

# Disability contra Docetism

## Following the disabled Christ

Daniel Rempel

Christology has material consequences. So argued Nancy Bedford in her 2019 lecture “The Problem of a Ghostly Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, what we believe about the person of Jesus Christ affects the manner in which we live in the world and understand our place as creatures within God’s good creation. Bedford chose an interesting place to begin her three-part lecture series on Christology. She turned not to constructive claims but rather to Docetism, the ancient belief that Christ only *appeared* human. While Docetism was officially condemned as a heresy during the first Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, Bedford contends that “in multiple ways much of Christian theology and practice has gone astray, distorted by a conception of Jesus that does not truly see him as a human being who fully took on our human reality.”

Mennonites bear their own history with Docetism, most notably in Menno Simons’s adoption of the Melchiorite belief in Jesus as one bearing celestial flesh—the idea that “Christ took no human flesh from Mary, who served only as a vessel, and instead possessed his own, celestial flesh.”<sup>2</sup> Bedford’s concern is not just that this is an awkward aspect of Mennonite history. Rather, she contends that in many ways Docetism continues to lurk its ugly head today.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the contemporary impulse

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1 Nancy Bedford, “The Problem of a Ghostly Jesus,” J. J. Thiessen Lecture Series, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba, October 24, 2019, <https://youtu.be/UKa61XxStu0>.

2 Christina E. Moss, “Some Reflections on Early Anabaptists and the Creeds,” Anabaptist Historians blog, October 22, 2020, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2020/10/22/some-reflections-on-early-anabaptists-and-the-creeds/>. Melchiorites were followers of Melchior Hofmann, a sixteenth-century spiritualist and Anabaptist leader in northern Germany. For Menno Simons’s account of the flesh of Christ, see Menno Simons, “Incarnation of Our Lord,” in *The Complete Works of Menno Simons: c. 1496–1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. John Christian Wenger (Herald, 1974), 783–834.

3 James Reimer noted something similar, suggesting that Mennonites have tended either toward Docetism or Arianism, the belief that Christ was either not fully human (Docetism) or not fully God (Arianism). Reimer does not delve deeply into a solution

toward Docetism does not arise from an impulse to recreate Menno's ideas of celestial flesh but rather from a desire to control Christology. As Bedford suggests, it may be "no more than the projection of the values of a given dominant culture." This

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is an error made in both progressive and conservative circles, in which we attempt to conform Christ to our secular ethics, manipulating his person to meet our preconceived ends.

Struggling against Docetism requires us to give up our desires for control and manipulation because we are dealing not with a principle but with a human person. At some time or another, we have all tried to control another—a

child, a friend, a family member, a coworker—only to leave frustrated because, as it turns out, dealing with humans means dealing with people who have wills and ideas other than our own. Attending to Jesus's person gives us precisely the conditions we need to live our life free from control and in response to the Word made flesh.

In what follows, I attend not to the whole of Jesus's human nature but rather to one particular aspect of it, what disability theologians have understood as Christ's *disability*. It is my contention that there is something about this focus on the disabled Christ—as understood in disability theology circles—that leads us to reject the allure of Docetism and move toward a more faithful *Nachfolge* of God incarnate.<sup>4</sup>

## The disabled God

Nancy Eiesland's text *The Disabled God* is often credited with commencing the discipline we now know of as disability theology. There she describes the theological vision that illumines and orients her work:

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but merely gestures in a direction that takes seriously the dual nature of Christ's humanity and divinity. A. James Reimer, "Toward Christian Theology from a Diversity of Mennonite Perspectives," *Conrad Grebel Review* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 157.

4 *Nachfolge* is a German term that means "follow after" but is often translated into English as "discipleship." It is a word that was used both by early Anabaptist leaders and by more contemporary German theologians. What I like about the term *Nachfolge* that sometimes gets missed in its translation as "discipleship" is that following Jesus is just that: following after Jesus, letting him take the lead, while subordinating our place behind him.

*I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is, the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to maneuver by blowing and sucking on a strawlike device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright. I recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged “not feasible,” “unemployable,” with “questionable quality of life.” Here was God for me.<sup>5</sup>*

Lest we think this merely some disabled utopian fantasy, Eiesland quickly attempts to ground her vision in the scriptural narrative. According to Eiesland, the disabled God is best understood through the post-resurrection wounds of Christ (Luke 24:36–39). Just like Christ in a sip-puff wheelchair, the Christ who bears the scars of his resurrection is the disabled Christ. Eiesland explains,

*Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Savior, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In so doing, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.<sup>6</sup>*

The potency of Eiesland’s provocative argument is that she leads us to a particular cruciform reflection on the woundedness of Christ—the one who she argues became disabled for us. A docetic Christ is one that can neither be crucified nor wounded. If Christ is not wounded, argues Eiesland, then Christ is not God for us—or, at best, if the docetic Christ is God for us, then it is a different Christ and maybe even a different *us* than the one we read about in scripture.

