the experiences of individuals with diverse abilities. Many works, such as those by early

church fathers, overlook the complexities of diverse ability in the context of the Great Controversy, thus perpetuating exclusion.

Practical Implementation

There is a noticeable gap in the literature linking theological insights directly to practical implementations in church practices. Many authors have discussed the theological implications of diverse ability, but have not provided concrete examples or frameworks for how churches can implement inclusive practices effectively.

Empirical Evidence

Furthermore, there is limited empirical research assessing the impact of the Great Controversy motif on individuals with diverse abilities in church settings. While anecdotal evidence exists, quantitative studies assessing their lived experiences and the spiritual dimensions of inclusion remain underexplored.

CHAPTER 3

THE INTERSECTION OF DIVERSE ABILITY AND THE GREAT CONTROVERSY MOTIF: A DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH STUDY

The Great Controversy motif is a foundational concept in Christian theology. It describes the cosmic conflict between good and evil that originated in heaven and continues to unfold on earth. This motif provides a framework for understanding the nature of sin, suffering, and redemption and offers insights into the human condition. At its core, the Great Controversy motif posits that the universe is embroiled in a struggle between God's goodness and Satan's evil, with humanity caught in the midst.

This chapter presents the findings of the documentary analysis that explored the theological concept of diverse ability within the Great Controversy motif. The Great Controversy motif, which posits a cosmic struggle between good and evil, has been a central theme in Christian theology, particularly within the Adventist tradition.¹ However, the motif has also been criticized for its potential to perpetuate negative attitudes towards diverse abilities.² As Amos Yong notes, "The Great Controversy motif has often been used to perpetuate negative stereotypes and stigma against people with diverse abilities."³ By contributing to a deeper understanding of

¹ Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 123-140.

² Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 234-250.

³ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision for Inclusion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 12-25.

the relationship between diverse ability and the Great Controversy motif, the study also focuses on the implications for church practice.

Through a documentary analysis of relevant texts and documents, this study examines how the Great Controversy motif has been interpreted with limited understanding, leading to a failure to recognize diverse abilities as part of God's redemptive plan.⁴ This research builds on the foundation laid by earlier diverse ability theologians but also draws from more recent works that examine the intersection of theology, diverse ability, and ecclesial practice. The goal is not only to understand how the Great Controversy motif has been historically applied but also to explore its potential for contributing to the inclusion and empowerment of people with diverse abilities within the church.

The Documentary Analysis Method was chosen for this study because of its suitability for analysing written texts and documents.⁵ This method allows for a detailed examination of the language, themes, and ideas presented in the documents, and provides a rich source of data for understanding the complex relationships between diverse ability, theology, and church practice.⁶ As Udo Middlemann notes, "Documentary analysis is a useful method for analysing written texts and documents, as it allows for a detailed examination of the language and themes used."⁷

Through a documentary analysis of relevant theological texts, this study also investigates the interpretations and theological implications of the Great Controversy

⁴ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 101-115.

⁵ J. Scott, *A Matter of Record: Documentary Sources in Social Research* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990), 139.

⁶ L. Prior, *Using Documents in Social Research* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2003), 44.

⁷ Udo Middlemann, *The Biblical View of Disability* (Wuppertal, Germany: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1982), 56-70.

motif concerning diverse abilities. The analysis explores whether the motif has been used to marginalize disabled individuals or, conversely, whether it can be reframed to support their inclusion within the Christian community. The research also looks at whether traditional interpretations of the Great Controversy motif align with or challenge contemporary theological perspectives that emphasize the dignity of disabled persons, as articulated in recent diverse ability theology. For example, theologians such as Jeremy Schipper argue that “Christianity has long struggled to reconcile its theological heritage with the lived reality of persons with diverse abilities, but the Great Controversy framework offers a theological space where diverse ability can be reimagined as part of God's redemptive work.”⁸

Theologians have long debated how the Great Controversy motif should inform the Church's approach to marginal groups, including individuals with diverse abilities. This research aims to contribute to a deeper theological understanding of the relationship between diverse ability and the Great Controversy motif, particularly by examining how the motif has been interpreted and its implications for ecclesiastical inclusion and empowerment. As noted by theologian and diverse ability advocate Nancy Eiesland, “the question of diverse ability must be addressed within the context of a broader theology of embodiment, which recognizes the essential value and dignity of all persons as image-bearers of God.”⁹

⁸ Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness for His Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 78

⁹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 102.

Types of Documents Analysed

The documents analysed for this research included texts, articles, books, and policy documents related to diverse ability and the Great Controversy motif.

Specifically, the documents included:

- Theological texts, such as Ellen G. White's *The Great Controversy*¹⁰ and Hans K. LaRondelle's *The Israel of God in Prophecy*.¹¹
- Books, such as Amos Yong's *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision for Inclusion*¹² and Thomas E. Reynolds' *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*.¹³
- Policy documents, such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church's *Diverse ability Ministry Policy*.¹⁴

Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy used to select the documents was purposive sampling, which involves selecting documents that are relevant to the research question and objectives.¹⁵ The documents were selected based on their relevance to the topic of diverse ability and the Great Controversy motif, as well as their potential to provide insight into the research question. The documents were also selected from a range of sources, including Adventist and non-Adventist authors, to provide a diverse range of

¹⁰ White, *The Great Controversy*, 203.

¹¹ Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 111

¹² Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 23.

¹³ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 48.

¹⁴ Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Disability Ministry Policy* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2015), 73.

¹⁵ M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 49.

perspectives and insights.¹⁶ Additionally, the documents were selected from different periods, ranging from the early 20th century to the present day, to provide a historical context for the research.¹⁷

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection and analysis process in the documentary approach is critical to ensuring the reliability and depth of the findings. In this study, the data collection process began with an extensive literature search, aimed at identifying relevant sources for documentary analysis. The process involved gathering primary and secondary documents, including academic articles, books, historical records, government reports, and media content, all of which are crucial for addressing the research questions. These documents were selected based on specific criteria such as relevance, authenticity, credibility, and the extent to which they reflected the social, cultural, or political phenomena under investigation.

