

# *Disability in the Christian Tradition*

A READER

*Edited by*

Brian Brock & John Swinton

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

IRA J. TAYLOR LIBRARY  
THE ILIFF SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
DENVER, COLORADO

*With gratitude to Adam,  
and our many other teachers*

© 2012 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company  
All rights reserved

Published 2012 by  
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
2140 Oak Industrial Drive N.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505 /  
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

17 16 15 14 13 12      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Disability in the Christian tradition: a reader / edited by Brian Brock & John Swinton.

p.      cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8028-6602-8 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. People with disabilities — Religious aspects — Christianity.

2. Theological anthropology — Christianity

I. Brock, Brian, 1970- II. Swinton, John, 1957-

BT732.7.D57    2012

261.8'324 — dc23

2012018109

[www.eerdmans.com](http://www.eerdmans.com)

## INTRODUCTION:

### *Disability and the Quest for the Human*

BRIAN BROCK

What does it mean to be human? Any approach to the topic of disability leads inexorably toward the "problem of the human." Westerners face this problem, however, in an intellectual universe that has kept its distance from sustained attention to what we now call disabling conditions. In discussions about what it means to be human, disability has most often appeared in the modern period under the heading of "special cases," outlying exceptions useful mainly for demarcating the outer boundaries of anthropological definitions. The images of the human constructed in this manner are aptly called "best-case anthropologies." But understanding all humanity through the lens of a best-case anthropology has the awkward effect of rendering disability largely invisible. Like gender, race, and culture, disability is a topic that one takes to be either a reality that impacts us all in some way, or an issue that is really only a pressing issue for a specific subgroup of our peers. The latter view is widespread today and almost always accompanied by the self-assured geniality with which people assume that upon meeting someone in one of these subgroups, his or her needs would of course be accommodated. What is true of Western society in general is also largely true of the church. "The times that I have asked ministers and pastors about members of their congregations who are disabled," writes the Dutch theologian Hans Reinders, "the most frequent response is 'We don't have them'" (Reinders 2008, 335).

Coming to terms with the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of disability is central for any modern anthropology because it raises the question of what it is that we are expecting to see. Often the language of gender, race,

and nationalism cloaks deeper assumptions that the health and well-being of societies depends on being able to spot the threat presented to them by broken or malfunctioning bodies and minds. Quests to root out perceived moral and cultural deficiencies can therefore all too easily intertwine with suspicions that there are deeper physical and mental deficiencies at their root (Hall 2008). It is therefore not far-fetched to claim that the polarity between able and disabled humanity underlies the whole range of prejudicial attitudes that have been resisted by activists over the last hundred years, misogyny, racism, and nationalism being the most prominent, views which rest on deeply held beliefs that the bodies of women, other races, or other cultures are somehow deficient, intrinsically misshapen, or lacking some basic capacities (Carter 2008, ch. 2). We already see a glimmer of the fertility of the Christian theological tradition when noticing that theologians have often resisted these connections in the face of best-case anthropologies run wild (cf. readings 1.9, 2.13, 8.1, 11.10, and 13.3). Bernd Wannenwetsch encapsulates the dynamics of this Christian resistance in Chapter 10 of this volume by detailing the way that firsthand experience of persons living with various disabilities and worshiping together wholly reshaped Dietrich Bonhoeffer's presumptions about what it means to be human. This experience enabled him to perceive at once the inevitability of the slide from the desire to expel disabled people as enemies of society to the desire to expel or liquidate other minorities and reaching its logical terminus in war-breathing aggression against supposed external threats (10.1).

The persistence of the belief that some people are "broken" or "functionally deficient" is thus one of the core paradoxes of modernity. Because we are concerned with constructing just societies, we find it important to recognize that some humans face physical and intellectual challenges for which thoughtful societies will want to make provision. At the same time, we sense the immense dangers that modern history has taught us attend any culture's blanket designation of a class of persons as "partially functioning humans" (Bérubé 2003). These are the problematics of a society in which notions of freedom, self-determination, and equality are core to our collective identity and in which ideas about the cultivation of good citizens must rely on presuppositions about what constitutes "normal" and "abnormal" bodies and minds among those citizens (Nussbaum 2006, chs. 2-3).

