

## Research Report

# Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities

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For the God we Christians must learn to worship is not a god of self-sufficient power, a god who in self-possession needs no one; rather ours is a God who needs a people, who needs a son. Absoluteness of being or power is not a work of the God we have come to know through the cross of Christ<sup>1</sup>.

One of the interesting things about the field of disability theology is that there are very few people engaging with the issues who formally identify themselves as practical theologians. It is true that disability theologians draw heavily from practical theology method. However, those who would formally designate themselves as practical theologians are thin on the ground. This observation is worthy of deeper reflection. It is not coincidental that even those who specifically claim to be doing systematic theology<sup>2</sup> still find themselves guided by a performative dynamic<sup>3</sup> which res-

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- 1 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Suffering the Retarded: Should We Prevent Retardation?', in: *Suffering Presence. Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church*, Notre Dame (University of Notre Dame Press) 1996, 104.
  - 2 Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*, Waco (Baylor University Press) 2007. John Gillibrand, *Disabled Church: Disabled Society: The Implications of Autism for Philosophy, Theology and Politics*, London (Jessica Kingsley Publishers) 2010.
  - 3 Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome* (n.2), 13. This performative dynamic is also frequently tied in with a mutually critical correlative method that seeks to draw theology into conversation with other sources of knowledge. So, for example, Yong who is a systematic theologian, states that: "The credibility of any contemporary theology of disability rests in large part on its capacity to engage both the broad spectrum of the humanities – and the various social, cultural, economic, political and philosophical discourses on disability – and the wide range of medical, biogenetic, and evolutionary sciences, all of which continue to shape our understandings of disability. A pneumatological imagination alerts us to seek out, listen to, and discern the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit even in the "tongues" of the sciences, of modern technology, and of humanistic scholarship. Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome* (n.2), 12. Again, we see that practical theology method seems to become

onates with the general ethos of practical theological enquiry. It seems that when we think about issues of disability the obvious fact that all theology is practical and intended to enable the church to practice faithfully becomes apparent. To distort Karl Rahner<sup>4</sup> a little, when it comes to disability, we are all anonymous practical theologians!<sup>5</sup> What follows is not intended as a review of the literature. Nor is it intended as a critical conversation with the historical theological traditions. Rather it should be read as an extended practical theological reflection on the development, aims and goals of this particular theological movement which has particular significance for practical theology.

### What is disability theology?

Disability theology is the attempt by disabled and non-disabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities. It has come to refer to a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability.<sup>6</sup>

Disability theology is contextual insofar as it emerges from theological reflection on quite specific forms of human experience. However, as we will see, this contextuality is not necessarily the driver for theological construction. For some it is, but for others human disability is a way of shaping, forming and reforming theology within the boundaries of historical doctrinal thought. It would therefore be a mistake to suggest that disability theology is nothing other than political or contextual theology. Some strands are but others clearly are not<sup>7</sup>.

Disability theology begins with the recognition that people with disabilities have been at best a minority voice in the development of Christian the-

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necessary when dealing directly with issues emerging directly from experience, even for those whose natural disciplinary inclination is to theorise and systematise.

- 4 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 22 Volumes, Trans. by Cornelius Ernst et al., London (Darton, Longman & Todd) 1965–1991.
- 5 For a deeper reflection on the implications of this suggestion see John Swinton, 'Practical theology and disability theology,' in: Bonnie McLemore (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (in press).
- 6 John Swinton, 'Disability Theology,' in: Ian McFarland, David Fergusson, Karen Kilby, and Iain Torrance (eds.), *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, London (Cambridge University Press) 2010 (in Press).
- 7 By contextual theology I refer to approaches that assume theology can be constructed directly out of particular experiences. With Bevens, I recognise that there is a real sense in which all theology is contextual. (Stephen B. Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll, NY (Orbis Books) 1992) Here I am contrasting contextual theology with those who assume theology emerges from the Christian traditions and in particular the creedal traditions rather than from any particular human experience.

ology and practice and at worst have been completely silenced within the conversation. In listening to such voices and reflecting on the life experiences of people with disabilities, it hopes to re-think and recalibrate aspects of theology and practice that serve to exclude or to misrepresent the human experience of disability. Its theological roots are rich and diverse: Liberationist,<sup>8</sup> Reformed,<sup>9</sup> Feminist,<sup>10</sup> Lutheran,<sup>11</sup> Methodist,<sup>12</sup> Process theology,<sup>13</sup> Roman Catholic,<sup>14</sup> Anglican<sup>15</sup> and Pentecostalist.<sup>16</sup>

As well as being denominationally ecumenical, disability theology also traverses the theological disciplines. Theologians writing in this area have roots in biblical studies, systematic theology, Christian ethics, church history and practical theology. It is interesting to note that some of the key disability theologians are not in fact formal theologians. Rather they are sociologists, ethicists, educationalists, parents, psychologists and philosophers who do theology from out of their own perspectives and disciplines. The methods of disability theology are similarly diverse, ranging from story-telling to social scientific analysis, through to systematic theological reflection on the nature of Christian doctrine. It is therefore clear that the field is wide, complex and has a variety of different interlocking methods

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- 8 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Nashville (Abingdon) 1994. John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the care of people with severe mental health problems*, Nashville (Abingdon Press) 2000. Hannah Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology. Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology*, Aldershot (Ashgate) 2007.
  - 9 Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2003. Brett Webb-Mitchell, *God Plays Piano, Too: The Spiritual Lives of Disabled Children*, New York (Crossroad Publishing Company) 1994. Burton Cooper, "The Disabled God." *Theology Today* 49:2 (2006), 173–182.
  - 10 Deborah Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, New York (Oxford University Press) 2009. 'Roundtable on 'Women with Disabilities: A Challenge to Feminist Theology,' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10:2 (1994). Nancy Eiesland, "Encountering the Disabled God," *The Other Side* (2002), 10–15. Doreen Freeman, "A Feminist Theology of Disability," *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain and Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 29, 71–85.
  - 11 Stewart Govig, *Strong at the Broken Places: Persons with Disabilities and the Church*, Louisville (Westminster/John Knox Press) 1989.
  - 12 Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering*, London (Epworth) 1986.
  - 13 David Pailin, *A Gentle Touch: From a Theology of Handicap to a Theology of Human Being*, London (SPCK) 1992.
  - 14 Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, New York (Paulist Press) 1989. Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*, New York/London (Continuum) 2000.
  - 15 Gillibrand, *Disabled Church* (n.2).
  - 16 Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*, Waco (Baylor University Press) 2007.

and foci. Trying to capture something of the richness and complexity of the field is necessarily difficult.

### Who is the God we worship?

In trying to communicate something of what is going on within the field it will be helpful to focus our reflections around a guiding question that will help us capture something of the structure and flow of the field: *Who is the God we worship?* This deceptively simple question will provide a way of entering into the field and coordinating our conversation around the various issues.

At first glance the question 'who is the God we worship?' seems to be quite straight forward. We worship the God revealed to us in Scripture through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That of course is the case. However, the rich, diverse and often contradictory understandings of God available within the Christian tradition tempts us to ask: *whose* God is the God we worship and *whose* Jesus do we follow? Developing, clarifying and creating such God images and drawing out their implications for practice is key to the task of disability theology. The human tendency to create God according to our own image is not difficult to track down. Burton Cooper in his reflections on the idea of a disabled God puts it this way:

Our tendency is to think of divine power in the same terms as our power, except to extend God's power unlimitedly. That is, there are limits to our power; there are no limits to God's power. If we can do some things, God is able to do anything. Thus, human 'ableness' provides us with the image to think about God's power. In this context, the image of a disabled God is not simply a shocker but also a theological reminder that we are not to think of God's powers or abilities as simply an unlimited extension of our powers or abilities.<sup>17</sup>

Doing theology is always an embodied and interpretative enterprise; we inevitably use our bodies and our minds (and our implicit and explicit assumptions about both) to make sense of the world. Such bodies inhabit cultures and contexts which profoundly impact and shape what we see, how we see and importantly how we should respond to what we see. Disability theologians, in different ways and for different reasons, have become sensitised to this hermeneutic as it relates to the ways in which the church has constructed God and the practices that have emerged from such constructions. They argue that the development and acceptance of images of God within Christian theology has been deeply impacted by two factors:

Firstly, most influential theologians, historically and contemporarily have been able-bodied and have thus assumed an able-bodied hermeneutic as the norm for deciphering human experience and developing images of

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<sup>17</sup> Cooper, 'The Disabled God' (n.9), 173.

God. A consequence of this is that the experience of disability has not been allowed to voice itself effectively within the development of Christian doctrine and tradition. This has led to various modes of misrepresentation leading to practices that oppress and exclude. The ways in which we construct our understandings of beauty, normality, strength, intellect and reason have a direct implication for the ways in which we interpret and respond to disability. Our “normal” constructions mean that disability can only be perceived as an abnormality which, it is assumed, cannot reflect the true image of God. If disabled lives are presumed not to represent God’s image, clearly they “must” be a product of sin or some other distortion of the natural order. In other words, those defined not to adhere to God’s image need to be explained. The precise nature of that explanation will determine how individuals and communities respond. It is on such a basis that people with disabilities have been subjected to exclusion, marginalisation and healing practices designed to “free” them from sin and draw them back to “normality.” Within this frame excluding disability from our images of the God to whom we offer our worship has profound practical and theological implications for people with disabilities. Disability theologians thus agree that there is a need for different voices within the construction of theology and the practices that emerge from such constructions.

