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Women, Disabled

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12 *Women, Disabled*

JANA BENNETT

The dissonance raised by the nonacceptance of persons with disabilities and the acceptance of grace through Christ's broken body necessitates that the church find new ways of interpreting disability.

Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God*

Women are disabled. This is not simply the notion that some women have disabilities (in the way that I myself am a woman with a hearing loss), but that the very fact of being a woman is a disability. I have no doubt that there are people who might find this statement offensive. People with disabilities (as commonly understood) might find it so because it would seem to lessen difficulties, pains, and real encumbrances that disability entails. Some feminists might do so because it would seem to emphasize some of the very stereotypes of women that they wish to overcome: that women are weak and irrational.

Yet I do not make this statement to be provocative so much as to highlight that women's problems have been curiously similar to those experienced by people with disabilities. By many feminist accounts, Nancy Eiesland's quote above could easily apply to women, substituting "women" for "persons with disabilities." The woman-disability connection exists in part because feminists often write about the ways in which women wrestle with bodies that are limiting and frustrating, and the ways in which Christians have contributed to poor theology and oppressive practices about those bodies. As Doreen Freeman writes, "Looking through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and writings of the tradition, it is hard to tell women

apart from disabled people” (Freeman 2002, 74). Writers over the centuries have noted that women bleed, are missing (apparently) some key anatomy, and are not rational — just as those with disabilities have wounds that don’t heal, may be missing some parts of their anatomy, and may not present themselves as rational. Feminist and disability theologians alike critique thought that suggests “normal” is a young, physically muscular, perfectly formed adult male body, which by default is rational. Bodies are especially difficult and frustrating for those who are patronized or persecuted because of them, so in this sense, perhaps women and people with disabilities have similar concerns and points to share with each other. Although thoughts about disability and women may well be intertwined, disability theologians and feminist theologians rarely reference each other except in passing.

Of course, I have a caveat to all this. Saying that women are disabled does not thereby mean that women intuitively have a greater understanding of what it means to live in a wheelchair or any host of other ways in which bodies can be disabling. That women (and men) have reflected on bodily frustrations about gender in ways that intersect with work done by disability theologians does not yield a universal account of disability. And yet, I think that feminists and disability theologians can learn something from each other. My aim in this chapter, therefore, is to tell a story about feminist theology in terms of thinking about disability. My telling of the story highlights the similarity of questions and observations made for both and *also* indicates some of the ways in which feminism and disability theology have not been good for each other. Ultimately, I make the case that naming women as disabled, even with all the caveats, opens a space for a better theological anthropology — a better understanding of who we are as God’s creatures.

The three excerpts I have chosen help me tell this story (though not exhaustively). The first excerpt is written by Rosemary Radford Ruether, a Catholic theologian currently working at Graduate Theological Union, who offers a survey of several kinds of feminism and proposes her own liberatory model of feminism. The second excerpt is by Nancy Eiesland, a disability theologian most known for her book *The Disabled God*. Eiesland taught at Candler School of Theology and was interested in how feminist theology intersected with liberation models of disability. The third excerpt is from Sarah Coakley, who teaches at Harvard Divinity School. Unlike Ruether and Eiesland, Coakley has taken questions about bodies in postmodern directions, following the work of feminist theorists like Judith Butler.

I offer an additional note about “feminism” here. The word usually refers to twentieth-century and twenty-first-century academics, activists, and

Others concerned for women's political and economic rights (such as the right to get a divorce on the same terms as men can), as well as the ways in which history and culture have often made women out to be lesser beings. The word therefore involves several diverse collections of ideas and people, so that contemporary scholars speak of "feminisms" in the plural.

If there is a common issue that unites these diverse feminisms together, I think it may well be concern for bodies. Different feminist perspectives will variously approach what "the body" means, but all have confronted the inescapable fact that humans exasperatingly inhabit bodies that mark and limit them. Feminist theologies therefore provide an excellent opportunity for thinking through various approaches toward disabled bodies.

The Body to Be Surpassed

This history begins with many people's realization that Jewish and Christian traditions have long considered both women and those with disabilities to be troublesome. At least as far back as the Grimké sisters (nineteenth century), women have wondered what it is about their bodies that prohibits them from working outside the home, from seeking ordination, and from having equal legal rights (and even authority) over men. Creation, in Genesis, looms large: Eve is taken from Adam's side and is therefore inferior to Adam, because he was made directly by God. Even from her very birth, then (at least according to the second creation account), Eve has a body that is inferior to Adam's, just as those with disabilities are seen as having inferior bodies. Moreover, being a woman is linked to sin, just as disability has often been linked to sin. Eve is the first one to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree, and thus she and all women bear the blame for sin being brought into the world, just as in ancient Hebrew tradition, disability was seen as evidence of sin.

