

Disability and the Church:

Looking for a Theology of Inclusion

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Preface

This paper is prepared by David McLachlan,¹ at the request of the *Theological Commission* of the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA), in collaboration with under the auspices of its *Theological Commission*. The aim is to assist national Evangelical alliances as well as the members of the Disability Network in developing a theological reflection statement and practical strategies for the full inclusion of people with disabilities in Christian life and worship.

The paper begins to gather together a selection of biblical and theological resources from the field of disability theology for the following purposes:

- (i) to indicate how those resources are currently being applied;
- (ii) to indicate how they can contribute to a useful theology of inclusion for pastors and churches; and
- (iii) to assess what further work is needed, particularly from an Evangelical perspective, alongside the insights which have so far arisen, often in other Christian traditions.

Introduction

Every life, every family, community and church is affected in some way by disability.² That statement has probably always been true, or at least very nearly true; which is perhaps why it is strange that the study of a coherent theological and biblical foundation for the inclusion of those with disabilities has only fairly recently begun to emerge.

That field of study owes much to the disability rights movement and related, wider disability studies. Those have protested against a prevailing, largely unquestioned “medical model” of disability that framed any impairment in comparison to a “typical” human form as a clinical problem to be fixed by intervention. In its place a “social model” has been proposed, which recognises variety and impairment, but which

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² The terms “disability” and “people with disabilities” will be used in this paper. All terms are inadequate in some way, but these are perhaps the ones most commonly used in the literature.

locates the source of the experience of “being disabled” much more in society, which is unwilling to adjust itself so that those with impairments might flourish.³ It is in this context that disability theology, as reviewed in this paper, has also begun to take shape.

That is not to suggest that previously the Church and Christian theologians have had nothing to say on the subject. Brock and Swinton have provided an excellent historical review of Christian theological ideas about disability.⁴ The Church’s history of caring for the sick, poor and marginalised has encompassed people with disabilities, who often find themselves also in those categories. And many churches provide very good services and worship opportunities for people with disabilities. Nonetheless, as pastors and churches, we still find ourselves short of biblical and theological resources from which to respond well, and with confidence, to people in situations of disability.

Setting out the challenges

Many of us first encounter disability theology around questions of access and inclusion in church life, and indeed that is the genesis of this paper. Before long, the many facets of the question become apparent. In practical terms, “disability” encompasses a wide range of life situations, many of which are completely unrelated to each other. We might attempt some broad categories as follows:

- (i) those with physical or mobility needs, for whom physical access is the priority;
- (ii) those with learning disabilities or intellectual impairment, where communication and understanding also need to be addressed;
- (iii) those with sensory impairment or sensitivity (visual, auditory and other senses), where environment and means of communication might need to be adapted;
- (iv) those with invisible disabilities related to internal organ function or mental health.

These factors can interact in complex ways, all of which also affect families and friends, as we consider how to enable people with disabilities to be present, to participate, to worship, and to give and receive the grace and wonder of the gospel.

In theological and biblical terms (the focus of this paper), behind the immediate, presenting questions of access and participation are deeper questions of inclusion. These include:

1. Inclusion in *the image of God* (theological anthropology). Here we are seeking a basis for asserting that those with disabilities are of equal worth in God’s eyes as well as our own.

³ Colin Barnes, ‘Understanding the Social Model of Disability’, in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. by N. Watson and others (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp.12-29.

⁴ Brian Brock, and John Swinton,, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: a Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012)

2. Inclusion in *the reading of Scripture* (hermeneutics). What are sought here are approaches to reading the references to disability in Scripture in a positive and constructive way.
3. Inclusion in *the drama of salvation* (soteriology and eschatology). This addresses both how we talk of repentance and faith, and what aspects of a life lived with disability might be preserved through the resurrection.
4. Inclusion in *the body of Christ* (ecclesiology). Here we return to questions of worship and church life.

The discussion below will take each of these in turn and review helpful biblical and theological resources that those writing on disability theology have proposed. A detailed critique of each is not given, but a broader comment on how these might be used and what further development is needed is provided after that review.

Two general comments are necessary before proceeding. Firstly, disability theology as a whole tends to assume a willingness to move away from a view that what we choose to identify as disability can only be understood as a result of the Fall, and therefore of sin. This point is also returned to below in considering the need for further work.

Secondly, part of the task is the challenging of what are often unexamined presumptions about disability made by those who do not regard themselves as disabled. In the literature these are typically termed “normate” presumptions. An example would be that a person with a disability would definitely wish for their impairment to be “fixed”, either in the present or at the resurrection.

This more inclusive frame of reference for the discussion is captured well by Thomas Reynolds in his summary statement: “Disability is a factor of being finite and contingent in an open universe subject to elements of unpredictability, instability and conflict.”⁵

Inclusion in the image of God

Although direct reference to humanity being made in the image of God appears only half a dozen times in Scripture, it is understood to be a crucial theological constituent of our relationship with God. What we seek is a sound basis for asserting that this applies equally to all people, whether they have disabilities or not.

