

# A Theological Introduction to Disability

*By Leow Wen-Pin*

## Introduction

A crucial dimension of meaningful Christian engagement with persons with disability is theologizing about disability. A leading disability theologian, John Swinton, helpfully defines disability theology as “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.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, theologizing about disability is a way of (re)thinking about the Christian faith while taking into consideration the lives of persons with disabilities. In that sense, disability theology is literally a “discipline” in that it requires disciplined engagement with Christian biblical tradition to address how the Church today might better journey alongside persons with disabilities, in order to faithfully live out the gospel with them in a context-relevant fashion.

What we think about God, the Church, and persons with disabilities will inevitably shape the way we include the latter in the body of Christ, and therefore, it is absolutely critical that we ensure that we are theologically clear-minded. Hence, this chapter will seek to introduce some key aspects of disability theology that are acutely relevant to disability ministry. The chapter seeks to answer three questions and is divided accordingly: (1) What is disability? (2) What is not disability? (3) Why must the Church be disability-inclusive?

## What Is Disability?

Often, when I teach on disability ministry, I like to pose the following question to my students:

Imagine you were in a world where everyone was a wheelchair user except for you. How would going to school be different for you?

(The present reader is invited to reflect on this question before reading on). I love asking this question because the answers provided by the students are often very creative.

Some answers given by past students include:

- “When I come for class, there would be no chairs for me to sit on, and I would have to sit on the floor.”
- “When I walk into a room, I would have to stoop down my head, as the doors would be lower.”
- “When I am walking with my friends, I would constantly have to be alert lest I get injured by my friends’ wheels rolling over my foot!”
- “When we go ‘jogging’ together, I would always be left behind as they zoom ahead on their fancy racing wheelchairs.”

Then, usually towards the end of the discussion, the students will concede two things. First, they would feel rather out of place all of the time. Second, despite being ambulant, they would be extremely tempted to buy a wheelchair!

Here is the point of the exercise: In a world like that, even though you would technically not be physically impaired, you would still experience disability. That is, disability is both a product of society and of the individual. This is a critical mindset shift, because how we think about disability affects how we think about inclusion of persons with disabilities. If disability is produced by society, then society also has a responsibility to adapt itself in order to minimise disabling exclusion and maximise enabling inclusion.<sup>2</sup>

There is a fascinating episode in the Gospels that illustrates Jesus' recognition of the social dimension of disability, namely, Luke 5:12–14's healing of the leper:

While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him. And he charged him to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them."

In order to understand this story, a number of things need to be borne in mind. First, leprosy in the Bible (Greek: *lepra*) is "a broad term for a whole series of skin diseases, rather than referring just to Hansen's Disease" (what we denote by "leprosy" today). Therefore, *lepra* could also denote boils or sores and more.<sup>3</sup>

Second, in biblical times, a major challenge that Jewish lepers would experience would be alienation and marginalization by society at large. Mosaic law stipulated the following of lepers (Leviticus 13:45–46):

The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. *He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp* (emphasis added).

So, even if the specific form of *lepra* experienced by the individual was not medically contagious, the ritual uncleanness associated with it would still be considered contagious by Jews.

In light of the preceding two points, we can now recognise how significant Luke 5:12–14 is. Note first that as the leper comes before Jesus, he asks to be cleaned (Greek: *katharizō*), not healed (*therapeuō*). The former is a ritual term (and thus, social), while the latter is more medical in nature.

Jesus' own response is fascinating. After affirming the leper's request, Jesus touches the leper!<sup>4</sup> One might imagine that if this story were read out to a Jewish audience, you would at this point expect a collective gasp. After all, *lepra* is a form of communicable uncleanness—was Jesus not afraid of becoming unclean like any law-abiding Jew would? But, of course, in touching the leper, the Holy One of God (Luke 4:34)<sup>5</sup> does not just cleanse the leper, but also provides him with an inclusive touch, welcoming him back into Jewish society. Indeed, Jesus subsequently instructs the man, now free of *lepra*, to go and make the necessary offering as "proof" to other Jews.

Thus, while this story is often read by Christians as "just another miracle story", Christians should be more attentive to the dynamics of social disability that permeate this narrative. Jesus Himself shows a clear awareness of the social implications of the leper's disability. Then, in His role as the Christ, works to address the man's disability as a demonstration of His Messianic identity. It is stories like Luke 5:12–14 that foreshadow Jesus' ultimate cleansing sacrifice for His people upon the cross. In the same way that the Holy One of God removed the uncleanness of the leper, Jesus

...loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25–27).