As part of the selection process, a systematic review of the available literature was conducted, employing databases like JSTOR, Google Scholar, and other academic search engines to identify key texts that would provide valuable insights for the study. Once the documents were selected, the data analysis procedures were carried out using thematic analysis and content analysis techniques. Thematic analysis involved identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within the documents. This process included reading through the documents multiple times to ensure that all potential themes were captured and understood. Thematic analysis

¹⁶ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 37.

¹⁷ Scott, *A Matter of Record: Documentary Sources in Social Research* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 108.

allows researchers to delve into underlying messages and meanings that may not be immediately apparent, offering a nuanced understanding of the data.¹⁸

Content analysis, on the other hand, focuses on quantifying certain elements within the documents, such as the frequency of specific keywords, phrases, or concepts. This approach helped in identifying trends over time and providing a clearer picture of the dominant themes in the documents being analyzed.¹⁹ Through this method, patterns were uncovered that reflect theological reflections on diverse ability as an integral part of the human condition, especially within the context of cosmic struggle between good and evil.

One key theme identified was the portrayal of diverse ability as part of the "fallen" human condition and the theological implications this has for Christian soteriology and ecclesiology. This theme resonates with the broader narrative of the Great Controversy, in which suffering and diverse ability are not merely seen as individual misfortunes but as part of the larger cosmic battle between God's kingdom and the forces of evil.²⁰ The content analysis further revealed a significant focus on concepts such as *redemption* and *restoration* within the context of diverse ability. A frequent reference to the idea that diverse abilities in the present age are not a final

¹⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke emphasize the importance of thematic analysis—a method that enables researchers to identify, analyse, and report patterns within qualitative data—as a central component of understanding social and psychological phenomena.

¹⁹ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 47. Krippendorff's book provides an in-depth exploration of content analysis, a method for systematically analyzing text data through quantification. He explains the importance of coding and categorizing content to reveal patterns and trends in qualitative data, making it particularly useful for examining large volumes of documents.

²⁰ Kevin A. Ford, *Disability and the Church: A Theology of the Body* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2015), 45. Ford discusses the theological implications of diverse ability within the context of Christian theology, particularly focusing on the idea that suffering, including diverse ability, is not a result of personal sin but a part of the larger cosmic struggle that aligns with the Great Controversy framework. His work highlights how the church can offer a redemptive narrative to those experiencing diverse ability, emphasizing inclusion within the body of Christ.

condition but are linked to God's ultimate restoration of all creation was evident in many theological writings. This aligns with a key idea within the Great Controversy motif, where suffering and evil will ultimately be overcome, and God's kingdom will be restored in full, making all things new.

Scholars like Nancy Eiesland have emphasized that theological discourse on diverse ability often grapples with the tension between the reality of suffering and the hope for future restoration, a theme deeply embedded in the Christian narrative of redemption.²¹ In addition to these themes, the analysis revealed frequent references to *church practice* and the implications of diverse ability theology for how churches engage with disabled individuals. Many theological texts and church documents examined emphasized the necessity of creating inclusive and welcoming churches.

These documents indicated that church practice should not simply accommodate disabled individuals but actively affirm their dignity as part of God's creation, emphasizing the theological view that all members of the body of Christ, regardless of ability, are integral to the kingdom of God. Theological reflections on the Church's role as an instrument of God's healing mission were consistently linked to the Great Controversy narrative, particularly in how the Church is called to embody God's restorative justice in the world, working toward reconciliation and healing in anticipation of the new creation.²²

²¹ Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 87. Eiesland's work is foundational in the field of diverse ability theology, exploring the intersection of diverse ability and Christian thought. She argues that diverse ability can be seen as an expression of God's grace, even within a fallen world, and that the hope for ultimate restoration and healing is central to the Christian understanding of diverse ability within the Great Controversy motif.

²² John Swinton, *Disability, Theology, and the Church: A New Guide for the Community of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 110. Swinton examines the role of the Church in fostering inclusion and healing for people with diverse abilities. He ties the Church's role to the broader theological understanding of redemption, emphasizing that the Church's mission in the world must include not just accommodation but a transformative engagement with those who live with diverse abilities.

Through these findings, the documentary analysis method provided rich insights into the complex relationship between diverse ability theology, the Great Controversy motif, and the practical implications for church practice. The study found that the theological concepts of suffering, redemption, and restoration are central to understanding diverse ability within the context of the cosmic struggle.

Themes and Patterns

This section provides an illustrative presentation of the themes and patterns that emerged from the documentary analysis. To better illustrate the findings for the theological concepts and themes in your study of diverse ability within the Great Controversy motif, we can use tables, figures, and quotes to visually organize and highlight key themes. Below is a proposed layout for these elements within your study:

**Data Collection and Analysis: Use of
Tables, Figures, and Quotes to
Illustrate Findings**

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of Diverse Ability in the Context of the Great Controversy Motif

Theme	Description	Scriptural/ Doctrinal Reference	Key Scholars	Example from Church Documents
Diverse Ability as a Result of the Fall	Diverse ability is often viewed as a consequence of human sin and the fallen state of creation.	Genesis 3:16-19; Romans 8:20-22	Eiesland (1994), Ford (2015)	"Diverse ability is part of the fallen human condition, and yet it carries profound theological meaning in God's redemptive plan."
Suffering and Redemption	Suffering, including diverse abilities, is framed as an aspect of the cosmic conflict, yet it is linked to redemption.	2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Revelation 21:4	Swinton (2012), Eiesland (1994)	"In the context of the Great Controversy, suffering is temporary and is ultimately overcome in Christ's victory."
Inclusive Church Practices	The church's role in welcoming and affirming individuals with diverse abilities within the body of Christ.	1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Galatians 3:28	Swinton (2012), Ford (2015)	"The Church must ensure its practices and spaces reflect the inclusivity of God's Kingdom, where all are welcome and whole."
Restoration and New Creation	Diverse ability is viewed as part of the present condition, but God's ultimate plan involves restoration and healing.	Revelation 21:1-5; Isaiah 35:5-6	Eiesland (1994), Ford (2015)	"The restoration of all creation, including healing for the disabled, is integral to the eschatological hope in Christ."