Nancy Eiesland, in one of the best-known and most-referenced books on disability theology, *The Disabled God*, challenged what our image of God is. She asked whether we could conceive of God as one who uses a sip-puff wheelchair (controlled by the movement of breath through a tube, or wand).⁶ Her suggestion is that even our image of God himself is conditioned by normate assumptions about the typical human form.

⁵ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), p. 187.

⁶ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 89.

Eiesland and others ask what evidence there is for God's solidarity with humanity, inclusive of disability. Reference is often made to the disabling of Jesus all the way through the biblical account of his Passion to the point of death itself. Jesus became progressively physically disabled through the long process of execution, as well as suffering the loss of freedom and complete social rejection and humiliation. To this evidence is added that of the wounds of the crucifixion in the resurrected body of Jesus (for example Luke 24:39-40 and John 20:27). If Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of the image of God, and is so most vividly at the cross and resurrection, then here is the demonstration of God's solidarity with humanity, inclusive of disability.⁷ Further evidence of this solidarity is found in Jesus' ministry, and his deliberate seeking out and care for those with disabilities as well as those suffering from disease (what Jennie Block calls a 'relational Christology'⁸).

Hans Reinders provides a complementary line of argument, with a focus on people with profound intellectual impairment. He challenges some approaches to the image of God question as relying too heavily on the assertion and exercise of agency and rights, or the achievement of goals, things which are of little relevance to those with profound intellectual impairment. Instead, Reinders locates the worth of the human being (which is what being made in God's image establishes) in: (i) God's gift of life itself; and (ii) God's gift of friendship to us, which we see demonstrated in Jesus Christ. His theological point is that the value of the human must be extrinsic to us. If it relies on any quality or ability of ours, then some (often those with significant disabilities) will seem to fall short of being fully human.

The last anthropological point to make briefly here has probably found its greatest advocate in Jean Vanier, founder of the *L'Arche* communities for people with learning disabilities. He argues that those with disabilities reveal the true nature of humanity, that we are vulnerable and interdependent. Our ideas of self-sufficiency are thus unmasked by God through these brothers and sisters of ours.⁹

Inclusion in the reading of Scripture

References to disability in Scripture present a varied and potentially confusing picture. For example, God seems to indicate to Moses that God himself is the source of Moses' slowness of speech and of other forms of disability (Exodus 4:10-11), and yet the Torah forbids people with various impairments from offering some sacrifices (Leviticus 21:16). Jesus sometimes seems to go along with the idea that sin and disability are linked (the paralysed man in Luke 5:17-26, or the healed invalid in John 5:14) and at other times rejects the idea (the man born blind in John 9:3). Scholars identify a number of possible problematic normative assumptions arising from such passages, such as the impression that God only seems to be glorified in the healing of

⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, pp. 98-101.

⁸ Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: a Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York and London: Continuum, 2002), p.133-137.

⁹ Jean Vanier, *Essential Writings*, ed. by Carolyn Whitney-Brown (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), p.55.

disabilities; or that only those who are healed (and “made whole”) can go on to follow Jesus.¹⁰

Two insights are helpful here. Amos Yong, who has written extensively on disability theology, points out that we cannot assume an understanding of disability either in biblical times, or through much of history, which is similar to our understanding of it today.¹¹ Also, Mikeal Parsons has demonstrated that New Testament writers in particular made use of physiognomic ideas¹² of their time, which assumed that character traits are reflected in the physical appearance of the body.

With these in mind, positive strategies for an inclusive reading of Scripture in our own time become possible. We can argue, for example that Jesus on occasion works within the presumptions of his time, to make a particular point. At other times he challenges them, not least by his behaviour in being willing to touch the “untouchable”, such as the man in Luke 5:12-16 who has leprosy. Yong suggests that three principles might govern our reading:

- (i) that people with disabilities are created in the image of God;
- (ii) that people with disabilities are people first, and are not defined by their disability;
- (iii) that disability is neither evil nor necessarily to be eliminated.

An example of such reading could be Mephibosheth, a son of Saul who was disabled in an accident as a child (2 Samuel 4:4). In his interaction with King David, he might be negatively interpreted merely as a literary device embodying the weakness of Saul’s reign. However, Yong finds in him a rounded and dramatically significant character who critiques human ideas of power.¹³

To these strategies must also be added the imperative, early in the hermeneutical task, of asking those with disabilities and those who share life with them what they see in a particular passage of Scripture and what it seems to say to them, rather than those without disabilities assuming that they already know these things. A useful prompt in this direction is the book in which John Hull (a theologian who became blind during his adult life) records his reaction, as a blind person, to various scriptures.¹⁴

Inclusion in the drama of salvation

This aspect could be summed up in the questions: “who is saved?” and “what is saved?”

