

Crippling Christian Theology as I Power My Wheelchair Out the Door

Theology Today

2020, Vol. 77(2) 124–137

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DOI: 10.1177/0040573620920666

journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj**Shane Clifton** 

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Abstract

This article draws on the author's experience of spinal cord injury to reflect on theological method and central elements of Christian theology. It uses disability theory to unmask the ablest ideology that too often frames church hierarchies and that marginalizes and excludes people with disability and others who are different, notably LGBTQI people of faith. From this perspective, it provides a critical reading of the traditional threefold Christian gospel of perfect creation, fall, and redemption as renewed perfection, arguing that vulnerability, pain, and disability are not a consequence of the fall, but the product of the creative generativity of nature. It tentatively reimagines atonement theory and redemption as a reversal of unjust marginalization (transformative grace for those who experience and perpetrate evil). Finally it considers the transformation of the soul by reference to a disability aesthetic and the truth, goodness, and beauty of God and the diverse creation. It elevates disability as beautiful and desirable, a creative gift of infinite difference.

Keywords

crip theory, disability theology, paternalism, experience and theology, disabled God, Pentecostal theology, ableism

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2017, Alphacrucis College in Australia, where I had taught theology and ethics for nearly two decades, appointed Dr. Rick Watts, a conservative evangelical scholar, as Dean. From the outset he set about opposing my theological and ethical positions, especially my affirmation of marriage equality (legalized in Australia after an acrimonious debate in 2017) and LGBTQI+ inclusion in the church. In March 2018 he used the publication of my book on disability and virtue ethics, *Crippled Grace*, to ban me from teaching.¹ He deemed my ideological critique of the Scriptures and my use of Greek philosophy and contemporary disability scholarship as undermining the authority of the Bible. After losing my appeal against his ban, I resigned my position at the end of 2018. My theological career is ostensibly over. Sydney is overall a conservative city theologically, and quadriplegia makes it difficult for me to move elsewhere. I have thus taken the invitation to contribute to the disability edition of *Theology Today* as an opportunity to cripple (or cripp) Christian theology as I walk out the door. I do so on my own terms, with my electric wheelchair in fast mode.

Given it was used as the reason for my ban, I begin the essay by explaining (not defending) my assumptions about the nature and authority of the Scriptures, and their relative authority in relation to experience. I then use the lens of a lived experience of disability to sketch a deconstruction and (partial) reconstruction of Christian theologies of creation, fall, redemption, and soul. Just as a spinal cord injury in 2010 entailed loss and rehabilitation, so has it disabled my faith and provided opportunity for the reimagining that follows. Disability is at heart a critique of ableism, paternalism, and hierarchical power, and it thus has unique insight into the dangers of the paternalistic church and its ableist theology and scholarship. It also provides a rich and diverse set of experiences out of which to explore inclusive theologies.

Disability, Sources, and Method

While theologians should be open to meaning wherever it can be found, Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are often framed as the primary sources. As a post-Pentecostal disability theologian, I am particularly interested in the contribution of the last of these. In elevating experience, I carry forward the tradition of Spirit-filled Pentecostalism in its empowerment of people on the margins and its affirmation of lived experience. In Australia, as elsewhere, early twentieth-century Pentecostalism led the way in recognizing the potent experience of Spirit-filled women, religious outsiders and heretics, and (to a lesser extent) the spirituality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.² It embraces personal experience as a

1. Shane Clifton, *Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics, and the Good Life*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2018). His rationale for the ban is contained in email correspondence to me and an academic freedom complaint.

theological guide, and I follow its lead by writing theology with my story front and center. The accusation against experience is that it lacks the authority of the Scriptures (for Protestants) and tradition (for Catholics). But if taking experience seriously means that theological conclusions are subjective and cannot be projected onto others, then that is as it should be. Theological paternalism is the root of ecclesial dogma, control, and the silencing of women, LGBTQIA+, people of color, people living in poverty, and the disabled.³ It comes about because the church and its theologians typically claim objectivity, that their dogma transcends experience. What they will never admit is the extent to which their experience of authoritative power and ableism have constrained their theology within the bounds of dogma, and closed their heart to the multivocal spirit at work in the experience of those on the margins. Ableism is the prevailing expectations about typical body abilities, which produces a normative standard that constitutes the essential and full humanity against which disability is a diminished state of being human.⁴ Critics of the logic of this article will say that I write with the bias of my experience of exclusion. I agree (although I also bring the joy and wonder of my experience of disabled diversity to the task, and an appreciation that it is possible to flourish in situations of vulnerability and dependency), and my experience of disability is one reason the argument deserves attention.

