

Dis/Ability (Systematic Theology)

by Nadine Hamilton

Version 1.0 | Published 1 May 2026 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-116701>

Other language version: Behinderung (dogmatisch) (Deutsch)

Disability is not only a socially and medically relevant experience, but also opens up a fundamental theological path to knowledge. Disability theology questions central tenets of doctrine by reinterpreting concepts such as wholeness, normality, and salvation in the light of dependence, relationship, and the lived experience of difference. It criticizes the equation of healing with salvation, normativity with wholeness, and autonomy with humanity, and instead opens up physically situated life, based on resonance and participation, as a place of divine presence. This raises not only ethical questions about inclusion, medical boundaries, and social participation, but also systematic theological questions: How, for example, can our view of God, anthropology, Christology, pneumatology, and eschatology be rethought in light of physical diversity, relational interdependence, and shared dependence? Disability theology thus presents itself as an interdisciplinary but dogmatically distinct field that is gaining relevance both within the church and ecumenically.

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Editorial Note

Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

1. Disability as an Environment for Theological Learning

Disability is not a static biological or medical fact. It is rather the result of social, cultural, and normative processes that determine which bodies, perceptions, and ways of life are considered “normal” and which are considered “deviant.” Dis/ability Studies have significantly shaped this shift in perspective by understanding disability as a socially constructed concept of difference, as an intersection between physical variation, social expectations, and symbolic orders.^[1]

This perspective also challenges theology. For theology has been and continues to be involved in creating, legitimizing, and questioning notions of normality, for example in its discourse on the image of God, on physical integrity as a sign of salvation, or on delivered human beings as ideal human beings. Dis/ability theology therefore asks not only what theology says about disability, but what it can learn from it. In its strongest expressions, it understands disability as a place of theological insight where central doctrinal statements such as God's power, the body of Christ, grace, and salvation must be systematically rethought.

Disability is not only a topic of pastoral care within the church or part of a theological anthropology, but also highly relevant to society. Questions of inclusion, prenatal diagnostics, assisted living, care, and participation touch on medical, ethical, and sociopolitical fields and demand theological answers that go beyond the purely pastoral. Dis/ability theology, therefore, is particularly relevant to nursing sciences, social ethics, rehabilitative medicine, and discourses on human rights. At the same time, its importance is growing within the church and ecumenical contexts, for example in liturgical questions, the structuring of the sacraments, the doctrine of vocation, and the theological self-understanding of the church.

2. Models of Disability

For the purpose of orientation, various models of disability can be distinguished, as described in particular in disability studies and in the context of social sciences.^[2] They offer different perspectives on the causes, effects, and social conditions of disability as simplifications of complex social and physical realities. These models do not compete with each other but rather mark different interpretive frameworks that are relevant to theological reflection and at the same time challenge it:

- *Individual Model:* This model is also known as the medical model. It understands disability as an individual deviation from a physical or mental function that is considered “normal.” The focus is on diagnosis, cure, or compensation, often in the context of medical or rehabilitative care. This model continues to dominate large areas of health care, special education, and church relief services.
- *Relational Model:* Developed in the context of the Scandinavian welfare state, this model emphasizes the misalignment between the individual and their environment. Disability is viewed as a situational interaction rather than a fixed characteristic. The goal is to enable social participation through professional support and societal adaptation.
- *Social Model:* Developed from the British disability movement, this model understands disability not as an individual problem but as a socially constructed limitation. Barriers in architecture, communication, and attitudes are considered the main causes. Disability is seen here as an expression of structural exclusion.
- *Human Rights Model:* Emphasizes the dignity, self-determination, and equal rights of people with disabilities. It forms the foundation of international legal instruments like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and focuses on social responsibility and political participation independent of individual abilities.
- *Cultural Model:* Examines how disability is created and represented through speech, images, and cultural practices. The focus is on discursive power relations, normative ideas of physicality, and symbolic orders that define normality and deviation.