The question of “who is saved” asks, particularly in the context of intellectual impairment (and encompassing mental ill-health and dementia), whether we believe that

¹⁰ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), pp.53-54

¹¹ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, p.6.

¹² Physiognomy is the idea that by looking at a person’s physical body, aspects of their character can be discerned. In biblical times there were handbooks that informed such diagnosis. For example, limited mobility might be linked to weak moral character. Mikeal C. Parsons reviews the influence of such thinking in: *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006)

¹³ Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, p.17.

¹⁴ John Hull, *In the Beginning There was Darkness* (London: SCM Press, 2001)

salvation requires, not only the work of Christ, but also an intellectual understanding of the gospel, and the ability to articulate it. If so, many would seem to be excluded. John Swinton, a theologian who is also a psychiatric nurse, suggests that a more inclusive approach involves recognising different ways of knowing God. Rather than just analytical knowledge, he argues that more relational and phenomenological forms of knowledge should be explored. He combines the commands to love God and love our neighbour (Matthew 22:34-40 for example), suggesting that our relationship with God is inextricable from our relationships with each other. Neither can be understood on its own and if that is true, faith is something more like friendship than theological assertion.¹⁵ Those with intellectual disabilities, Swinton suggests, can powerfully encounter and respond to God's saving grace through their relationships with others.

Another approach, suggested by Jill Harshaw, explores the doctrine of accommodation. Drawing on Calvin and others, Harshaw argues that there is no basis for assuming that God's accommodation (on which any communication with humanity must depend) should stop at a particular level or style of intellect. There is no difference in principle between God's accommodation to persons with or without what we identify as intellectual impairment. Such accommodation is not the over-simplifying of complex ideas, but God's use of a means of communication suitable to each of us.¹⁶

The question of "what is saved" (i.e, what aspects of ourselves continue into the new creation) rests on what we feel God will do, or "ought" to do, with our bodies and minds through the power of the cross and resurrection. The normative presumption that is challenged here is that, come the resurrection, God will conform all bodies and minds to what the majority from time to time regard as a "typical" pattern. Much of the blame for this is often laid at St Augustine's door, claiming that we have inherited his idea that the resurrection body will be that which we had in the prime of life, without "deformity", regardless of the age at which we die.¹⁷ While many with disabilities anticipate a complete, holistic redemption and wholeness, in many cases this has as much to do with a Kingdom of God characterised by kindness and the absence of barriers to inclusion, as it has with a normalisation of bodies and minds. This much broader and more inclusive view is again summed up succinctly by Reynolds: 'There is no assimilation into normalcy in the new life to come.'¹⁸

Biblical and theological resources for resisting a presumption of normalisation include once again the resurrection wounds of Jesus. Yong also points to Jesus' parable of the feast in Luke 14:15-24, where "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" appear to be included in the feast of the kingdom just as they are.¹⁹ Following a similar line, the interpretation of a strongly eschatological text such as Revelation 21:3-4

¹⁵ John Swinton, 'Restoring the Image: Spirituality, Faith and Cognitive Disability', in *Journal of Religion and Health*, 36.1 (1997), 21-27 (p.25).

¹⁶ Jill Harshaw, 'Finding Accommodation: Spirituality and People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities', in *Journal of Disability and Religion* 20 (2016), 140-153 (p.143) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2016.1203694>>

¹⁷ St Augustine of Hippo, *City of God, Volume 2* trans. by Marcus Dods (London: T&T Clark, 1871) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45305/45305-h/45305-h.htm#Page_472>, Book 22, chapter 20.

¹⁸ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, p.208.

¹⁹ Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), p246.

would be that mourning, crying and pain are no more, ‘not because our impairments will be eliminated, but because they will be redeemed.’²⁰

A related question here is that of healing through prayer. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have enriched the life of the Church through emphasising the work of the Holy Spirit in healing and the expectation that all Christians can be involved in healing prayer ministry. None of this would we wish to lose. Balanced against it, however, is the experience of people with disabilities who, when their disability remains after such prayer feel accused of a failure of faith, and feel they are regarded as carrying a mark of the Fall.

The approach in disability theology is to call for a willingness to differentiate the variations of embodiment that we call disability, from sickness and disease. This is related to the call, mentioned above, to move away from linking disability and sin. It is not unusual for someone with a disability to regard themselves as complete and not needing to be “fixed”, while from time to time they may, like anyone, suffer from sickness or disease, for which healing is certainly needed. And all need forgiveness for sin. Block comments that while Jesus often cured, his main concern was the spiritual wholeness of the community.²¹

The Holy Spirit is of course not imprisoned by our theological emphasis here. He can bring transformation through a change to an individual’s situation, just as he can through the creation of the Church as a hospitable fellowship in which each person finds a holistic wholeness in Christ.