Secondly, the church in her theology has often been overly influenced by the values and assumptions that emerge from dominant cultures and in particular, in the West, cultures that reflect the assumptions of modernity. Certain expectations and assumptions emerging from liberal democratic culture have influenced the church and presented it with a set of values and assumptions that makes sense culturally (hence they are rarely noticed as problematic), but which make no sense theologically when their true implications are revealed. Here reflection on disability (particularly disabilities that relate to intellect and reason: the prized assets of liberal society), is seen as a way of cracking open false assumptions and revealing the true nature of God and human beings. In so doing a focus on disability challenges the church to see God for whom God is, return to its true character and engage in forms of life that are counter-cultural and faithful. Disability reveals the God whom we worship to be quite different from our unreflective assumptions.

These two issues – the impact of God images on theological anthropology and ecclesial practice and the subservience of theology to modernity – form central streams that traverse the field of disability theology. The question: ‘who is the God we worship,’ allows us to begin to develop a framework and a hermeneutic of suspicion that will guide us through some of the complexities of the field.

## Origins and theoretical foundations: Disability Studies

In order to understand what is going on within the area of disability it is necessary to begin by exploring its conceptual origins. Many of the conceptual assumptions and practical goals of disability theology emerge from its theoretical connections with Disability Studies<sup>18</sup>. Not all theologians working with disability come from or agree with this perspective. Nonetheless, the main thrust throughout the literature locates itself in accordance with the basic premises of this movement. Disability studies are an interdisciplinary approach to the study of disability which focuses on the particular ways in which people with disabilities are portrayed and treated within society. The scope and focus of Disability Studies varies across cultures with the UK tending to concentrate on the experiences of people with disabilities<sup>19</sup> and the USA engaging with a wider range of professions which are concerned with issues of disability.<sup>20</sup> Disability studies attempts to critically re-imagine human disability by focusing attention on the fact that disability is as much a social issue as it is a biological or psychological one. Disability is a social construct, the product of negative beliefs, values, assumptions, policies and practices.

The theoretical and analytical roots of Disability Studies emerged from the discipline of sociology and a critique of models of disability such as the medical or the rehabilitation models.<sup>21</sup> Within these models disability is assumed to be something that resides purely within the mind or the body of the individual. It is a 'personal tragedy' that requires medical or other forms of rehabilitative intervention designed to enable the person to live a life as close to the accepted norm as possible.

The originators of the Disability Studies approach were physically disabled sociologists who sat broadly within a Marxist materialist paradigm.<sup>22</sup> Using that perspective to explore the sociology of disability they noticed that the social experience of people with disabilities was one of exclusion and injustice. However, the reasons for such exclusion and injustice did not relate directly to the impairments that people were encountering. The impairments were not the disabled and disadvantaged people; it was society's responses to impairments that was disabling. Being in a wheelchair is only disabling if the built environment prevents you from participating in soci-

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18 Colin Barnes, Michael Oliver, Len Barton, *Disability Studies Today*. London (Polity Press) 2002.

19 Tom Shakespeare, *The Disability reader: Social Scientific perspectives*, London (Continuum) 1998.

20 Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury (eds.), *Handbook of disability studies*, Thousand Oaks (Sage Publications) 2001.

21 Michael Oliver, *Understanding disability: from theory to practice*, London (Macmillan) 1996.

22 Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement*, Basingstoke (Macmillan) 1990.

ety. Being deaf is only disabling if the people around you haven't bothered to learn sign language. Being blind is only disabling if the environment around you is built around the assumption that everyone can see. In other words, *impairments* (blindness, deafness, lack of mobility) are not the things that produce disability. In a different environment these impairments would not cause a person to be disabled. Rather, it is negative social reactions to such impairments and inflexible social structures which assume a norm that excludes particular impairments which causes a person to become disabled. The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation sums up this understanding of disability in this way:

In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society.<sup>23</sup>

Disability is therefore not a personal tragedy; it is a social situation in which a person finds themselves:

Disability is a situation, caused by social conditions, which requires for its elimination, (a) that on one aspect such as incomes, mobility or institutions is treated in isolation, (b) that disabled people should, with the advice and help of others, assume control over their lives, and (c) that professionals, experts and others who seek to help must be committed to promoting such control by disabled people.<sup>24</sup>

In this perspective disability becomes radically reframed. Whereas previously 'impairment' and 'disability' had been causally connected – to be impaired was to have a disability – now that connection is broken. One can be impaired but it does not follow that one is necessarily disabled. Being disabled therefore occurs when the social circumstances one finds one's self in serve to oppress or exclude the individual involved from meaningful participation in the social and political systems. The appropriate response to disability then is not medical treatment or rehabilitation. Rather the response to disability is social change and radical political action for justice, inclusion and full citizenship for people with disabilities. This way of thinking has come to be known as the *social model* of disability. It is important to notice that according to this understanding disability is not an essentialised feature of an individual. It is the product of social forces.

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23 UPIAS, *Fundamental Principles of Disability*, London (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation) 1976, 3.

24 UPIAS, *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (n.23), 3.

### The social model and the minority group/civil rights model

In the United Kingdom the social model has for many years been the “big idea”<sup>25</sup> which has driven the agenda of Disability Studies. Whilst currently under challenge from certain quarters,<sup>26</sup> the social model of disability remains a highly influential and formative theoretical perspective. In the United States the social constructionist perspective has had a slightly different history and development. Influenced by a similar Marxist analysis and a political perspective which mirrors civil and constitutional rights legislation, people with disabilities are likened to an oppressed *minority group* that requires to be liberated via changes in the political process.<sup>27</sup> There is nothing amongst the various impairments that people have which gives them a unified identity as ‘disabled.’ A person who is blind may have nothing at all in common with a person who has an intellectual disability. What holds them together as a unified group is this common experience of oppression, exclusion and injustice. It is this that binds people with a variety of impairments together as a political movement. Hahn summarises this approach thus:

Disabled men and women have been subjected to the same forms of prejudices, discrimination and segregation imposed upon other oppressed groups which are differentiated from the remainder of the population on the basis of characteristics such as race or ethnicity, gender and aging.<sup>28</sup>

This minority group/civil rights approach has borne much important fruit culminating in the development and implementation of the Americans with Disabilities act of 1990, an act which has been hailed as the “Emancipation Proclamation” for people with disabilities marking a day when their civil rights are finally acknowledged and protected by laws.<sup>29</sup>

Whilst there may be differences between the UK and the US approaches, at heart the assumptions within the Disability Studies approach are very similar: *disability is the product of malignant social practices which require social, cultural and political change rather than simply the rehabilitation of individuals. Within this perspective disability is not something that one has;*

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25 F. Hasler, Developments in the disabled people’s movement, in: J. Swain et al. (eds.), *Disabling barriers, enabling environments*, London (Sage) 1993.

26 Tom Shakespeare, Nicholas Watson, ‘The social model of disability: an outdated ideology?’ *Research in Social Science and Disability* 2 (2002), 9–28. Marion Corker, *Differences, confluents and foundations: the limits to ‘accurate’ theoretical representation of disabled people’s experience?*, *Disability and Society*, 14,5 (1999), 627–642.

27 This of course is a broad-based assessment as both models are used in both contexts.

28 Harlan Hahn, ‘Advertising the acceptability employable image,’ in: Lennard J. Davis, *London* (Routledge) 1997, 174.

29 In the United Kingdom the legislation would be the Disability Discrimination: [http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/RightsAndObligations/DisabilityRights/DG\\_4001068](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/RightsAndObligations/DisabilityRights/DG_4001068) Accessed 21.02 22/10/2010.



*rather it is something that one is given or has bestowed upon one in and through the relationships and practices of one's community.*

These approaches lead to political action aimed at liberation and equality for people with disabilities. Their primary goals are therefore: liberation, civil rights, self-representation, autonomy and social and political access.

### Theologies of disability

Disability theologians in different ways have taken the principles of the Disability Studies model and applied a similar analysis to the church in its theology and practice. Through a process of critical theological reflection on ecclesial practices disability theologians seek to initiate a process wherein people with disabilities can be empowered to find meaningful inclusion (physical, psychological and spiritual) within religious communities.<sup>30</sup> The core of this enterprise relates to re-encountering God in the light of the experience of disability and a search for fresh understandings of what it means to live in the image of such a God<sup>31</sup>. In order to illustrate the basic theological dynamics of the field we will focus on five God images that have been developed within the literature:

1. God as disabled
2. God as accessible
3. God as limited
4. God as vulnerable
5. God as giver and receiver.

Critical reflection on these images will enable us to see the ways in which the field has developed in terms of method and theological construction.

### A Disabled God?

The most influential text within the field is Nancy Eiesland's book *The Disabled God*<sup>32</sup>. Eiesland, a sociologist and a person who had a severe physical

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30 For example: Wilton H. Bunch, "Toward a theology of inclusion for those with disabilities: A Christian Response," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 5,4 (2001), 37–44. Barbara J. Hedges-Goettl, "Thinking theologically about inclusion: disability, imago Dei and the Body of Christ," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 6,4 (2002), 7–30.