Likewise, Christians who are called to follow the way of Jesus must not consider disability to be simply a problem for the individual who has the impairment. So, while disability certainly has a physiological dimension that must not be ignored, Christians should also recognise that people disable people. As such, the Church itself should take a hard look at itself for how it is complicit in disablement, and how it can follow Jesus' example of proclaiming the Kingdom by including persons with disabilities as a necessary outworking of the gospel.

## What Is Not Disability?

Having addressed to some extent what disability is, this section shifts the focus to what disability is not by addressing two common myths that are often detrimental to persons with disabilities.

### **Myth 1: Disability is caused by sin, either of persons with disabilities or their forebears.**

The trouble with this myth is that it is a half-truth, that is, it can *sometimes* be true. It is not difficult to imagine a circumstance where a person's disability can be directly traced to his or her sinful actions, e.g. a physical impairment that was the result of a traffic accident due to the individual's reckless driving, or a mental impairment that was the outcome of willful binge drinking. Our sins have consequences.

The problem, however, is in assuming that all or most disabilities are a result of personal sin. In contrast, Scripture's view on disability is varied. For example, the Bible sometimes portrays disability as a product of mankind's general fallenness (e.g. the woman's curse in Genesis 3:16). Other times, disability is the result of others' actions (e.g. Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 4:4). Disability could even be the result of God's divine providence in order to display His works (e.g. the man born blind in John 9:3). And finally, at other points, Scripture is simply silent or neutral towards why a person has a disability (the man lame from birth in Acts 3:2).

Therefore, Christians must exercise epistemic humility when encountering disability. Or, to put it simply: Do not jump to conclusions about why a person has a disability! To illustrate this point, the late Nancy Eiesland—who herself was disabled—once wryly commented that “My family frequented faith healers with me in tow. I was never healed. People asked about my hidden sins, but they must have been so well hidden that they were misplaced even by me.”<sup>6</sup>

A Singaporean parent of a son with autism recounted an episode where his son went forward to receive communion during a service. Unfortunately, his son did not respond well to the circumstances and he started to kick up a fuss at the altar table. After receiving the bread and the wine from the communion steward, the steward prayed out loud to God to cast “the demon” out of the young man. This so-called prayer went on for a very long time.<sup>7</sup> When I was reflecting upon this story, it occurred to me that this was probably a failure of theological imagination/interpretation (as well as pastoral care)—the steward was perhaps only able to interpret disability as demonic possession and could not see that Scripture, in fact, provided alternative explanations.

### **Myth 2: God heals disability. If your disability is not healed, there must be either unconfessed sin or insufficient faith.**

This view is again a half-truth, and again is an excessively narrow vision of Scripture's view on healing and disability. One root of this myth is the simplistic reading of Jesus' healing acts in the four Gospels as a paradigm for church practice today. Since a comprehensive rebuttal of this reading will require a whole

book, allow me to simply state the broad conclusion of biblical scholarship on Jesus' healing acts: Rather than functioning as examples to be imitated, Jesus' healings function as visible signs of the Kingdom of God and its arrival in the person of Jesus (cf. Luke 7:22–23). It is thus closely associated with Jesus' earthly ministry. Therefore, Christians should not approach miraculous healing with the same expectations that they see in the Gospels.

Three clarifications need to complement the preceding point. First, the foregoing does not automatically imply a cessationist view of healing miracles. James 5:14–20 suggests that elders should pray for the healing of those who are sick. Second, the same James text also connects some sicknesses with sins, so, again, epistemic humility must be maintained. Third, while God does promise in Scripture to heal all brokenness in eternity, we recognize that this does not mean that God must do so in the present, and must answer every prayer for healing in the affirmative.

Thus, rather than hastily linking any apparent ineffectiveness of prayer with sin or faithlessness, Christians should expand their theological vision. In this regard, Dr Wong Meng Ee provides some wise pastoral advice from his own experiences of praying for his disability:

I was prayed upon very fervently—prayer upon prayer! Each time we went to these services, we went with anticipation, believing that it would work because so many people had been praying, fasting, and then praying even harder! Yet, nothing happened. This felt like a blow to our faith.