In 12.1, Rosemary Radford Ruether traces the development of these scriptural ideas through the broader Christian tradition. She notes, for example, Augustine's sense of woman's "bodily representation of inferior, sin-prone self [so] that he regards her as possessing the image of God only secondarily" (Ruether 1993, 95). Thomas Aquinas strengthens Augustine's view in her account, because he accepts a view of women as inferior because they are reversed versions of men (*Summa Theologica* I.92). Women's genitalia are inward, receptive cavities — the reverse of men's. Men's genitalia are outward, more clearly present, and add to the sense that men are less passive. The Reformers did nothing to change bodily representations of women; in

fact, they even more strongly counted the Fall as the reason for the loss of women's equality with men. Women's subjugation is punishment for crimes committed at creation.

And so, according to tradition, these troublesome bodies cannot be ordained. Leviticus 21:16-23 says:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles."

According to this passage and others in Leviticus and Numbers, women may not be priests, but neither may those who are disabled. (For further discussion, see Christopher Newell 2007, 328.) Feminist theologians and disability theologians alike have taken on the task of reading scripture with their own respective eyes. Consider Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*, which examines stories in Hebrew scriptures for what they have to say about women, though their focus is often on men.

Added to all this is a question about salvation. The importance of Jesus is that he is the God-man, taking on human flesh, becoming one with us, and therefore offering both the possibility of salvation from sin and unification and restored friendship with God. But this point of theology has led some to ask how it is that a male savior can save women. The second part of the excerpt from Ruether addresses this question. Jesus took on only male flesh, so is there not a way in which he is saving only men? In terms of disability, people do not generally speak of Jesus as disabled, so likewise, how is it that Jesus identifies enough with deafness to offer salvation to those with hearing loss? If Jesus is envisioned as somewhat disabled, it is on the cross, and his suffering is seen as virtuous — a problem for some feminists and disability theologians. Why glorify suffering, particularly when women and the disabled suffer at the hands of a patriarchal, able-bodied society?

The self-doubt raised by these questions and assumptions leads in part to a desire to get beyond these troublesome bodies. The predominant medical model of disability supposes that we might be able to surpass disability, in a sense, by healing it. Gene therapy, cochlear implants, and other medical interventions are designed to give the appearance, if not the reality, of a

whole, non-disabled body. At heart, the medical model presupposes that the problem is the person with the disability, that the disabled person wants to overcome that disability, and that medicine and/or scientific advancements provide a way to surpass otherwise disabled bodies.

Likewise, the medical model of disability applies to women. Several authors have noted the ways in which childbirth and periods have become part of the realm of doctors, to be properly attended to by scientifically trained people who see pregnancy, labor, and periods as illnesses. Jennifer Block discusses the episiotomy, for example. There was a common belief in the mid-twentieth century that episiotomies were necessary because babies were too big to pass through the vagina. People failed to note, however, that the birth canal only seemed too small when women were lying on their backs in bed, which was and is the normal birth position in most hospitals. But for centuries, women had been giving birth in a variety of other positions, including squatting and standing. Those positions allow the pelvis to widen to the greatest degree possible, enabling women to give birth much more easily than when lying down. Yet under new hospital protocol, women were given episiotomies surgically, which actually increased the time they needed for recovery and which could lead to infections and problems with bladder and bowel control. By the early 1980s, the Center for Disease Control in the United States did a study that determined conclusively that there was no scientific basis for episiotomies, and yet that had been the medical standard for decades because doctors saw women's bodies as inadequate (Block 2007, 28-30). Another example might be the Seasonale birth control pill, touted as a way for a woman to have a period only four times a year, to "fix" the problem that is menstruation. Via pharmaceuticals, women can limit their own limits and presumably surpass much that is wrong with being in female bodies.

Why not embrace these visions to surpass bodies? A medical model that allows a person to surpass a body in such a way that one could "pass" as not-disabled or not-woman is a ticket to greater freedoms, greater enjoyment of life, and salvation in *this* life. Why would feminists object to anything that would permit women to have better lives, free of regular periods and painful childbirth? Why should theologians of disability object to a medical model of disability that might, in fact, allow for ordination of those who do not have hands or perfect limbs?

