

Consensus

Volume 44
Issue 2 *Canadian Lutheran History:*
Remembering Today, for the Sake of Tomorrow

Article 24

7-25-2023

The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology, and Liberation

Allen Jorgenson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jorgenson, Allen (2023) "The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology, and Liberation," *Consensus*: Vol. 44: Iss. 2, Article 24.

DOI: 10.51644/QKDG6862

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol44/iss2/24>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Book Review

The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology, and Liberation

Lisa D. Powell

London: T & T Clark, 2023

Lisa D. Powell has written a remarkable book that takes leave from Nancy L. Eiesland's *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, which was written in 1994. Eiesland's book is oft cited in theologies of disability, with frequent reference to her image of God in a sip-puff wheelchair, as is used by many quadriplegics. With this image she burst open a new way of thinking about God that has been of great use to the disability community and beyond. In this book, Powell endeavors "to offer more theological ground to the vision of God [Eiesland] sketches" (p. 4).



Powell notes that despite the limited doctrinal development of *The Disabled God*, it was very influential in an incipient field, before the development of Crip theory and intersectional analysis, for instance. For readers not familiar with such discourse, Powell succinctly sketches the lay of the land in an accessible way while summarizing the most significant and germane critiques of Eiesland's insights. Among the most pressing is her identification of the wounds of Jesus as evidence of Jesus' disability, and thus perdurable into eternity. Eiesland fails to answer the critiques of those who see the resurrected Jesus as "newly abled" (John Swinton) rather than disabled. Powell grants this critique but sees an answer in Eiesland's reference to the continual brokenness of the Word made flesh in the Eucharist to fulsomely buttress her claim that God is disabled. So, what do we know of this disabled God?

In the second chapter Powell addresses the identity of God using the theme of covenant ontology, borrowed from the Barthian scholar Bruce McCormack. Readers might be surprised to discover a theologian wishing to advance the image of a disabled God drawing upon a theology most frequently identified with God as radically other. But deep in the Barthian trenches a war is being waged regarding Barth's trinitarian theology. At the core of this disagreement, so nicely summarized by Powell, is the question of whether the trinity of God is logically prior to the electing identity of God. In McCormack's (and Powell's) estimation, the answer to this question is decisive. If the trinity of God is prior, then God is in relationship *in se* and has no need of a community for "fulfillment of the divine life itself" (p. 44). If the electing identity of God is prior, then "God self-constitutes as triune in order to be in covenant" (p. 54). The astounding and provocative consequence of this claim is that the identity of *Jesus* (not only the Logos) exists eternally, since God always (and first) intended creation, with its consequent fall and redemption. Jesus "is constitutive of the identity of the second person of the Trinity, without metaphysical remainder" (p. 49). But what does this have to do with *The Disabled God*? Powell suggests that this eternal identity of the second person of the Trinity as Jesus means that God has always been and will always be "broken for you," in a Eucharistic posture of disability.

In the third chapter Powell explores what this all means for Christology, noting the twists and turns of kenotic Christologies, which draw heavily upon Philippians 2:6-7. Historically this and like passages have been read such that the divine Logos is agential and the human nature of the person of Jesus is instrumentalized and passive. Following

McCormack, drawing upon Cyril of Alexandria, Powell reverses this. Kenosis is not about divine inactivity but divine receptivity of the human. It is then the humanity of Jesus that acts by the power of the Spirit. Kenosis, then, “does not refer to the Son setting aside majesty in order to enter into this state of receptivity, but the identity of the Son is shaped specifically for receptivity, to receive the full humanity of Jesus as God’s own humanity” (p. 65). Despite this interpretation of Philippians 2, readers know that kenosis language has been regularly used to valorize self-abnegation, and so weaponized against women and marginalized groups, including people with disabilities. Powell is mindful of this and has two responses that can be used as correctives. The first is that she distinguishes, following McCormack, receptivity from passivity. Passivity envisages a rather instrumentalized vision of the human. A receptive human is more deeply engaged. Secondly, and in building on this, Powell argues that the language of obedience used to describe Jesus’s relation to the Father is to be replaced by language of call and response. Following Paul Dafydd Jones, she notes that God takes a real risk in the incarnation of the Logos. Jesus was called, not made, to be obedient. Vulnerability and risk enter the narrative of God as the human is rendered active in kenosis. When God is allowed to be vulnerable and in need, then humans are allowed to be agents whose actions impact the God who is no longer radically other.

