

# *Gelassenheit* and Intellectual Disability

Daniel Rempel

## ABSTRACT

Many early Anabaptists held the concept of *Gelassenheit* near to the heart of their understanding of theology and ethics. However, *Gelassenheit* has become a term that may be used colloquially but has largely fallen out of scholarly discourse. This essay attempts to reclaim an understanding of it for contemporary Anabaptism while at the same time showing the liberatory power that it can have for understanding the places and roles of people with intellectual disabilities in our communities today. The author brings *Gelassenheit* into a particular realm of the ethical and suggests where it may find a place in the world of disability theology.

There has never been a consensus on what exactly is meant by the term *Gelassenheit*. While scholars agree that it was used widely among early Anabaptists—particularly those from a “mystical” stream—how various individuals employed it was slightly nuanced.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the difficulty in coming to a precise understanding of *Gelassenheit* today is compounded by the fact that it does not easily translate into English. Indeed, in an essay attempting to recover an understanding of *Gelassenheit* for 20th-century Anabaptists, Robert Friedmann noted up to fifteen different possible English renderings of the word.<sup>2</sup> Friedmann, like many who came after him, settled

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<sup>1</sup> See Walter Klaassen, “‘Gelassenheit’ and Creation,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 9, no. 1 (1991): 23-35. Klaassen begins the arduous task of assessing and explicating the various nuanced views of early Anabaptist understandings of *Gelassenheit*, but more work must be done to fully recognize the breadth of usage across the early radical reformers.

<sup>2</sup> Friedmann lists the following terms as possible renderings: resignation, calmness of mind, composure, staidness, conquest of selfishness, long-sufferingness, collectedness, silence of the soul, tranquility, inner surrender, acquiescence, submission to God, yieldedness, *ataraxia*, unresponsiveness, equanimity, imperturbability, unconcern, detachment. See Robert Friedmann, “Anabaptism and Protestantism,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24, no. 1 (January 1950): 22, n17.

on “yieldedness,” particularly in relation to an inner surrender and conquest of one’s self, as perhaps the best understanding of what early Anabaptists generally meant by the term.<sup>3</sup>

What are Anabaptists today to do with this lack of consensus and coherence around what has been regarded as a central spiritual doctrine of the radical reformers? Two immediate options present themselves: 1) conduct a historical survey of early Anabaptist understandings of *Gelassenheit*, or 2) using the knowledge we have of early Anabaptist conceptions, construct a usable albeit provisional understanding of the term, subject to change upon the findings of further research. I have chosen the second option. First, in drawing upon the constructive work of Walter Klaassen and C. Arnold Snyder, I excavate what a contemporary definition of *Gelassenheit* might look like for Anabaptist theology and ethics. Second, I explore how it is helpful for accurately picturing the place and role of people with intellectual disabilities in our churches and communities today.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Gelassenheit*: Klaassen and Snyder**

In “‘Gelassenheit’ and Creation,” Walter Klaassen examines the term *Gelassenheit* to glean from it a modern relevance for Anabaptist theology.<sup>5</sup> Locating early Anabaptist understandings of the term in the tradition of German mysticism,<sup>6</sup> he notes two things that can be drawn from these early mystics. First, *Gelassenheit* entails detachment from the self and all created things in order to be attached closely to God.<sup>7</sup> Second, “creatures” were understood not to be particulars of the physical creation but included human creations such as wealth, property, sexual expression, or anything

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 22. However, even in settling on this definition Friedmann is quick to qualify his thoughts, in hopes that the term may be understood correctly. He observes that *Gelassenheit* does not denote a passive principle but an active spiritual practice that should move believers towards brotherly love, which he believes “yieldedness” as a translation captures.

<sup>4</sup> My hope is to stimulate constructive thinking about *Gelassenheit*, and should someone provide a more robust definition of the term that renders this definition obsolete, I would welcome it as a valuable contribution to the discourse.

<sup>5</sup> Klaassen, “‘Gelassenheit’ and Creation,” 23.

