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Book Review: Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Book Review

Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body, by Brian Brock.
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 180 pages, \$21.99.

Reviewer: Ron Bruner

Scholars and practitioners are increasingly engaging in theological conversations about disability. Though the global list of scholars who have researched and written about disability is limited, such conversations among theologians at the University of Aberdeen have been particularly robust and fruitful. One of those theologians is Brian Brock, professor of moral and practical theology.

Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body is an intentional effort by Brock to make accessible parts of his scholarly (and less approachable) work in *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*.¹ To achieve this accessibility, Brock persuades readers by presenting a broad range of materials from biblical, theological, and experiential sources.

Brock begins chapters with fallacies he refutes. He starts chapter one, "Nobody with Disabilities at Our Church," with a personal experience of temporary disability. By doing so, he creates an accessible place for readers to begin to cope with the reality that all humans experience disability despite our resistance to understanding ourselves in that way. Our refusal to see our own disability means that we often do not *see* disability in our communities and that our discomfort with disability too often results in the departure of those who are visibly disabled from those communities. Thus, from this willfully inattentive perspective, there is "nobody with disabilities at our church." The statistics Brock presents disprove this assertion. Disability, whether temporary or permanent; intellectual, physical, or psychological; congenital or accidental—or even as the result

¹ Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020).

of the poor choices of others—shapes human identity and, too often, relationships with others.

These relationship problems require a theological response from the church. Brock defines disability theology as “theological work necessary for us to receive with joy and practical welcome, and without sentimentality or pity, each and every human being as one for whom Christ died” (p. 24). In Brock’s view, modern culture operates with a “biomedical” perspective, which is both mechanical (humans have a normative condition and function capable of repair when faulty) and individualistic (the problem belongs to the person experiencing it) (p. 26). In contrast, he brings forward the theological work of Bethany McKinney Fox,² asserting that the modern use of biomedical perspectives has served no one well, particularly those experiencing permanent and visible disabilities. A robust disability theology might empower us to see that many human conditions are beyond “healing” and that those experiencing such disabilities are worthy of “greater honor.” The correct responses to the limitations of our humanity are consequently communal and not individual.

Chapter two presents Brock’s work addressing the flawed biomedical perspective of normativity and the notion that “Jesus heals everyone he meets.” Since “Biblical stories fundamentally orient Christian discernment” (p. 32), Brock finds that simplistic and flawed readings of Scripture result in misunderstandings of disability, misrepresentations of the work of Jesus as a healer, and how these overlap. Such texts deserve more careful reading. Brock’s presentation of the healing accounts of Jesus in this chapter is thorough and often accesses the perspectives of disabled persons. These paradigm-shifting readings are theological and yet remain solidly connected with historical-critical work. Jesus was a careful listener and observer who healed people when he was asked for healing—not every disabled person he encountered. The thrust of these readings, though, is uniform; the primary healing work of Jesus was with souls and only secondarily with bodies. As he examines these texts, Brock makes several helpful moves. He calls attention to our struggle in reading certain words (blindness and deafness, for example) literally as physical conditions or metaphorically as a spiritual problem in ways that are painful to the blind and deaf. He emphasizes that the nonverbal work and the touch of Jesus are powerful portraits of Jesus to those with disabilities where communication is notably difficult. The healing of Jesus involves mercy

² Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healings in the Gospel and the Church*, foreword by John Swinton (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019).

more than biomechanics. Ultimately, the lesson to be learned is that “People living the disability experience are, like all people, not reducible to their bodily conditions. Their story with God is necessarily more than disability” (p. 58).

“God chose you because he knew you could handle it.” By the time we have reached chapter three, we understand that the chapter titles name fallacies Brock will repudiate in the following paragraphs. Brock well understands that this platitude is not a consolation but, in fact, an indictment of God. In fact, the biblical text consistently reveals the inherent “wrestling with God” involved in the disability experience.