31 See for example: James S. Deland, "Images of God Through the Lens of Disability," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 3,2 (1999), 47–81. Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, "The Imago Dei: The Implications of John Wesley's Scriptural Holiness for Conceptions of Suffering and Disability," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 9,3 (2005), 21–46.

32 Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (n.10).

disability, set out to construct a contextual Christology specifically for people with physical disabilities.

To be sure, it would be a worthwhile and much-needed project to examine the experience of persons with intellectual, social, or emotional disabilities within the church. However, such endeavours are outside the scope of this work. One reason for excluding these important concerns is the prominence of physical disability in the sociological theory and the theologizing arguments employed here....the paucity of theological exploration of social, emotional, and intellectual disabilities is scandalous.<sup>33</sup>

In focusing on physical disability alone and assuming the basic premises of the minority group model of disability, Eiesland places herself directly in line with the originators of the Disability Studies perspective. Persons with disabilities “define themselves not in some essentialist meaning of disabilities, but rather in a common historical project for liberation.”<sup>34</sup> Noting the way in which the Americans with Disabilities Act has brought about liberation and inclusion for people with disabilities in a secular context, she draws on liberation theology as a means of initiating similar changes within the church.

Eiesland begins by drawing attention to the ways in which theology and practice has served to exclude people with disabilities. Unhelpful associations of disability with sin, concepts of virtuous suffering, negative and segregationist views on disability and charity, oppressive readings of the healing miracles<sup>35</sup> and bias against disabled people receiving ordination, have led many disabled persons to view the church as “a “city on a hill” – physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable.”<sup>36</sup> People with disabilities are an oppressed minority group within the church. The inclusion of people with disabilities involves not only making churches physically accessible, it also means a fundamental re-symbolising of the tradition. Her major focus for this task is the re-symbolisation of God.

Eiesland’s theology emerged from her own experience as a disabled person, but was brought sharply into focus through her encounter with another disabled person whose life suddenly revealed to her a new image of God:

My epiphany bore little resemblance to the God I was expecting or the God of my dreams. I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is, the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to maneuver by blowing and sucking on a straw-like device. Not an omnipotent self sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpyting and forthright.

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33 Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (n.10), 27–28.

34 Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (n.10), 9.

35 For a fuller discussion of this and a constructive theological alternative reading of the healing miracles from the perspective of people with disabilities, see: Graham W. Monteith, *Deconstructing Miracles: From Thoughtless Indifference to Honouring Disabled People*, Edinburgh (Covenanters Press) 2005.

36 Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (n.10), 20.

I recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged “not feasible”, “unemployable”, with “questionable quality of life”. *Here was God for me.*<sup>37</sup>

Her experience as a disabled person led her to a re-reading of Scripture, in particular a fresh reflection on Luke 24: 36–39:<sup>38</sup>

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

Here we find the disciples encountering the risen Christ. The startling thing is that the risen Christ still carries the wounds of the resurrection. In other words the risen Christ is disabled. If this is so, then rather than being associated with limitations of personhood, beauty, perfection or desirability, human impairment *as it is now*, is found to be fully equitable with our present and eschatological hopes. More than that, such impairment is incorporated within the life (and the body) of the Divine. “...disability not only does not contradict the human-divine integrity, it becomes a new model of wholeness and a symbol of solidarity.”<sup>39</sup>

In re-symbolizing God as disabled, Eiesland neutralises arguments that equate disability with sinfulness or which suggest that people with disabilities are inferior, in need of healing or have bodies that will require to be transformed in the eschaton. God is not outside of disability trying to heal it; but deeply implicated within it. In God’s very being, God shares in the experience. This identification is not simply a matter of the social location of God (God is alongside, or sympathetic towards the disabled); it is in fact an ontological statement about what God is in and of God’s self. God is the disabled God who is truly *with* the disabled in their physical impairment and social exclusion. The God we worship is disabled; disability is therefore no barrier to being in God’s image and therefore no barrier to full participation in the ecclesiological and theological constructions of the church. Political action for justice and change becomes a theological necessity when the true nature of God is revealed.

This idea that we need to re-symbolise God in the light of the experience of disability is a common theme running through a good deal of the literature. God is shown to be limited,<sup>40</sup> deaf,<sup>41</sup> blind,<sup>42</sup> crippled;<sup>43</sup> God is im-

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37 Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (n.10), 9. Italics added.

38 For a fuller discussion on the idea of using disability as a biblical hermeneutic see: Kathleen A. Black, *Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*, Nashville (Abingdon Press) 1996. Also Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome* (n.2), Chapter 2.

39 Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (n.10), 101.

40 Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology* (n.10).

41 Wayne Morris, *Theology Without Words: Theology in the deaf community*, London (Ashgate) 2008.

aged as having Down's syndrome<sup>44</sup> and even bipolar disorder!<sup>45</sup> The important point here is that there is a radical contextual exegesis of God's image followed by calls for theological and practical change. Insights from the experience of disability are taken to theology which is then expected to change in response to that experience. The experience of human disability becomes the primary hermeneutic through which we gain an understanding of God.

### Critical reflections on liberation theology and the disabled God

The idea of the disabled God has much to offer to the conversation around disability and theology. It brings sharply to the fore the prejudices and biases which we use when constructing our images of God and pushes the church to think why it assumes certain theologies and practices which are clearly oppressive are acceptable. Likewise the liberation theology perspective reminds the church that working for justice is not something that is done after the gospel is preached; it is fundamental to what the gospel is. (Jeremiah 22:16) The minority group approach offers an opportunity to mobilise an oppressed group of people and to challenge theological and political perspectives and actions that cause pain and distress. If we worship a God who is disabled then the meaning of disability and normality and our responses to both become quite different.

However, the liberation theology perspective is problematic on a number of counts.

Firstly, the problem with the suggestion that Jesus' resurrected body as disabled is that Jesus' body was in fact no less able than it had been before the crucifixion. He could do the things he could before, and it was through doing one of the same things as before that he was recognised. If anything he was *more* able – he could walk through walls and disguise himself and then appear. Plus, he had just risen from the dead which is quite the display of ability! It seems that Jesus was scarred and battered, but not disabled.<sup>46</sup> It makes perfect sense to talk about the disabled body of Jesus in terms of the

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42 J.M Hull, *In the Beginning there was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible*, London (SCM Press) 2001.

43 A. Lewis, *God as cripple: Disability, personhood, and the reign of God*, *Pacific Theological Review* 16, 11 (1982), 13–18.

44 John Swinton, *The body of Christ has Down Syndrome: Theological reflections on vulnerability, disability, and graceful communities*, *The Journal of Pastoral Theology* (2004).

45 Philip Browning Helsel, 'Introduction to Three Diagnoses of God,' *Pastoral Psychology* 58, 2 (2009).

46 Perhaps the image of the resurrected Christ would work better in the context of self-harm?

incarnation and in particular his experiences of the cross<sup>47</sup>, but in terms of the resurrection it is much more problematic.<sup>48</sup>

Tied in with the previous point is the question as to whether Jesus was disabled according to the minority group model of disability. Recognising disability in Jesus according to the marks of his scars seems strangely at odds with the suggestion that disability is social and shouldn't be essentialised as any particular feature. If disability is a product of social forces rather than any form of impairment, then what difference does it make that Jesus carried his scars? His scars were not the reason for his oppression or the injustices perpetrated against him. Importantly, within mainstream theology, the scars of Jesus are perceived as a source of hope and salvation as they remind Christians of the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice and the reality of their redemption. *Jesus' scars are marks of redemption and hope, not of oppression or disability.* The most that we might say about the "imperfect" form of Jesus' resurrection body is that it was surprising and that all of our resurrection bodies will be surprising.<sup>49</sup> The resurrection body doesn't say much about disability as a social experience. God crucified might.

Secondly, whilst the political intentions of models such as these are clear, precisely how such 'new theologies' relate to 'old theologies' is not always clear. If, for example, God loves all people (John 3:16, which it seems to me is a much clearer text with regard to the integration of all people), then how can Eiesland justify developing a theology and an image of God that is *only* for disabled people?<sup>50</sup> The argument here might be that traditional theology has always been for able-bodied people and that a dedicated theology is necessary to redress the balance and enable conscientisation. Or/and, it could be argued as does Eiesland, that able-bodiedness is temporary; that it is in everyone's self-interest that we re-symbolise God as disabled as we all will be at some point or other in our lives. But does developing a theology that excludes people who do not have disabilities really work as a counter to a theology that excludes people with disabilities? Are both modes of exclusion not equally problematic? If God is disabled in a way that is anything other than metaphorical, then presumably God can't be able-bodied? The danger here is either that we end up with a form of theology that is as exclusive as the theology it is trying to replace or challenge, or we find ourselves lost in a mass of impairment specific God images which may do political work but end up deeply theologically confusing.

The liberation theology approach runs into difficulties when it encounters certain forms of human impairment that stand starkly against its stated

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47 1 Corinthians 11:26. "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

48 I am grateful to my colleague Elizabeth Lynch for these insights.

49 1 Corinthians 15.