In the modern era, the rise to dominance of the medical and psychological sciences has established their definitions as default accounts of the category of "disability" (Oliver 1996; Shakespeare 1998). Biological and psychological frameworks can designate individuals among us who should be

considered to have well-functioning minds or bodies and those who do not and so, by definition, lie on the margins of human "normalcy." The activists who have taken these definitions and gone into battle for better care for those in need in society, and the professionals who have backed the rise of these definitions of disability over the last century or so, have always had practical and political aims — cure, rehabilitation, normalization, and political justice. But postmodern theorists have asked more probing questions of the theories that ground these medical discourses, questioning the justice of any such ascriptions of normalcy and deviance (Betcher 2007). Declaring that the paternalistic age of "speaking for minorities" is at its end (Badiou 2003, 13), they have tended in turn to glorify the self-expressions of those considered marginalized or different (Althaus-Reid 2003). Rather than too quickly choosing sides in this battle between modern traditionalists and reactionaries, it is probably better to hold this question open a bit longer by asking whether different accounts of disability in fact dismantle or further entrench the center-and-periphery conceptualizations of disability.

Within this intellectual landscape, the question remains for Christians: Ought they to join one or another of these camps or eschew the available options? Are these viable or even compatible ways for Christians to begin their thinking about the issues raised by the phenomena to which the label "disability" is most often attached? Are there any alternative conceptualities? On what grounds might the relative worth of various definitions of disability be assessed? The assumption that grounds this project is that there are indeed alternatives, readily discovered by investigating the writings that constitute the Christian tradition. The variations in human mental and physical capacities that characterize the human race have been named and explained in a wide variety of ways through the centuries, and have had no single meaning or significance (Yong 2007, Parts I and II). To note that within the long history of Christian thought conditions that are today considered disabling have been understood within a range of quite different frameworks is to be offered better access to one of the central questions facing Christians today: How should we think of and treat those human beings whom we experience as "other" than "us"?

The time has come to ask this question as self-consciously Christian theologians in dialogue with the communion of saints. Our suggestion is that Christian theology is able to place modern accounts of disability within a much broader canvas, so moving beyond polarized discourses that have grown sterile, whether of personal experience and autobiography or activism and application. In the last decades several notable efforts have been

made to think about disability in theological terms, most notably in works by Jean Vanier, Frances Young, David Pailin, Brett Webb-Mitchell, Burton Cooper, Nancy Eisland, and Stanley Hauerwas. More recently, scholars such as Hans Reinders, Deborah Creamer, Kathy Black, John Gillibrand, Tom Reynolds, and Amos Yong have undertaken robustly theological explorations of disability. But to date there has been no serious or systematic effort to ask what Christians of other ages might bring to this inquiry. This reader remedies that deficit.<sup>1</sup>

There are many reasons why this approach has never before been explored, not least the modern conceit that on this issue, authors from previous ages are by definition backward and primitive. There is no doubt that strands of the Christian tradition have worked to stigmatize and marginalize those it deems disabled, and there is ample evidence of the reasons for this in the excerpts collected in this volume. When Christians throughout the ages have failed to transcend the prejudices of their ages, as they have often done, they demand the censure of contemporary Christians. But if past Christians were guilty of reproducing the prejudices of the age, this problem is not properly solved by a contemporary church that swallows wholesale the prejudices of modern secularity, which deems the Christian tradition as a whole to be largely anti-progressive, especially on the topic of social marginalization.

Such dismissals are neither historically nor intellectually tenable. They evade the investigative task of asking how Christians of earlier ages actually lived and thought in the short-sighted assumption that the history of the West can simply be left behind. An important aim of this reader is to indicate the *intellectual* beliefs that have allowed or justified Christian condescension toward or outright rejection of people with disabilities. This self-critical task is crucial for a modern church that all too often is indistinguishable from or even lags behind its secular counterparts in the welcome it offers to disabled people. At the same time, strands within the Christian tradition have also served to uphold, value, and include people that today might be labeled disabled. Moderns should be prepared to discover that this accepting stance of earlier Christians may have been undertaken with a grace that seems to suggest that contemporary accounts of the “problem” of disability as one, for instance, of “social justice” are rather lacking in ambition, scope, and clarity. By providing access to the primary sources, this reader thus counters contempo-

1. The research in this volume was supported by a grant from the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Aberdeen and the excellent editorial work of Judith Heyhoe.

rary habits of thought in which nothing good ever came to the disabled from people of faith in the bad old days before modernity, as well as enabling readers to undertake the more constructive task of exposing and commenting on theological insights and ideas that might enrich contemporary thinking about the issue of disability.