Inclusion in the Body of Christ

The question of who is part of the Church will flow in part from the question above concerning who is saved. However, there are other contributions to add here.

Of the various biblical metaphors for the church, that of the body of Christ is probably foremost here, looking in particular to Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 12 and his earlier emphasis on God’s using the weak and foolish to shame the apparently wise and strong. With this in mind, theologian Stanley Hauerwas raises the challenge that the Church may not represent the body of Christ at all unless the most vulnerable (in which category he includes those with disabilities) are at its core.²² While the focus of Paul’s argument was not particularly those with disabilities, applying his argument to the present discussion nonetheless seems legitimate.

Potential hazards in seeking inclusion in the life and worship of the church include:

- (i) seeing it as enabling “them” to participate in worship as “we” have defined it; and
- (ii) looking for evidence of “joining in” as affirmation that worship is really taking place.

Moving away from such “us and them” ways of thinking is challenging. Theologically, Block begins a response by focusing on Jesus as the “copious host” of our

²⁰ Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, p135.

²¹ Block, *Copious Hosting*, p.104.

²² Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), p.178.

worship, who is God's gift to all of humanity, particularly those who typically find themselves treated as outsiders.²³

Continuing the theme of the body in 1 Corinthians, Brian Brock adds two further insights. One is to ask whether we truly expect and anticipate that everyone who is present when we gather as the church is 'an active *giver* or *conduit* of divine love.'²⁴ To do so means an expectation that those with disabilities will minister God's grace to others. The other insight is to propose that the root of participation in worship is presence, rather than the evidence of any particular activity. Our primary concern should be that those with disabilities are present, rather than that they fulfil an activity or function (even that of reminding us of human or divine vulnerability, as mentioned above). These theological starting points suggest an emphasis on all worshipping together, rather than on always organising separate services for those with disabilities (although these may also remain very worthwhile).

What emerges from this discussion

This paper is an initial summary of the biblical and theological resources that are often brought to bear on questions of disability and inclusion. There is far more that could be said or explored on any of the points raised here, and such discussion is underway in the disability theology literature. In addition, each church will encounter a different mixture of disabilities within its community and fellowship, requiring particular practical responses and action in terms of access and communication, not addressed here, but indicated in the introduction.

Nonetheless, starting with the theological and biblical points raised here, a number of positive suggestions can be made towards moving our church fellowships in a more inclusive direction:

- (i) A significant starting point is to begin to identify and discuss with honesty our own, often unexamined, normative theological and practical presumptions about disability and about God's attitude to disability. This should include open discussion about the often different frame of reference we find in the Bible's references to various disabilities.
- (ii) From there, a gradual process of including these aspects in our teaching, preaching and use of language in church is needed. Part of that process is attention to our habits and disciplines of reading and speaking. A single illustrative example would be, if speaking on a passage concerning blindness and seeing (say, the account of Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52), to ask, without assuming we know the answer, how this would be heard by someone with impaired vision, what questions they would have of the passage and what insights they might bring that others might otherwise miss.
- (iii) On the assumption that what we believe and what we do (our doctrine and ethics) affect each other deeply, the theological and biblical assertions indicated briefly above need to become an integral part of our expression of the gospel,

²³ Block, *Copious Hosting*, pp.130-132.

²⁴ Brian Brock, 'Theologizing Inclusion: 1 Corinthians 12 and the Politics of the Body of Christ', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 15 (2011) 351-376, pp.352, 369 (italics original).

not an occasional reference. Similarly, the practice of inclusion in worship should become habitual and the norm, rather than occasional.

- (iv) These insights should also influence the way we conduct healing ministry, incorporating a willingness to differentiate disability and sickness and with as much emphasis on the Church as a community of welcome and wholeness, as on individual cure.
- (v) As part of these changes, the planning of preaching and worship within the church and of mission in the community should include, as a priority, the question of how it will welcome and include those with disabilities. The best resource for that is discussion with those with disabilities and those who share life with them.

Further work

There is a final point to make from an Evangelical theological point of view in relation to the discussion in this paper. As the field of disability theology is developing, its corpus of literature is growing and while there is much still to explore, excellent contributions are emerging, some of which are referenced in this paper. To date, these certainly draw on Jesus' life and ministry and on some specific aspects of the cross and resurrection, as indicated. However, there has been less work done on the part played by central Christian tenets such as the Atonement wrought by God through the person and work of Christ. This is understandable, given the often awkward history of association of disability and sin (encountered for example in questions of healing, as mentioned briefly above). However, it would seem that a distinctively Christian disability theology should address such questions robustly. As a contribution to this, the author is currently working on a project focused on how the Atonement of Christ can become a foundation for Christian disability theology and it is hoped that the output of this will be published in the near future.

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