<sup>6</sup> Klaassen identifies Meister Eckhart, Johann Tauler, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Julian of Norwich, and *German Theology* as major influences on early Anabaptist understandings of *Gelassenheit*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 24.

else that one could come to depend upon. These mystics “were saying that creatures are precisely that—created—and that they cannot be depended on for salvation.”<sup>8</sup> This view of *Gelassenheit* set the stage for the emergence of Anabaptist accounts a few centuries later.<sup>9</sup>

Much Anabaptist discourse on *Gelassenheit* remained similar to that of their medieval mystical predecessors. However, the biggest change in the concept’s transference from German mysticism to that discourse was that while Anabaptists took over the robust theological vision of this mysticism, they placed more emphasis on practice. For Klaassen, this is explained by the mystics being cloistered monastics while the Anabaptists “were uncloistered and exposed to the world.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the emergence of Anabaptism brought the practice of *Gelassenheit* into the world for the first time, subject to new and different challenges than those present in segregated monastic communities. Klaassen concludes the essay by seeking to evoke an understanding of the concept for Anabaptists today. To accomplish this, he highlights the role of creation in Anabaptist theology and ethics. This is an easy, straightforward connection to make, for as noted above, early conceptions of *Gelassenheit* always invoked a particular ordered understanding of the place of created things in this world. Thus, Klaassen views it as “a symbol both for our state of being and for the character of our action in the world” insofar as a proper Anabaptist spirituality ought to wrestle with how we order our being and our lives in relation to God and the rest of the created world.<sup>11</sup>

He suggests four practical measures that Anabaptists can take to practice *Gelassenheit* today. First, it means living without weapons.<sup>12</sup> As yieldedness to the will and work of God in the world, it means “the renunciation of all attempts to impose our own solutions on the issues of the present by our restless, distracted activity.” This involves the renunciation of control and abandonment of manipulation in submission to God. Living with weapons negates this surrender of control. Second, it means patience,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>9</sup> Here, Andreas Carlstadt, Hans Denck, Thomas Müntzer, Hans Hut, Michael Sattler, Ulrich Stadler, and Pilgram Marpeck all figure prominently, which illustrates the breadth of usage of the term among early Anabaptists.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 33.

that is, “waiting on the Lord for the outcome of what we are and do.” Patience becomes a part of the noncoercive nature of *Gelassenheit* as believers resist attempts to control or manipulate outcomes towards their wills and desires. Third, it requires renunciation of wrath, the “underlying continual resentment against the world” that can manifest itself against others who do not share our stance on justice, peace, or a host of other issues.<sup>13</sup> Fourth, it means detachment from created things, the very things that we put in the place of God. Klaassen reiterates that “created things” are not simply the physical acts of creation but “everything that constitutes human life in this world. It means ourselves, time, science, religion, theologies, structures of thought, institutions, church, programs, five-year plans of all sorts, calls-to-kingdom-commitment, MCC; all these are the creatures, in addition, of course, to our houses, cars, computers, libraries, and so on, from all of which we need to become detached.” Thus, living *Gelassenheit* is to live truly in this world, knowing the joy and peaceful contentment that comes through God, all the while participating in a struggle for shalom through trust in Jesus Christ.

In “*Gelassenheit* and Power: Some Historical Reflections,” C. Arnold Snyder also seeks to bring *Gelassenheit* into contemporary Anabaptist practice.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Klaassen, who focuses primarily on creation as the realm of *Gelassenheit*, Snyder situates his reflection on its role in the relation between inner and outer transformation, by which he hopes to guide Anabaptist perspectives on power. He states that the early Anabaptists were primarily concerned not with issues of power and authority but with issues pertaining to one’s salvation.<sup>15</sup> According to Snyder, central to their view of salvation was an insistence upon coming into a right relationship with God. Thus, questions about this relationship naturally flow into questions about how believers can come into a right relationship with each other. Ultimately, at the heart of both questions lies the defining attitude of *Gelassenheit*, which he identifies as “yieldedness, abandonment, resignation, and complete

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>14</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, “*Gelassenheit* and Power: Some Historical Reflections,” *Vision* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 6-13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 6.

acceptance of what God wills.”<sup>16</sup>

Similar to Klaassen, Snyder draws attention to *Gelassenheit* as it is lived in the world, the realm of human sinfulness and alienation from God. He argues that the first step to practicing it is to recognize our fallen, helpless state, and to call on God to deliver us out of our own helplessness. This can be done only in a spirit of genuine need and humility.<sup>17</sup> Such humility is bound up in recognition of our helplessness when we realize that we cannot rely on any worldly domain to achieve salvation and are entirely at the mercy of God. As a result, Snyder argues that *Gelassenheit* involves a certain amount of standing idle, learning “to entrust and yield our lives to the living power of God in Christ. . . . *Gelassenheit* is the doing that, paradoxically, is a surrender of doing, a surrender of control.”<sup>18</sup> It becomes a spiritual discipline by actively surrendering human will to the power of God so that God is free to act in the world through us. In “standing idle,” Christians are not to do nothing but to recognize the role and place of the One who can do all things in us. *Gelassenheit* thus becomes a paradigm for discipleship, which is not to be regarded as doing the best by one’s human power but as attentively yielding to the will of the Spirit working in us.<sup>19</sup> By yielding to this power, Christians are led to the obedience of God, which has always been at the core of Anabaptist teachings on spirituality and discipleship.