Once we start looking, it is surprisingly easy to find reflections in the Christian tradition on the definition and meaning of variations in the human population. Such reflections may not have been a central preoccupation of Christian authors, but they recur throughout the ages, and when they do, they are often theologically astute and intellectually provocative. The attentive reader can detect traces everywhere of a will to embrace and include those we might call disabled. Following up these traces promises to increase our contemporary capacity to make fine-grained and theological distinctions about the definition of disability, and to give more appropriate accounts of how contemporary Christians and others concerned with disability issues ought to respond to it. It would be anachronistic to suggest that our authors comment directly on a concept that has emerged only in the last few decades. What they do offer, however, are insights and conceptualities that can sharpen our thinking today as we come to terms with disability in the twenty-first century. The power of studying any historical account is its invitation to explore different frameworks for perception. It is our hope that listening closely to the thoughts of Christians through the ages might yield a Christian community with new sensitivities for perceiving and responding to the physically and mentally marginalized in our societies, and, perhaps more importantly, for thinking about the inabilities of those who consider themselves “normal” to take the marginalized and their experiences seriously.

## Tradition

Within the remit of such a project, the terms “disability” and “tradition” are both highly contentious terms. We have assumed that, in its most basic form, the *Christian tradition* is made up of the writings of a faith community on its scriptures. For that reason, we have not included a separate chapter on “disability in the Bible” (see Avalos et al. 2007; Monteith 2005, 2010), and we consider “the tradition” that range of interpretations which have emerged as the church tries to interpret its scriptures. This tradition is not an inert deposit that is simply “recovered.” Rather, serious thought about any *contemporary* idea is impoverished if we confine our field in historically narrow

terms. "Without the dialogue between the ages," Oliver O'Donovan comments, "we can frame no serious critical questions about the prejudices with which our society approaches practical reasoning. These [prejudgments] *themselves* belong to the process of tradition. Tradition is judged through tradition" (Torrance and Banner 2006, 37). This raises the problem of the "Western canon," that familiar, venerable line-up of (presumably) white males who "made history" and so have become mandatory reading in university survey courses. We consider the selection of authors chosen for this volume to be not a definitive line-up, but only a beginning, a first sampling of what has traditionally been considered the main stream of Western Christendom.

For several centuries now, under the influence of thinkers like Immanuel Kant, theologians who consider themselves modern have tended to consider the notion of a "theological tradition" a problem to be overcome. As a result, those modern theologians most strongly devoted to care for the poor and the outsider have been especially prone to understanding past Christian thought to be an obstacle rather than a resource for fostering a more inclusive church. Walter Rauschenbusch, the founder of the Social Gospel movement and a classic post-Kantian, stated this prejudice in the bluntest possible terms. The task of theology is stripping away the husk of Christian interpretation to get to the kernel of the teachings of the historical Jesus and Paul. "When we have been in contact with the ethical legalism and the sacramental superstitions of the Fathers, we feel the glorious freedom and the pure spirituality of Paul like a mighty rushing wind in a forest of pines. When we have walked among the dogmatic abstractions of the Nicene age, the Synoptic Gospels welcome us back to Galilee with a new charm, and we feel that their daylight simplicity is far more majestic and divine than the calcium light of the creeds" (Rauschenbusch 1907, 115). Clearly, Rauschenbusch appreciates the ways that modern historical method has invited Christian self-criticism, but he embraces it so exuberantly that the very notion of an intellectual heritage is fatally corroded, and along with it any role for the shaping of perception that has long been the gift of religious traditions. If one central characteristic of modernity is a widespread suspicion of the value of previous ages, this reader challenges that premise by proceeding with the rival suspicion that there is more to learn from Christians of past ages than contemporary Christians have noticed. The lens of our interest in disability reveals quite a bit of neglected material in the Christian tradition, immediately provoking critical reflection on the reasons for this elision, not by way of cutting away tradition but by attending more closely to what it actually says.

