

Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body

Brian Brock, Baker Academic, 2021

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In this significant contribution to a practical theology of disability, Brian Brock offers timely, sensitive, and deeply needed guidance to the Christian church. Beginning with an invitation for readers to enter with him into the experience of disability, he weaves this journey with biblical exegesis, systematic theology, and pastoral ministry. He leads the church beyond mere inclusion and toward integrating disabled persons into the local congregation. Dr. Brock brings his own temporary disability (from an injury) into the mix, along with surveys of pastors and disabled persons. This presents a balanced account of past and present challenges, with a hopeful vision for future change.

Brock's conversations with pastors often reveal that they believe their congregations have no disabled attendees. This dim awareness illustrates the selective neglect of disability ministry, even in churches with many other specialized forms of outreach. Brock draws the reader beyond the notion of specialized ministry programming and into a critique of the frequent "othering" of disabled persons. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:22, Brock asks: "Put theologically, can I really accept my *own* unsightly member?" He poignantly adds, "Do I *truly* accept those in the body of Christ who diverge from my ideals?" (p. 15).

In Chapter 1, the author considers the practical issue of whether or not a disability is readily visible and whether all disabling conditions constitute disabilities. Not everyone experiences disabling conditions in the same way. The problem of "labeling" means failing to hear the voices of those affected. Brock helpfully deconstructs the notion of "normal," given the prevalence and variety of disabilities that have recently come to light (p. 20). A robust theology of disability undermines the pervasive othering of the disabled but requires the "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).

Chapter 2 considers the healing ministry of Jesus and challenges the widespread assumption that disability is always an evil to be conquered. The biblical stories about disabled persons, taken as a whole, show diversity and complexity. Christ's words about blindness, for example, are a metaphor for spiritual insensitivity but not a slight towards the physically blind. Instead, Jesus found more faith and receptivity among those people than the ones with physical sight. Brock notes that "the blind people around Jesus *see all too clearly*." This realization exemplifies that "*there is no easy or single way to connect Scripture with any given disability*" (p. 37). The author illustrates the frustration of disabled persons who, when interviewed, recounted harmful experiences with believers who simplistically associated their disability with the demonic or labeled them as "cripples" (pp. 38–43).

Dennis L. Durst, "Review of *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body*, by Brian Brock," *Ethics & Medicine* 38, no. 3 (2022): 57–59.

Of particular interest for readers of *Ethics & Medicine*, Brock shows how modern medicine departs from the perspective of the world of Scripture and its authors. Five “very deep-seated assumptions” lead to a modern misreading of Scripture. First, modern medicine focuses on curing sickness. Second, it seeks out the bodily locus of illness as the focal point for healing. Third, modern medical practice emphasizes lifestyle changes recommended for individual patients. Such reductive approaches contrast with a more collectivist cultural understanding of Jesus. Fourth, under the guise of objectivity, today’s clinicians emphasize the need for emotional disengagement, unlike the approach of Christ. Finally, modern medicine is built on narrow specialization rather than treating the whole person (pp. 44–45). Brock describes the Lord’s approach to healing and redemption as a “multilayered” process (p. 46). When Jesus encountered disabled people, he approached them holistically, not merely attentive to physical deficits. He sought a response of faith, building a relational connection to them. Their agency mattered, as shown in the healing narratives focusing on those who “cry out” to Jesus (p. 46).

Chapter 3 describes a theology of disability from the remainder of Scripture, aside from the four gospels. Brock examines the encounters between God, Job, and Jacob from the Old Testament. He considers the thorny passages in the Mosaic Law that exclude disabled persons from specific ministry roles, most notably the priesthood. He rejects inadequate readings of these texts to argue for a “Christological” understanding, where only Christ is the ideal priest free from blemish. While accepting “wounding, breaking, and even blinding,” Christ fulfills his priestly role. Thus, “Jesus fulfills the quest for the perfect priest and sacrifice *in an impaired and disabled body*” (p. 76), implicitly including the disabled in his redeeming work.

Brock explores Peter’s healing of the disabled man in the temple and the evangelist Philip’s interaction with the eunuch of Ethiopia. He looks at evidence in the New Testament that Paul experienced temporary blindness but later had impairment of his sight as a more permanent and progressive condition. Including disabled persons in fruitful ministry is an obvious application of these texts. The insistence that the Corinthian church should not neglect its “weaker” members makes greater sense in the context of Paul’s own struggles (pp. 84–91).

I would raise some mild criticisms of Chapter 4. The title, “Disability is a Tragic Effect of the Fall,” does not entirely represent the chapter’s content. While early portions explore this theme, the author spends more time forging a more positive vision. A theology of disability must begin with the original created goodness of creation and must insist on the continuance of that good. In particular, no disability can erase the “image of God” in persons (pp. 106–115).

Chapter 4 also considers various issues that call for more systematic organization. The section entitled “What is Theology For?” (pp. 97–99) would fit more readily in the book’s opening chapter. Sections on “The Lament of Vulnerable Creatures” (pp. 102–4) and “Disability and Sin” (pp. 104–6) would more logically follow the discussion of the image of God. Sections on spiritual gifts (pp. 121–29) or disability in the resurrection (129–33) deserve their own discrete chapters.

Chapter 5 returns to interviews with those desiring to reform the local church to make it more welcoming and inclusive. For pastors, this is the strongest chapter, and I would recommend it to anyone in local church leadership. The chapter could easily form the outline for a series of

fruitful messages on the following topics: Becoming a Community of Reconciliation; Becoming a Community of Hope; Becoming a Community of Discernment; Becoming a Community of Respite; Becoming a Community of Friends; Becoming a Community of Advocates (pp. 152–66). The author’s encouraging and optimistic tone reassures church leaders that inclusion of the disabled is both good and achievable. I highly recommend *Disability* as a required reading for church leaders and Christian medical professionals passionate about partnering with the local church toward holistic patient care.