

Talking about

disability, church and faith

## Book Reviews

### Becoming Friends of Time

By John Swinton

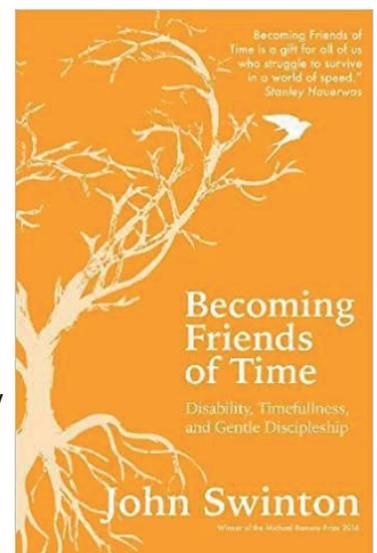
Reviewed by Martin Hobgen

This book proposes a practical theology of time, for individuals and communities of faith, with particular attention to those who live with the experience of 'forms of disability that emerge from some kind of damage the brain'.<sup>1</sup> Swinton argues that instead of focussing on clock time<sup>2</sup> we can helpfully shift our focus to what he calls God's time, which 'is holistic, all embracing, mysterious and ever present'.<sup>3</sup>

Opening with a critique of the nature of clock time Swinton examines how this has shaped societies attitudes towards both the euthanasia of people with dementia, and pre-natal testing for the likelihood of impairments with subsequent abortion. He shows that, in contrast to the exclusion fostered by clock time, the concept of God's time enables relationships with disabled people to be continued or re-established. The discussion about what this means for people with dementia, brain injury and how non-disabled people relate to them helpfully draws on the experiences of disabled people. These show the importance of slowing down, showing love and paying attention to those who are overlooked in the haste engendered by clock time.

There is a significant challenge presented for the way that churches relate to disabled people, particularly those with significant learning disabilities or injuries. It is too easy for the church to see such people as objects of care and for inclusion to be limited to enabling their presence. Swinton argues, persuasively, that rather than inclusion the focus should be on discipleship. This shapes not only how churches perceive people with significant disabilities but how they are enabled to participate in the life of the church.

Swinton's re-conception of memory has particular significance for pastoral ministry to individuals and families who are experiencing the dramatic changes brought by dementia, Parkinson's or brain injury. This underpins the continuity of persons despite the outward discontinuity suggested by changes in personality and character.



1 John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2017), 15.  
2 The characteristics of clock time are described as linear, dynamic, forward facing, measurable and controllable. *ibid.*, 22.  
3 *ibid.*, 11.

Although the focus of the book is on people with some form of damage to the brain, it has important applications to those who become physically disabled through accident or illness. Whereas clock time emphasises a discontinuity between the 'before' and 'after' the acquisition of a disability, God's time enables us to find continuities which can help us to realise that our identity was and remains in Christ, rather than our ability or inability.

This book provides a refreshing and challenging way of relating to a diverse range of people who are often on the edges of church and society. I do however have one minor disagreement with Swinton's suggestion that the relationship between us and God is not mutual in any sense. Following Paul Fiddes' proposal of a relational trinity set out in *Participating in God*<sup>4</sup> it can be argued that God allows for a significantly greater level of mutuality between and participation with God than Swinton countenances.<sup>5</sup>

This review was previously published in the *Baptist Ministers' Journal*, July 2021 issue: vol. 351

## Details:

**Author:** Swinton, John

**Title:** *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship*

**Publisher:** London: SCM Press (2017)

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4 Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

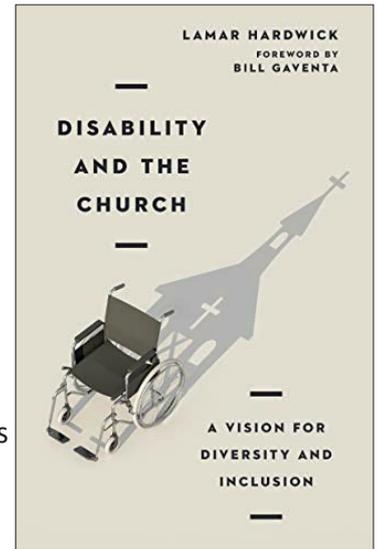
5 Swinton, 101f.