The most difficult methodological problem in conceiving a volume of this type was achieving a balance between a survey of what "people in the past" thought, which would only be of antiquarian interest, and a project which just "mines" thinkers of the past for fresh concepts for use in the present, without letting the thought structures of these conversation partners emerge to challenge us. Because "disability" is a blatantly modern term, the strict historian's interest in objectivity and pure description untainted by our current concerns makes a project like this look like an imposition of our problems and questions on people who neither knew nor cared about them. Either we read the texts as they stand and try to understand them in their context, which is of course different in many ways to ours, or we try to force them to say something they never dreamed of saying, the historian concludes.

The idea of the communion of saints provides a way through this historiographical impasse. The historian must often terminate her investigation with the admission that the thinking of those in the past was so different from ours that we can't make any reasonable sense of it. We must simply admit that we are alienated from them and find it very difficult to learn from them. But it is precisely here that Christian theology is forced to take another route. Its study of those in the past takes place as a study of people under a shared Lord. Because Christians throughout the ages have read a single set of scriptures within a shared confession of the role of the person and work of Jesus Christ, they are provided with a theologically inflected understanding of the very concepts of tradition and history (Barth 2002, introduction). Christians are formed into a trans-temporal and trans-spatial community that Augustine called the "City of God," a "communion of saints." The vast cultural differences that make up this communion of saints remind modern Christians that in order to be part of this community, we must develop skills of listening and learning from others who strike us as almost incomprehensibly different from ourselves. This negotiation is part of the divine identity imprinted on the church as a social body (Bonhoeffer 2009).

These are the conceptual grounds for the strong moral imperative laid upon Christians both to study the breadth of the Christian tradition and to take seriously the problem of learning how to negotiate perceived difference. The special efforts required to come to terms with thinkers of previous ages thus parallel and foster the central contemporary skills of gracefully and appreciatively negotiating cultural, socioeconomic, gender, intellectual, and other kinds of otherness. A television age has made us familiar with the extension of our sympathy across space and cultures. Its instantaneous images can engage us in the distress of those who are far away and invite us to learn

from them, often despite the fact that some facets of their cultures might appear repulsive to us. This reader is an invitation to extend this same hermeneutic of generosity back in time, to our own intellectual heritage and ecclesial progenitors. It requires a movement out of our familiar culture into another culture conceptually and practically configured in bewilderingly different ways. To accomplish such an immersive learning requires suspending our assumptions about how to take on board the perceptions of those we perceive as "others." Once we have done so, however, our ability to designate them as "other" quickly diminishes because we have been changed; "they" have become part of "us." This discipline of entering empathetically into the thought of other ages can only occur, however, if we are prepared to be surprised if and when Christians of past ages have clear insights into issues important to disability theology, and when they are more concerned with the marginalized than is usually assumed by moderns. It is within this framework that Christians must ask, What "disables" human beings? Who should be cared for in society? What constitutes care? Who are "we," as church?

It is important that this approach to the tradition not be made too quickly or easily, however, for many of the saints frame their discussions in quite unfamiliar terms. When premodern theologians, for instance, want to talk about what humans in this world are supposed to look like when they are flourishing, they talk about the Garden of Eden, or the resurrection body, or the body of Jesus. While such language may today appear sheer fantasy or rosy-tinted projection, to hear what is being said in these discourses requires becoming comfortable with the fact that it was in this way that our predecessors in the faith investigated what it means to be a creature, and what it means to be redeemed and healed. Such discussions are not "pie in the sky" imaginings, but a biblically and theologically informed mode of teasing out what is right about the world in which we live and to be upheld with our action, and what is evil and denuding. It is for these reasons that any efforts expended in coming to terms with their framing of the issues promise rich gains in insight as we learn to see what they saw. Most importantly, such new perceptions often reveal how our own ways of seeing have become somehow stale and fruitless.

## Disability

A more complex problem is to find a working definition of disability that does not too quickly foreclose a proper investigation of what it might mean.

As it is used today, the term is a placeholder for a whole range of ideas and interests. The first issue this raises is terminological. How are we to refer to those with perceived impairments without denigrating them, so reinforcing the very problem we have set out to remedy? An important step is to avoid reducing people to their condition with single-word labels like "the disabled," "the blind," and so on. Right now the English-speaking world seems to be divided on the issue of appropriate terminology. The more mainstream usage is "people with disability," a designation emphasizing that people are whole as they are, that people come first, before any discussion can begin of any presumably standard human capacities they may or may not share. A more recent and radical trend has been to co-opt or even commandeer the language of disability, owning repressive language with pride in order to dramatize the way that society marginalizes certain people. The aim is to reveal in the ontological difference that society seems to have bestowed on them, in order to make it clear that what is at stake in the ascription of disability is not an ontological but a social status. This volume will use neither of these terms exclusively, but it has a strong interest in uncovering what is at stake in this debate by taking it seriously and coming to terms with the whole scope of issues being raised around the question of the relation between the social and ontological levels of the discourse.