50 Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (n.10), 19–29.

goals and intentions. If autonomy, liberation, civil rights, self-representation and equal access to the political and ecclesiological systems are the goals of such approaches, then how are we to understand and make sense of those people whose impairments prevent them from ever being able to achieve or participate in such goals? People with advanced Alzheimer's disease, or those with profound intellectual disabilities i. e. people who are losing or do not have the very things that the disability studies approach seeks after, are necessarily excluded from the process. What if we *are* weak, dependent, vulnerable and helpless? How could we participate in such a process or find a place in such a model of disability? Which God are we to worship then? The problem with the social model and minority group approaches to disability is that they assume they are addressing people who are autonomous, cognitively able and have the ability to desire autonomy, freedom and access to the political or ecclesial system. This is no small issue as Frances Young has noted; people with profound intellectual disabilities are the minority group that people with other forms of disability dread<sup>51</sup>. There is a rather unfortunate irony in the fact that a perspective designed to bring about inclusivity and political empowerment may actually serve to disempower and alienate people encountering forms of disability that are not physical. It is not enough simply to state that there is a need for a theology that encompasses such lives. Liberation should not be exclusive.

### An Accessible God?

Aware of some of these weaknesses within the liberation theology perspective, but still deeply sensitised by the Disability Studies perspective, Jennie Weiss Block in her book *Copious Hosting* offers a different image of God.<sup>52</sup> Weiss Block is not a person with a disability. She describes herself as a “secondary consumer,” that is someone who has a family member who is disabled. Her stated intention is to bring together Christian theology and Disability Studies in a mutually critical correlative conversation.

The theological community must learn about the philosophy that drives the disability movement and, then, be willing to critique the Christian tradition in the light of that philosophy. In like fashion, the disability community must be willing to search the Christian tradition for ways that can give meaning to the experience of being disabled.

She therefore begins by agreeing with the suggestion that people with disabilities are defined by their status as an oppressed minority. However, Weiss Block is uncomfortable with the exclusionary dynamic within the lib-

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51 Young, *Face to Face* (n.12).

52 Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting* (n.14).

eratory approach and strives to develop a “cross disability approach”<sup>53</sup> that encompasses people with a wide range of impairments. Part of her concern about the liberatory approach relates to what Hans Reinders describes as the “two-place logic” of liberation theology.”<sup>54</sup> By this he means that there are really only two categories ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressor.’ Weiss Block finds this schema overly divisive, not least because as a person without a disability she can only find a role as oppressor. She seeks a more inclusive approach that will bring about positive change specifically within religious communities.

She argues that churches have a responsibility to challenge oppressive structures. Her primary aim is to use the Disability Studies concepts of *access* and *inclusion* to clarify our understandings of God and enable these things to become realities within Christian communities. Her interpretation of the gospel and the Grace-full movements of God in history draw her to present an image of God as fully committed to inclusion and access for all people. The mandate for such access and inclusion is: “biblically based, central to our baptismal promise and commitment, and rooted in the Triune God.”<sup>55</sup> The heart of the gospel is that all are welcome. She bases this on the inclusive ministry of Jesus which transcended boundaries of gender, class, race or ability.

When we live for God, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot help but give hope to others, and we cannot help but be inclusive. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a call to a new world where outsiders become insiders. The church as the body of Christ is the quintessential inclusive community, where Jesus Christ, the one who is always identified with the outsider, presides as the copious host.<sup>56</sup>

In presenting a Trinitarian account of who God is in Christ she hopes that people will be enabled to recognise who they are as creatures made in the image of such a God. Thus Christians are called to become co-hosts who are fully present. Two issues are worth highlighting here. The idea of co-hosts reflects the hospitality of Jesus. Sometimes Jesus was guest, sometimes he was host. Often people with disabilities are assumed only to be guests. In developing the idea of ‘co-hosts’ Weiss Block opens the possibility for a community wherein each member both gives and receives. In order for this to happen it is necessarily to be fully present. To be present to others is not simply to be alongside of them; it is to recognise them for who they are and to learn what it means to love them. Liberation for Weiss Block comes through relationships. Of course in order to be present to others they need to be physically present. Thus access enables presence in both

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53 Weiss Block, Copious Hosting (n.14), 28–29.

54 Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship (n.9), 183.

55 Weiss Block, Copious hosting (n.14), 22.

56 Weiss Block, Copious hosting (n14), 132.

of these senses. That being so, “the gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of access; creating access for those on the margins is the Christian mandate.” God is an accessible God. Weiss Block calls the church to accept responsibility for its own oppressive practices and to change its structures and theological emphases in order that people with disability can find acceptance and inclusion.

### Critical reflections

Weiss Block’s position enables a more inclusive theology of disability to develop and helps us to deal effectively with some of the difficult issues raised by the liberation theology perspective. Access and inclusion are important for faithful practice and it is the responsibility of religious communities to fulfil their calling in these areas. Her Trinitarian account locates her position firmly within established doctrine and tradition. The conversation with disability studies remains important but not determinative of the theological context into which she speaks. She thus holds a more creative tension within the interdisciplinary conversation than Eiesland.

However, there seems to be a fundamental problem with Weiss’s position, specifically around her use of mutual critical correlation. Deborah Creamer points out that Disability Studies has thus far shown scarce interest in religion.<sup>57</sup> That being so, it is difficult to see exactly what a *mutually* critical conversation with Disability Studies would actually look like. The danger here is that Disability Studies simply becomes a mode of audit for church practices with its philosophical assumptions remaining unchallenged. This may be effective in making some changes internal to the church and its theology, but it has little impact on the ways in which Disability Studies perceives itself or functions in the world. Theology’s public voice is inevitably silenced if its dialogue partner is not participating in the conversation.

Secondly, and connected with this, is the fact that by her own argument, the Disability Studies perspective won’t actually do the work that she wants it to. Weiss Block puts it this way:

I am deeply committed to principles of advocacy, social justice, and inclusionary practices. However, my experience has shown me that they are not enough. No laws, bishop’s letters, human services paradigms, or parish accessibility committees will ever truly provide access to people with disabilities. Liberation and equal access to the community will only be realized through personal relationships that develop into genuine friendships.<sup>58</sup>

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57 Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology* (n.10), 78.

58 Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting* (n.14), 158.



If this is so, then what can the Disability Studies actually offer in a conversation with theology? It can help to create structures which provide a degree of safety for people with disabilities, but it is helpless to fill those structures with the types of relationship which make them meaningful. This seems to me inherently problematic if the conversation between theology and Disability Studies is to be mutual. If its basic philosophy and method cannot sustain the types of relationships it calls for in order to operationalise their perspective, then there may well be a problem with that philosophy and method. As Hans Reinders puts it: “Weiss Block has not interpreted the Christian tradition in terms of the philosophy of rights, because in the end what she suggests is that this philosophy must fail by its own objectives.”<sup>59</sup> My point is not that we should reject the Disability Studies approach. I think it remains significant for reasons that I will outline in the conclusion to this paper. My point is that a genuinely mutual critical correlative conversation between Disability Studies is highly problematic. The endpoint of Weiss Block’s theological argument seems to indicate that the Disability Rights approach is at best inadequate and at worst misleading.

### A God of Limits?

What we see in the work of Weiss Block is a movement towards the dissolution of the boundaries between disability and able-bodiedness and the creation of theologies that are inclusive of the full breadth of disability. Deborah Creamer, a systematic theologian and a feminist scholar, offers a model of disability that develops this further. She describes her theology as: *a theology of limits*. Creamer accepts the premises of both the medical and the Disability Studies approaches. However, for reasons similar to those outlined above, she recognises the need for a more inclusive model. This model is not intended to replace other models of disability. Rather it is intended to be complementary; a ‘gifts model’ that counters the standard ‘deficit models.’<sup>60</sup> The limits model makes three primary theological claims:

1. Limits are an unsurprising characteristic of humanity.
2. Limits are an intrinsic aspect of humanity.
3. Limits are *good* or, at the very least, not evil.

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59 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship* (n.9), 190.

60 Creamer. *Disability and Christian Theology* (n.10), 95. See also: Deborah Creamer, “Including all Bodies in the Body of God: Disability and the Theology of Sallie McFague.” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 9, 4 (2005), 55–69. Deborah Creamer, “Toward a Theology that Includes the Human Experience of Disability.” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 7, 3 (2003), 57–67.

Creamer observes that a strictly medical approach to disability frames particular impairments as limitations, that is, things that prevent one from enjoying the fullness of life. However, 'limits' need not be equated with problems. Limits are simply an unavoidable aspect of being human. The limits that emerge from disability are but an instance of the overall limited condition of all human beings. In making this claim she draws our attention to the distinction between 'limits' and 'limitations.' The limits of human existence need not be negativised into limitations: "...our limits need not (and perhaps ought not) be seen as negative, but rather ... they are an important part of being human<sup>61</sup>." Limits are neutral and universal attributes of human beings. They are nothing more (and nothing less) than aspects of what it means to be human. Certain forms of impairment will certainly limit us from doing some things. (If I am blind I won't be able to drive.) However, such a limit is but one example of the human condition and need not be turned into pathology. Human differences such as disability can be turned into suffering by social limitations, actions, attitudes and values; but *that is a choice we make*, not something that is a necessary or 'natural' response to an 'abnormal' condition. Creamer draws attention to the fact that disability is not an exceptional case but simply a concentrated example that reminds us of the nature of all human beings.