As a theological source, personal experience is shaped (but not controlled) by the church community, both its tradition and present embodiment. I also bring the insight of a second community to the task of theology, the experiences of the tribe of people who claim the disabled identity. Disability is a term that references paradoxes of embodied vulnerability and strength, radical diversity and shared experience, sociocultural marginalization and collective power that has transformed the world. It is also the rejection of pity and paternalism. Disability theology resists the assumption that “The savages need to be civilized (for their own good). The cripples need to be cared for (for their own good). The pagans need to be saved (for their own good).”⁵

When I was banned from teaching, the accusation against me for asserting that Leviticus 21:16–23 revealed ancient prejudice against disability—“For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is

2. Shane Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition: Analysing the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia*, ed. A. Davies and W. Kay (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Tanya Riches, “Editorial: Spirit-Filled Christianity and the Dreaming: Can Australia Create Space for Theological ‘Makarrata’?,” *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 20 (August, 2019): 4–17; Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (London: Harvard, 2001).

3. I understand disability as an identity; I am proudly disabled, and I reject the necessity of so-called person-first language.

4. Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Aabledness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009), 6.

5. Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Broadway, 1994).

blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is a hunchback or a dwarf, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. . . . or any defect is to come near to present the food offerings to the Lord”—was that “you seem to think that disability theologians know more about the entailments of image [of God] than Scripture.”⁶ Ideological critique though is central to disability theology, and I would argue to theology also. Disability politics and theory have its origins in the distinction between the medical and social model of disability. The medical model sees disability as abnormality and loss that needs to be fixed. The social model asserts that disability is not a medical problem but a social one, that people with disabilities do not need fixing or healing, society does. From this perspective, disablement is a product of social structures, political exclusion, cultural values, and religious ideology. Thus disability theology unmaskes theological sources of disablement, critiquing ableist voices in the Scriptures and Christian tradition.

For some, critique is acceptable when applied to what they consider relatively unimportant sources, but a disability hermeneutic brooks no compromise to paternalistic disablement. If the Gospels recount Jesus labelling mental illness as demonic and as typically responding to nameless people with disability by healing them, then disability theology has the courage to recognize that even the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels works out of a medical model of disability. This should not be surprising, or even controversial, yet it is. The medical model prevailed for most of human history, the Bible is a product of history, and Christ was incarnate as a first-century Jew. The biblical message remains redemptive even as we admit its potential to perpetrate prejudice. It is the failure of the church to square up to the ideologies of the Bible, whether in its authorial intention or its later interpretation, that leads the majority of churches to insist on a male priesthood (because Jesus was male), and to model his presumed perfections; in Catholicism his asexual celibate piety, and in Protestantism his hetero-normative, masculine authoritative power. Yet, it is only after confronting disabling ideology in sacred authorities that it is possible to redeem the Scriptures and Christian theology for people with disability, women, and queers.

Does that mean Watts was right to judge me heterodox, for setting disability over the Scriptures, when the priority should be reversed? The problem is the assumption that ranking of theological sources is necessary or possible. There is no Scripture outside of the interpretation of it, just as reason, experience, and tradition cannot be weighed against one another. Meaning exists in the interplay of the multiple sources of insight, and because disability frames my horizon it is theologically important to me. Whether it is meaningful to you depends on the capacity of the disabled community to show you how we see the world. Too many religious people adhere thoughtlessly to dogma because they believe God needs them to submit to an authority. Disability theology rejects authority (that is

6. Email correspondence with Rick Watts.

paternalism) and invites discovery of meaning, goodness, and beauty via the wondrous diversity of disabled horizons in interaction with Christian tradition.