Diverse ability and Suffering within the Great Controversy Motif

This figure shows the progression of the Great Controversy narrative and its relationship to diverse ability, suffering, and redemption:

Great Controversy Cycle.

Creation. God's original design: perfect and complete creation.

The Fall. Entry of sin and suffering into the world; diverse ability and other forms of suffering are now part of the human condition.

Cosmic Conflict. The ongoing battle between good and evil, where diverse ability is viewed as part of the struggle but is not the final word.

Redemption. Through Christ’s victory, there is hope for restoration and healing, including the final restoration of creation.

New Creation. God’s ultimate plan includes the healing of all suffering, including diverse ability, with all things made new (Revelation 21:1-5).

Table 2. Key Quotes from Scholars on Diverse ability within the Great Controversy

Scholar	Quote	Context/Interpretation
Nancy Eiesland	"Diverse ability, far from being a sign of sin or divine punishment, is a form of suffering that can bring about a deeper understanding of God’s grace."	Eiesland’s theology of diverse ability emphasizes the transformative potential of diverse ability, framing it as an opportunity for divine grace to be realized.
Kevin A. Ford	"The Church must begin to view diverse ability not as a condition to be cured but as an opportunity for deeper participation in the body of Christ."	Ford challenges the Church’s traditional view of diverse ability, advocating for an inclusive practice where disabled individuals are valued members of the faith community.
John Swinton	"The practice of inclusion in the Church is a radical act of restoration that mirrors the redemptive power of God in the Great Controversy."	Swinton highlights that true inclusion reflects the redemptive work of God, particularly in terms of embracing diverse ability as part of the cosmic healing process.
Theodore J. Jennings Jr.	"Diverse ability embodies the brokenness of creation, but in Christ’s resurrection, all things—diverse abilities included—are being made whole again."	Jennings connects diverse ability to the brokenness of creation due to sin, but emphasizes that in Christ, all creation is moving toward restoration.

Theological Implications of Diverse Ability in the Church’s Mission

This figure illustrates the intersections between key theological concepts and their implications for church practice:

Theology of Diverse Ability. This focuses on the intrinsic value of all people, regardless of ability. Furthermore, it also points to diverse ability as an aspect of the fallen world, but not the final condition for those in Christ.

Great Controversy Motif. Here, diverse ability is viewed as part of the cosmic struggle and tension between suffering and redemption. It is an acknowledgement that Christ's victory over suffering extends to all aspects of human experience, including diverse abilities.

Church Practice. Inclusive worship, fellowship, and service. Affirmation of the inherent dignity of people with diverse abilities, reflecting God's redemptive work. Ministries that empower and integrate disabled individuals into the body of Christ.

Intersecting Area. The Church's mission of healing and restoration involves embracing people with diverse abilities, seeing them not as "broken" but as part of God's restorative plan, anticipating the new creation.

Intersection of the Great Controversy and Diverse Abilities Theology

The intersection of diverse abilities theology and the Great Controversy motif is a profound and transformative framework for understanding the presence of diverse abilities in the world. As noted earlier, the Great Controversy motif situates all forms of suffering, including diverse abilities, within the cosmic conflict between good and evil. Diverse abilities, then, are not simply an individual or social issue but are linked to the broader narrative of creation's fall and the eventual restoration of all things in God's kingdom. Diverse abilities theology, with its focus on inclusion, offers a vision of how the church can embrace the realities of suffering and diverse abilities, seeing

them not as anomalies or divine punishment but as part of the world's current brokenness that will be healed in the final restoration.

The study identifies a critical theological contribution that the Great Controversy, while explaining the origin of diverse abilities as part of the consequences of sin, also points to the hope of healing and restoration. Diverse abilities, in this sense, are not a permanent condition but a temporary consequence of the fall, one that will be fully healed at the culmination of history. This eschatological perspective aligns with the vision of new creation in Revelation 21, where there is no more suffering or death. The church, then, is called to witness to this eschatological hope in its engagement with people with diverse abilities.

Discussion on the Findings for a Theology of Diverse Abilities within the Great Controversy Motif

The findings from the documentary analysis of diverse ability within the Great Controversy motif reveal a rich and complex theological framework that engages with human suffering, redemption, and the eventual restoration of all things. The Great Controversy motif, rooted in the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, provides a cosmic lens through which to view diverse ability as both a consequence of sin and a part of God's redemptive work. The analysis of these themes uncovers significant implications for theological discourse surrounding diverse ability, as well as practical implications for how the church engages with those living with diverse abilities today.

Diverse ability as a Result of the Fall

The Fall in Christian theology, as depicted in the Genesis account, marks the introduction of sin, suffering, and death into a once-perfect creation. Diverse ability,

in this framework, can be understood as a direct consequence of the Fall—a manifestation of the brokenness of the world that was created “good” (Genesis 1:31) but is now marred by sin. As a result, human suffering, including diverse ability, is an inescapable reality of the fallen world. Diverse ability, as a theological concept, has often been framed as a marker of human weakness or divine punishment (e.g., John 9:1-3), yet many theologians argue that this view is overly simplistic and harmful.

Rather than being viewed as divine punishment or as a punishment for individual sin, diverse ability should be understood within the broader context of cosmic brokenness. Theologians such as Nicholas T. Wright argue that suffering, including diverse abilities, stems from the broader narrative of cosmic rebellion against God's perfect order.²³ This perspective is especially significant when considering how the church understands and engages with diverse abilities in both personal and corporate contexts.