# Disability and the Church

By Lamar Hardwick

Reviewed by Martin Hobgen

This book makes a welcome contribution to both Disability and Practical Theology. Lamar Hardwick begins his exploration of the inclusion of disabled people in church communities with his experience of undiagnosed autism and the impact that his diagnosis at the age of 36 had upon himself, his church and his calling to enable disabled people to be included in church communities. This personal perspective is one of the great strengths of this book, as Hardwick sets out a vision for affirming disabled people and so encourages churches to become fully inclusive of disabled people.



Prompted by a discussion of Luke 14 the author asks who is 'lost' from the church. Having identified disabled people as being under-represented in church communities he proceeds to identify barriers to the inclusion of disabled people and proposes ways of addressing these. The importance of this task is underlined by Hardwick because 'unless persons with disabilities have full access to participate fully in all that your church offers, then the church is not functioning as the church should'.<sup>1</sup>

Hardwick notes that a common question concerning disability takes the form "Why am I/you/they disabled?" He suggests that this is the wrong question to ask. Drawing on John 9, where Jesus redirects the disciples' question 'away from defining the man by his deficits and toward defining the man by his destiny'.<sup>2</sup> Rather than focussing on a person's disability he urges churches to look for the ways that God is revealed in their lives. This raises the thorny question of healing leading to Hardwick's suggestion that since 'Jesus did not heal everyone... healing has to be evaluated as but one of the tools that God uses to reveal his glory to the world'. As a wheelchair user I believe that God can reveal himself through my ministry as a pastor and disability theologian as effectively as he could if he physically healed me.

Drawing on Matthew 13:18-23 he identifies three specific barriers that hinder the participatory inclusion of disabled people in church communities:<sup>3</sup> lack of understanding (of disability); Life's problems (which prevent disabled people and their families becoming rooted in the church); Limited by thorns (how church policies etc. can restrict the spiritual growth of disabled people in church communities.) Addressing these three barriers occupies the remainder of the book.

At the heart of the book are the three chapters concerning the building of a learning culture, a linking culture and a leadership culture.

Firstly, building a learning culture addresses the widespread lack of understanding about disability and the experiences of disabled people. Through a discussion of definitions and data about disability he shows the diversity of disability in both the Bible and today's society. The dominant perspective of a medical understanding of disability is challenged by a call for reciprocal relationship between disabled and non-disabled people. This, Hardwick argues, shifts the perspective of disabled people from symbols in the Bible to being people in relationship with God and other disciples. Although the core of teaching about disability is focussed on preaching, Hardwick urges that 'Churches need to be environments where learning about disabilities and learning from people with disabilities is normal and seen as something that is needed for the health, strength, and vitality of God's ever-expanding kingdom'.<sup>4</sup>

1 Lamar Hardwick, *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2021). 48.

2 *Ibid.*, 61.

3 *Ibid.*, 98-9.

4 *Ibid.*, 112-18.

Secondly, building a linking culture addresses the failure of churches to provide a context for families with disabled children to find support and where the families can become rooted in a faith community. Hardwick recognises the experience of exclusion from churches that is felt by many families with disabled children, partly through disabling theology and inappropriate language.

Recognising that different disabilities lead to different forms of exclusion, suggesting no single solution, he suggest that enabling disabled people and their families to put down roots is of vital importance. 'Roots are about relationship – long-term, reciprocal relationships that hold people close to the church and hold the church accountable for providing real care'.<sup>5</sup> He suggests a number of practical ways to facilitate and enable churches to become more inclusive and ensuring that this goes beyond inclusion on Sundays.

Thirdly, building a leadership culture addresses the failure of churches to enable a diversity of people, including disabled people, to become involved in leadership. Hardwick suggests that leadership teams need to be intentionally diverse in order to provide role models for members of diverse congregations. Just as Black History Month provided role models for Hardwick, who is Afro-American, he suggests that better disability awareness can foster pathways for disabled people to become leaders, supporting his argument with examples of inclusion in the New Testament that challenge assumptions of exclusion rooted in Old Testament passages such as Leviticus 21:17-21.<sup>6</sup>

The widespread US concept of church programs or ministry to/for disabled people and those special needs has no significant equivalent here. In the light of comments about how expensive these approaches are perhaps we have an advantage in the UK.<sup>7</sup> There are brief, helpful explanations of both the medical model of disability, noting its negative impact within church communities, and the social model of disability, which has largely replaced the former. Unusually for an American writer of disability theology, Lamar Hardwick describes a social model that is close to the approach that is dominant in the UK, rather than a minority group model of disability utilised by Nancy Eiesland and others who cite her ground-breaking book *The Disabled God*.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Eiesland's image of the post-resurrection bearing the wounds of crucifixion yet conquering death, Hardwick draws a powerful link to the images in Revelation 5:6-8 of Jesus as both the mortally wounded lamb and the lion of Judah.<sup>9</sup> This provides the foundation for his vision of affirmation, which starts with churches recognising they have a problem and then affirming disabled people through their participation, through acceptance, and through their empowerment.