I realize this theological outlook is some distance from my Pentecostal/evangelical roots. I may have come to these conclusions about the sources of theology prior to my injury, but perhaps would not have admitted it. The solid fact of spinal cord injury demanded that I give up any affectation to conservative biblical and theological orthodoxy. I had lived, like most Christians in leadership do (especially theologians and teachers, for all their put-on edginess), wearing the mask of “right believing” for the sake of my job, my reputation, my too-fragile ego. Spinal cord injury unmasked the shallowness of my theological pretense. In the immobility of a broken body, truth matters more than reputation. And the truth was, I began to doubt God. I gave up on the idea of miracles, as any honest person who had received as much prayer as I had (yet remained disabled) would.⁷ As I lay on my back and stared at the ceiling, unable to roll over or get myself out of bed, the seed of doubt settled itself in my mind, over time grew roots, and remains firmly planted (even after discovering that I can be free and happy while constrained by impairment). Pentecostal and evangelical positivism set up doubt as the opposite of faith, but other traditions welcome its illuminative potential:

The contemplative experience awakens a tragic anguish and opens many questions in the depths of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding. For every gain in deep certitude there is a corresponding growth of superficial “doubt.” . . . In which we are compelled to examine, to doubt and finally to reject all the prejudices and conventions that we have hitherto accepted as if they were dogmas.⁸

The contemplative lens of disability helped me to discover a version of faith I had no inkling of beforehand, and to hold that faith together with doubt, to disbelieve in God, the Sovereign Creator, Savior, Healer, and soon-coming King, and to encounter meaning, goodness, and beauty (God) in the unruly, ungovernable, and glorious natural world within which we receive the spark of life.

Creation

Christian theology and soteriology generally follow the threefold structure of (1) perfect creator, perfect creation, (2) fall, sin, and suffering, and (3) redemption and renewed perfection. With this structure in place, we are used to reading Genesis as a movement from the ideals of humanity made perfect in the divine image, living in an idyllic garden—read literally as constituting a time before human sin when there was no suffering, hardship, or death, only the bland uniform perfection of a

7. Shane Clifton, “The Dark Side of Prayer for Healing: Toward a Theology of Well-Being,” *Pneuma* 36, no. 2 (2014): 204–25.

8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003), 13–14.

tendered haven stripped of its wild unruliness—to a fall, which introduces the vulnerability and horror of human existence. From this perspective, the disabled difference is a consequence of the fall, either a direct or indirect result of sin, and salvation includes its elimination (another instance of the medical model of disability).⁹ That is, whether disability is earned directly from one's own sin, or indirectly from universal depravity, to be saved is to be set free from sin and guilt and their disabling consequences. If healing is not immediate (which Pentecostals assume it should be), heaven promises to be disability-free.

The threefold logic of perfection, fall, and redeemed perfection is inherently dualist. Because bodies that are weak and vulnerable are a consequence of the fall, ideal humanity is thought to be disembodied, the image of God as (masculine) reason and will, and salvation conceived of as a rejection of embodied (feminine, disabled) weakness. Salvation is sold as a gift of grace, but once purchased, sanctification entails the suppression of the flesh, the burden of transforming ourselves into the incorporeal perfections of the (masculine) divine, rational, pure, mind. It proves an impossible task, so the experience of being saved ends up as a cycle of failure, guilt, repentance, and failure, masked by pretended religious piety. Most theologians that take the theory of evolution as a given have critiqued the normative structure of perfect creation, fall, and redeemed perfection (at least in any literal sense), but it still predominates in mainstream Christianity.¹⁰

For people undergoing the trial of an acquired disability, the structure of this narrative can provide comfort and hope for a time, the promise that lost freedoms and joys will be restored. But disability's permanence eventually unmasks its fiction. Disability is a reminder that the cycle of life and death, in all its glorious creativity and horrific destructiveness, is built into the very structure of the universe. The fragility of the spinal cord, for example, is not a consequence of any fall. There was never a time in human or animal history where bones were unbreakable, as though magically constructed of titanium. Had the mythical Eve fallen out of the tree prior to tasting its fruit, her neck would still have broken.