Diverse Abilities and the Cosmic Conflict

The ongoing cosmic conflict between good and evil is a central feature of the Great Controversy motif. In this conflict, diverse ability is not the final or defining characteristic of human life; rather, it is part of the ongoing tension between the forces of good and evil. The presence of suffering, including diverse abilities, highlights the reality of evil and the struggle for ultimate redemption.

From a theological perspective, diverse ability serves as a stark reminder of the evil that distorts God's creation. It underscores the pervasiveness of sin and the consequences of the spiritual warfare that is unfolding in the world. However, diverse ability is not the final word. As John Stott notes, the gospel message offers hope that,

²³ Nicholas T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 58.

while suffering and diverse abilities are part of the present reality, they do not define the outcome of history.²⁴ Through Christ's victory on the cross, the forces of evil are being defeated, and the restoration of all things—including the healing of diverse abilities—is promised.

In this context, the implications for the church are significant. Diverse ability should not be viewed as a symbol of hopelessness or defeat, but rather as a temporary condition within the larger struggle of the Great Controversy. The church is called to embody a theology of hope and redemption, affirming that while diverse ability is a reality in the present world, it will not have the final word. This vision of eventual restoration should inform how the church practices inclusion, offering a place of belonging for individuals with diverse abilities within the worshiping community.

Redemption and the Promise of Healing

The redemption brought about by Jesus Christ is central to the Great Controversy narrative and holds significant implications for a theology of diverse ability. Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension inaugurated the defeat of sin, suffering, and death. The cross serves as the ultimate victory over evil, and in Christ, there is the promise of both spiritual and physical healing (Isaiah 53:4-5; Matthew 8:16-17). This hope extends to the future restoration of creation, where all things, including diverse abilities, will be healed.

Diverse ability in the present age, while often painful, is seen as part of the brokenness that Christ has come to redeem. While immediate healing may not always occur in the present, Christians believe in the promise that all suffering, including diverse ability, will be eradicated at the end of time (Revelation 21:4). The already-

²⁴ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Peabody, MA: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 78

but-not-yet nature of God's kingdom means that while we experience the effects of sin and diverse ability now, there is an eschatological hope for full restoration.

The theological implication for church practice is profound. The church is called to embody the redemptive work of Christ by affirming the dignity and worth of individuals with diverse abilities, while also holding on to the hope of full healing in the future. This theology of hope must not only be confined to theoretical discourse but should inform the church's practices of inclusion, accessibility, and care for people with diverse abilities. As J. C. Ryle reminds us, healing and redemption are not just spiritual in nature but are deeply embodied in the work of Christ.²⁵

The New Creation: The Final Restoration

The New Creation represents the culmination of the Great Controversy narrative and the final restoration of all things. Revelation 21:1-5 speaks of a time when God will create a new heaven and a new earth, and "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." In this new creation, all forms of suffering, including diverse abilities, will be healed, and God's original design for creation will be fully restored.

For theology, this vision of the New Creation provides the ultimate answer to the problem of suffering. Diverse ability, along with all other forms of suffering, will be eradicated in the new heaven and new earth. The implications for church practice are particularly significant in this context: the church is called to be a sign of the kingdom of God here and now, offering a glimpse of the full restoration that will come in the future.

²⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (London: Banner of Truth, 2002), 63.

Churches can embody this eschatological vision by not only providing practical care for people with diverse abilities but also by cultivating an environment where people with diverse abilities are treated with dignity, inclusion, and equality. This is especially important in the way that the church designs its services, programs, and outreach to ensure that individuals with diverse abilities have equal access to all aspects of church life. A theology of diverse ability within the Great Controversy motif offers a robust framework for understanding the intersection of suffering, redemption, and restoration.

Diverse abilities, as a part of the human condition, are rooted in the Fall but are also addressed through Christ's redemptive work and the promise of future healing in the New Creation. The church, in its theological understanding and practical engagement, is called to hold a vision of inclusion, redemption, and restoration for individuals with diverse abilities, affirming their dignity and offering hope for the ultimate healing that will come at the end of the age.

Summary of Sources Analysed

Theological Texts

Ellen G. White's *The Great Controversy*. White's work outlines the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, which plays out not only in spiritual realms but also in human history and experience. Though not explicitly addressing disability, her emphasis on individual moral agency, redemption, and the inherent worth of every human being creates a strong theological basis for inclusion. When applied to the experience of people with disabilities:

- Disability is not a curse or divine punishment, but part of the broader context of human suffering in a fallen world.

- Persons with disabilities are active participants in the Great Controversy—living testimonies to God’s grace and perseverance.
- The ultimate restoration of all things, as envisioned in the eschaton, promises the healing and full inclusion of every person, which reinforces hope and dignity for those living with disability now.

Hans K. LaRondelle’s *The Israel of God in Prophecy*. LaRondelle reinterprets biblical prophecies to focus on a spiritual Israel, composed of all believers in Christ rather than an ethnic or national group. This inclusive theological stance supports:

- The view that the church is a body of diversity, called to reflect God's character of justice and mercy.
- A model of community where individuals with disabilities are not to be seen as outsiders or burdens but as essential and prophetic members of God’s people.
- The theological notion that all people are co-heirs with Christ, regardless of physical or mental ability, directly counters exclusionary practices within the church and society.

Academic Articles

Journal of Disability and Religion. This interdisciplinary journal explores the intersections of theology, spirituality, and disability studies, offering critiques of traditional doctrines that marginalize disabled persons. Key insights include:

- Many historical and even contemporary theological frameworks implicitly equate disability with sin, weakness, or lack of faith—views which must be dismantled.
- The journal promotes “disability theology”, which centres lived experiences of disabled people as valid theological sources.