- *Affirmative Model*: Developed as a supplement to the social model. It emphasizes disability as an identity forming experience that is not necessarily negative. The aim is to deal with impairment in a self-confident manner, especially through creative, cultural, and collective forms of expression.
- *Minority Model*: Views disabled people as a socially disadvantaged group with their own rights and collective identity. The focus is on discrimination, political representation, and the fight against social inequality, analogous to other civil rights movements.

In theological contexts, these models open up different possibilities for connection: they shape the perception of physicality, dependence, difference, and participation, and interact with classical dogmatic conceptions such as creation, grace, salvation, and perfection. Theological reflection faces the task of critically examining these perspectives, constructively incorporating them, or consciously transcending them – while remaining aware of their specific presuppositions.

3. Lines of Development: A Historical Overview

The theological debate on disability is embedded in a complex history of social, medical, and religious patterns of interpretation. For a long time, this history was characterized by ambivalent attitudes: people with disabilities were both cared for and socially excluded, both interpreted religiously and disciplined institutionally. The development of dis/ability theology stands at the center of this tension and draws on critical reinterpretations of traditional dogmatic categories as well as on analyses from the social sciences. A differentiated theological reflection therefore requires knowledge of historical structures, attributions, and models of thought that continue to influence contemporary discourse.

3.1. From Antiquity to Modernity

Throughout much of history, the way society and the church have treated people with disabilities has been marked with tension: between integration and exclusion, care and control, religious interpretation and social differentiation. A coherent concept of disability in the modern sense did not exist until the 20th century. Instead, physical, mental, or sensory deviations were classified according to a network of medical, moral, and religious attributions.^[3]

In *antiquity*, ideals of physical perfection dominated; people with impairments were often considered deficient, but were sometimes integrated into family structures. Early Christian interpretations associated disability with sin or divine punishment. In the *Middle Ages*, church praxis ranged between charitable care, for example in monastic contexts, to theologically based stigmatization.

The *early modern period* saw the emergence of a more functional understanding that defined disability in light of medical, economic, and administrative categories. The emerging welfare state combined rehabilitation approaches with the logic of normalization in the interests of economic exploitability. These tendencies intensified in the *modern era*: people with disabilities were often institutionalized, classified, and subjected to educational discipline. With the rise of National Socialism, this development reached its cruel climax in the systematic murder of people with physical, mental, and psychological disabilities. Under ideological constructs such as “hereditary disease,” “substandard life,” and the concept of “life unworthy of living,” they were disenfranchised, marginalized, and killed.

As early as the first half of the 20th century, individual critical voices began to question the dominant welfare model. With the emergence of dis/ability studies in the 1970s, disability became visible as a socially constructed difference and has since been increasingly repositioned in theological terms.

3.2. Germany: From the Diaconate to Dogmatics

In German-speaking countries, reflection on disability in church praxis has long focused on the diaconate, pastoral care, and ethics. The interlocking of church, inner mission, and welfare services which developed over time shaped an

understanding that was strongly influenced by the medical model and a caring, paternalistic view of disability. This was supplemented by special pedagogically motivated integration approaches, which were often linked to implicit notions of normality.

However, a change has been taking place since the 1980s. Inspired by international developments, the reception of dis/ability studies, and processes of reflection within the church, this discourse is increasingly opening up to systematic theological questioning. This shifts perspectives: disability is no longer understood solely as a pastoral-ethical challenge, but as an opportunity to reexamine fundamental concepts such as being created in the image of God, grace, physicality, community, and perfection.

Authors such as Ulrich Bach ^{GND}, Johannes Eurich ^{GND}, Ulf Liedke ^{GND}, and Hanna Braun ^{GND} have contributed in different ways to reflecting on disability not only as a subject of diaconal praxis, but also as a theological perspective. The connections to inclusive ecclesiologies, to a relational anthropology, and to a theologically responsible discourse on disability mark important steps toward an integrative theological discourse. This makes it clear that disability is not only ethically or pastorally relevant, but also opens up a theological perspective that reexamines central doctrines and challenges systemic theological reflections in a lasting way.