Indeed, some forms of feminism undergird this desire to get beyond bodies. In excerpts 12.2 and 12.3, Ruether discusses some of these "egalitarian Christologies" that wish to transcend bodiliness. For example, she discusses what she names "eschatological feminism" (excerpt 12.2), exemplified

by some early Gnostic groups which developed the idea that being Christian required surpassing bodies in favor of spiritual lives focused on the world to come, which, as these Gnostics saw it, would be egalitarian. Ruether critiques this stance, however. While she is sympathetic to an egalitarian view, she is concerned by the exclusive focus on the future and not the here and now. Thus, Ruether does not share the optimism of Elaine Pagels, another prominent feminist scholar who sees Gnostic texts as liberating for women.

Liberal feminism (excerpt 12.3) represents another egalitarian Christology stemming from the secular version of liberalism. Mary McClintock Fulkerson describes the main ideas of liberalism: "the primacy of individuals, the value of individual autonomy and choice, a state limited to the function of protecting the rights and freedoms of individuals, and a neutral posture toward any account of the good in order to protect a plurality of views" (Fulkerson 1994, 5). Under liberalism's influence, some concluded that men and women could be equal because both were autonomous individuals and had rationality and moral reasoning in common.

The benefit of liberalism is that it envisions equality as a historical possibility, so, unlike Gnostic views, it allows for and even foments revolution with the aim of equality. But who provides the basis for that equality? Equality has often meant urging women to take on male roles, which then further suppresses women. Ruether makes her critique of liberalism along this line, and that critique stands against the medical model of disability as well. It presumes a liberal view of bodies in its attempt to help all be "equal," which means that we are all autonomous, rational creatures. Yet Ruether claims that this focus is exclusive even as it seeks to universalize all humans, because the focus on rationality and autonomy means that other valid (perhaps better) accounts of humans are left out.

Thus far, I have suggested that for feminist theologians, women and people who are disabled stand together against prevalent presumptions about bodies. The initial issues that the Christian tradition raised and the arguments made against those issues are such that it is almost impossible to distinguish between the issues of women's bodies and disabled bodies.

The One Human Body

One solution to attempting to surpass bodies is to embrace them. Lisa Isherwood, a postmodern theologian particularly concerned with body theology, writes, "I think we have to take incarnation much more seriously, to

take the flesh as the place where the utopian vision of heaven is felt and lived — we have to enflesh the Christ that we are baptized into and profess to believe in” (Isherwood 2007). Far from being an object to surpass, the body is something to celebrate, according to many feminists and disability theologians. A focus on Paul’s vision that Christians are one body in Christ and that there are many members in the one body allows for different bodies to be appreciated as gifts. Paul’s words here provide a popular early feminist scripture that supports many ways of being, both male and female.

Alongside this celebratory view of bodies comes the “social model” (as opposed to the medical model), which sees that disability exists only where social structures prevent a person from fully interacting. Thus, for example, as a person with a hearing loss, I do not have a disability when I am among a community of people who also speech read (and speak in “speech read”), because then I can understand and be understood perfectly. Likewise, the person in a wheelchair does not have a disability if he is able to wheel himself into a building that is built with wheelchair access (with a ramp and wide doorways). In these instances, it is society itself that accommodates to disability without trying to “fix” it but instead seeing it as a gift, whether that is society at large, or a simple, small society of speech-readers.

This social model of disability has some parallel strands in theological discourse and feminist thought. In the 1970s, some feminists began to think in terms of “cultural feminism” or “gynocentric feminism.” Ruether names and describes this kind of feminism as “romantic” in excerpt 12.4. Romantic feminism will often name women as the peacekeepers, as gentle and nurturing caregivers, and therefore as having no disability. On this account, women bring unique gifts to humanity by their very woman-ness. Mary Aquin O’Neill writes of this form of feminism:

There is a male way of being and a female way, and these can be known from an examination of the bodies of the two and given a fair degree of specificity. Thus men are supposed to be, by nature, active, rational, willful, autonomous beings whose direction goes outward into the world; women are to be passive, intuitive, emotional, connected beings whose natural inclination is inward. (O’Neill 1993, 149)

Many romantic feminists (Ruether discusses two types — conservative and reformist romantics) see these differences in men and women as simply part of their complementary nature. That is, humans share one nature, and men and women together demonstrate what that nature is. Men need women to

fill in gaps, and vice versa: men have roles and habits that are complementary to women's. We cannot be fully human without knowing ourselves in relation to members of the other gender, and so what it means to be fully human is to be in relationship with each other as men and women. Thus, men and women together comprise the many members of the one body of which Paul speaks.