### A limited God?

The movement of Creamer's theological reflection is from the human experience of limits to a revised understanding of God. If limits are a natural aspect of being human and if human beings are made in God's image, then it is possible to make claims about the nature of God by reflecting on human experience. Her theology is therefore a theology from below. Creamer puts it this way:

When we think of limits, we think of limit-ed. We tend to imagine that a God with limits (e.g., a God with an impairment) is less (at best) or defective (at worst). Why would we worship, or even want, a limit-ed God? If God has an impairment, we tend (from a limited-ness perspective) to think of what God is *not* (a blind God cannot see, a deaf God cannot hear). However, applying the limits model may instead give us a very different way to think of God.<sup>62</sup>

The idea that God is limited is in line with certain significant aspects of the Christian tradition. It is clear that in the incarnation God took upon God's self limits; emptying God's self of power in order to bring about the redemption of the world<sup>63</sup>. Similarly, the obvious but crucial observation

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61 Creamer, *Toward a Theology* (n.60), 64.

62 Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology* (n.10), 112.

63 *Philippians* 2:5–11.

that in order for creation to have form it requires limits indicates that limits are built into the order of the universe and need not be pathologised. A limits perspective does not tell us all that there is to know about God, Creation or human beings. But it does offer a perspective that is often overlooked.

### Critical reflections

Creamer's position opens up a vital conversation that seeks to reframe the perceived limits that disability places on people and to enable a fresh perception of limits as neutral, natural and universal to human beings. However her claim that the limits model is just one other metaphor for understanding disability raises issues. How are we actually to find any truthful and definitive images of God that will guide us all? Creamer calls for disability theology to accept multiple metaphors around images of God and human being. In so doing she wants to hold together the need for the medical model and Disability Studies models of disability whilst pushing the field onwards to explore different models. But what if these metaphors are incompatible? It is not clear in Creamer's work how the contradictory philosophies and theologies contained in the various models of disability can be reconciled. Are the politics of autonomy and self-representation which exclude people unable to participate in this way compatible with a theology of limits? Do the two perspectives not run in completely different directions? What mechanism might there be for negotiating multiple metaphors and what is to stop disability theology from disappearing into a sea of relativism and impairment specific theologies which can only talk with one another at a rather superficial level? The acknowledgement of limits is important, but the connections between theologies of limits and theologies of empowerment need to be deepened and clarified.

### A Vulnerable God?

Along similar lines, Tom Reynolds, another systematic theologian, applies a Foucauldian analysis to push us to re-think issues of power, individualism, competitiveness and other social goods that have come to be highly valued within modern liberal societies. Normality, he argues, is the product of an accepted understanding of the nature of 'the good.' Within liberal cultures 'the good' is defined in line with the social goods highlighted. (autonomy, freedom, self-representation etc) Within the relational economy the primary units of exchange are what Reynolds describes as 'body capital,'<sup>64</sup>

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64 The body is of course of central importance for many disability theologians. The focus of this paper has meant that this aspect has not been emphasised. For a useful insight into this dimension of disability theology see: Robert C. Anderson, "In Search of the Disabled

value is inscribed on individual bodies according to the dictates of the institutions that construct normality. Disabled bodies do not fit because they do not contain the body capital necessary to participate in the accepted economy of exchange. This is why people fear and reject disabled bodies.

He points to the fact that despite our tendencies to value autonomy, freedom and independence, the empirical evidence is that human beings are *dependent* on one another in all things, even to become persons: 'I am because we are.'

Rather than autonomous self-sufficiency (e.g. the individual's ability to construct, produce or purchase), our human vulnerability is a starting point for discovering what we truly share in our differences...there is, in the end, no hard-and-fast dualism between ability and disability, but rather a nexus of reciprocity that is based in our vulnerable humanity. All of life comes to us as a gift, an endowment received in countless ways from others throughout our lifetime. When we acknowledge this, the line between giving and receiving, ability and disability, begins to blur.<sup>65</sup>

The natural state of human beings is thus seen to be dependence (life is gift) and vulnerability (love requires vulnerability). If we are dependent on others for our very being, then we are necessarily *vulnerable*; vulnerable to rejection, exploitation, loneliness and suffering. People with impairments reside within a cultural context where their modes of embodiment and mindedness are lacking in social/body capital. However, the vulnerability of people with disabilities is but an example and a revelation of the vulnerability of all human beings. Within modernity we attempt to pretend that this is not so. But it was ever thus.

A recognition of shared vulnerability does away with negative cultural assumptions and opens up spaces for forms of love that mirror God's love for creation.

It is precisely such vulnerable love that God embraces in Christ, entering fully into the frailty of the human condition, even unto a tragic death. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Sharing the divine self in this way sends a distinct message: God is in solidarity with humanity at its most fundamental level, in weakness and brokenness. This is not to romanticize weakness. Rather, here God reveals the divine nature as compassion not only by undergoing or suffering with human vulnerability, but also by raising it up into God's own being. Redemption then is a welcoming, an empowering act of divine hospitality.<sup>66</sup>

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Human Body in Theological Education: Critical Perspectives on the Construction of Normalcy and Overview." *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 7, 3 (2003), 33–55. And Susanne Rappmann, "The Disabled Body of Christ as a Critical Metaphor: Towards a Theory." *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 7, 4 (2003), 25.

65 Thomas E. Reynolds. *Vulnerable Communion. A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Grand Rapids (Brazos Press) 2008, 14.

66 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion* (n. 65), 19.

God brings creation into being, and continues to love it even when God is rejected. Creativity, relationality and availability are therefore three primary characteristics of God that reveal something of what it means to be in the image of such a God. "Fundamentally, love involves welcoming another into a space of mutual vulnerability."<sup>67</sup> We exercise our freedom by becoming available to others. "[F]reedom is a relationship of availability for the other wherein we bind ourselves to her by offering the gift of ourselves. This is what God does for humanity."<sup>68</sup> Such radical availability requires the recognition of vulnerability. Vulnerability is the core of love; hospitality is a manifestation of the divine. Jesus Christ reveals the vulnerability of God. "[H]ospitality is the Christ shaped character of God's reconciling love, displayed not in power but in vulnerability."<sup>69</sup> We worship a vulnerable God.

A focus on vulnerability then acts as a theological solvent that dissolves the boundaries between able bodiedness and disability. When we realize that we are all vulnerable, the possibility of welcoming people with disabilities into relationships which are marked by mutual vulnerability and care becomes an option. Once again we discover that there is nothing qualitatively different about the lives of people with disabilities. Rather the vulnerability of disability is revelatory of the nature of human beings and of God.

#### Challenging modernity: The virtues of dependence, powerlessness and friendship

Before we offer some critical reflections on Reynolds' position it will be helpful to spend time with two other theologians whose perspective is in some ways similar but in other ways quite different from the theologies examined thus far. Weiss Block, Creamer and Reynolds desire to hold onto the disability studies approach if in a modified and more inclusive form. However, this is not the case for all disability theologians. For them, the emphasis is on allowing reflection on the experiences of people with disabilities to cut through cultural assumptions and reveal how the church in its theology and practice has become acculturated in ways that prevent it from functioning faithfully. In this sense these approaches stand in line with the hermeneutics of suspicion that underpin the disability studies approach. However, the theological movement is quite different. The image of God that emerges here does not move from the human experience of disability to a modified understanding of God. Rather images of God emerge from doctrine and tradition and are then clarified and revived through interaction with the experience of disability.

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67 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion* (n. 65), 119.

68 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion* (n. 65), 185.

69 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion* (n. 65), 20.

The underlying assumption is that movements towards social change and political intervention simply can't work within the premises of modernity. Rights will offer some protection, but modernity's valuing of autonomy, freedom, rights and choices actually poses a significant threat for people with disabilities. The same rights that enable people to choose *for* people with disabilities enables people to stand against them. Take for example the difficult tension that exists between disability legislation which emphasises the full freedom and citizenship of people with disabilities and the fact that society is comfortable with developing medical technologies designed to identify disability prenatally and offer parents the freedom and choice not to have the child.<sup>70</sup> Rights and citizenship are acceptable *when people with disabilities are here*, but we seem quite comfortable to prevent them from getting here. The same freedom (freedom of choice) that liberates one group of people can be deadly for others. This leads Hans Reinders to surmise that modern liberal societies simply do not have the ability to change in ways that will lead to genuine acceptance and a place of belonging for people with disabilities:

Assuming that disabled people will always be among us, that the proliferation of genetic testing will strengthen the perception that the prevention of disability is a matter of responsible reproductive behaviour, and that society is therefore entitled to hold people personally responsible for having a disabled child, it is not unlikely that political support for the provision of their special needs will erode...the question of civic and social hospitality is key, but political liberalism is not ultimately capable of engendering and fostering hospitality towards people with overt, recalcitrant needs. The norms encircling the liberal axis of individual autonomy cannot easily accommodate lives dedicated to the care of perpetually dependent individuals, or admit the intrinsic value of these individuals.<sup>71</sup>

In essence, Reinders suggests that liberal society has neither the practical nor the moral capabilities or desire to protect the disabled and to ensure their future. In other words, the goals and assumptions of modernity form people in ways which mean that the desire to accept and care for people with socially significant differences is limited if it is there at all. We can develop protective legislation, but unless people's hearts are changed nothing will really change. If this is so, then the basic goals of the Disability Rights approach will ultimately be unachievable. Theologies based on such and approach are destined to failure.