Brock reminds us of a fundamental truth: God created humans to have certain limitations in physical, mental, and spiritual capabilities and in the length of our lives. They are a part of God’s intent for humans.

Having limits is therefore good. It is essential to the creaturely condition. With limits comes vulnerability. Having limits means that humans need things they do not have, like food, and are subject to change. Only God is unchanging. To be a creature is ultimately to cease to function and to die (p. 67).

Importantly, our limitations draw us into connection with God and others. God intended us to live in community and to find completeness together.

To demonstrate the complexity of disability and our struggle with it, Brock explores biblical narratives beyond the gospels. First, he explores prominent disability stories from the Hebrew Bible: Job, Jacob, Samson, and Mephibosheth. He then finds good and bad “precedents” in NT narratives. In Brock’s view, Peter stumbles as a healer, but Paul and the deacon Philip show others how to attend to and live with disability in godly ways.

In chapter four, Brock addresses the reality that the pastoral efforts of most churches are “not accompanied by a fully thought out theological account of what disability is—or by any theological thought about disability at all” (p. 95). Consequently, he lays out the structure for such a “theological account.” He begins with a brief discussion of God and the nature of the theological enterprise. Brock then moves the disability conversation from theology to theological anthropology to ecclesiology, soteriology, back to theological anthropology, to Christology, then pneumatology, ending the chapter (appropriately) with eschatology. In the process of accessing the traditional loci of systematic theology (without calling attention to this), he creates a robust theological account of disability with coherence. This coherence comes at the cost of some commonly held

theological concepts (for example, the chapter's title, "Disability is a tragic effect of the Fall"). Some of these ideas were perhaps intended as theodicies by their creators, but in the light of Brock's reasoning, these notions are revealed to be flawed. His moves are too complex to rehearse in more detail here, but they construct a normative theology that churches can use to shape their operant theologies—their ways of thinking about disability—in day-to-day work with disabilities.

The quandary of most congregations thinking about disability is "We don't know where to start." This is, appropriately, the title of chapter five. The uncertainty of where to start is often compounded by various fears; Brock observes that "Fear of doing the wrong thing makes it easy not to do anything" (p. 135). He does, though, have practical suggestions, which begin with what *not* to do. Do not create special programs for disabilities but empower the entire church to grow in this work. Learn from how schools deal with disabilities but do not uncritically adopt their practices. Be careful about language. Refer to people by their names, not labels. Instead, Brock advises the church to yield to the work of the Holy Spirit that draws people together who would not normally choose that connection and then learn how to let every part of the body serve one another. Such a community will work by trial and error toward becoming a community of reconciliation, hope, discernment, respite, friends, and advocates. The deacon Philip is to be our role model as the careful listener.

What is a collegial and critical response to this work? There are some textual readings one might question. For example, is Brock arguing from silence about Job's apparently unrestored physical condition at the end of the Job narrative? Based on the high level of scholarship present in this book, one should understand that this reading is, in fact, a theological reading, not a naïve one. Similarly, although not everyone ascribes to the theological positions that Brock seeks to correct, a careful reader must acknowledge that a substantial number of Christians hold these stances.

Throughout the book, there are lines of thought a reader might wish Brock would pursue in more detail (his discussion of the resurrected human body, for example). Writers must make difficult choices, however limiting. Occasionally, Brock's choices for the depth of a discussion may result in readers not being completely convinced by the evidence presented. Even so, he has accomplished his mission of stimulating us to think through our own theological response to disability. This slender yet powerful volume achieves much in its pages. I expect it will influence numerous scholars and practitioners as they begin the needed hard work on disability in their studies, sanctuaries, and communities. Additionally, the theology and

practices developed in *Disability* could be modified and used to great effect in pastoral work alongside other minority groups in contemporary congregations.

I recommend that you obtain this book. Slow down to take your time with it. Listen to it carefully. Welcome Brock's careful work into your consideration with all its strengths and limitations. Your ministry with others—and yourself—will be the better for it.

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