If creation is good, as Genesis 1 repeatedly claims, then disability is good. This linkage is most pointed in genetic disability, which is not a result of a breakdown in the created order (a fall), but of nature's creative capacity. From single-celled organisms through to the unfathomable diversity of species that have thrived (and gone extinct) during Earth's history, the wonders of the natural world are a consequence of genetic variability, of so-called "mutations" that drive the

9. Rick Watts made precisely this point in arguing that my disability reading of the image of God and salvation was heterodox: "And it is precisely because of this that God's intention in 'salvation' is to restore all of his images to a fully functioning state since this is essential to what he intended all his images to be (Is 35; cf. Pss 115 135); e.g. 'I am the Lord that heals you.' Though rarely recognised, most of Jesus' mighty deeds that involve healings fall into this category of restoration of the image; the gospels will sometimes even use 'save' when speaking of restoring proper bodily function." Cited from formal email correspondence.

10. E.g. John F. Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2008), 145–52.

process of evolution and its remarkable adaptivity. These same life-giving processes also generate disability. The paradox of life is that potency and vulnerability go together. Because this is so, far from being a consequence of sin, disability is a good, a symbol of potent, creative, beauty, a testimony to the generativity and limits of nature.

While some would reject this view as unbiblical, the Genesis narrative does not fit the traditional perfection and fall structure as easily as is generally presumed:

Genesis 1:1–3: First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

God spoke: "Light!" And light appeared.

Here is a poetic embrace of the paradox of chaos and order, of the Spirit (breath) of God bringing light and beauty out of the chaotic darkness of the void. If evolution and disability are read into the biblical myth of life's emergence, from "a soup of nothingness" to humanity made in the divine image, creation is a movement of the Spirit that embraces a chaotic, wild, unruly, world, mutating in an "infinity of difference from God," a gift of difference that includes humanity as the *imago Dei*.¹¹ Just as God is wholly other, the divine image is not captured in the ideal of a singular "manly" reasoned perfection, but in the vulnerable, untamed chaotic potent limits of disabled bodies (where body is a holistic term that includes the brain/mind, otherwise labelled "bodyminds"), as in female, queer, and colored bodies (and also but not primarily white male abled bodies).¹²

In speaking of disability together with feminism and queer theory, I draw on the insight of crip theory, which takes a term of derision, crippled, and turns it into an identity of power. To claim or to come out crip is to own the impairments that our culture tells us are shameful and wear them as a mark of pride. Crip theory calls attention to the normative demands of compulsory able-bodiedness as a form of resistance to cultural homogenization.¹³ It uses the disruptive potential of disability to confront normative culture, unmasking the bland and narrow assumptions that create and sustain power, control, and exclusion. As the primary metaphor for theological anthropology, the *imago Dei* has long been used to shape expected norms; as reason and will to prioritize masculine piety, as complementarian to

11. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, cited in Janice McRandal, *Christian Doctrine and the Grammar of Difference* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9m0tfw>.

12. Some disability scholars use the term "bodymind" to highlight the inextricability of the body and mind/brain; Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127>; Samantha Dawn Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham: Duke University, 2018).

13. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Cultural Front (New York: New York University, 2006).

cement the subordination of women to men, as heteronormative to control and restrict desire and sexuality. Crip theology, therefore, infuses the *imago Dei* with the shocking notion that disability is not something to be wished away. Rather, disability is desirable (a term used in its broadest sense to mean wanted, as well as beautiful and even sexy).¹⁴ That is to say, God desires disability.

Fall

The narrow vision of the *imago Dei* constructs the fall as irrationality, immorality, insubordination, intemperate sexual deviance—as disobedience to divine authority as mediated through church hierarchy—and implicitly locates disability in each category. In contrast, a theological anthropology that affirms the goodness of disability locates sin in the rejection of embodied vulnerability, and in abusing, subjugating, marginalizing, and excluding those who carry the divine image.