There is a recurrent theme of the importance of relationships which are intentional and mutual. I believe that these relationships can be understood to be covenant friendships between disabled and non-disabled people which are grounded in the friendship with God offered through Jesus Christ.

There are some minor criticisms, however. The personal perspective somewhat limits the depth of the illustrations beyond those concerning autism. While there is no problematic language, such as use of the once common term 'handicapped', the author repeatedly use the term 'the disabled'. This infers a clearly defined, homogenous group that is at odds with his much-needed focus on the diversity of disabled people being included in diverse church communities.

This review was previously published in Regent's Reviews (October 2021)

## Details:

**Author:** Hardwick, Lamar

**Title:** *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion*

**Publisher:** Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, (2021)

5 Ibid., 121.

6 Ibid., 154.

7 Ibid., 44-45.

8 Nancy L Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

9 Hardwick. 169.

# In The Beginning There Was Darkness

By John Hull

Reviewed by David McLachlan

John Hull is a theologian and teacher who went completely blind during his adult life. His insights are therefore quite unique among books in this area. The book takes us on a journey through the Bible, commenting on what it is like for Hull to read the various texts where blindness or light feature. This starts in Genesis, where God creates light and darkness, picks up King David, who was said to have “beautiful eyes”, and on to events we would expect to find here, like Jesus’ encounters with Bartimaeus and with the man born blind in John’s gospel.

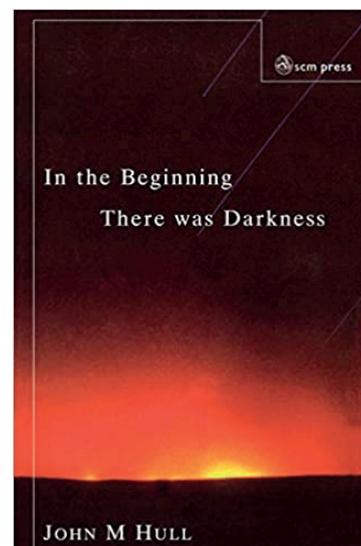
The book is unusual in the way that it gives Hull’s reaction to each text without feeling it has to explain everything. It is a fascinating read for anyone interested in disability theology and it particularly acts as a warning to those thinking about preaching on these passages to think more deeply and widely about how they appear to people whose experience of life is different from one’s own.

## Details:

**Author:** Hull, John M

**Title:** *In the Beginning There was Darkness*

**Publisher:** London: SCM Press (2001)

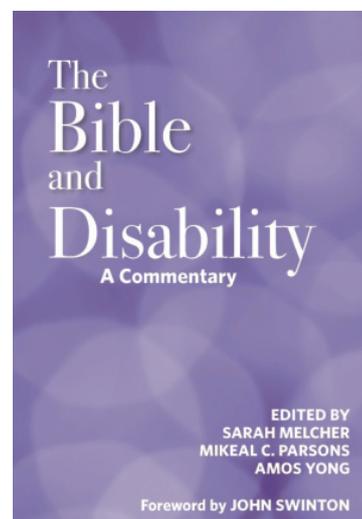


# The Bible and Disability: A Commentary

Edited by Sarah Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Young

Reviewed by Martin Hobgen

This book is a very significant contribution to both the fields of Disability Studies and Biblical Studies. In the past there has been a tendency to focus on 'difficult passages' with regards to disability, such as the Levitical 'ban' on disabled priests (Leviticus 21, 22) or the many healing miracles recorded in the gospels. One of the greatest strengths of this book is that it provides a broad perspective on how disability features throughout the Bible. The whole bible is covered in twelve chapters, written by biblical scholars who are familiar with Disability Theology: Genesis & Exodus; Leviticus-Deuteronomy; Joshua-Second Kings; First and Second Chronicles-Esther; Job, Proverbs & Ecclesiastes; Psalms, Lamentations & Song of Songs; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the Twelve; Mark and Matthew; Luke-Acts; John, first-third John, Revelation; Paul; Hebrews and Catholic Letters.