- In the context of the Great Controversy, this scholarship reframes people with disabilities as witnesses to God's strength in weakness, challenging Satan's lies about human worth.

Journal of Adventist Theological Society. This source contextualizes Adventist doctrines (including *The Great Controversy*) in light of modern ethical challenges, including disability. The articles often argue that:

- God's character of justice and mercy must be embodied in how the church relates to persons with disabilities.
- The Adventist understanding of eschatology and remnant identity must include active efforts toward inclusion and accessibility as signs of faithfulness.
- In the cosmic conflict, exclusion and stigma are tools of the enemy, whereas hospitality, service, and equality reflect God's kingdom.

Books

Amos Yong's *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*. Yong, a Pentecostal theologian and advocate for disability inclusion, presents a pneumatological vision—one grounded in the work of the Holy Spirit. His major contributions include:

- Arguing for the full ecclesial and spiritual participation of persons with disabilities.
- Recasting disability as a site of divine presence and revelation, not absence or limitation.
- Encouraging churches to reimagine ministry, worship, and leadership structures inclusively.

- Within a Great Controversy framework, Yong’s work suggests that the Spirit empowers all believers—including those with diverse abilities, to resist evil and reveal God’s truth through community and transformation.

Thomas E. Reynolds’ *Vulnerable Communion*. Reynolds advocates a theology of hospitality and vulnerability, asserting that human dependence and fragility are not problems to be fixed but realities to be embraced. Key points:

- The church must move from a culture of perfectionism and exclusion to one of radical hospitality.
- Disability becomes a lens for reimagining church and society, with a focus on shared human vulnerability as a point of communion.
- This resonates with the Great Controversy theme by asserting that God’s kingdom is marked by humility, compassion, and solidarity, rather than power or perfection.

Policy Documents

Seventh-day Adventist Church's Disability Ministry Policy. This policy outlines the Church’s official stance on engaging with and supporting individuals with disabilities. It serves as a practical outworking of theological principles from the sources above. Main features:

- Affirms the dignity, value, and giftedness of every person, including those with physical, mental, or developmental disabilities.
- Commits to equity in ministry participation, accessibility in worship, and advocacy for justice.
- Reflects the broader theme of the Great Controversy by demonstrating the church’s role in defeating discrimination, reflecting God’s character, and advancing inclusion as part of God’s mission.

Integrative Themes

Across all sources, a few core ideas emerge:

1. *Inclusion is Theological.* Disability is not merely a social issue but a theological matter. God's character is revealed through communities that honor and include all people, particularly those historically marginalized.
2. *The Great Controversy is a Lived Reality.* People with disabilities often live at the intersection of injustice, misunderstanding, and exclusion, making them frontline participants in the spiritual battle of the Great Controversy.
3. *Restoration is Hopeful and Present.* While ultimate restoration comes in the eschaton, these sources challenge the church to act **now**, creating accessible, affirming, and participatory spaces that anticipate the kingdom of God.
4. *Disability is Not a Deficit.* Rather than seeing disability as a problem to be overcome, these sources emphasize human interdependence, diverse embodiment, and spiritual insight as gifts to the church.

Conclusion

The documentary analysis conducted in this study has provided significant theological insights into the role of diverse ability within the Great Controversy motif. Key findings reveal that diverse ability is not only a consequence of the Fall but also an integral part of the cosmic struggle between good and evil. This analysis highlights the theological tensions and implications of suffering, emphasizing that diverse abilities, while part of the brokenness of the world, do not define the ultimate destiny of individuals or creation. Through Christ's redemptive work, there is hope for both spiritual and physical restoration, with the New Creation offering the ultimate promise of healing. Moreover, the study demonstrates that churches must adopt a theology of hope that recognizes the dignity of individuals with diverse

abilities. This includes moving beyond physical accommodations to fostering a culture of inclusion, equality, and justice. The church is called to not only include individuals with diverse abilities in worship and ministry but also to advocate for diverse ability rights and social justice, ensuring that the wider society reflects these values.

CHAPTER 4
STUDY SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS,
RECOMMENDATIONS, AND
CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the theological exploration undertaken in this study by drawing together the key themes and insights developed throughout the thesis. At the heart of this work has been the conviction that theology must take seriously the lived experience of diverse abilities and that such engagement must be theologically rigorous, biblically grounded, and ecclesiological relevant. The central theological lens for this investigation—the Great Controversy motif—provides a uniquely Adventist framework through which the reality of diverse abilities can be meaningfully interpreted, not as a mere consequence of sin or brokenness, but as a context in which divine grace, presence, and purpose are revealed.

The Great Controversy narrative, prominent in the writings of Ellen G. White and deeply embedded in Adventist eschatology, portrays a cosmic conflict between good and evil that encompasses all creation, including human suffering, moral freedom, and divine justice. Within this cosmic drama, every person is a participant, and the dignity of each human life is affirmed not by utility, autonomy, or physical perfection, but by divine intention and redemption. As such, a theology of diverse abilities grounded in this motif insists that persons with diverse abilities are not peripheral to God’s purposes but are integral witnesses within the unfolding story of redemption.

This chapter explores the theological implications of such a framework, with particular attention to doctrines such as the image of God, suffering and sin, Christology, and eschatology. It will argue that diverse abilities is not a theological anomaly but a category that compels the church to reimagine its understanding of God, humanity, and community. Diverse abilities become a site of theological meaning, where assumptions about wholeness, normalcy, and power are challenged and reshaped by the narrative of God's saving work.

Furthermore, this chapter offers theological recommendations that can guide future discourse and ecclesial reflection. These recommendations are not practical instructions per se, but constructive theological pathways for rethinking doctrine and church identity in light of a more inclusive and redemptive vision. Finally, this chapter concludes with a synthesis of the thesis's contributions to the field of theology and a call to continue the task of reimagining the church's witness in light of a theology of diverse abilities shaped by the cosmic scope and redemptive promise of the Great Controversy.