A full appreciation of this project will depend on staving off one of the foreshortenings induced by the very concept of "disability." Polarizations such as health-disability, normal-aberrant, or functioning-impaired assume that some people are at the center of normal humanity and others are on its margins. These polarities thus name in various ways the *human*. The heartland of this project is to look constructively and imaginatively at the human, understanding disability within the scope of a full and positive account of what it means to be a human, rather than resting content with disability and people with disabilities being understood as special problem cases lying at the edges of more basic or central discourses. This is one gain that the tradition offers a contemporary discussion which is rhetorically focused on "those" who have disabilities, rather than on what it means to be human. This is to suggest that disability is not a topic that is properly located as an elective in the university or seminary curriculum, but ought properly to be a core inquiry. To talk about disability, therefore, is not to take up a "marginal" issue at all, but to press a range of fresh questions on secular thinkers as well as modern Christian theology as a whole. The discourse of disability cannot be only a discourse about politics or disability studies, because it raises wide-ranging questions for constructive practical and dogmatic theology. At the



same time, it also relies on the patient working habits of the church historian who brings up from the bowels of the library resources to liberate disability as a real feature of people's lives from the narrow confines and politics of university disability studies.

This criticism can be pushed one step further. Modern (especially academic) intellectual life is shaped by the secularization of knowledge. If in Christian theology the main topic is God and humans' relation to God, modern secular thought confines itself to what can be said about the natural processes of the universe. Anthropology is rendered the basic discipline of philosophy, an emphasis that has in most cases been absorbed in turn by modern theology. But a wholly philosophical anthropology makes it difficult to escape the polarizing categories that emphasize people's lack. In contrast, an ecclesial view escapes this problem by focusing on what each person *brings* and who we are *together* (Wannenwetsch 2004, Parts II and III). A theological account, therefore, can begin its investigation of the human with appreciation of every person in every form rather than with pity or by pointing out what individuals might lack (Kelsey 2009, 201-7). To return to the study of God and humans together thus promises a vantage point from which the Western tendency to work from best-case anthropologies can be overturned.

In sum, the second important methodological challenge facing a study of this type is to overcome the problem that "disability" is not in the Christian tradition because it is a modern idea. Christians through the ages will obviously have taken a range of conditions to hinder human flourishing in various ways, but these may well not be the ways we moderns might expect. John Swinton and I have thus asked contributors not simply to skim through writings from different ages to see what they had to say about the conditions that *seem to us today to qualify as* handicaps. We have asked rather for a more searching investigation of the sources to discover the conditions *they* considered disabling. The aim of this volume is for each contributor to expose how his or her author might fill out the term or even render it meaningless. What *content* is properly associated with this term? In some cases, various authors' positions may simply reflect the prejudices of the age; in other cases, not. But it is more instructive for our thinking to see *how* their positions are constructed than to simply fit them into our own preconceptions about the constitution of disability. The aim of the reader is not to promulgate a single definition of disability, but to allow unfamiliar theological constructions to open up fresh ways of thinking about it.

The task, then, is neither a purely descriptive exercise ("What those in the past once said") nor a purely constructive one ("Here is what this author said, on the basis of which we can say something more interesting today"). Each contributor's introduction to their chosen figure from the Christian tradition is structured by three questions. First, what did each thinker say directly about disabling conditions? Christians through the ages have often used terminology rendered problematic today, referring to monsters, idiots, madmen, and so on. Contributors will thus provide us with a view of the whole range of the thinker's own descriptions at their most discomforting and even conceptually confused as well as at its most insightful. The second question is, What is problematic about such an account? This question allows us to test ideas from other ages against modern ideas, demanding that we moderns become more self-aware about our own assumptions about disability. The third question is, What can we learn from such an account of disability? Here each contributor indicates the conceptual moves present in the work of the thinker they are introducing which they see as having the most direct or important contemporary relevance for a theology of disability. Naturally, the different contributors have weighted these tasks differently, some focusing more on historical description and others on revealing constructive resources. The main task of the reader is simply to give unmediated access to primary sources that bear on questions related to disability, and to suggest ways in which they might enrich contemporary thinking about the topic. Tracing the development of the tradition provides an opportunity to see precisely *which* ideas were added *when* in order to build up what we now know to be modern ways of thinking about disability. In the process, it will become clear *why* terms like "charity" became pivotal for Christians as they thought about people we would call disabled as we learn about the practices such charity was intended to displace. In so doing we gain a better sense of both how the modern tradition developed and how more incisively to direct our current intellectual efforts to understand and respond to disability.