There may well be no political will to change, but change and transformation nevertheless remains a possibility. It will, however, come in a different mode. In Reinders' words:

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70 Erik Parens, Adrienne Asch, *Prenatal Testing and Disability Rights*, Washington (Georgetown University Press) 2000.

71 Hans Reinders, *The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society: An Ethical Analysis*, Chicago (University of Notre Dame Press) 2001, 14.

The benefits bestowed by love and friendships are consequential rather than conditional, which explains why human life that is constituted by these relationships is appropriately experienced as a gift. A society that accepts responsibility for dependent others such as the mentally disabled will do so because there are sufficient people who accept [this] account as true.<sup>72</sup>

The way of persuasion and change is to learn to live the types of loving lives within which the meaning and value of disabled lives becomes obvious. This the place of transformation; the place where people begin to learn what it means to live such lives. This place is the church.

### A God who Gives and receives

What we see here is movement from politics to ecclesiology. Stanley Hauerwas' reflections on disability will help draw out a clearer understanding of this perspective. Hauerwas is an ethicist and a theologian who focuses on the lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities, that is, people who have no language and are assumed to have little ability to process the intellectual aspects of the Christian tradition in the ways assumed as normal within modernity. Hauerwas has no interest whatsoever in the Disability Studies approach; his intentions are purely theological. His initial interest relates primarily to the ways in which such lives have provided him with a crack in modernity<sup>73</sup> that illuminates the corrosive influence of modernity on Christian theology. He observes that within modernity to be a person means that one must be able to live one's life, develop one's potential and live out a purposeful life-course without any necessary reference to others. Such things as independence, autonomy, and intellectual skill have become primary social goods and fundamental markers with regard to what a good life might look like. The lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities bring this sharply to the fore. Such lives appear to share few of these culturally valued norms for humanness.

In contrast to the modern quest for individualism and freedom, Hauerwas uses the experience of profound intellectual disability to draw our attention to a basic theological truth: we are *created* and as such, inherently *dependent*.

As Christians we know we have not been created to be 'our own authors', to be autonomous. We are creatures. Dependency, not autonomy, is one of the ontological characteristics of our lives. That we are creatures, moreover is but a reminder that we are created with and for one another. We are not just accidentally communal, but we are such by necessity. We are not created to be alone... For Christians the mentally handicapped [sic] do

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72 Reinders, *The Future of the Disabled in Liberal Society* (n.70), 17.

73 Stanley Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends: Living with the handicapped," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 8, 3-4 (2005), 11-25, 14.

not present a peculiar challenge. That the mentally handicapped are constituted by narratives they have not chosen simply reveals the character of our lives.<sup>74</sup>

Hauerwas emphasizes that the lives of people with disabilities do not constitute an 'unusual case' or an 'ethical dilemma.' Their lives simply remind us of what we all are. Modernity assumes each person has the right to write their own personal story. Hauerwas points to the fact that for Christians, there is only one story; the story of human createdness and our communal need for redemption as it is offered to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Within this story we discover that we are creatures wholly dependent on God and on one another; all that we have is gift. That being so, any ideas of ability or disability are trumped by the fact that as creatures we have nothing to offer; it is all gift and promise.

Within this frame the idea of independence and human autonomy is seen to be an illusion as are any moral judgments made about others on such a basis; we are dependent, deeply vulnerable, limited creatures. Rather than being a negative to be overcome, the dependence, vulnerability, powerlessness, lack of knowledge and weakness revealed in the lives of people with profound and complex intellectual disabilities turns out to be a revelation of the true condition of all human beings. We only ever know what is revealed to us by God and that is a work not of the intellect but of the Spirit.<sup>75</sup> Rather than being inequitable with the image of God, it turns out that the lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities actually reveal God:

Quite simply, the challenge of learning to know, to be with, and care for the retarded [sic] is nothing less than learning to know, be with, and love God. God's face is the face of the retarded; God's body is the body of the retarded; God's being is that of the retarded. For the God we Christians must learn to worship is not a god of self-sufficient power, a god who in self-possession needs no one; rather ours is a God who needs a people, who needs a son.<sup>76</sup> Absoluteness of being or power is not a work<sup>77</sup> of the God we have come to know through the cross of Christ.<sup>78</sup>

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74 Hauerwas, *Timeful Friends* (n. 73).

75 1 Corinthians 2:10 "but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God."

76 Here I interpret Hauerwas' use of the term "needs" as an expression of classical Trinitarian theology. The Father is the Father only inasmuch as he has this Son. Only as the Father is he God. The Son is only the Son inasmuch as he has the Father. Only as the Son is he God. The Spirit is the Spirit only inasmuch as he is the Spirit of the Father resting on the Son. Only as Spirit is he God. This "need" does not indicate lack. Rather it is an ontological statement about the nature of God that radicalizes our understandings of the nature of the self: we are as we relate.

77 It is of course nonetheless a condition of Divine existence.

78 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Suffering the retarded: Should we prevent retardation,' in: John Swinton, *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas' Essays on Disability: Disabling society, enabling theology*, New York (Haworth Press) 2005.



At first glance it might appear that Hauerwas is doing something similar to Eiesland's disabled God, only this time with a focus on people with profound intellectual disabilities. However, his intentions are quite different. He is not re-symbolising God in response to the experience of disability. Rather he is re-symbolising humanness in the light of what we know of God. Rather than embracing a particular human experience as it is lived out within modernity and shaping theology accordingly, Hauerwas uses disability to highlight "forgotten" aspects of traditional theological understandings which in turn challenge the goals and assumptions of modernity. In this way he creates a space within which disabled lives can be both valued and reframed. But more importantly, he makes a clear statement as to who the God we worship actually is.

### Who is the God we worship?

In the preceding argument to the above quotation Hauerwas argues that the historical controversy between Arius and Athanasius had nothing to do with whether God is one or three. Rather the controversy really revolved around "what quality makes God divine, what quality constitutes his [sic] perfection."<sup>79</sup> If God is self-contained, absolute and transcendent, the suggestion that the Son is begotten is blasphemy insofar as it indicates a need within the all powerful God. God is thus imperfect. But if God is trinity; if the Son is begotten and dependent on God; if God is a God of self-communicating love, then perfection is different. It is not comprised of independence, power and transcendence. "...love and not transcendence, giving and not being superior, are qualities that mark God's divinity."<sup>80</sup> God is a God who gives *and receives*. There is thus a "receptive, dependent, needy pole within the being of God."<sup>81</sup> Love and dependence are aspects of perfection, both divine and human.

That is why in the face of the retarded we are offered an opportunity to see God, for like God they offer us an opportunity of recognizing the character of our neediness. In truth the retarded [sic] in this respect are but an instance of the capacity we each have for one another. That the retarded are singled out is only an indication of how they can serve for all of us as a prophetic sign of our true nature as creatures destined to need God and, thus, one another. Moreover, it is through such recognition that we learn how God would have the world governed.<sup>82</sup>

Hauerwas' metaphor of 'the disabled God' therefore works in a different way from Eiesland's. His perspective on God's "disability" is that it is

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79 Hauerwas, *Suffering the retarded* (n.78), 105.

80 *Ibid.*

81 *Ibid.*

82 *Ibid.*

not a disability at all. It just looks like one under the gaze of modernity's expectations. His mode of transformation is not via political actions for liberation, equality and justice, terms of which he is quite suspicious.<sup>83</sup> Rather, he calls for the formation of a community within which this alternative (actually natural and real) way of conceiving God and human beings is lived out in the life and worship of the church.

So Hauerwas ends up in the same place as Reinders:

- we are dependent creatures,
- we are powerless before God,
- all that we have is gift,
- the church as a community is the place where this truth is revealed and lived out.

What we find in this line of thinking is a movement from politics to ecclesiology. Tied in with this is a general movement away from a perception of the self as an isolated individual towards an understanding of the self-in-community; a self that requires others to be itself. The church is the place where this occurs and the gospel is the guiding narrative that makes sense of such a suggestion. We will return to the nature of such a community towards the end of this chapter.

#### Critical reflections on vulnerability, weakness and the giftedness of creaturehood.

The positions that seek to reframe vulnerability and dependence draw our attention to some of the problems within Disability Studies and the ways in which modernity as it is embedded in culture can lead to theological confusion which has significant practical implications. The "disabled God" in this perspective simply reveals the true conditions of all people irrespective of the presence or absence of impairments. As such it provides a vital critique of modernity and a powerful model for inclusion; only this time inclusion is theologically defined.