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5 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon, 1994), 89.

6 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 100.

As John Webster has argued, the scandal of the statement “God with us” lies neither in the subject nor the object of the statement but in the preposition.<sup>7</sup> It is not scandalous to think of God or *us*, but to think of the manner in which God engages *with* humanity is scandalous indeed. To retain the force of the scandal, we need both parties at play. We need the fully divine God and the fully created human. What we believe about each matters.

It thus matters that Eiesland conceives of Christ as disabled because it informs which God is with us. As Eiesland notes, this is not the God who is removed from the trivialities of our creaturely condition but the God who incorporates human contingency into the life of God and, in turn, reveals a new humanity. It matters who this God is because who God is determines who we are.

### Following the disabled Christ

As Karl Barth has argued, dogmatics is ethics. It is not just that what we believe is a precursor to what we do; rather, belief and practice are always inherently interrelated.<sup>8</sup> If Barth is right, then we cannot exhume our ethics from their dogmatic context. Anabaptists have come to be known for our ethics and our service, but if we detach these from our beliefs, we risk ending up with an ethics that is wildly different from the person we confess to worship. What we believe about the person of Christ thus sets the groundwork for our ethics, and the way we live is a visible representation of the things we believe. For Eiesland, “ignoring disability means ignoring life”<sup>9</sup>—or, stated positively, attending to disability means attending to life. Eiesland appeals to Christ’s post-resurrection body to indicate that the woundedness of Christ is not reserved only for his death; it remains with him in his life. As Christ lives, Christ lives as the wounded one.

Eiesland’s Christology has material consequences. Christians do not follow the dead Christ. We do not follow the *principles* of Christ or think of him only as a figure of history. Christians follow the living Christ, and, according to Eiesland, this living Christ is disabled. Christ is not someone who rejects disability or tries to eliminate disability, and neither should we. Following the disabled Christ thus means, first, recognizing

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7 John Webster, “Immanuel, God’s Presence with Us,” Kantzer Lectures, Henry Center for Theological Understanding, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, September 11, 2007, [https://youtu.be/WjOeD\\_OThTM](https://youtu.be/WjOeD_OThTM).


8 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1957), 515.

9 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 13.

that disability is a regular feature of lived reality and not something to be eradicated. This posture toward disability affects every response hereafter.

Following the disabled Christ leads us, second, to embrace human contingency. As Eiesland argues, the disabled Christ incorporates the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. Contingency is not something we need to flee from; it is something we can come to embrace. To embrace contingency means that we are not in control of our lives. It is to recognize that we constantly live in a state of need—in need

of others and, ultimately, of the body of Christ.



**Following the disabled Christ leads us to embrace human contingency.**

In a world that seems obsessed with controlling our destinies, the embrace of contingency flies in the face of dominant trends. We desire to be in control

of our careers, finances, fitness, and health. While control in and of itself is not sinful, it becomes sinful when our desire for control is the ultimate orientation of our lives. To live a life of *Nachfolge* requires giving up control because we are not to be leaders but followers after Christ. Embracing human contingency is the ultimate act of placing our trust in Christ, the giver of every good gift.

Following the disabled Christ means, third, recognizing in these wounds our salvation, which in turn paves the way for a new recognition of humanity. Christ's resurrection marks the reversal of our sinful state and the inauguration of a new way of being—a personhood not only compatible with the experience of disability but also found *within* the experience of disability. Dominant modes of being in the world often find no place for disability. The able-bodied experience is the normative experience, and those who diverge from these socially conceived norms are ostracized as a result.

In Christ's resurrection, we are saved from the need to conform to the norm and be the masters of our lives. In the living Christ, we find the one who meets us in our particular lived existence, not to remove our disabilities but to save us where we are, as we are. Following the disabled Christ leads us into our salvation as people redeemed by the one who embraces our humanity.

## **Conclusion**

To believe in a particular Christ means to live in a particular way. While the fullness of Christ exceeds the context of disability, attending to the

disabled Christ—the fully human Christ—does have material consequences. In attending to the tendency to overlook the humanity of Christ, we are drawn further into the mystery of the Word become flesh in the one who was born of a virgin and then wounded for us. It is in the wounds of this disabled Christ that we find life to the fullest.

### **About the author**

Daniel Rempel is assistant professor of biblical and theological studies at Providence University College and Theological Seminary in Otterburne, Manitoba. He worked as a disability support professional for five years and currently serves as the vice president of the board of directors for L'Arche Winnipeg.