In the mythical curse of Genesis 3:16 God tells Eve “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” The curse is best read as an insightful statement on the horror of domestic abuse, so that readers recognize the evil of abusive power of every variety. The male-dominated church takes it as constituting the divine will, an affirmation of male authority. It then co-opts God into this potent, violent schema, creating *him* in the image of the patriarchal, white, bearded, father, King, who rules through a warrior kingdom and masculine priesthood. If we read the Scriptures as fundamentalists want us to, God the powerful wipes out depraved humanity in a flood, destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their “homosexual” sin (and turns a woman who mourns the loss into a pillar of salt), and instigates the genocide of Canaan with the chilling injunction, “you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them . . . just as the Lord your God has commanded” (Deut 20:16–17). Even the eschatological Christ is read as victor, whose promised return is in triumph, riding the clouds of heaven, exacting his wrath and divine judgement against unbelievers (Matt 24). While disability is not explicitly at the forefront of this potent violence, it has always been a symbol of depravity, which takes its most potent form as a disabled and sexually deviant women.¹⁵ We imagine these attitudes as relics of an intolerant past, but wealthy communities still fear deviancy when people with disability build their homes in their neighborhoods (as they do of refugees trying to cross their borders).¹⁶

Yet, while the Scriptures are too easily appropriated to enact and sustain the violence of subjugating, dehumanizing, power, they are better read as reversals of

14. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 2013).

15. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Ann Petry’s Mrs. Hedges and the Evil, One-Eyed Girl: A Feminist Exploration of the Physically Disabled Female Subject,” *Women’s Studies* 24, no. 6 (1995): 599.

16. Alison L. Gash, “Group Homes in Gridlock: Litigation and Backlash over Group Home Location,” in *Below the Radar: How Silence Can Save Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2015).

power. As René Girard points out, what differentiates other mythical texts from the Bible is that, while the former give victorious persecutors the last word (winners write history), in the latter it is the voice of the victim that stands out, even in the cry for violent retribution.¹⁷ Those who are concerned about the violence of the text (e.g. Psalm 21:9) have not imagined the rage that is the appropriate response to the abuse perpetrated on children, women, and people with disability. Contemporary liberal scholars have been known to affirm the nonviolent Jesus of much of the Gospels, and lament the “rhetorical violence” of some passages.¹⁸ While there is reason for concern that the violent speech of Jesus has the potential to perpetuate Christian violence and anti-Semitism, the problem with the meek and mild vision is its failure to appreciate that injustice demands an angry response, and that Jesus rails on the side of victims. The point is not to endorse violence, even biblical violence. As Girard notes, “It is for biblical reasons, paradoxically, that we criticize the Bible.”¹⁹

Girard’s work echoes the insight of the feminism that preceded him. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, asserts that the image of God is the potential for women and men to represent God fully, whereas the fallen world is characterized by patriarchy, which “means not only the subordination of females to males, but the whole structure of Father-ruled society: Aristocracy over serfs, masters over slaves, kings over subjects, radical overlords over colonized people.”²⁰ Feminist theology took inspiration from the Bible to unmask violent, biblical paternalism, and then reconstructed a vision of human flourishing that elevated the potent spirituality of women as fully embodying *imago Dei* (and in so doing reimagining God in female terms).²¹

In feminist and disability theologies that retain and reframe the doctrine of the fall, it is “a means by which the sins against difference (e.g. sexism, racism, homophobia, and ableism) can be named in universal and catastrophic terms.”²² The point is not to literalize the fall, but to use it as a metaphor of personal and systemic evil, and insist that the rejection of people because of their wondrous rich difference is an evil that warrants judgement and redemption.

17. René Girard, “Violence in Biblical Narrative,” *Philosophy and Literature* 23, no. 2 (1999): 387–92.

18. John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 142.

19. Girard, 392.

20. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 61.

21. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 5.

22. McRandal, *The Grammar of Difference*, 104; also Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2007), 164–65.

Redemption

Paternalistic conceptions of the *imago Dei* and the fall lead to an oppressive redemption. Crip theory observes how the dominant modern narrative of progress, especially as realized in university funded research for disability cure and propagated in popular media, celebrates disability only when, under the guidance of a wise doctor, an inspirational person triumphs over mind and body (so-called “inspiration porn”). The rehabilitative contract stipulates assimilation in return for beneficent, normalizing, rehabilitation and cure, erasing the disability difference.²³ Crip theory is not against research and technological development per se, embracing technologies that make life richer. Rather, it opposes the paternalistic presumptions of rehabilitative ideology, which, in its exclusive focus on tomorrow’s hoped-for cure, ignores the present-day experience of disability and its rich contribution to the world. In popular Christian theology, likewise, redemption, as moral and physical cure (sanctification and healing), becomes a form of assimilation and integration into a church in which everyone follows the rules and looks and acts the same, or at least pretends to do so, without complaint. Redemption is pitying and paternal. It is offered by powerful priests and stylish, charismatic evangelists, who look down from the pulpit or stage at depraved women, deviant queers, needy cripples, and rebellious teenagers, to make them feel the guilt of their depravity or the faithlessness of their illness or impairment, and offers them the grace, freedom, and healing of salvation. What is meant by this sales pitch for salvation is, “Forget who you are, let go of your unique spirit, and become like *Jesus* (shaped in my image).”

In her seminal *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland explores what redemption might mean if the broken body of Christ is imagined as a symbol of the disabled God (she imagines Christ with a spinal cord injury using a sip and puff wheelchair).²⁴ The messianic promise of Isaiah 53:1–4, which is generally appropriated by Christians as a reference to Jesus, identifies the Messiah in language characteristic of social disablement, as ugly, undesirable, despised, rejected, familiar with pain, punished by God, childless, one from whom people look away (Isa 53:1–4; cf. Acts 8). In the Gospels, Jesus, understood as God incarnate, is not a powerful king, but a refugee born in poverty, who, unlike other princes and kings then and now, was devoted to those socially marginalized, including people with disability. Even the first witnesses were shepherds, which in biblical times were viewed as disreputable riff-raff.

In hospital after my injury, I was struck by how frequently disability comes up in the Gospels. Like never before, I saw myself in its pages, and even while struggling with Jesus’ tendency to offer cure, which became burdensome under the

23. McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 113.

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

ministrations of those looking to follow his example, what stood out was his affirmation of disabled faith and worth and his rejection of marginalizing social attitudes and actions. He offered healing when told not to, welcomed a hemorrhaging woman judged untouchable, rejected the presumption that blindness was the result of sin, and treated people with diverse disabilities and ailments in the same gracious way as he did everyone.²⁵ While I later came to recognize that the Gospels also include stereotypical, pitying, and paternalistic attitudes, I still believe that grace and welcome predominate. Beyond Jesus' specific dealing with disability, in his actions, attitudes, and relationships he refused to conform to the ableist, normative, masculinity of his day. As a result of his radical difference, he was vulnerable, despised, rejected, and suffered the humiliating horror of the cross, the ultimate symbol of disabling marginalization. In his resurrection, he carried permanent wounds on his hands and feet, scars that become the symbol of divine redemption. Usually, people with disability are objects of religious charity. Recognizing disability as ubiquitous in the Gospels and envisioning the disabled God in Christ offers a vision of disability as subject, as central to the narrative of salvation.