It is less powerful with regard to political intervention. Hauerwas and Reinders focus on the need for a new politics: a politics of the church and the coming Kingdom. Within this perspective there is a general wariness of Christian involvement in the politics of modernity some of which is for good reasons. Reynolds is more comfortable with engaging with modernity and specifically commits himself to the disability rights agenda. For him, politics remains an option even though there are clear tensions between

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83 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Some Theological Reflections on Gutierrez's use of 'Liberation' as a Theological Concept,' *Modern Theology* 3, 1 (1986), 67.

the idea of vulnerability and the aggressive nature of liberal democratic politics.

However, despite these tensions, Hauerwas and Reinders' rejection of liberal politics and modernity is problematic. There is a real danger that in turning away from the politics of this world, such perspectives leave people with disabilities vulnerable to the forms of oppression and injustice that is powerfully highlighted by the disability studies perspective. One thing that is noticeably underplayed in the theologies of Hauerwas and Reinders is the impact of sin.<sup>84</sup> The issues of church, sanctification and redemption are a strong theme, but the fallenness of this world and the vulnerability of people with disabilities to the consequences of sin and fallenness do not feature as highly in their theologies. This may be one reason why Reynolds holds onto the Disability Studies perspective. In a fallen world people need protection. Does the church not have a responsibility to engage with issues of justice "in the world?" Difficult as the politics of modernity may be, could they not actually serve as a positive force for good if they are properly engaged? It is true that legislation does not change hearts. But what legislation and engagement with liberal politics does do is to provide a legal framework which can at least act as a brake on the excesses of liberal thinking. My point here is not that we should uncritically accept the liberal point of view. My point is that when liberalism acts in ways which are in line with the goals of the coming Kingdom, Christians should act supportively. When it does not it should be resisted. In a truly fallen world, certain aspects of the liberal project may at best be valuable and at least the lesser of two evils.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, there is a clear empirical contradiction between the eschatological vision of the church and the empirical realities of the sociological church. Churches do not necessarily reveal the vital theological truths that Reynolds, Hauerwas and Reinders push for. Churches require chastising and education as well as encouragement and it may well be that the secular politics of the moment, flawed as they are may be precisely the source of such education. To reject some of the contentious claims of liberalism as theologically problematic shows proper prophetic sensitivity. However, such rejection requires a parallel movement which recognises and respects its contribution to the goals and visions of and for the church. To push us towards the recognition of our vulnerability is valid. However, in a fallen world, recognition of the importance of vulnerability may require to be accompanied by moral outrage, lament, protest and social action.

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84 This is not to suggest that either do not take sin seriously. However, with regard to their work on disability, the practical issues of sin and how that may or may not affect our interactions with liberal politics is underplayed.

85 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 2005, 326–333.

## Possible ways forward: the knowledge of not knowing

Thus far I have offered an overview of the field of disability theology which has tried to draw out its significance for practical theology and practical theology method. The question I want to address as we move towards a conclusion is: how might deal creatively with the problems and tensions that have been highlighted thus far? I want to offer a different perspective that takes seriously the issues that have been raised up to now, but offers a possible way of synthesizing the perspectives and moving the conversation in some new and complementary directions.

## Who is the God we worship?

The theme that has run throughout this essay is the question: *who is the God we worship?* I have suggested that this is the key question that holds a rather disparate field together. The type of God we assume God to be will, to a greater or lesser extent, determine how we understand what it means to be human, which in turn will determine how we respond to disability. It is therefore a deeply theological and practical question. If God is disabled, deaf, interdependent, friendly, accessible and so forth, then our responses to those who are made in the image of such a God will be shaped accordingly. The assumption throughout is that there is a clear and identifiable analogy between images of God and images of human beings or between human beings and God. *But what if God has no image?* What might it look like for human beings to be made in the image of a God who has no image? I would like to introduce a theological dimension that is under developed within the conversations around the theology of disability: *the apophatic tradition*.<sup>86</sup>

## Knowing God by not knowing God

Within the apophatic tradition God is assumed to be unknowable and unimaginable. God is not simply another object in the world that we can scrutinize and seek to understand.<sup>87</sup> Human beings cannot make any categorical ontological claims about God other than those which God chooses to

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86 The only theologian with an interest in disability who has touched on this tradition in any detail is Frances Young, *Brokenness and Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality*, London (Darton, Longman and Todd) 2007, Chapter 2.

87 This of course is the fundamental category mistake that the so called new atheists make. They assume that God is another earthly object like a mouse or a lemon. The apophatic tradition reminds us of the absolute otherness of the Divine.

reveal.<sup>88</sup> Human knowledge and concepts simply cannot contain or even reveal anything categorical about God. If we call God good we are mistaken as God transcends all of our concepts of goodness. If we call God strong we are mistaken. God's strength is beyond human understanding. So also for any other attribute or aspect that we ascribe to God. God is fundamentally unknowable. The best that we can do is to talk about what God is *not*. We know that God is not unloving even if we are not sure what God's love looks like. We know that God is not evil as evil is the opposite of good...-although we can only gain a shadow of an understanding of what God's goodness might comprise. Within this perception of God, God is assumed to be the paradigm of normality; yet we have no idea of what God's normality might comprise. That being so, God is not disabled, and yet God is not not disabled. Likewise God is not able bodied; and yet God is not not able bodied! God is simply God. God's image cannot be claimed by any group of human beings. To be in God's image has nothing to do with able bodiedness; nor has it anything to do with disability. God has neither and yet may have both!

That being so, human beings made in God's image cannot be perceived as able bodied nor disabled as we do not know what either of these terms means in relation to God. Human beings are simply varied and loved.<sup>89</sup> To use the idea of the image of God as a way to divide up human beings is a category mistake which assumes the imaginative analogy to be empirically true. That being so, human variation doesn't have any specifically theological or moral significance. Rather, such variation is an obvious aspect of a created universe within which neither able bodiedness nor disablement need be attributed to sin (For *everyone* has sinned; we *all* fall short of God's glorious standard (Romans 3:23)), or claimed as representative of the image of God. As embodied beings *all people* are subject to the limitations of biological existence, with its multiple variations and unpredictable outcomes.

Human beings are thus seen to be varied and limited; made in the image of a God whom they do not know apart from that which God chooses to reveal. Put slightly differently, human knowledge is useless in the quest for knowing God. Having a profound intellectual disability is no different from being Albert Einstein when it comes to what it means to know God. It is all gift. Such forms of disability are but one instance of the overall condition of being human.

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88 John 1:18; Matt 11:27.

89 John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

## Strong and weak apophaticism: The unfathomability of God

I do not raise the issue of apophaticism in an absolute sense. As we shall see, it is clear that we can know certain things about God although such knowledge is not a work but a gift. Perhaps the term 'unfathomable' is more appropriate for current purposes;<sup>90</sup> we cannot perceive God fully through our creaturely perceptions, but God remains in a sense searchable with the help of the Holy Spirit.<sup>91</sup> God is unfathomable,<sup>92</sup> but paradoxically, God is still knowable.<sup>93</sup> Put slightly differently, God can be known but only in a limited sense through what God chooses to reveal. My point in raising apophaticism is to introduce an element of uncertainty about what we think we can and cannot know about God. In so doing I want also to introduce some uncertainty as to what we can and cannot know about human beings. If God is mystery then so are human beings made in God's image. Absolute statements about God or human beings are, as we have seen, dangerous, disingenuous and self-fulfilling. Apophaticism in its weaker form, introduces a necessary element of humility to a conversation where all parties, able bodied and disabled have a tendency to project their own images onto both God and humans. An attitude of bold humility is what is required.<sup>94</sup>

## Called to love: what can we know about God?

While a focus on apophaticism and the unfathomableness of God reminds us of our limits when it comes to knowing about God, there are certain things that we can know. We can know that God is love<sup>95</sup> and that God loves us.<sup>96</sup> We can know that that love is self-sacrificing and open to all peo-

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90 I am grateful to my colleague Priscilla Oh for this insight.

91 1 Cor 2:10: "but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God."

92 Job 11:7: "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?"

93 Col 1:9–12: "For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light."

94 *Mission in Bold Humility*, ed. W. Saayman and K. Kritzing, Maryknoll, N.Y. (Orbis Books) 1996.

95 1 John 4:8.

96 1 John 4:19.

ple.<sup>97</sup> But such knowledge does not come to us through reason, intellect or human ability. Quite the opposite, the knowledge of God that is given to us is considered foolishness by the world.<sup>98</sup> The only knowledge we have of God is that which has been given to us: knowledge of God is a gift.<sup>99</sup> God has chosen to reveal God's self to us in a quite particular way in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. (Matt 11:27; John 1:18). Jesus is thus the critical hermeneutic that determines the boundaries of normality and abnormality. This has a profound impact on how we view the nature and meaning of the good life and what it means to live humanly. If the chief end of human beings is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever,<sup>100</sup> and if God is unknowable apart from God's choice to reveal God's self in Jesus, then the good life is seen to be a relational concept that is not determined by any particular human attributes: *it is a gift*. Knowledge of God is then necessarily ecstatic (coming from outside of human beings.) Hans Reinders draws on the Trinitarian theology of John Zizoulas to make this point. "[We] are truly human because we are drawn into communion with God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>101</sup> The manifestation of this gift is discovered in the giving of God's Divine friendship.<sup>102</sup> Such a friendship is not the product of human possibilities; it is simply a gift that is given freely by God to human beings because God is love.<sup>103</sup>

If it is the case that it is only through Jesus that we will discover what knowing God might mean,<sup>104</sup> then it is the shape and texture of our relationships with Jesus that mark out our encounter with God. If friendship with Jesus is friendship with God,<sup>105</sup> this opens up a possible way of resolving some of the tensions highlighted previously. The friendships revealed in the life of Jesus were based on a principle of acceptance and grace and a

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97 Graham Monteith's constructive work on re-reading Paul's letters from the perspective of disability is a good example of one way making this point by bringing together Christian theology and the Disability Studies approach. (Graham W. Monteith, *Epistles of Inclusion: St Paul's Inspired Attitudes*, London (Grosvenor House Publishing Ltd.) 2010.