## Chapter Summaries

In broad overview, there are three intertwining questions to which Christians through the ages have continually returned when facing persons with what we would consider disabling conditions and the larger human phenomenon of mental and physical impairment.



Jana Bennett traces the convergence of modern feminist concerns about the gendered moral prescriptions of the modern world and the Western intellectual tradition with those of Christians thinking about disability: for many centuries, to be a woman was itself considered a disability. In the works of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Nancy Eisland, and Sarah Coakley, Bennett finds special sensitivities to the intertwining of social exclusion and ecclesial rigidities as expressions of Christian doctrines of God and Christology. In the work of these three thinkers, the three strands of the Christian inquiry into disability intertwine in complex ways. Where the three thinkers meet is in their agreement that the work of the Trinitarian God can be understood to enable the struggle for justice in the public and legal sphere for those with disabilities, and also to offer a way out of those beliefs which estrange us from our own bodies. From the perspective of the half of humanity who have been so often considered disabled in Western best-case anthropologies, suggests Bennett, we can learn what is promising about giving up the all-too-seductive desire to claim "I am not disabled."

Jean Vanier is a special thinker in the collection in that his Christian vocation has been to spend his life intentionally with mentally disabled people. Hans Reinders explains how this life with the severely intellectually disabled has shaped his theology, not least by teaching him to write in plain, simple language. Vanier describes his own journey as the remaking of a complex and sophisticated man of action into one who seeks to know himself in order to be a gentle and perceptive conduit of divine love. His story presents the reader with an especially fertile example of the effects of bounding definitional and activist discourses within the orbit of the existential. Vanier's recurrent interest is in how we as subjects can learn about reality not by defining what constitutes the normal human, nor by offering "service" to those who are deficient on these terms, but by facing down the fears and resistances that make it impossible for us to love others. In learning to attend to the weakness in others, we may learn of our own weakness, and in learning about the weakness that characterizes both sides of such relationships, our illusions are stripped away, and we begin to understand the reality of God's grace.

Stanley Hauerwas reflects in more theoretical and definitional terms on the theological meaning of lives like that of Jean Vanier. John Swinton explains that Hauerwas's main interest is in uncovering the many ways in which profoundly intellectually disabled people challenge modern presumptions about what it means to be human, for societies to be just, and for the church to be the church. He asks after the conceptual and practical affir-

mations which sustain the modern sensibility that disability is a "problem" to be solved. The indirection of this approach to the topic allows Hauerwas to probe modern assumptions about the presumed suffering of the disabled and the inhumanities that can flow from it; his interest is in developing a better account of what it means for *all* of us to be human. In this he directly responds to the bias of Western anthropologies toward best-case scenarios, though in his conclusion Swinton wonders whether this fruitful inquiry into modern accounts of disability may depend more than necessary on unhelpful reifications of the concept of "the disabled."

## Conclusion

What emerges, in overview, is that throughout the history of the West, Christian thinkers have been concerned to articulate in their own characteristic ways how humans are related to each other by Jesus Christ. This core interpretative assumption constitutes the continuity of a tradition that has construed both the problem and the meaning of disability in often quite different and sometimes diametrically opposed ways. The centrality of this core theological theme in holding a diverse tradition together is thus especially important, a realization that has recently regained some prominence in disability theology (cf. Eisland 1994, Swinton 2000, Creamer 2009, Yong 2007, Reynolds 2008, and Reinders 2008). This contemporary renaissance of explicitly theological and doctrinal approaches to the question of disability offers a way beyond modern secular disability discourses which most often operate within a primary concept of equality, a concept always haunted by the spectre of homogeneity in having reasons both to use and to reject the very notion of nonfunctional or inadequate humanity. These contemporary thinkers have each reconsidered what it might mean to take a step back from definitional, existential, and activist discourses in order to think again about the deficiencies of any account of disability that divides humanity (including able-disabled) in ways that assume some humans are conceived as "outside." They return to the work of Christ in order to discern afresh the vast diversity that comprises our shared humanity.

