

Review

Brock, Brian, 2021. *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, ISBN9781540964212

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After I moved to Canada, I worked as a support worker for people with developmental disabilities for a few years. Though I had a degree in social work, without any Canadian experience I felt this was the place to start. I look back at those years with deep gratitude for the personal and spiritual formation I experienced. Now, as a marriage and family therapist I specialize in working with families whose lives are impacted by disability, neurodiverse couples and individuals with disability who experience mental health struggles. Some of the most common inquiries that families and individuals bring to therapy are connected to making sense of God's perspective on disability, as they often feel marginalized and not welcome in church.

As a contribution to the Baker Publishing series *Pastoring for Life*, Dr. Brian Brock's book *Disability: Living into the Diversity of the Christ's Body* is essential in helping us reconsider our perspective on faith and disability. Though the author approaches a difficult and somewhat uncomfortable subject, the book is easy to read and comprehend. Brock is not offering quick fixes or cheap solutions or hurrying through the uncomfortable passages of scripture. Instead, he challenges our own theological views on disability, asking us to move away from doing (performing) to learning more about being (we are all lovable, fillable children of God).

We rarely think of disability because it reminds us of the fragility and vulnerability of our own lives. More so, we don't acknowledge (or are not aware of) our resistance, discomfort and even disgust when we meet certain people with disability. As a result, we have a hard time reconciling theology with the experience of disability.

Often the experience of disability is the experience of the "other," remote and theoretical, until it hits home, and then all the disgust and rejection we felt toward the "other" is turned towards ourselves. The goal of Brock's book is to take us on a journey into the disability experience and what it reveals about God, the world and the church. It's a practical book written for pastors, congregants and families who struggle to understand how God views their loved ones who contend with a disability.

Chapter one explores the question: “Where are people with special needs on Sundays?” because very few of them can be found in our churches. The painful truth is that most people with disabilities and their loved ones experience church as an unwelcome environment. Church communities who try to be inclusive often frame the ministry to people with disability in terms of the need for help and accommodation offered by the church. Hence, people with disabilities are seen as a burden and a challenge that needs to be managed. If we see life with disability as a marginal human experience, our theology is skewed and superficial.

The author’s experience with temporary disability reminds us that the subject is closer to us than we imagine, because “we are all one accident away from being disabled” (p.27). If we are not able to connect with our own fragility and vulnerability, we cannot have an accurate theological perspective and practice in relation to disability. To get disability right requires us to accept our limitations and to negotiate our discomfort with difference.

Chapter two challenges the many views and theological stereotypes of Christians on disability. The author acknowledges that the Bible’s presentation of disability is often ambiguous and full of difficulties. His goal is to help Christians resist the desire to categorize disabled people and learn rather to ask: “Which story with God is this person living?” (p.32). This helps us meet people where they are and “discover what God is doing in and through them” (p.32). The poignant stories in this chapter helps us accept that there is no easy or single way to connect the Scripture with one’s experience of disability. The reader is asked to put aside its Western medical model on cure and healing and read the scripture understanding the more communal culture perspective of Jesus’ times. Jesus showed great sensitivity to the context of those who approached him for healing. His healing was never intrusive, unwanted or embarrassing. His healing focused not only on restoring people’s bodies but also on restoring relationships. Jesus’ miracles bring people together.

The author does not avoid difficult passages in the Scripture, especially those related to laws about who can and cannot be a priest, and descriptions of disability as punishment for disobedience of God. He suggests a Christological reading of the text; Jesus is the perfect priest and the perfect offering, and his impaired and disabled body ends the request for a blemish-free act of worship. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross, and true communion with God is when, as a collective church, we acknowledge not only our brokenness but also the unity we find in this

brokenness. We are all part of the body of Christ, and we need to learn “to travel at the speed of others so that the bonds of community can flourish” (p.91).

In chapter four, Dr. Brock explores Christian theology and doctrine, challenging our views on disability and sin, and disability and the image of God. If we approach disability in terms of sin, virtuous suffering, or charitable programs, the focus will not be on living an ordinary life but on avoiding, explaining, and maybe championing a cause. Getting sin and disability right, is to let go of the assumption that these two go hand in hand. We need to focus on God’s decree that all creation was made good. We can only understand sin, when we focus on the healing and redemption offered by Jesus on the cross.

The last chapter helps us to put Brock’s analysis into practice. To welcome people with disabilities takes a whole church. Knowing scriptures is not enough and setting up “special needs ministries” has limitations. Instead, we are called to learn to wait for each other. Brock draws attention to the apostle Paul’s vision of the church presented in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, where not only the leaders are involved, but the whole church learns to wait for each other.

The practical advice offered in the last chapter shows both the depth of the author’s knowledge and extended research of the subject, and his personal experience. The afterword of the book mentions Dr. Brock’s son, Adam, and the insight into the disability experience gained through their relationship.

The book takes contemporary Christians on a journey of reconsidering one’s experience with disability with the goal of helping us reconceive how we live as a church community. Dr. Brock’s book helps us “rediscover the power of a gospel that bubbles in the interactions that the Holy Spirit calling Christians into with those who today carry the label “disabled” “(p.3)

Disability: Living into the Diversity of the Christ’s Body is a valuable resource, and it should be read by pastors, leaders, and their congregations. This book should be part of the training curriculum for pastors, and Christian leaders.

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