### **A Guide to Reflection**

Klaassen and Snyder offer two windows through which to view the relationship between *Gelassenheit* and discipleship today. Both authors posit readings of the concept that easily translate into concrete practices. In examining their essays side by side, we are given some of the tools for crafting our own preliminary understanding of the concept. Before examining concrete practices in the same vein as these authors, I offer four points to guide the reflection on *Gelassenheit* and disability in the rest of this essay.

1) *Gelassenheit begins as yieldedness to God’s working in the world.* A proper understanding of *Gelassenheit* requires grasping that this practice

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 10.

always begins with God's action in the world. It never begins with human action. However, this does not negate the fact that *Gelassenheit* occurs in the world, precisely in the midst of human fallenness and helplessness. It also recognizes that fallen, sinful creatures are not abandoned by a distant God but rather are creatures helped on by an active and living God. Recognizing this point is foundational.

2) *Gelassenheit involves an active surrender, not a passive idling.* Just as God is living and active in the world, so too disciples must be living and active in the world. However, human action and God's action will look different, as we must patiently wait and act for God's command to declare the way that we should move. To yield to God's action in the world means recognizing that we cannot rush to quick conclusions. But this does not mean doing nothing. Rather, active surrender involves readying ourselves, attuning ourselves to God so that when the time comes, we are ready to act following God's command.

3) *Gelassenheit invokes noncoercion.* Because of *Gelassenheit's* insistence on our reliance upon God's work to move before us, disciples who practice it remove themselves from reliance on coercive practices, recognizing the freedom at play between humanity and God. Here, Klaassen is emphatic, stressing both living without weapons and renouncing wrath as contemporary methods of living *Gelassenheit* today. At its heart is a surrender of control of our lives over to God. Any attempt at coercion would cease to live into this active surrender.

4) *Gelassenheit provides a paradigm for discipleship.* The early Anabaptists were right to bring *Gelassenheit* into the realm of the ethical, and Anabaptists have maintained this ethical impulse throughout history. However, this impulse must follow discipleship, which ought to be guided by the movement of the Spirit among us. *Gelassenheit* ensures that we rightly order our discipleship, in that it always begins with, and leads from, the action of God in the world before us. While, as Snyder argues, discipleship requires an outer transformation that makes visible an inner transformation, this transformation always begins with God's prior act that goes before our own.

***Gelassenheit and the Care of People with Disabilities***

The early Anabaptists have been credited with bringing the practices of *Gelassenheit* into the realm of the ethical. Similarly, the exposition of Klaassen and Snyder drew on examples of what such practices may look like for contemporary Anabaptists in the realm of creation theology and the world of power. Here I want to bring *Gelassenheit* into a particular realm of the ethical by examining a few preliminary places it may occupy in the world of disability theology. The first and perhaps most obvious connection between *Gelassenheit* and intellectual disability relates to how the so-called “able-bodied” are to treat and respond to those in their communities understood to be “intellectually disabled.” Assuming that able-bodied persons come into contact with people with intellectual disabilities in churches, jobs, families, or other social spaces, what role can a practice of *Gelassenheit* have on how able-bodied persons relate to those with intellectual disabilities? It is helpful to draw direct connections to the summarized implications listed above:

1) *Yieldedness to God’s working in the world.* In *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, Brian Brock appeals to patristic theology to recover the church fathers’ view of anomalous births and the “strange vocations” of these children.<sup>20</sup> Drawing particularly on Augustine, Brock notes that he viewed these births as having been “created by God for a reason,” identifying them as “a special *communicative act* of God.”<sup>21</sup> For Augustine “some impairments had to be understood positively as divine speech in the world.”<sup>22</sup> This is not to conclude that people with intellectual disabilities are “holy innocents” or as incapable of sin, but rather to recognize the unique role and gift they can offer to churches and societies.

Augustine’s understanding of anomalous births aligns well with the first tenet of *Gelassenheit* outlined above. To yield to God’s working in the world gives us the capacity to recognize that perhaps God has created people with intellectual disabilities exactly as they are for a particular purpose and place in this world. Recognizing this possibility can lead us to consider the

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<sup>20</sup> An anomalous birth was taken by Augustine as “a clear departure from the orderly progress of nature.” Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2019), 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. Italics original.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

ramifications of a God who refuses to abandon us and is active in the day-to-day lives of all people. While it would be wrong to universalize a role inhabited by people with intellectual disabilities, *Gelassenheit* allows us to assume that they have particular giftings precisely because they are just as much a part of God's working in the world as anyone else.

