

# not abandoned



**T**he SUV showed considerable age and apparent hard use. A bit of rust, some dents, and a less-than-polished appearance revealed either neglect or an owner with better things to do than fuss over his or her car's exterior. A blue sticker with white letters boldly proclaimed, "This is *not* an abandoned car!"

Perhaps the owners enjoyed an inside joke with friends, some good-natured teasing about neighborhood blight, or offers of a free tow to the junkyard. Maybe the driver relished this

**Rich Dixon, himself a quadriplegic, reflects on God's view of those who suffer from disfigurements of mind, body, or both.**

small symbol of rebellion in a culture of conformity that associates status with a shiny new auto.

There's something healthy about not taking a car's appearance too

are physically or mentally different from expected norms. Church folks probably display a bit more outward compassion, but I suspect our human propensity toward internal uneasiness doesn't disappear at the sanctuary door.

In fact, the reaction in church may approach the opposite extreme of the anxiety spectrum. Sincere efforts to demonstrate gracious acceptance may heap excess attention on someone with an apparent physical

need. Admirable intent leads to a familiar result—an unwelcome feeling of separation and distinction on the part of the disabled person.

As I pondered that bumper sticker's message, I wondered if God sometimes wants to place a sign on some of His people: "This is *not* an abandoned person!"

## my accident

I'm 57 years old. A freak accident, a cervical spinal cord injury, and quadriplegia have confined me to a wheelchair for more than two decades. I know how it feels to be a beat-up old car. I waited nearly ten years for someone to tow me out of sight so I wouldn't detract from the carefully cultivated neighborhood ambiance.

Prior to my accident, I earned a master's degree and worked as

**WE AVOID, STARE, OR SIMPLY SQUELCH THE DESIRE TO TURN AWAY WHEN WE ENCOUNTER SOMEONE WHO'S OUTSIDE THE TIDY LITTLE BOX OF "NORMAL" APPEARANCE.**

seriously. I appreciate the use of self-deprecating humor to convey a serious message, and that bumper sticker made me wonder about society's celebration of physical perfection.

I've learned to accept awkward incidents when well-meaning folks become uncomfortable at the sight of my wheelchair. I've learned to chuckle when kids stare or ask innocent questions before their parents can shush them up. Yet even with my heightened sensitivity, I myself still react to others who have a physical disfigurement, injury, or illness. We all do it at some level: we avoid, stare, or simply squelch the desire to turn away when we encounter someone who's outside the tidy little box of "normal" appearance.

The church isn't immune from this inclination toward embarrassed unease in the presence of those who

a counselor, teacher, and coach. I owned a general contracting business and did construction work. Since my injury, I've been a successful middle school mathematics teacher, a role that would terrify most able-bodied people. I've cranked a hand cycle more than three thousand miles in a year.

Despite indecipherable handwriting, I've learned to communicate effectively by typing on a keyboard with the eraser ends of two pencils, because my paralyzed fingers can't strike the keys. Using this improvised technique, I've published several magazine articles and written a book.

None of these defines me or determines my significance.

I have worth for one simple reason: God created me and loves me. Limitations caused by injury and tasks I can no longer perform don't diminish me in God's eyes, nor do milestones on the path to surviving and thriving in spite of tragedy add to my value.

The simple children's song says, "Jesus loves me, this I know," and that's truly all I need to know. God loves me so much that He sent His Son to die for me, and nothing I do, nothing I am, can enhance or detract from the price Jesus paid for me.

### my limited perspective

For many years after my injury,

I could see only what I'd lost, the tasks I no longer performed independently. Since I share the human propensity to act as though I am the center of the universe, I was certain that others also perceived me as worthless and useless. Able only to recognize incapacity, I believed I could no longer contribute.

Thankfully, God's grace dwarfed my limited perspective. Where I saw hopelessness, He saw carefully crafted potential. Where I saw a damaged, broken body, He saw His precious creation. I thought I was destined for the junkyard, but despite the battered exterior, He refused to abandon me.

When the neurosurgeon initially explained the extent and potential consequences of my injury, I tried to lighten the mood with an old joke. "Doc, will I be able to play the piano?"

"Maybe."

"Great, because I sure couldn't play before the accident."

My lame attempt at humor actually contained a kernel of wisdom. Before my injury, I never perceived myself as worthless because I couldn't play the piano. I simply accepted that everyone had strengths and weaknesses, and playing the piano wasn't one of my strengths.

Gradually, I realized that my situation hadn't really changed. I could do some tasks well, some poorly, and

some not at all. God directs me to identify and develop my gifts and use them to serve others. Despite my injury, I was fundamentally no different than anyone else.

## THE CHURCH SUFFERS WHEN WE MARGINALIZE ANYONE WHO'S DIFFERENT, BECAUSE WE DISCOUNT THAT PERSON'S UNIQUE GIFTS.

The church isn't created for the sporty new cars of humanity. From God's perspective, we all need major repair work, but He wants to use us anyway. He instructs the church to help each person discover his or her own unique gifts and then provide avenues of service through which these gifts can contribute to building up His kingdom.

### the body of Christ

Paul used the metaphor of a human body to explain that every person plays an essential role in the church. He dismissed the notion of expendable parts: "On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:22).

God doesn't make junk. He created each of us with a purpose. Even those of us who are a little beat up—and that's *all of us*—have something crucial to offer. It's the church's role

to provide even dented, rusty people an opportunity to serve and fulfill their unique purpose.

I can't lift furniture or shovel snow, but I can write, speak, and teach. It took a long time for me to understand that a disability doesn't provide a free pass to waste God's gifts. I'm here for a reason. My accidental injury doesn't make me an accident. I'm called to be a responsible steward of my abilities—*just like everyone else!*

It's still not easy. The wheelchair demands a special space. Crippled fingers fumble in frustration when someone extends a hand in greeting. Lifeless legs still make me want to hide in embarrassment. Weaknesses and failures tempt me to believe the enemy's message that I don't belong, that I'm messing up the appearance of the neighborhood.

### it's not about me

I still need to be reminded that it's not about me or my personal comfort level. It's about the church and its mission.

It's about God.

The enemy urges us toward those most similar to ourselves. He knows that Paul was serious about every part being essential. The church suffers when we marginalize anyone who's different, because we discount that person's unique gifts.

"But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:24–27).

Look around. The wheelchair transports one who's injured or ill. We're called to look beyond appearance and see an integral part of Christ's body. That sight-impaired or hearing-impaired person carries some special gift that completes us.

The lady with a disfiguring injury, the guy in the shabby clothing, the young man with the disease that makes him look different—they're not here by accident. We need them.

God hasn't abandoned them. He doesn't want us to gently tow them out of sight. He wants us to help them discover and use their gifts in His service.

And He doesn't want me to hide either. I used to imagine that God removed my hair because He liked looking down at my head. I'm starting to think He might intend my bare scalp as a place to display His reminder, "You're not an abandoned person!"

✞



Need restoration?

Answers FOR ME

visit: [www.answersforme.org](http://www.answersforme.org) - Real help for real people

The advertisement features a photograph of a rusted, vintage car in a field. The text "Need restoration?" is at the top. The "Answers FOR ME" logo is in the bottom right, and the website URL and tagline are at the bottom.