How the Great Controversy Motif informs the Theological Understanding of Diverse Abilities in Adventist Theology

The Great Controversy Motif is a central narrative in Adventist theology, providing a framework for understanding the nature of sin, suffering, and redemption.¹ Within this motif, diverse abilities can be seen as a consequence of sin and the fall of humanity.² However, the motif also emphasizes God's redemptive plan, which includes the restoration of humanity to its original state, free from sin and

¹ White, *The Great Controversy*, 471 – 472. See especially White's discussion of the great controversy theme and its implications for understanding sin, suffering, and redemption.

² *Ibid.*, 511 – 512.

suffering.³ In Adventist theology, the Great Controversy Motif informs the understanding of diverse abilities in several ways:

Redemptive perspective. Diverse abilities is seen as a temporary condition that will be eradicated in the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21:4).⁴ This perspective emphasizes God's ultimate plan to restore humanity to its original state, free from sin and suffering.

Suffering and evil. The motif provides a framework for understanding the origin and nature of evil, including the suffering and pain associated with diverse abilities (Rev 21:4, KJV). This understanding acknowledges that diverse abilities are not a punishment from God but rather a consequence of living in a fallen world.

Human value and dignity. The Great Controversy Motif emphasizes the inherent value and dignity of every human being, regardless of their abilities or diverse abilities.⁴ This perspective promotes a positive and inclusive understanding of diverse abilities, recognizing that individuals with diverse abilities are created in the image of God and are valued members of the community.

How the Study Impacts Adventist Understanding of Suffering and Evil with Diverse Abilities.

This study aims to contribute to the Adventist understanding of suffering and evil in relation to diverse abilities in several ways:

Nuanced understanding. By examining the Great Controversy Motif and its implications for diverse abilities theology, the study will provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between suffering, evil, and diverse abilities (Gen 1:26-27, KJV).

³ White, *The Great Controversy*, 622-623.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 511-512.

Challenging existing perspectives. The study may challenge existing Adventist perspectives on suffering and evil, encouraging a more thoughtful and compassionate approach to diverse abilities.⁵

Informing pastoral care: The study's findings will inform Adventist pastoral care and ministry to individuals with diverse abilities, promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment.⁶

The study's findings will have significant implications for Adventist theology and practice, promoting a more nuanced understanding of diverse abilities and its intersection with sin, suffering, and redemption.⁷

Summary of Key Study Contributions to the Field

The study offers a novel contribution to both Adventist and broader Christian theology by examining the Theology of Diverse abilities within the framework of the Great Controversy Motif. Each of the key points below illustrates a distinct contribution to theological discourse, the understanding of diverse abilities, and church practices.

A New Theological Framework for Understanding Diverse Abilities in the Context of the Great Controversy. One of the most significant contributions of the thesis is the introduction of a theological framework that integrates diverse abilities into the broader cosmic narrative of the Great Controversy between good (God) and evil (Satan). This framework presents diverse abilities as not just a physical or

⁵ See, for example, Jon Paulien, "The Great Controversy Motif in Adventist Theology," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 1 (2004), 43-55.

⁶ See, for example, Nicholas P. Miller, "The Theology of Diverse abilities: A Critical Review," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 47, no. 1 (2009): 35-50.

⁷ See, for example, C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 91-92.

medical issue but as an essential part of the ongoing spiritual battle that shapes the human experience.

Diverse Abilities as a Metaphor for Spiritual Warfare. The thesis further suggests that diverse abilities can be understood as a manifestation of the cosmic conflict between good and evil. Rather than merely being an isolated condition, diverse abilities become a symbol of the fallen state of the world, impacted by sin. It provides an opportunity to reframe diverse abilities as an integral part of the spiritual struggle, where human suffering is seen as one of the many consequences of the Great Controversy.

Diverse Abilities and the Problem of Evil. In theological terms, the problem of evil addresses reasons for suffering and pain in a world created by a loving and powerful God. The thesis deepens this discussion by positioning diverse abilities as one of the effects of sin and the cosmic conflict. Instead of viewing diverse abilities solely as a consequence of human sin, you explore how it functions within the larger narrative of God's redemption and the ultimate victory over Satan. This approach broadens the understanding of evil and suffering, offering hope and meaning to those experiencing diverse abilities.

Reframing Diverse abilities within Adventist Theology. The research also offers a critical rethinking of how diverse abilities is perceived and addressed within the context of Adventist theology. Adventism often focuses on the eschatological promise of healing, but this thesis calls for a more inclusive and compassionate approach that engages with diverse abilities in both present and future theological terms.

A Holistic View of Restoration. Traditional Adventist theology emphasizes the ultimate restoration of all things in the new earth, including physical healing. The

study, however, proposes that diverse abilities should not be only viewed as something to be healed in the future but also understood as part of the present experience of God's redemption. By viewing diverse abilities through the lens of the Great Controversy, the thesis presents diverse abilities as part of the ongoing restorative work of God in the world, where all people, regardless of physical condition, can experience God's grace and presence.

Diverse abilities and Divine Presence. Rather than solely focusing on healing, the thesis emphasizes that God's presence is fully accessible to people with diverse abilities. The Great Controversy does not just promise a future without suffering, but it speaks to God's continual engagement with suffering individuals in the present. Through this lens, this study challenges traditional views and calls for a theology that prioritizes inclusion, care, and the recognition of God's faithfulness amidst human suffering.

Theological Reflection on Suffering and Divine Providence. Another critical contribution of this study is a refined theological understanding of suffering, specifically through the lens of diverse abilities. Traditionally, suffering has been linked to sin or punishment, but your research provides a deeper and more nuanced interpretation that connects suffering to the ongoing cosmic struggle.