One problem that gynocentric feminism presents for thinking about disability is the "ethic of care" that it has developed. The "ethic of care" views women's unique gift to humanity as forming relationships with each other that emphasize care of others. This is opposed to other ethical theories like those of Immanuel Kant and John Rawls, which focus on rationality and justice, often from male perspectives that overlook women's ideas and work as valid. From the viewpoint of a theology of disability, however, there is a concern with seeing women as the caregivers, particularly of people with disabilities. For one thing, an ethic of care reinforces the idea that people with disabilities are different and therefore in need of more care than people without disabilities. Another argument against the ethic of care is that it may produce worry about whether a person can truly care for another or not. Jackie Leach Scully writes, "Parents might believe, rightly or wrongly, that they can better care for a child who is more rather than less like themselves: better able to anticipate their needs, to create strong emotional bonds, and to provide some appropriate guidance as they grow . . ." (Scully 2003, 277).

Likewise, Ruether does not see romantic feminism as the solution for understanding bodies. In excerpt 12.5, she makes the case that the best from liberal and romantic feminisms ought to be combined to create what she names "liberatory feminism." Liberating women means making use of symbols and tradition in new, freeing ways. Thus, Ruether examines the traditional Christian doctrine of Christ (excerpt 12.6) and answers definitively that a male savior can save women. (Some of Ruether's counterparts, like Mary Daly, will disagree.) As Ruether sees it, the traditional masculine symbol of Christ becomes a powerful force for liberation because Jesus, far from upholding societal standards that approved of male superiority, always supported those with marginalized bodies, especially women.

Multiplying Bodies

Other feminists questioned this view of the "one body," though, recognizing that for all that feminists might have achieved, there were some women who had not benefited from liberation. Liberal and gynocentric feminisms arose

from mainly white, educated women and tended to universalize "woman" to suggest that all women everywhere experienced what Ruether, as a white Christian woman, experienced. By the late 1970s and into the 1980s, women who did not share that background began to question the underlying assumptions that white women made about other women, and the ways in which oppression took many forms. While white women might be oppressed, that did not mean they were not also guilty of oppressing others or overlooking significant concerns.

The move toward understanding the feminist movement as a collection of many feminisms came in part out of the desire of women of other races, ethnicities, and classes to consider how gender politics worked. What it means to be a "body" began to have multiple answers for feminist scholars as well as theologians. Dualisms were no longer the problem. There was not woman versus man, but African-American woman in relation to African-American man, African-American woman in relation to white man, Asian woman in relation to Asian man, and so on.

Likewise, feminists concerned with disability took similar trajectories, realizing that theology cannot simply take white feminist strands and pull them in a thoroughgoing, uncritical way into thought about disability. For one thing, many of those associated with women's and gendered studies have a concerted focus on abortion that many disability activists find annihilating. As Nancy Eiesland recounts,

Not long ago I gave a guest lecture in a feminist ethics course at a mainline seminary in the United States. The participants in the class were enthusiastic about understanding the social and ethical issues raised by women with disabilities until I noted that many people with disabilities were critical of the antidisability bias present in some feminist pro-choice arguments. A student asked, "Wouldn't you agree that it is a woman's right to decide whether she wants to have a disabled child?" (quoted in Elshout 1994, 114)

Eiesland attempted to point out that that pattern of thought was one of the problems that those with disabilities have in modern culture. Eiesland's conversation not only highlights the points of departure between disability theology and feminist theologies, but also raises up the inseparability of disability theology and feminist thought. The idea that a woman has an inalienable right to choose for her own body comes crashing into the concern that such a focus stems from "able-ism." Prevailing feminist thought presupposes that

the woman is able-bodied and wouldn't/couldn't/shouldn't care for a baby that would be disabled.

For those with disabilities, the theological problem with feminists and abortion is not just that disabled fetuses are often the ones deemed necessary to be aborted, which is offensive to those with disabilities. It is also that the background of much feminist thought presumes a certain amount of choice with respect to bodies, and autonomy over those bodies. These are liberal assumptions that stem from Enlightenment thought. African-American women, too, have struggled with this issue. (See Dorothy Roberts' book titled *Killing the Black Body*.)