Thinkers in the Christian tradition track most closely with the modern anthropological and medical definitions of disability when they ask the definitional question: What are the traits of the "normal" human? But one important lesson learned from the many Christians who have pursued this question in the past is that it is dangerous to define the human merely em-

pirically. People with disabilities will always be a marginal phenomenon if "normal" humanity is a matter of statistical occurrence. But in Jesus Christ, thinkers like Augustine, Thomas, Calvin, and Barth insist, we know the real human in a way that often flies in the face of cultural assumptions about normalcy.

The muted but significant exploration by Augustine of the importance of the transformation of the subject rather than the definition of the objects of disability is further developed in the thought of Julian, Luther, and Vanier, and is clearly articulated by Kierkegaard: "It is a sad but altogether too common inversion to go on talking continually about how the object of love must be so it can be lovable, instead of talking about how love must be so it can be love" (Kierkegaard 1995, 159; cf. 8.10). The thinkers who pursue this existential investigation of disability emphasize that in Christ Christians learn that to love is to receive with welcome and in a new way what is divinely given and therefore waiting to be embraced. It warns that without love for those with whom we are concerned, defining disability as a lack of certain common human capacities or engaging in activism on the behalf of disabled people will inevitably be a projection of our own wishes, a totalizing activity that cannot avoid becoming patronizing or even violent. In this they take up but extend the insights of the social critique of disability, which emphasizes how our own attitudes and expectations cause more suffering for others than their physical pain or the mechanical challenges presented by their own physiognomy. For these Christian thinkers, to learn to attend to people in the way Christ does is to know them and to respond to them (as well as ourselves) aright.

The activist strand of the Christian tradition insists that engagement with and care for those whom either society or physical conditions disable is not optional for Christians. To notice and make smooth the path of those among us with special conditions is constitutive of the Christian community's identity in Christ. From the very first, Christians recognized that a God who became incarnate calls for embodied, practical forms of love corresponding to his own care for the "least of these." While Christian activists from the patristic period (Gregory of Nyssa) to the modern (van den Bergh, Vanier) have explained their activism in very different ways, and even named the recipients of their special attention within contradictory definitional frameworks, it is impossible to find a thinker within the broad stream of the tradition who does not value and commend concrete acts of love toward those we would today call disabled.

In John the Evangelist's portrayal of the Last Supper, Jesus iconically dis-

plays his humble mission to serve humanity by washing his disciples' feet. Enacting once again the form which God's love takes, he points directly to its culmination in his laying down his life on the cross. His disciples had found this love difficult to grasp in their three years of living with him, and even at this Last Supper, Peter recoils at the man he had come to confess to be God taking the place of a servant rather than that of the sage or king which Peter believed better suited him. "For Peter this is impossible," comments Jean Vanier. It is impossible only because Peter still has not grasped the full scope of Jesus' form of love, which claims "to transform the model of society from a pyramid to a body, where each and every person has a place, whatever their abilities or disabilities, where each one is dependent upon the other" (Vanier, 2004, 227). Betrayed by their aspirations for the recognition they thought was due as a result of their "leadership" in the top tier of the kingdom they thought Jesus was establishing, the disciples revealed to all of us that they had not yet grasped its essence. It is certainly an essence easily lost to view. This reader is an attempt, once again, to hear this invitation afresh.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Althaus-Reid, Marcella. 2003. *The Queer God*. New York: Routledge.
- Avalos, Hector, Sara J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, editors. 2007. *Thisabled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Studies.
- Badiou, Alain. 2003. *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Translated by Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Barth, Karl. 2002. *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. New edition. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Bérubé, Michael. 2003. "Citizenship and Disability." *Dissent* (Spring): 52-57.
- Betcher, Sharon. 2007. *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Black, Kathleen. 1996. *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2009. *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 1, edited by Clifford Green. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Carter, J. Kameron. 2008. *Race: A Theological Inquiry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cooper, Burton. 1992. "The Disabled God." *Theology Today* 49, no. 2: 173-82.
- Creamer, Deborah. 2009. *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*. New York: Oxford University Press.