The book is written from a US perspective and some of the scholars and the extensive references may be unfamiliar to UK readers. There are several brief discussions of sociological models of disability, which would have benefited from being addressed together in the introduction. In addition to this discussion of the 'Social Model' often assumes a US variant, the 'Minority Group Model' as used by Nancy Eiesland in her ground breaking *The Disabled God* (Eiesland, 1994). This is used rather than the Social Model that is widely used in the UK. ((Oliver, 1990) critiqued by (Shakespeare, 2013)) The 'Cultural Model' referred to several times is closest to the 'critical realist' approach taken by Oliver and others in the UK (Shakespeare, 2013). The approach taken by the different authors varies and this is both a strength and weakness, providing different perspectives but making straightforward comparisons difficult at times. There is an assumption that the reader is familiar with the issues raised by Disability Theology and the wider context of Disability Studies. (This is a wide-ranging interdisciplinary approach to understanding disability that has been developed in the last 15 or so years in the UK and US.)

The authors are not afraid to acknowledge when the Bible presents problematic material but rather than accept these at face value they seek to determine if there are deeper influences shaping these. By doing this they expose and utilise aspects of the Bible which challenge some preconceptions of disability. One important theme is to point out that some concerns of the OT, such as infertility, were socially very disabling in contrast to the contemporary situation where IVF and related treatments, together with adoption, have all but removed the social stigma for many people. There has been a similar transformation in the attitude towards people with a range of skin diseases, often labelled leprosy, which are not treatable and no longer a reason to exclude people from the community.

The picture of disability that emerges is complex and it is clear that there are no easy ways to encapsulate a biblical approach to the subject. This book challenges the common tendency to read our understanding of disability back into the text and provides resources to gain a better perspective of the context in which the various parts of the Bible were first written. This enables disability to be understood as part of the rich diversity of humanity made by and in the image of God.

Nancy Eiesland's image of the disabled God focuses the resurrected Jesus still bearing the marks of crucifixion, the marks of impairment, which he brings into the God-head. Some of the writers in this volume extend the concept of Jesus as the disabled God into his ministry through the identification of the attitudes towards him that counted him as an outsider along with disabled people of his day.

To my mind one of the aspects of this book that has the broadest application are the various discussions of the metaphoric language that both reveals and shapes how we understand disability and relate to disabled people. The way we use metaphors of sight, hearing, walking etc. can have a profound impact on how disabled people are included or excluded from church communities.

This book provides a rich and diverse perspective on disability that will enable a nuanced approach to disability and disabled people to be developed. It serves as a good companion the previously published *Disability in the Christian Tradition*. (Brock & Swinton, 2012)

This article was first published in *Regent's Reviews* (April 2019)

## **Details:**

**Edited by:** Sarah Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Young

**Title:** *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*

**Publisher:** London: SCM Press (2018)

## **Bibliography:**

Brock, B, & Swinton, J (2012). *Disability in the Christian tradition: a reader*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B Eerdmans Pub Co.

Eiesland, N L (1994). *The Disabled God : Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abingdon.

Melcher, S J, Parsons, M C, & Yong, A (2017). *The Bible and disability: A commentary*: Baylor University Press.

Oliver, M (1990). *The politics of disablement*. London: Macmillan.

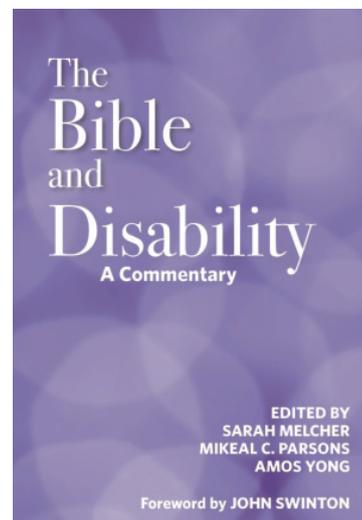
Shakespeare, T (2013). *Disability rights and wrongs revisited*: Routledge.

# The Bible and Disability: A Commentary

Edited by Sarah Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Young

Reviewed by Rosa Hunt

This is a one-volume commentary on the Bible with a difference: it encourages us to read the Bible through the lens of a disability hermeneutic. This challenges our assumptions that we need to fix what is 'broken' and to normalise the 'different'. It thus provides a different view of the nature and role of healing and redemption. It also challenges our idea of who God is and what God is like, starting as it does with Nancy Eiesland's image of the disabled God as a liberating symbol.