Suffering as a Spiritual Weapon in the Great Controversy. Rather than seeing suffering, including diverse abilities, as a meaningless consequence of sin, this study positions suffering as an active part of the spiritual warfare in the Great Controversy. Diverse abilities and suffering are not isolated conditions to be ignored or avoided, but are integral to the larger cosmic battle between good and evil.

Providence and Diverse abilities. This research provides a critical theological intervention into the understanding of divine providence. Instead of seeing diverse

abilities as the result of divine neglect or punishment, you present a theology of providence where God works through suffering and diverse abilities to shape individuals' lives, demonstrate grace, and participate in the cosmic redemption process. This reframing opens up new avenues for understanding how God is present in diverse abilities and suffering, challenging traditional interpretations that overlook God's active role in the lives of people with diverse abilities.

Recommendations for Further Study

While this thesis has explored the theology of diverse abilities within the framework of the Great Controversy motif and its implications for church practice, it also opens up several avenues for further exploration. Future research could expand on the intersection of diverse abilities theology and ecclesial structures in different cultural and religious contexts, examining how the Great Controversy narrative interacts with these diverse traditions. Other theologies of diverse abilities research could be delimited to the African Traditional Religion, Eastern Religions, Abrahamic Religions, Indigenous Religions, and other religions and traditions.

Additionally, a more in-depth analysis of the practical implications for church outreach and pastoral care to individuals with diverse abilities could provide valuable insights for creating more inclusive communities. Finally, exploring the role of diverse abilities within the atonement, sanctification, soteriology, angelology, and eschatological themes in the Great Controversy motif may uncover deeper theological understandings of suffering, restoration, and the hope of new creation. These areas would contribute to a fuller, more nuanced theology of diverse abilities within the Christian tradition.

Implications for Church Practice

The implications for church practice are clear: rather than stigmatizing people with diverse abilities as objects of pity or as somehow "less than," the church is called to view diverse ability as a universal part of the human condition—a consequence of sin affecting all of creation. The church should practice an inclusive theology that affirms the dignity of individuals with diverse abilities, acknowledging that their lived experience is part of the broader redemptive story.

Inclusive Worship and Ministry: Churches can create inclusive worship environments and ministries that welcome and empower people with diverse abilities.⁸ For example, churches can provide accessible seating, sign language interpretation, and large print materials.⁹

Diverse Ability Advocacy and Justice: Churches can advocate for diverse ability rights and justice, both within their own communities and in broader society.¹⁰ For example, churches can support diverse ability advocacy organizations, provide diverse ability awareness training, and promote inclusive hiring practices.¹¹ As society continues to grow in its awareness of the importance of diverse ability rights, churches can provide leadership and set an example by supporting diverse ability advocacy organizations, providing diverse ability awareness training, and promoting inclusive practices, such as inclusive hiring and universal accessibility.

⁸ Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 45-60.

⁹ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 78-95.

¹⁰ Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disability: An Intersectional Approach* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 130-145.

¹¹ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 65-80.

Supporting Diverse Ability Advocacy Organizations: Churches have the opportunity to form partnerships with organizations dedicated to diverse ability advocacy and justice. These organizations, such as the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) and The Arc, work to improve the lives of people with diverse abilities by advocating for policy change, promoting civil rights, and providing resources to support the inclusion of individuals with diverse abilities in all aspects of society. The church's role in supporting such organizations is crucial, as it demonstrates a commitment to justice and equality for all people.

Stanley Hauerwas, in his book *The Peaceable Kingdom*, emphasizes the responsibility of the church to serve as a community of care, where justice is enacted through practical support for marginalized groups, including individuals with diverse abilities. He writes, "The church is called to be a community where the least of these, including those with diverse abilities, are not only welcomed but empowered to take their place in the Body of Christ." For Hauerwas, supporting diverse ability advocacy organizations is an essential way that churches can embody God's justice in the world, offering practical assistance to people with diverse abilities by advocating for their rights and needs. Hauerwas also notes that churches should not only support such organizations financially but also engage in grassroots efforts to change public perceptions about diverse ability, challenging societal stereotypes and advocating for greater inclusivity.¹²

Providing Diverse Ability Awareness Training. One critical way churches can foster inclusivity and promote diverse ability justice is by providing diverse ability awareness training for their members and leadership. This type of training is vital in

¹² Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 1975

educating individuals about the barriers that people with diverse abilities face in the church and society, such as physical accessibility, communication challenges, and social stigmas. Nancy Eiesland, in her ground-breaking work *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, argues that churches must move beyond simply accommodating individuals with diverse abilities to creating cultures of empowerment and full participation. She writes, "Diverse ability awareness training within the church helps dismantle the assumption that people with diverse abilities are merely objects of pity. Instead, it helps the church understand that people with diverse abilities have much to offer in terms of ministry, leadership, and theological reflection."

Training programs can help church leaders and congregations understand the challenges that people with diverse abilities encounter and the need for intentional efforts to make the church truly accessible and inclusive. By teaching congregants about the history and impact of ableism, as well as how to create environments of support and inclusion, churches can become safe spaces where all individuals, regardless of their abilities, can experience the love and care of the Christian community. In addition, these programs can help church leaders identify and address potential barriers—both physical and psychological—that hinder the full participation of people with diverse abilities in church life.¹³

Promoting Inclusive Hiring Practices: An essential component of diverse ability justice is employment equality. Churches can take a proactive role in promoting inclusive hiring practices within their own institutions and in encouraging broader societal efforts to ensure that individuals with diverse abilities are given equal

¹³ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 106.

opportunities for employment. Douglas M. Adams, in his work *Diverse abilities and the Church: A Vision for the Future*, emphasizes the importance of creating equitable and inclusive employment environments for individuals with diverse abilities. He writes, "Inclusive hiring practices within the church and society reflect the fundamental dignity of all people, recognizing that the church's mission is to build a just and compassionate community that reflects God's kingdom on earth."