Traditional substitutionary models of the atonement assert that humanity's sinful disobedience to God causes disharmony in creation, offends God's honor, and warrants the just and retributive punishment of death. Depraved humanity is incapable of rendering satisfaction, so God shows mercy in sending his son, who freely offers his life as a sacrifice of obedience to restore harmony between God, humanity, and creation. Only Jesus Christ as the divine-human mediator can render to God the honor he is due, appease his righteous wrath at humanity's brokenness, and bear the consequences of humanity's disobedience. This (no doubt simplistic) summary of the Anselmic model of the atonement has been subject to wide-ranging critique, both for its philosophic limitations (e.g. its formulaic constraints on divine forgiveness) and practical consequences. Feminists are concerned about the impact of the logic of sacrifice, especially penal versions, where salvation is accomplished by the self-sacrificing submission of Christ to appease the wrath of the Father against depraved humanity, and so pay the price due for our sins. Atonement theories that elevate Christ's submissive suffering as the ideal paradigm for Christian life too often justify and sustain female oppression and domestic abuse.²⁶ Clearly, feminist concerns carry over to disability.

Can the disabled Christ invest some sense into the substitutionary model? At the least, it would emphasize that the offence to God's honor is not disobedience to an aristocratic overlord (as in Anselm), but the uncountable harm of abusive power subjugating disabled bodyminds and undermining their unique capacities and diverse modes of flourishing (a logic that applies similarly to the suppression of

25. Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019).

26. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), chapter 4.

female, black, queer, and other abused bodyminds, and the natural world). This dishonor is no small thing and cries out for a justice that transcends any human capacity to repay. In taking disability into the life of the incarnate son all the way to the horror of the cross, God shows the magnitude of his passionate love, satisfies the divine dishonor, unmasks the evil and horror of abusive power, and reveals the world-transforming capacity of disability. Thereafter, in Christ, the victims of paternalistic abuse experience the solidarity of God with them in suffering and in the hope of flourishing (even through pain, impairment, and death). Also, perpetrators of evil (every one of us caught up in systems of power and privilege) are offered forgiveness and the chance to repent, where the latter is not mere words (the sinner's prayer) but concrete efforts to transform character and action, and participate in (not lead or dominate) the shared effort to effect social change.²⁷ Redemption is thus flourishing via authentic connection with the truth, goodness, and beauty of God revealed by and accessed through Christ and the diverse creation (the Spirit at work in surprising places and through voices that generally go unheard).

Soul

Redemption saves or transforms the soul, and makes that within us that is evil and ugly beautiful. In this article I have referenced the transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty without explanation, but might disability theology provide some insight into their meaning? Tobin Siebers suggests that depictions of Christ's suffering and defiled body in art contribute to a disability aesthetic, one that confronts the classical aesthetic taste that normalizes beauty as harmony, bodily integrity, and health, and in contrast unearths the beauty of bodies that are distorted, deformed, diseased, and physically and mentally disabled. He asks, "how does beauty thought broken at first glance become beauty adored as perfect at second glance?"²⁸ Artistic associations between disability and the crucifixion in renderings of Jesus, and in nonreligious art referencing the symbolism of the cross (such as Frida Kahlo's self-portraits, which often emphasize her disability by reference to crucifixion), invite deep examinations of the transcendentals, of the ways in which they emerge from pain, distortion, vulnerability, and disabled difference, intermingled with pride, resilience, resistance, passion, and the like. In a theological frame, we might label this deeper form of beauty "soul," and the disability

27. Whether this sketched reimagining of the satisfaction model is convincing will depend upon how one views the metaphysical assumptions that underlie Christian tradition. It may be that trinitarian theology provides a means of conceptualizing, not the necessity of divine vulnerability, but the active choice to take disablement into the divine life. Perhaps disability scholars can learn from feminist reappropriation of the doctrine of the Trinity; Johnson, *She Who Is*; McRandal, *The Grammar of Difference*.

28. Tobin Siebers, "Disability Aesthetics and the Body Beautiful: Signposts in the History of Art," *Alter, European Journal of Disability Research* 2 (2008): 331; Tobin Siebers, "Disability Aesthetics," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 7, no. 2 (2006): 63–73.

aesthetic form of soulfulness. In the West we live in a culture led by materialistic science and technology and fixated on individual rationality and the myth of progress, and while reason and science have their many benefits, there is an increasing sense of dissatisfaction, a psychic deadness accompanying our successful lives.²⁹ A disability aesthetic, with its artistic origins in disabling representations of the crucifixion and modern renderings of disabled bodies, offers intuitive insight into more complex, rawer senses of meaning, goodness, and beauty. In so doing it looks beyond disability to embrace the wild and unruly beauty of humanity in all its gendered, racial, sexual, generational, and religious diversity. It thus locates God, not in “his” absolute power and authority, but in the creative gift of infinite difference that constitutes the universe in which we live.