98 1 Cor 3:19. "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness."

99 Matt 11:27; John 1:18.

100 Westminster shorter catechism: [http://www.creeds.net/Westminster/shorter\\_catechism.html](http://www.creeds.net/Westminster/shorter_catechism.html) Accessed 29/9/10.

101 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship* (n.9), 274.

102 There is of course a problem with the term friendship and whether it actually does the work that Reinders and others intend it to do. For example, a statement such as "we used to be in love but now we are just friends" indicates that the relationship of friendship can be conceived of as derivative of love or even belonging to a different order. This is not the place to develop this but it is a critique that requires clarification, as the motif of friendship seems to be attracting growing attention within the field.

103 1 John 4:8.

104 John 15:15.

105 John 14:6-7.

principle of justice.<sup>106</sup> They were designed to create a new community *and* to bring about justice of a quite particular kind.<sup>107</sup> Jesus' friendships were primarily with those who were rejected and marginalized.<sup>108</sup> Liberatory perspectives are therefore right to stress that being in relationship with God means being in solidarity with those whom society chooses to oppress. Knowing God means doing justice.<sup>109</sup>

But the friendships of Jesus had eschatological rather than political intent. In other words his interest was not in changing political systems but in instigating a new community that reflected the radical new ways of the coming Kingdom of God. The context of Jesus acts for justice was focused on the coming Kingdom and not in accordance with current politics or political correctness. This is an important observation. Justice requires a context and a community.<sup>110</sup> For Christians, Jesus and the coming Kingdom is the context for justice, and love is the mode of its delivery. Love does not require words. It is a gift of the Spirit, in to and for the new community that is the church.<sup>111</sup> This new community is called to work towards justice, but, according to its own criterion. Such an understanding calls for a critical politics of liberation that is wary of the goals of modernity and alert to the ways in which these goals function to exclude rather than include important groups of people with disabilities, but which is nonetheless aware of the temporary need for laws that offer protection to the weak. Thus the Disability Studies perspective remains valid, but requires theological re-contextualisation.

Put slightly differently the Disability Studies/Disability Rights approach should be framed as a necessary but penultimate discourse. Here I am thinking about Bonhoeffer's distinction between ultimate and penultimate things:

What is this penultimate? it is all that precedes the ultimate – the justification of the sinner by grace alone – and that is addressed as penultimate after finding the ultimate. At the same time it is everything that follows the ultimate, in order

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106 John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the care of people with severe mental health problems*, Nashville (Abingdon Press) 2000.

107 As opposed to the types of generic justice based on universal principles that is the product of modern thinking in this area. As we have seen, universal principles of justice and equality can be double edged in the context of human disability.

108 Matt 11:19.

109 Jer 22:16: "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the LORD." Here Jeremiah is talking about King Josiah whom God considers to be a good King because he defended the poor and the needy. The key thing is the suggestion that knowing god is not a cognitive or intellectual task but a social relation. To know God is to care for the poor. Friendship as a divinely inspired relationship is a mode of knowing God.

110 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame (University of Notre Dame Press) 1988.

111 1 Cor 12:7–11.



again to precede it. There is no penultimate as such, as if something or other could justify itself as being in itself penultimate; but the penultimate becomes what it is only through the ultimate, that is, in the moment when it has already lost its own self-sufficiency. The penultimate does not determine the ultimate; the ultimate determines the penultimate.<sup>112</sup>

Such a suggestion is helpful with regard to the types of correlative conversations that we have explored in this paper. If the Disability Studies approach is framed in terms of ultimate knowledge, theology encounters the types of difficulties that have been highlighted in this paper. However, if it is viewed as penultimate knowledge then things look quite different. Penultimate knowledge gains its meaning and telos from ultimate knowledge. Penultimate knowledge is valuable, but it is not determinative; it only finds its meaning in the light of the ultimate. As Bonhoeffer puts it:

Since God's justification by grace and by faith alone remains in every respects the ultimate word, now we must also speak of penultimate things not as if they had some value of their own, but so as to make clear their relation to the ultimate. For the sake of the ultimate we must speak of the penultimate."<sup>113</sup>

If justification by grace and faith alone remains in every respect the final word", then everything else – ethics, hospitality, theology, beauty, disability, – is penultimate.

This opens up the possibility of a critical correlative conversation that is bounded by the context in which it is carried out: creation, human createdness and the Kingdom of God which is here yet still to come. Within creation, both sin and redemption reside within human experience. That being so, penultimate knowledge, no matter how flawed it may be, can function for the good insofar as it reveals and strives to counter evil and sin in its personal and institutional forms. However, the mode and function of penultimate knowledge within creation requires to be tested against the eschatological realities of God's coming kingdom wherein such knowledge will find both its fulfillment and its rejection. Disability rights are important, but only as they relate to the goals of the coming Kingdom. That being so, rights without love won't work. Hauerwas, Reinders and indeed in a different way, Weis Block are correct. But, in the present, love without rights leaves people vulnerable to the fallout from human sinfulness. Weis Block, Reynolds and Creamer thus raise issues which are of the utmost importance. In this sense Eiesland's liberatory approach is absolutely necessary, but only if its penultimate nature is recognized and honoured.

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112 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (n.85), 159.

113 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (n.85), 151.

## Knowing God in Christ

In being befriended by God in Jesus we come to know those aspects of the unknowable God that God chooses to reveal. Jesus' friendship calls our attention to our relationship with God, but also to our relationship with our neighbor.<sup>114</sup> This dimension manifests itself both in relation to politics and community building, but also with regard to revelation. Friendships towards others is the place where we meet God. The full revelation of love requires bodies and not just words. *The theology of disability draws our attention to the importance of 'body proclamation'* and what that might look and feel like. If this is so, even the most intellectually disabled person has access to God in Jesus via the practice of friendship as they are offered by and through the Christian community.<sup>115</sup> To be loved by God and to receive that which the unknowable God chooses to offer is not an action dependent on capabilities; it is a gift given by God to human beings through the friendships of Jesus and mediated to all people through human friendship. Friendship requires justice, but justice requires friendship for its actualisation.

Human variation in all of its different forms calls the church to recognize and act out the paradoxical truth that all human beings are loved by an unknowable God who can be known as God chooses to reveal God's self in the person of Jesus. Within such an understanding that community we call the Body of Christ is called to become a place where discrimination and prejudice are abandoned and uncompromising love is embraced. Only then can the apostle Paul's vision of a community within which there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female . . . black nor white, able bodied nor disabled,' become a reality. (Galatians 3:28) Disability theology is that place where we notice such things and in noticing learn to practise differently. Practical theology has much to learn from the theology of disability even though, for now, few of us choose formally to engage with it.

## Abstract

This research report is less a survey of the literature than a reflection on the emergence, aims and predominant themes to emerge from theological engagements with issues of disability. It advances a rather bold claim: *the theology of disability is central to our understanding of what it means to know who God is and to know what it means to be a human being living fully under God.* While such a statement will need justification, the emphasis within this essay is that the theology of disability is not a specialist enterprise for those who are "interested in such things." Theological reflection on human disability

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114 John 13:34.

115 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship* (n.9); Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person* (n.106).

leads us into the very heart of the theological enterprise in both its practical and theoretical aspects. As such it has particular significance for practical theology.

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Research Report ist weniger ein Literaturbericht als vielmehr eine Reflexion des Aufkommens, der Ziele und vorherrschenden Themen, die zu entwickeln sind, wenn Theologie sich mit dem Thema Behinderung beschäftigt. Dabei wird eine durchaus gewagte These vertreten: Die Theologie der Behinderung ist zentral für unser Verständnis davon, was es bedeutet zu wissen, wer Gott ist, und zu wissen, was es bedeutet ein Mensch zu sein, der ganz und gar von Gott abhängig ist. Eine solche These verlangt natürlich nach Begründung; der Schwerpunkt dieses Beitrags liegt allerdings darin deutlich zu machen, dass die Theologie der Behinderung nicht einfach eine Sonderbeschäftigung derer ist, die sich für diese Fragen interessieren. Theologische Reflexion über Menschen mit Behinderung führt, so die Meinung des Autors, direkt ins Herz theologischer Unternehmungen, und zwar in praktischer wie in theoretischer Hinsicht. Deshalb hat sie eine ganz besondere Bedeutung für die Praktische Theologie.