

ANABAPTISM AND DISABILITY THEOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Anabaptist Theology Needs Disability Theology

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Among the many streams of theological inquiry currently being pursued in constructive and interesting ways is disability theology. As is so often the case in this field, my own interest has been heightened by my personal context, specifically in relation to my brother Levi, my mother, and my involvement with L'Arche Winnipeg. In his early twenties, Levi was hurt badly in a catastrophic traffic accident, the result of which included significant paralysis (the diagnosis of quadriplegia). He lived as independently as possible for the rest of his life, and then, having spent the last three years of his life in the hospital, died in 2013 at age 54. Our beloved mother, Tina, after suffering several strokes and the ravages of Parkinson's disease, experienced significant dementia before dying in 2016.

Among many other dimensions of relating to Levi and Mom, our family sought to reflect on the nature of our shared Christian faith and how we might be shaped by that faith, given the realities that we all faced, albeit in different ways. One of the blessings for me in the midst of all of this came in the form of John Swinton's theological work, specifically his book titled *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*.¹ My point here is not to rehearse Swinton's argument, but simply to acknowledge how insightful, instructive, and shaping such a theological resource can be, not only to comfort the reader but to assist in, or even initiate, a grappling with what it might mean to be a faithful Christian disciple along with a person experiencing significant dementia or another form of what is commonly described as disability.

¹ John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

Further along the way, as I was teaching and studying, Stanley Hauerwas's theological thought pressed me to reflect further about God, people, questions, and issues that animate the field of disability theology, in which Hauerwas has done considerable work.² Here I encountered the work of L'Arche communities, which later led to my joining the board of L'Arche Winnipeg for nearly a decade (and counting).

Much writing about disability, theological or otherwise, includes the kind of biographical and autobiographical material I have shared here.³ Indeed, inclusion of such personal dimensions can easily slip into a "presentation of credentials"—bona fides, as it were, that qualify one to write in the field. Brian Brock issues an appropriate warning concerning this kind of all-too-familiar gesture. Following Brock, I too want to disavow my (limited) experiences as giving me a platform from which to write. Similarly, in this collection of essays by a diverse range of academics and practitioners, the biographies of the authors insofar as they have certain kinds of experience with people with disabilities is not a qualifying criterion for inclusion.⁴ Rather, it is more the case that we are collectively seeking to discover, to bring into view, in what ways Anabaptist theology and church life need disability theology.⁵ It would be easy enough to see it the other way round, to suggest (ever so humbly) that Anabaptist theology can make unique contributions to theologies of disability, which may well be the case. What is clear, I suggest, is that the witness of people with disabilities—the reflections of people and their experiences—theologically pursued and framed has much to offer to the renewal of Anabaptist theology.

While I want to avoid imposing (retrospectively) a specific theme

² See for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

³ See for example, Ian Brown, *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Search for His Disabled Son* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2009); Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2014).

⁴ Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, *Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2019), xiii.

⁵ As Tim Basselin says, "The church needs a theology of disability to deconstruct societal and theological ideals of self-sufficiency and autonomy and to reconstruct ideals of community born in vulnerability, weakness, and dependence." Timothy J. Basselin, "Why Theology Needs Disability," *Theology Today* 68, no. 1 (April 2011): 47.

on these essays, I think that a thread can be readily identified: namely that Anabaptist theology needs disability theology. Thus Melanie Howard argues that Anabaptist hermeneutics characterized by a community-driven practice, Christocentric focus, and lived obedience may well lead to distortions that can be addressed by pairing those hermeneutical emphases with a cultural model of disability. Kathy Dickson asserts that Anabaptist theology in concert with disability theology can offer principles for action and decision-making that militate against the vagaries of cultural bases for considering and treating persons as “normal,” and presses for a renewed understanding of ways of being human in the image of God that can be embodied only beyond those societal norms. Dickson insists that disability theology can be crucially instructive to Anabaptist theology at exactly this point.

In a related vein, Jason Reimer Greig makes the case that Anabaptist baptismal theology needs to be re-visioned to honor more fully those with profound intellectual disabilities, an insight drawn from disability theology that can not only address issues specific to people with disabilities but apply broadly to a more faithful understanding and practice of discipleship. Melissa Florer-Bixler also deals with Anabaptist baptismal theology, but with a view to stripping away the emphasis on cognitive assent and rationalism that have so long dominated baptismal practice. She argues that people with disabilities should not be treated as exceptional cases; rather, they reveal to the church what should lie at the heart of believers baptism.

Drawing on a Kierkegaardian notion of simplicity and purity of heart, Keith Dow sets forth the argument that Anabaptists, who claim to prize these dimensions of Christian expression, have much to learn about such matters from people described as having limitations and disabilities. In the final essay in this collection, Daniel Rempel counsels a retrieval of *Gelassenheit*—but not simply as an exercise of historical reclamation. Rather, he argues, people with intellectual disabilities can train Anabaptists in the practice of *Gelassenheit* through their prophetic witness, which is embodied in lives displaying a surprising liberatory power.

In each case, but in particular ways, these essays witness to a reality that is perhaps not transparent enough to those who live in it: namely, that Anabaptist theology *needs* disability theology. More pointedly, the Anabaptist church needs people described as disabled if we are to live lives

of faithful discipleship.

Daniel Rempel and I shared the work of co-editing this issue. He provided the initial vision, and our working together has been an enjoyable and fruitful partnership. We want to express our gratitude to the authors who contributed essays to this collection. It has been a pleasure to work with all of them. We are also grateful to Derek Suderman and Stephen Jones, editors of *The Conrad Grebel Review*, for their openness to our proposal and for invaluable guidance along the way.

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