2) *Active surrender, not passive idling.* Another work that aids consideration of *Gelassenheit's* place in disability theology is William Gaventa's "Learning from People with Disabilities: How to Ask the Right Questions." Gaventa reflects on his role as a chaplain in two large residential facilities earlier in his career, in which it became clear that two theological linchpins held together everything that he did: celebration and belonging.<sup>23</sup> What is notable is not his conclusions—although I have no qualms with where he ends up—but his methodology. He focuses on how proper care of people with disabilities involves placing them at the center of reflection. At the heart of Gaventa's self-examination is this idea:

[P]eople with disabilities raise our awareness of the many ways of our connectedness to others because of the profound ways in which the quality of their lives depends on the care and support of others. We build systems of support and service to help so-called dependent people develop more independence; but in the process of getting to know them as individuals, we become more profoundly aware of how all of our lives are *interdependent*.<sup>24</sup>

It was not generic practices that allowed Gaventa to care for and minister to people with disabilities. It was rather his active engagement in the life of the particular person, exemplifying the active surrender of *Gelassenheit*, that enabled him to minister to those under his care. Just as the disciple who practices *Gelassenheit* yields to the work of the Spirit, so the caregiver yields to the needs of the person with a disability. Gaventa recognizes the role that systems of support and service have in caring for and ministering to people with disabilities, but at the same time urges his readers to go beyond those systems towards the heart of the individual, actively

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<sup>23</sup> William C. Gaventa, "Learning from People with Disabilities: How to Ask the Right Questions," in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans Reinders (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 103.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.



surrendering to their needs and will.

3) *Noncoercion*. In “Having and Learning to Care for Retarded Children,” Stanley Hauerwas voices a concern for the place of children with disabilities in our society, particularly how we can welcome them into our lives.<sup>25</sup> He does this not out of a desire to argue for what these children can provide for us but to urge us to reflect on “what kind of families and communities should we be so we could welcome retarded children into our midst regardless of the happy or unhappy consequences they may bring.”<sup>26</sup> For Hauerwas, families and communities must be places where children with disabilities are cared for, but this care involves less of a “doing for” than a “being with.” The charge to be with another necessitates acting in a way that our actions are directed not towards preserving ourselves but towards serving the other. Being with another means acting on their behalf, modifying both our behavior and our desires in a way that benefits the other’s life.

Focusing on “being with” rather than “doing for” represents a way of enacting the noncoercive nature of *Gelassenheit*. Operating under the presupposition that care primarily involves a “doing for,” Christians can fall into the error of assuming that they know best and must coerce those in their care to conform to their own vested interests. Noncoercive care and ministry, on the other hand, allows space for human flourishing that may look different from how we think it ought to look. By yielding to God’s work in the world, the disciple trusts God to move and work in those being cared for and ministered to, so that they too can flourish through that work.

4) *Paradigm for discipleship*. Just as practicing *Gelassenheit* may challenge assumptions about discipleship that see it as something humans initiate or control, incorporating people with disabilities into our churches may change the lens through which we conceive discipleship. In following the work of the Spirit, churches may be led to new places where they did not expect to go. Similarly, by following and taking seriously the needs of these people in our communities, churches may be led into new understandings

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<sup>25</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “Having and Learning to Care for Retarded Children,” in *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1977). Hauerwas’s use of “retarded” comes out of a period where it was the socially accepted word for persons with intellectual disability. While I will quote him as he wrote in order to be faithful to his text, I do not endorse his use of the word in our present context.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

of discipleship and spiritual practices. An example of this change is found in John Swinton's *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship*.<sup>27</sup> Swinton crafts a vision of discipleship based on "living in God's time." This vision entails an understanding of time occurring in God, which involves a particular attentiveness and slowness that allows people with disabilities the space to flourish. This leads Swinton to claim that "viewed from within God's time, disability is not perceived in terms of abnormality or tragedy. Rather, if we time it properly, disability plays powerfully into our understanding of the beauty of human diversity and opens up fresh conduits for receiving God's revelation."<sup>28</sup> Like this re-framing of time in light of God, *Gelassenheit* as a practice of discipleship may cause us to reconceive the spiritual role and place of people with disabilities in our churches.