In elevating the beauty and desirability of disability, I may have given the impression that disability is universally wonderful. Alternatively, I may have overplayed its difficulties. Probably your judgement of my success in balancing these two alternate viewpoints is informed by your own experience. The social model of disability tends to underplay its physical and psychological challenges, just as the medical model ignores its sociocultural parameters. Disability is a bodymind and contextual reality, and its pains and joys are much the same as the pains and joys faced by every one of us. To be human is to be born dependent and vulnerable, to grow and mature and to maximize one’s independence, to ever be at risk of illness and disability, and if we are lucky, once more to become dependent and vulnerable as we age. Disability theology is a way of thinking about what it means to be a human soul, a bodymind, in relation to God, others, and the natural world.

Conclusion

Crip theorists note that disability is a category with fuzzy boundaries. At what point does an illness become a disability, or sensory loss become blindness or deafness? Since older people experience physical and social pain and marginalization, is old age disability? Crip theory invites lovers, family, friends, theorists, and activists who do not themselves have disability but who live in its ambit to claim crip as a means of endorsing the desirability of disability and challenging simplistic dualisms such as abled–disabled.³⁰ This invitation presents readers without disability the opportunity to participate in its social and political mission, which in the case of Christian crip theology involves political action in the church that can then flow out to the wider society in which religion still plays a vital part.

The danger in this broader claiming of crip is that of appropriation, which can turn into another form of paternalism.³¹ Disability theology has largely been

29. Matthew Del Nevo, *The Metaphysics of Night: Recovering Soul, Renewing Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315133119>.

30. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 13.

written by nondisabled scholars, and while their work makes a vital contribution to the field, it is time for people with lived experience of disability to take their place in the academy and pastorate, especially in permanent paid positions (a rarity in seminaries, universities, and churches).³² I started this circuitous article with the observation that I am walking out the door (or more truthfully, as too often happens with wheelchair users, have been pushed out), so my voice is unlikely to be part of the conversation. It is my hope that the next generation of disability theologians is predominated by people with disability. Just as it would now be unthinkable for indigenous or black theology to be written by white scholars, so it is time to magnify the disabled voice. One strategy to bring this about is for senior scholars and pastors without disability to work collaboratively in research, writing, and teaching, a rarity in a theological academy still dominated by the vision of a solo (white) man smoking a cigar (or an e-cigarette) in his office, thinking deep thoughts. Disability confronts the lie of independence, and reminds us that meaning, goodness, and beauty are discovered most clearly when the burdens and joys of life are experienced with others who are also authentically vulnerable.

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Shane Clifton was Professor of theology and ethics at Alphacrucis College in Australia for two decades until the end of 2018. He had a spinal cord injury in 2010, and since that time his scholarship has focused on the intersection between Christian theology, virtue ethics, and disability studies. He has been an Honorary Associate of the Centre for Disability Research and Policy at The University of Sydney since 2013, and has worked with the Centre for Research Excellence in Disability Health since 2018. He was recently appointed to the research and policy branch of the Australian Government's Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. The views expressed in this article are his own, and do not represent the official position of any of the organizations with which he has been associated.

31. This is one of the reasons crip theory has been criticized by some disability theorists; see Kirstin Marie Bone, "Trapped behind the Glass: Crip Theory and Disability Identity," *Disability & Society* 32, no. 9 (2017): 1297–1314, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1313722>.

32. Damian Mellifont et al., "The Ableism Elephant in the Academy: A Study Examining Academia as Informed by Australian Scholars with Lived Experience," *Disability & Society* 34, no. 7–8 (April, 2019): 1180–1199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1602510>.