In the fourth chapter Powell further explores this vulnerable and receptive God, in order to “transvalue our appraisals of human life” (p. 95). In so doing, Powell makes use of recent theological discourse around human sexuality. She carefully explores Graham Ward’s provocative image of the wound of Jesus being seen as a womb, explored by the finger of Thomas in John’s gospel. This image has been critiqued by Linn Marie Tonstad as reinscribing penetration as a valorized activity, which has been used to justify violence against women. Tonstad wants to assert the agential character of female sexuality to counter the violence inscribed on female passivity and receptivity. While Powell expresses appreciation for this critique, she also reminds us that language of receptivity reflects mutuality, and so the refusal of language of receptivity and interdependence means much is lost, a point well understood by the disability community. She is mindful that sexual language best serves to illumine the interplay of action and reception and so she leverages the complicated sexual experiences of some people with disability to illumine how activity and receptivity are not simple and clear-cut categories. Finally, she notes that, like fulsome sexual activity, God is best understood as not restricted to procreative models such that “we can conceive a God who engages in giving and receiving” (p. 105).

In the final chapter of the book, Powell returns to Eiesland’s provocative theme that the resurrected body will reprise the impairments of pre-resurrection bodies, as per the enduring scars evident on the hands, feet, and side of Jesus. Powell follows the lead of Amos Young who commends that resurrection involves the transformation rather than deletion of disabilities but goes further in proposing the eschatological erasure of the not/disabled binary. In so doing, she marries the transformative nature of resurrection to trans insights that eschew the notion of *stasis* in favour of “nonlinear transing of identities and bodies” (p. 131). This is an instance of her interest in seeing the resurrection as something other than an eschatological resolution of intransigent problems but rather as a “means of resistance to the forces that control and enact violence on marginalized and oppressed bodies” (p. 116). In a way, she provides an important corrective to what she deems to be a danger in Eiesland’s position, which can enshrine a not/disabled binary. The body and its identity are shifting, and our experience of this discontinuity is individuated even while our experience of

community is a source of some continuity. That this continues into the resurrection reflects how our identity “remains less our own and more a complex web of mutual life together in Christ” (p. 135).

Powell has provided readers with a rich exploration in *The Disabled God Revisited*. Of course, in re-envisioning God, our sense of self is also reframed, insofar as disability is seen as received in the broken body of Christ in the Eucharist. This can be profoundly liberating for people with disabilities. It can, of course, be cold comfort for those for whom impairment includes “chronic pain, deep fatigue, and struggle that is not overcome through eradicating stigma or providing accommodation and access” (p. 132)—a point not lost on Powell. And yet there remains something profoundly valuable in mapping our experiences onto our image of God. The danger, of course, is that when disability is scripted into God a malleable trope can easily be ossified. There is much here to serve to resist this movement. By using Barth’s theology, with its rich Christological foundations as a guide, Powell has done much to mitigate this danger. But theology is more than Christology, and so a rich exploration of divine disability in terms of creation, pneumatology, etc. awaits. What might it mean to imagine Pentecost as a disabling of the church, or seeing the entelechy of creation as both evolution and regression, and properly so since it reflects the nature of the Creator? There are many fertile fields to be plowed here, and for that we can thank Nancy Eiesland and Lisa Powell, who have begun the journey in earnest. Read this book and begin to imagine God—disabled.

Allen G. Jorgenson
Martin Luther University College
Wilfrid Laurier University