The book consists of 12 chapters: Beginnings (Genesis and Exodus), Law (Leviticus-Deuteronomy), History (Joshua-Second Kings, then 1 and 2 Chronicles and Esther), Wisdom (Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; Psalms, Lamentations and Song of Songs), Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the twelve minor prophets), Synoptic Gospels and Acts, Johannine Literature, Pauline Letters and Hebrews and the Catholic Letters.

The essays represent a variety of methodological approaches and a whole spectrum of assumptions on the nature and authority of Scripture. What they have in common is their attempt to foreground disability as a hermeneutic. They start from the assumption that Scripture is redemptive for disability, and that if Scripture is not good news for those with disabilities, then it is not good news for anyone.

Most of the essays operate with a cultural understanding of disability - for instance, the first essay explores infertility as a disability in the lives of the matriarchs and patriarchs of Genesis. Other essays also explore the links between disability and divine punishment, sin and demonic possession in the Biblical narrative, while yet others tackle the emotive and complex issues such as God's intent and sovereignty in creating people with disabilities.

I have never read the Bible through this lens before, and for this reason these essays make a very interesting, important and challenging read for those like myself who have tended to read the Bible from an able-bodied perspective.

## Details:

**Edited by:** Sarah Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Young

**Title:** *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*

**Publisher:** London: SCM Press (2018)

# The Disabled God

By Nancy Eiesland

Reviewed by David McLachlan

If you are looking for a first or well-known book to read on disability theology, this is a good place to start. Nancy Eiesland was a great campaigner for disability rights and her book is often regarded as laying a foundation stone for the subject. It is certainly one of the most referenced books in articles that explore questions of disability and God.

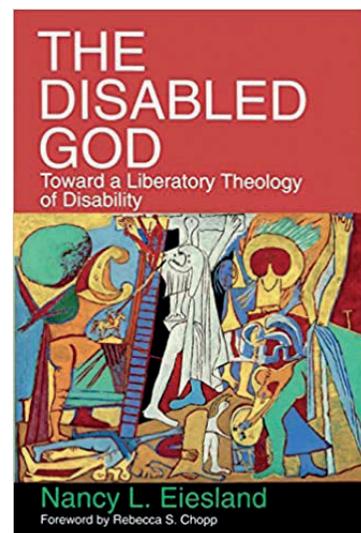
Eiesland provides some excellent background as she builds her case for wanting a theology of disability that is not oppressive or degrading, but instead is liberating for people with disabilities. This is done through personal stories and the history of disability rights, highlighting theological errors and presumptions along the way. Eiesland then explores two provocative questions. The first is how we would respond to a God who is disabled. She pictures God in a sip-puff wheelchair! The second asks about the meaning of the wounds of the cross in Jesus' resurrection body. For Eiesland, there is no sense that disabilities as a whole are to be eradicated by God, but rather that non-conventional physicality is affirmed.

## Details:

**Author:** Eiesland, Nancy L

**Title:** *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*

**Publisher:** Nashville: Abingdon Press (1994)

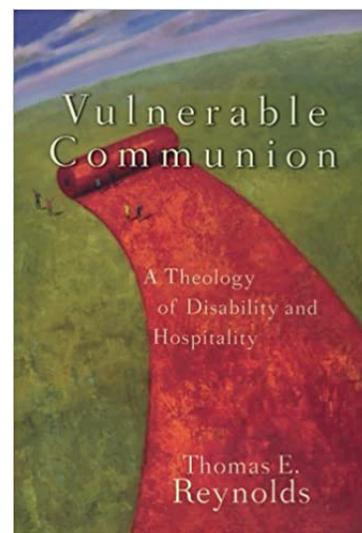


# Vulnerable Communion

By Thomas Reynolds

Reviewed by David McLachlan

This is quite a substantial book to read, but it is also very accessible. Reynolds writes from his experience as both a theologian and having a son with Tourette's syndrome and other challenges. The book sets out very clearly the questions that disability raises for Christian faith and theology. It looks at how God identifies with humanity and what it means for people to be made in the image of God. For Reynolds, the image of God is relational. One of the book's strong themes is that the pressure to be 'normal' can become a sort of tyranny to anyone who does not fit into a 'typical' pattern of body or brain.



Overall, Reynolds argues that through disability we can discover that all human beings are vulnerable. The model is Jesus' own embracing of vulnerability through the incarnation and the cross. Vulnerability allows true communion with God and if we embrace our vulnerability, the community of the church can become one that offers true hospitality to all. This is an excellent, thought-provoking read.

## Details:

**Author:** Thomas Reynolds

**Title:** *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*

**Publisher:** Grand Rapids: Brazos Press (2008)