Yet, upon reflection, I wonder whether such a belief is also a reflection of how we as a society have evolved in our understanding of the faith. When we are sick, we go to our local general practitioner, we get diagnosed, medicated, and we are up and about again. It is a consumer mindset at work... We apply that to God. You have a problem, you see God, and then think that God will restore you...

Going back to my experiences with healing services, I now think that praying for healing should not be the first port of call. Instead, we should let the person with the disability deal with the notion of loss. Let them grieve first... [W]e need to help them understand two things: first, the value of suffering, then, how to deal with brokenness. We need to give them space to explore their suffering and to learn lessons and values from it. People who are disabled and who go through a process of suffering can emerge from these periods of trauma transformed, much like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly.<sup>9</sup>

## Why Should the Church Be Disability-Inclusive?

Having undertaken some reflection on what disability is and is not, we are now well-positioned to address the crucial question of why the Church must be disability-inclusive. It should be noted that there are multiple answers to this question, and not necessarily only from a theological perspective. For example, the preface of this volume has already highlighted how common disability is in Singapore, and the need for churches to respond to Singapore's ageing demographics—these are pragmatic reasons. Here, instead, I wish to focus on theologically-grounded reasons, especially those concerning ecclesiology, i.e. God's design for the Church. In this vein, there are three reasons that must be highlighted.

First, and most obviously, the Great Commission dictates that the Church is to go forth to make disciples of all nations (*panta ta ethnē*, Matthew 28:19). This is an inclusive mandate, and is clearly echoed in Acts 1:8 and other texts. It is also clear that people with disabilities are often the focus of early missions in the Gospels and Acts. Sadly, modern Christians have often limited the scope of God's mandate to the able-bodied and neurotypical, dismissing persons with disability with a flippant statement like "God will meet those with disabilities in His good time." However, as James Hudson Taylor chides, "The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed." The Church needs to repent of its narrow vision and actively engage with persons with disabilities with the gospel.

The second point enlarges upon the first. The Church is called to more than evangelism. In his brilliant summary of God's vision of salvation, the apostle Paul reminds us in Titus 2:11–14 that

... the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession *who are zealous for good works* (emphasis added).

This text reminds us that salvation is not an end unto itself. Rather, God saved the Church in order to transform His people away from ungodliness towards good works. This vision of the Church is echoed in several other New Testament texts, not least in another powerful statement of the gospel in Ephesians 2:8–10 that states

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that *we should walk in them* (emphasis added).

As a people who are saved for good works (but not by good works), the Church is called to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [her] God” (Micah 6:8). As such, if churches are to follow the ethical vision of Scripture that emphasizes the last, the lost, and the least (e.g. Leviticus 19:10; James 1:27), should they not give special attention to persons with disabilities, a typically marginalized group in every society?

As a decade-long volunteer in the disability sector in Singapore, I have been heartened to hear many stories where Christians lived up to their call. AWWA School, a school for children with moderate to severe disabilities, was started by a group of ladies—many Christians—in the basement of St. Ignatius Church. St. Andrew's Autism Centre (SAAC), another school for children on the more severe end of the autism spectrum, was established through the sterling leadership of Anglican Bishop John Chew. Yet, these disability social services need to be matched by a thoroughgoing inclusion of persons with disabilities in church life as well. In this regard, every Christian church, whether big or small, has a call to answer by doing the good work of including persons with disabilities.

The third reason for including persons with disabilities is perhaps the most surprising—the Church needs persons with disabilities. This point is surprising because society often treats people with disabilities as objects of charity. One can easily remember television fundraising campaigns of various social service agencies where persons with disabilities are portrayed as pitiable and in dire need of assistance. While the instinct to love another in need should be encouraged—and persons with disabilities can often be in need—the Church must see their brothers and sisters with disabilities as more than passive recipients of charity.

In contrast to a passive vision of persons with disabilities, God's ecclesial vision for the Church demands that her growth is produced by the collaborative efforts of all members of the Church, regardless of their disabilities. As Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4:15–16,

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

This Pauline vision of church growth does not permit freeloaders—a church's vitality is linked to the contribution of every member. As such, if Christians with disabilities are prevented from serving and

contributing, the Church is poorer for it. Or to put it more starkly: a Church that is truly disabled is one that excludes people with disabilities.