### **People with Disabilities as Exemplars of *Gelassenheit***

The reader may have noticed the difficulty with which I tried above to speak of caring for and ministering to people with disabilities, something the "able-bodied" perform, in effect a one-way street. Care and ministry are never a one-way street, as if carers and ministers could perform their tasks without being simultaneously confronted by those they are caring for and ministering to. Thus, let me suggest that people with disabilities—not the caregivers—may actually be the exemplars of the practice of *Gelassenheit* today. By drawing on a real-life example, I will provide a snapshot of how *Gelassenheit* looks when we incorporate people with intellectual disabilities into our communities.

The example is a story Brian Brock tells about his son Adam in *Wondrously Wounded*. Adam, now sixteen, lives with Down Syndrome and autism. However, what ties the book together is not how Brock has come to be a better parent to a child with a disability, but how he has been repeatedly confronted by his son's prophetic witness. While he does not identify Adam's actions in exactly this way, we can read many vignettes in *Wondrously*

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<sup>27</sup> John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2016). For a more in-depth engagement with *Becoming Friends of Time*, see Daniel Rempel, "Disability, Productivity, and Living in God's Time," *Macrina Magazine*, February 1, 2020, <https://macrinamagazine.com/theology/guest/2020/02/01/disability-productivity-and-living-in-gods-time/>.

<sup>28</sup> Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*, 87.

*Wounded* as Adam practicing *Gelassenheit*. One instance Brock identifies as an “assault of grace”:

The setting is a public space, this time a crowded sidewalk on the main street in the middle of Aberdeen. An obviously inebriated man is confronting people on the busy sidewalk, shouting in each recoiling face in turn, ‘Come on, want to fight?’ Adam is not spared the challenge, offered with the same aggression that is setting the teeth on edge of everyone within earshot. Without hesitation, Adam reaches up, placing his hand flat across the mouth of the angry man towering over him (Hello!). This hurting man’s aggressive mask immediately crumbled at a personal touch suffused with kindness.<sup>29</sup>

Here we see Adam responding to the needs of “an obviously inebriated man” through the kindness of physical touch. There is nothing coercive about Adam’s actions, yet they suffuse grace into a situation of pain and anger. Such a response could likely not have occurred if an older, able-bodied individual had attempted the same thing. Yet Adam, who lives with the obvious visible characteristics of Down Syndrome, was able to follow the Spirit’s guidance and diffuse an obnoxious, uncomfortable situation with the gift of touch.

Like Adam’s touch, which surprised the inebriated man on the crowded sidewalk, *Gelassenheit* may surprise us. Because it occurs as a result of following God in the world, we cannot expect that it will look the same in every context. It may appear in the oddest, most unexpected places. Indeed, the apostle Paul captures its potential location by stating that “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27-28 NRSV). Adam, who may be looked down upon by society because of his Down Syndrome and autism, may be precisely the one who God chooses to act through, and thus the one who models *Gelassenheit* as an exemplar of God’s work in the world.

Perhaps it is *Adam* who is the provocateur revealing the resistance of the church and world to lives like his, and is drawing *us* in. Or

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<sup>29</sup> Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 239.

perhaps each of us has been given our own strange vocations in service of the merciful assault of Jesus Christ on the sin of the world. In a church born from this mercy, we might well discover that Jesus Christ is making humans of us all.<sup>30</sup>

This brief account offers a glimpse into the way in which people with disabilities may be exemplars of *Gelassenheit* in our communities. Adam, as a unique member of the Body of Christ, will have his own particular witness, and not every person with disability will model *Gelassenheit* in the same way. However, by conceiving it through the particular witness of Adam, we are afforded a view into the profound way they can confront the world with their own “assaults of grace.”

### **Conclusion**

In this essay I have explored the theme of *Gelassenheit* by attempting to construct a working definition by which Christians may come to a lived experience of the work of the Spirit in their lives. By employing intellectual disability as a lens, I sought to show how *Gelassenheit* provides a paradigm for the care of people with disabilities, as well as how these people may confront us with a witness of *Gelassenheit*. This essay is only a preliminary reflection on how Anabaptists can conceive of *Gelassenheit* today and on how they can choose to think of and incorporate people with disabilities into their lives. More certainly can and should be said on both *Gelassenheit* and disability. But for now, I suggest that yielding to the work of the Spirit in the world is something that should affect all areas of our lives, including the lives of those with intellectual disabilities.

*Daniel Rempel is a Ph.D. Candidate in Theological Ethics at The University of Aberdeen.*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 240.