Indeed, a conversation I once had with my ear doctor highlights the tension. When I was pregnant, the doctor recommended genetic testing, and presumed that even though I have a hearing loss, I obviously wouldn't want to bring a baby into the world who has a hearing loss. From the doctor's point of view, this was *my* decision to make, since I am the one responsible for my child-bearing capacity. Yet this view is uniquely offensive, for it suggests that what is worthwhile about my body is that it is rational, and that therefore as a rational creature I should recognize that disability is wrong-headed. It also presumes that as a woman, I bear the sole responsibility for the marks of my own child-bearing body, without recognizing that what I do with my body does, in fact, affect others. If I "choose" to abort a baby with a hearing loss, what is that saying to other women, other people with disabilities, about their own bodies? While seeming to support my autonomy, the doctor's statement also belies that our strongly anti-disabled culture controls people's views about who should and should not be born, and judges what "rational" people would and would not do.

Excerpt 12.7, from Nancy Eiesland's groundbreaking work *The Disabled God*, makes a further point about disability and feminism. Eiesland begins by discussing what she calls "contextual Christology," by which she means and presumes that God cares about people where they are, as they are. God does not love and care for a vague notion of universal humanity, but actually cares for each person as he/she is, and the way God does that is incarnationally. God incarnate — God's becoming flesh and blood in Jesus Christ — would be maimed, bruised, and yes, disabled, on the cross, and so experienced and thus knows firsthand what it is like to be disabled. Indeed, salvation comes *because* of the disability, and for Eiesland this is liberatory.

Eiesland recognizes feminist concerns here: that the same body that dies on the cross happens to be male, and so does not experience the bodiliness of being a woman. Eiesland agrees that women cannot support an image of

Christ that only undergirds white male privilege (that is, to see Christ as a white male is to privilege whiteness as the mode of Christ's salvation for humanity). Nonetheless, she thinks that feminists run too far in directions which suggest that Christ was not human or that Christ was not divine. For Eiesland, the point instead is that Jesus Christ is a "survivor" and lived physically in this world. Rather than attempting to surpass or "erase" our bodiliness, Christ in his physicality "removes the barriers which constrain our bodies, keep us excluded, and intend to humiliate us" (12.7, 103). Indeed, in her excerpt Eiesland speaks strongly against those who advocate divine healing of people with disabilities, for that insinuates that Christ matters only in a spiritual way. Spiritual healing presumes that if one has enough faith, the body will be healed and surpassed. But Eiesland says no — God's love for us is deeper than wanting us to surpass our broken bodies. God loves us *because of* those broken bodies, and even becomes disabled in the Incarnation. Eiesland's excerpt closes with a commentary on all these proliferating theologies — feminist, African-American, Latin American — that celebrates the diverse, many-membered Body of Christ in a Pentecostal (Acts 2) way. These new bodies of Christ simply represent "the corporate enactment of the resurrection of God" (12.7, 105).

The Playful Body

After the assertion of Eiesland and others that the many-membered Body of Christ is not a chaos after all, some scholars wondered whether bodies can have any meaning whatsoever. If the disabled God means something to me but not to you because you do not share my bodily experiences, then do we really have any shared understanding of what it is to say that we profess belief in "one Lord Jesus Christ," of whose body we are a part?

Accordingly, some postmodern scholars have probed the "we" assumptions — that is, the idea that "we" have a shared view of the world. They say there is no longer any "grand narrative" (another way to understand "grand narrative" might be to see it as "cultural assumptions" about the way the world is) in which all people can participate, like the story that Christianity tells about what the world is. The world, on the Christian view, is fallen, in need of redemption, and that redemption comes in the person of Jesus Christ. Once, people held that narrative as true, but now, in our secular culture, we cannot assume that acquiescence to the story. In the absence of a grand narrative, how is a person to think about and understand the world?

The answers of some postmodern thinkers have related to the idea that the meaning of the world is constructed by societies or by power structures. What it means to be a woman in the United States is constructed by our sense of what a woman should look like, and we develop that sense through television, movies, what we read, what girls tell each other in the bathroom in junior high, what boys tell girls on dates, what magazines suggest about how to dress, wear makeup, and act, and on and on. However, if we were to be in another culture — say, the culture in Saudi Arabia — our understanding of what it means to be a woman would be constructed in a very different way. Postmodern theorists take this idea still further, proclaiming that gender is a fluid concept within a culture itself, that what it means to be a man or a woman is not definitively set by biological bodies. (See Judith Butler's book titled *Bodies That Matter*.)