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> the biblical vision of persons with disabilities is that they are equally spiritual as other Christians, and they are also granted spiritual gifts that must be used to build up the Church. Able-bodied Christians must resist the temptation to exclude persons with disabilities because of any preconceived notion of “disability”, but rather invest in the hard work of deciphering God’s gifting in their brothers and sisters with disabilities, and then put them to work in the service of God and the Church. Persons with disabilities, on their part, have to eschew any tendency to self-exclusion from the body of Christ, and instead faithfully answer their own marching orders from their Lord to build up the Church.

That persons with disabilities are gifted by the Holy Spirit to be disciples and disciplemakers is powerfully illustrated in a recent volume, *Disability in Mission*, which chronicles more than ten stories of Christians with disabilities engaging in the work of cross-cultural missions.<sup>11</sup> I can personally testify of similar experiences as I engaged in the work of promoting inclusion in local churches in Singapore—I have been more blessed by persons with disabilities than I can ever imagine! As such, churches would do well to remember this story recounted in *Disability in Mission*:

Let me finish with a story of a brave bishop from the third century who understood a concept that we need to rediscover. During the persecution of the early church, Lawrence, who was a deacon in the church of Rome, was ordered to bring the treasures of the church before the emperor. He collected all the poor, the sick, the lame, the elderly and disabled people he could find, took them to the emperor and said, “See, here are the treasures of the Church!”<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has provided a brief overview to some key dimensions of disability that would be helpful for disability ministry leaders. It argued that disability must be regarded not only as a physiological issue but a social one, and demonstrated that Scripture adopts a similar stance as well. It sought to repudiate the half-truths linking disability to sin and faithlessness, and commended instead a posture of humility towards the question of why people have disabilities. Finally, the chapter showed that the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Church is not a passing social fad. Rather, inclusion of marginalized persons with disabilities is at the heart of God’s call to the Church to embrace all the nations, to do good works, and to build itself up through a diversity of gifts.

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## Recommended Reading

Michael S. Beates. *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

Albert A. Herzog Jr. *The Social Contexts of Disability Ministry: A Primer for Pastors, Seminarians, and Lay Leaders*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017.

## Permissions

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## Notes

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1. John Swinton, “Who is the God We Worship?: Theologies of Disability: Challenges and New Possibilities,” *IJPT* 14.2 (2010): 274.
2. The view that disability is a socially-mediated construct is commonly known as the social model of disability, cf. Dan Goodley, *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (London: SAGE Publications, 2011), 11–12.
3. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 472.
4. The Greek in Luke 5:13a draws the reader’s attention to the act of touching—the verbs “stretched out” (*ekteinas*) and “saying” (*legon*) are supporting participles to the main aorist indicative verb “touched” (*hepsato*), indicating to the reader that the focus in the expression is on the touching.
5. In Luke 5:12–14, it is interpretively significant that (1) the man is not called a leper but rather “full of leprosy” (*plērēs lepras*); and (2) after cleansing, the leprosy “left him” (*apēlthen ap’ autou*). This language is similar to the language used earlier in Luke 4:35 when Jesus “casts out” (*exēlthen ap’ autou*) an unclean demon from a possessed man. It is this unclean spirit that addresses Jesus rightfully as the “Holy One of God” (*ho hagios tou theou*). This vignette in Luke 4, and its resonances with Luke 5:12–14, suggest that the episodes depict a conflict (albeit one-sided) between Jesus’ holiness and the uncleanness extant in the world.
6. Cited in Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 36.
7. Kee Hian Loo, “God Is a Healer,” in *Call Me By Name: Stories of Faith, Identity, and Special Needs*, ed. Leow Wen-Pin and Anne Wong-Png (Singapore: Graceworks, 2018), 104.
8. Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).
9. Meng Ee Wong, “Helping Others to See,” in *Call Me By Name: Stories of Faith, Identity, and Special Needs*, ed. Leow Wen-Pin and Anne Wong-Png (Singapore: Graceworks, 2018), 4–6.
10. Leow Wen-Pin, “The Body Is One: Spiritual Growth and Disability in Conversation with 1 Corinthians 12,” in *An Owl’s Journey: Essays to Commemorate the 70th Birthday of David W. F. Wong*, ed. Dev Menon and Quek Tze Ming (Singapore: Graceworks, 2019), 238–50.
11. David C. Deuel and Nathan G. John, eds., *Disability in Mission: The Church’s Hidden Treasure* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019).
12. Nathan G. John, “The Church’s Treasure: People with Disability on Mission,” in *Disability in Mission: The Church’s Hidden Treasure*, ed. David C. Deuel and Nathan G. John (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019), 7.

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