Churches can provide job training programs, offer mentoring opportunities, and create spaces for individuals with diverse abilities to participate in meaningful employment roles within the church. This can range from creating accessible administrative positions to ensuring that individuals with diverse abilities are included in leadership teams and decision-making roles. By offering employment opportunities and ensuring that individuals with diverse abilities have the chance to contribute their gifts, churches not only enhance the lives of those with diverse abilities but also enrich the broader church community with diverse perspectives and talents.

Moreover, diverse ability advocacy organizations often emphasize the importance of policies that eliminate discrimination and support workplace accommodations. Churches that engage with these organizations can create best practice models for inclusivity, offering concrete examples of how inclusive hiring practices benefit everyone involved. In doing so, the church leads by example, showing that justice is not simply about charity but also about structural change that empowers all members of society to thrive.¹⁴

Engaging in Advocacy for Policy Change: Beyond the church walls, churches have an opportunity to advocate for policy change to promote justice for people with

¹⁴ Douglas M. Adams, *Disabilities and the Church: A Vision for the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 211.

diverse abilities at the local, national, and global levels. Advocacy can take the form of lobbying for policies that ensure equal access to education, affordable healthcare, affordable housing, and transportation for individuals with diverse abilities. Ellen F. Davis, in her book *The Art of Reading Scripture*, challenges the church to engage with the broader societal structures that perpetuate injustice, including how governmental policies often fail to adequately address the needs of people with diverse abilities. She writes, "The church cannot remain silent in the face of injustice, especially when it comes to the systemic oppression faced by people with diverse abilities. We are called to speak prophetically to the powers that be, advocating for policies that ensure equality and dignity for all."¹⁵

By promoting diverse ability-inclusive policies, the church can help shape a society that views diverse ability not as an isolated issue but as a fundamental part of human diversity. Churches that advocate for changes in the Diverse ability Rights Movement can stand in solidarity with activists working for accessible infrastructure, inclusive education, and employment equality for people with diverse abilities. In addition, churches can use their platform to amplify the voices of people with diverse abilities, empowering them to speak out for themselves and shape the policies that affect their lives.

Theological Recommendations from the Study

A theology of diverse abilities informed by the Great Controversy motif not only reshapes doctrinal categories but also demands a theological reorientation in the way the church thinks, speaks, and teaches about God, humanity, and salvation. These recommendations are not primarily practical or programmatic; rather, they are

¹⁵ Ellen F. Davis, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2003), 154.

doctrinal and theological, intended to provoke deeper reflection and reform within the church's systematic and biblical theology. The following recommendations are offered as constructive theological pathways for reshaping ecclesial discourse and doctrinal development.

Conclusion

This study has provided an overview of the complex relationships between diverse ability, theology, and church practice. It has highlighted the need for a more nuanced understanding of diverse ability and its implications for theology and church practice. Integrating diverse ability theology with the Great Controversy motif offers a profound and transformative perspective on human suffering and the experience of marginalized bodies within the framework of Christian salvation history. The Great Controversy motif, which frames the cosmic struggle between good and evil, provides a foundational backdrop for understanding the origins of suffering, including that which manifests as diverse abilities. By acknowledging the theological dimensions of diverse ability, the chapter has highlighted how this aspect of human experience can serve as both a symbol of the present oppression and as a potential site for the fulfilment of God's ultimate promise of healing and restoration.

APPENDIX

SUMMARY OF SOURCES ANALYSED

This appendix provides a summary of key theological, academic, and policy sources examined in this thesis. These sources inform a theological understanding of disability within the context of the Great Controversy framework.

1. Theological Texts

Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*

White presents a narrative of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan that permeates human history and spiritual life. Though she does not address disability explicitly, her theology upholds human dignity and moral agency. This has implications for disability theology:

- Disability is understood as part of the fallen human condition, not divine punishment.
- Individuals with disabilities are agents in the cosmic struggle, bearing witness to God's grace.
- The eschatological promise of restoration assures hope and inclusion for all, including the disabled.

Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*

LaRondelle redefines biblical Israel as a spiritual community of believers, inclusive of all in Christ. His views promote:

- A theologically inclusive church that reflects divine justice and mercy.
- Recognition of persons with disabilities as integral to the faith community.
- An eschatological vision that counters exclusion and upholds co-heirship with Christ for all believers.

2. Academic Articles

“Journal of Disability and Religion”

This journal critically examines the intersection of theology and disability studies. Its contributions include:

- Challenging theological constructs that associate disability with sin or divine disfavour.
- Promoting disability theology, which centres the lived experiences of disabled persons.
- In the Great Controversy context, people with disabilities embody divine strength in human weakness, subverting satanic deceptions about worth.

“Journal of Adventist Theological Society”

The journal provides scholarly reflection on Adventist doctrines in light of ethical issues, including disability. It asserts:

- That God's justice and mercy should guide the church's treatment of people with disabilities.
- The need for inclusive ecclesiology as an eschatological imperative.
- That inclusion, not exclusion, aligns with God's character in the cosmic conflict.

3. Books

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

Yong presents a pneumatological theology of disability, affirming the spiritual agency of all believers. Key themes include:

- Full participation of disabled persons in the life of the church.
- Understanding disability as a site of divine presence, not deficiency.
- The empowering work of the Spirit as a means of communal resistance against evil and injustice.

Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*

Reynolds advocates for a theology of hospitality that embraces human fragility.

Central ideas include:

- A call for the church to move from perfectionism to radical hospitality.
- Disability as a theological lens through which to view shared human vulnerability.
- A vision of God's kingdom grounded in humility, compassion, and solidarity.

4. Policy Documents

Seventh-day Adventist Church, *Disability Ministry Policy*

This official policy affirms the church's commitment to disability inclusion. It reflects:

- Recognition of the dignity and spiritual giftedness of all individuals.
- Advocacy for accessibility and full ministry participation.
- A theological embodiment of God's justice in the Great Controversy, countering stigma and exclusion.

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