Sarah Coakley's essay comprises the final excerpts in this chapter and demonstrates one feminist theologian's use of this postmodern view of bodies that is fluid and performative. In much of her work, Coakley uses sources such as Gregory of Nyssa to show how they offer a surprising account of gender and bodies, surprising because feminists like Ruether have tended to see these authors as patriarchal more often than not. For example, Gregory discusses virginity as a way to be "fecund," but not in the sense that married men and women bear children. Ascetics give birth to spiritual children, even to the point of "giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be, whether male or female, molding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice" (Coakley 2002, 164).

In excerpt 12.8, Coakley takes on arguments against women's ordination (she herself is an ordained Anglican priest), namely those of Mary Douglas and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Douglas and Balthasar both maintain that ordination of women is problematic because of the gender binaries that God has put forth. Christ is the bridegroom of the church, the bride; the feminine qualities that women have are already superior to the masculine qualities that men have because women can be Marian in the sense of totally assenting to God's will. Balthasar argues, "The Catholic Church is perhaps humanity's last bulwark of genuine appreciation of the difference of the sexes" (quoted in Sarah Coakley 2004, 85).

Coakley thinks that Douglas and Balthasar have both hit on important points about what it means to be a woman or a man, but she also thinks that their arguments against ordination belie another, more interesting meaning. Balthasar sees, for example, that the male priesthood takes on both masculine and feminine characteristics, though he is physiologically male. Coakley

finds this fascinating, for she agrees: a priest's role displays the fluidity of gender, but it causes her to ask why women, too, couldn't be part of this gender-bending, this playfulness with bodies.

In the final excerpt (12.9), then, Coakley describes the motions of her body as she celebrates the Eucharist and finds that she herself experiences fluid gender play. She remains a woman, and yet she takes on both femininity and masculinity. On Coakley's view, this gender fluidity shows God's breaking into our world and transforming it, even while also keeping the world as it is. Such a claim is good news for us, with our limited human bodies, because it gives us a way of understanding how our bodies might be limited and frustrating, but also capable of transcendence and transformation.

Perhaps Coakley's view of bodies is the most empowering and realistic of the feminist theologies presented. Rather than seeing a body, with all its limits, weaknesses, and troubles, as something to be surpassed, or conversely as something to be wholeheartedly embraced, Coakley offers both. Could this be a way of recognizing that while humans cannot get outside of their bodies, there are still many ways in which bodies can be "played" beyond seeing a person with a disability as someone with a broken body that needs something done to it?

Conclusion

Women are disabled. I hope that by this point, my readers will see that making this statement opens up a broad range of views about women, disability, and especially bodies, views that are both positive and negative. Yet the danger in this statement — and indeed in an essay of this kind — is to make it seem that all these differing points about feminist theologians have mostly to do with women and, as a sideline, with disabled people.

Isn't this all academic nonsense if it doesn't say something helpful? Aren't these mere mind games for academics (ironically) if discussions about bodies don't lead to something concrete? The point of studying feminist theology and bodies is to consider whether, from these particular points of view that *don't* arise from studying Karl Barth and the church fathers, Ruether, Eiesland, Coakley, and others are saying something truthful about human bodies. If we are reading them well, these theologians should cause us all to wonder and ask questions about our bodies — "Am I, too, a disabled body somehow?" — regardless of whether we fit into neat categories called "woman" or "disabled."

A world that sees “normal” bodies as young, athletic, healthy, and male (or women’s bodies as smooth, sleek, thin sex objects) — is not a world that understands itself as God does. “Normal” bodies require no help. Yet the prophets say that God views the world as fallen and in need of redemption. In that view, how can there truly be a “normal” body? Indeed, it could be said that Christianity makes all of our bodies abnormal. Jesus Christ’s salvation of us involves making us part of a new body that is strangely his (even his broken, bruised body on the cross), and yet comprised of all Christians — past, present, and future.

The truthful speech that feminist theologians offer about bodies should push us all to consider ourselves as disabled in some way, needing to be redeemed by a Christ whose own body is broken. Bodily redemption is not perfection in the way that patriarchal culture has often defined it.

The other lesson of feminist theologies and their wide-ranging discussion of bodies should be to add humility into the equation. To say “I am disabled” should not thereby lead to the mistaken notion that somehow I might now understand what it means to be blind or autistic. Rather, the very diversity of feminist theologies on the issue of bodies ought to spur us to understand that we do not fully understand, nor are we done with the need for seeking understanding of others around us.

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