

Reviews



Brian Brock, *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), pp. xxii + 180, ISBN 978-1540962973. £15.99

Brian Brock's *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body*, has, as its title suggests, disability as its primary concern. The book is also hugely valuable from a broader ecclesiological perspective. Indeed, in the author's own words, the aim of the book is to 'help contemporary Christians to take a journey' (p. 2) which will not only challenge their preconceived notions of disability, but in doing so will 'help Christians reconceive how we live as church' (p. 2). We are truly church when, as Brock puts it, we are 'comfortable welcoming people with all sorts of disabilities' (p. 27).

The journey we go on with the author is exciting. It is, not surprisingly, biblical and theological in the main, though it also takes interesting detours to consider other important disability-related themes such as healing, vulnerability, and wider society's preoccupation with achievement and eloquence, something that frequently renders people with disabilities second-class citizens.

Chapter One begins the journey with an account of Brock's accident with a circular saw, which resulted in the severing of a tendon, and how the experience caused physical, psychological, and also existential trauma at the time, forcing him to 'stop and consider what we're actually saying when we say that someone "is" disabled or "has" a disability' (p. 6). Brock's admission that his loss of capacity caused him to worry about his identity (as a writer) and alienated him from his 'familiar relationship with the world' (p. 6) becomes a motif for the rest of the book in which themes of isolation, alienation, inclusion, and welcome are explored via stories of those with disabilities in the Scriptures.

This chapter continues with an exploration of the 'why' and 'why not' of church membership and attendance for people with disabilities. Brock cites Erik Carter who accounts for the general absence of people with disabilities from church as resulting from a neglect of both 'the primacy of relationships' and 'the personal perspectives of people with disabilities



and their families' (p. 9). The rest of Chapter One considers definitional questions, including the meaning of 'the norm' and Brock cautions us to use the word disability 'thoughtfully' (p. 18).

Chapters Two and Three discuss Scripture and its relevance for people with disabilities. Brock, writing from a Reformed perspective, rightly describes the Bible as 'the central source of Christian theology' (p. 33), though a Catholic reader would likely add that it is not the only source for Christian theological reflection, on disability or any other matter pertaining to the life of faith.

Brock brings his biblical *dramatis personae* to life in an engaging way in these chapters. Characters who appear on Brock's journey include Bartimaeus who was born blind (Chapter Two), Job, Jacob, and the Ethiopian eunuch (Chapter Three), and Peter makes several appearances. Brock uses the stories effectively to explore the subject of disability and relevant themes such as strength, weakness, healing, acceptance, and redemption. He offers important insights here too into the anthropology of the region at the time of Jesus, and the deeper meanings of disability in that society. Ecclesiological themes are also introduced via an enumeration of the mistakes made by Peter who 'blunders along almost getting it right' (p. 79). Brock comments that 'Peter's falling short is a reminder that the shortcomings of the church do not thwart the work of the Holy Spirit' (p. 81). This is an important reminder for all Christians who, on being moved by the Spirit to act or proceed in one way or the other, can find themselves thwarted or unsupported by the church. Those who are moved to welcome and love people with disabilities for example, can also find themselves unsupported in churches. Perhaps Brock is a little hard on Peter! This reviewer has at any rate always been grateful for the blunderer Peter who, despite his frailties and mistakes, was able to recover and persevere, thanks to God's grace.

Brock reminds the reader that direct and easy correlations cannot be drawn between the experiences of the range of biblical characters he presents here and people with particular disabilities today. He comments; 'there is no easy or single way to connect Scripture with any given disability' (p. 37), wisely highlighting the ambiguities and 'angularity' (p. 33) of the Bible. The theme of healing in the Bible is particularly challenging from a hermeneutical perspective, and Brock comments that 'it is very easy to misread the Bible by projecting our contemporary assumptions back onto it' (p. 65).



Chapter Four begins with a positive view of the motivations of most church members who encounter people with disabilities, namely that while some disabilities can cause pain, ‘churches are filled with people who genuinely do want to meet people in pain [although] this pastoral response to disability is [often] not accompanied by a fully thought-out theological account of what disability is’ (p. 95). Brock’s challenging exploration of the role of the theologian in this important work brings to mind the often-cited comment that the only people who are interested in what theologians have to say are other theologians! He believes that the wider public do not see the point of theologians because most have not ‘dared to risk speaking to issues of such direct relevance to contemporary Christians’ (p. 97). This may indeed be the case with disability, but there are other relevant contemporary issues where the work of theologians is widely regarded and discussed, even among non-Christians, including the issues of creation and climate change.

In this regard, Brock’s observation reminds this reviewer of the insightful comment by the novelist Jonathan Franzen from his book of essays, *Farther Away*, that ‘trying to love all of humanity may be a worthy endeavour, but, in a funny way, it keeps the focus on the self, on the self’s own moral or spiritual well-being. Whereas, to love a specific person, and to identify with his or her struggles and joys as if they were your own, you have to surrender some of yourself.’¹ Perhaps it is indeed the case that, as Brock comments, ‘if churches become places where those with disabilities feel at home [...] and people become friends, this will be a major achievement. Churches should, however, be warned – it might lead to more!’ [friendship and mutual commitment] (p. 163). It is risky therefore for Christians to forge friendships with people with disabilities given that ‘genuine friendships [...] can rarely be constrained to church on Sunday’ (p. 162).

Despite some discomfort among many disability advocates and commentators, including some in the church, with the linking of disability to ‘woundedness’ and ‘vulnerability’, Brock does not shy away from these in his discussion of disability, though he rightly rejects disability as ‘a tragic effect of the fall’ (p. 146). He points out that not only is vulnerability ‘an anthropological constant [...] a universal characteristic of the creaturely state’ (p. 102), but that it is actually the vulnerability to being

¹ Jonathan Franzen, *Farther Away* (Leicester: WF Howes Ltd, 2013), pp. 8–9.



wounded that is ‘the place of transformation’ (p. 103).

As we move towards the end of our journey with Brock and his exploration of disability, Chapter Five acknowledges the reality that, with the best will in the world, churches and individual Christians often just do not know what to do when faced with people with disabilities. Brock writes of ‘the hesitation blues [...] sure that we should engage with someone but unsure how to do so and afraid of doing the wrong thing’ (p. 136). While Scriptural faithfulness, special programmes, and good intentions are all good and well, Brock is clear that ‘the whole church needs to become more aware of – and embrace – the sheer diversity of human life’ (p. 137). He enjoins us to trust the work of the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit which brings strangers together and which draws people ‘into a living organism made up of empathetic connections and works of service to one another’ (p. 146). It will be uncomfortable perhaps for churches at the start, but Brock believes that the breakthrough comes when people with disabilities, and those who welcome them, are honest and open about their hopes and fears. This is when the Spirit can do its work of transformation.

Brock’s book does not take us on any old journey. His aim is to challenge us and to help us to increase in holiness. ‘Sanctification’, he writes, ‘means discovering our place in the ongoing story God is writing with the world’ (p. 33). Having accompanied Brock on his journey, the reader is challenged to think differently about disability and to consider how the body of Christ, the church, is not complete when people with disabilities are either absent, or present but not welcomed with love.

I think Brock’s comment that he himself does not ‘have a reputation as an accessible writer’ (p. 167) is, if true, not the case with this book: *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ’s Body* is a book that is accessible and would be a useful resource for any church or parish seeking to understand not only the ‘how’, but also the ‘why’ of welcoming our brothers and sisters with disabilities.

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<https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v29i2.2527>