3.3. Country-Specific Paths of Development

- *USA:* In the USA, dis/ability theology was linked early on with the civil rights movement and disability studies. The focus was on criticizing normative social structures and reinterpreting disability theologically as a socially and culturally constructed category. Theologians such as Nancy Eiesland ^{GND}, Amos Yong ^{GND}, Deborah Creamer ^{GND}, and Thomas Reynolds ^{GND} have developed concepts in which disability is understood as a place of theological insight rather than as the opposite of divine presence. The experience of difference, dependence, and participation is reflected here as a starting point for redefining theological categories such as grace, incarnation, and community.
- *Great Britain:* In the United Kingdom, cultural, relational, and spiritual-liturgical perspectives on disability have been increasingly incorporated into theology. John Swinton ^{GND} and Brian Brock ^{GND}, for example, understand disability as a complex, irreducible reality that is deeply interwoven with temporality, relational density, and lived practice. Their work is more firmly anchored in pastoral, ecclesiological, and liturgical issues. Disability is not primarily discussed as a subject of inclusion, but as a challenge for a church that sees itself as a vulnerable community.
- *The Netherlands and Scandinavian Countries:* In the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, inclusive social strategies were also adopted early on by the church. The church and the welfare state often work together to create barrier-free structures. Theological reflections often focus on ethical and diaconal aspects (cf. art. Dis/ability, Christian Ethics), for example in relation to encounter, recognition, and participation. In the Netherlands, this is increasingly linked to systematic theological approaches – for example, in the works of Hans S. Reinders ^{GND}, who develops a theological anthropology with his theology of gift, presence, and dependence.

4. Theological Perspectives: Disability as a Dogmatic Place of Learning

Dis/ability theology fundamentally changes classical dogmatic teachings by reinterpreting them from the perspective of lived disability. Infirmary, dependence, relationship, and presence are not seen as deficiencies but as fundamental theological categories.

- *Doctrine of God:* Dis/ability theology critically questions traditional conceptions of God, such as omnipotence, immutability, and sovereignty, especially when they are associated with independence, control, or physical integrity. John Swinton ^{GND} proposes a doctrine of God in which divine presence is understood not in terms of

separation from the world, but in terms of relationship, reciprocity, and accompaniment.^[4] God is not conceived as a distant entity, but as a community-oriented counterpart who reveals Godself in concrete, even vulnerable, life. This perspective questions implicit ideals of autonomy and untouchability and draws attention to closeness, responsiveness, and shared experience as central theological categories.

- *Christology*: In the form of the risen Christ with permanent wounds (John 20:27), God reveals Godself not beyond vulnerability, but in the midst of physical signs of exclusion and injury. Nancy Eiesland ^{GND} interprets this infirmity as a theological self-revelation: the “disabled God”^[5] does not stand for a symbolic solidarity, but for a radical revision of the Christological conception of God. Here, salvation does not come about through the restoration of normality, but through the acceptance of difference. Lisa Powell ^{GND} builds on Eiesland’s approach and expands it in terms of Trinitarian theology:^[6] she understands divine self-communication as an event of physical relatedness, characterized by finitude, relationship, and mutual dependence.
- *Pneumatology*: In classical models, the Spirit of God is often linked to language, expressiveness, or rational understanding. Amos Yong ^{GND} ^[7] and Deborah Creamer ^{GND} ^[8] on the other hand, call for a pneumatology that also recognizes the work of the Spirit in silence, interaction, affectivity, and nonverbal communication. The Spirit works where relationships are formed, attention is shared, and space for diversity is opened up. Thus, the work of the Spirit is not linked to specific abilities, but to openness to encounters beyond established forms of communication.
- *Ecclesiology*: In dis/ability theology, the church is not seen as a perfect and homogenous body, but as the “wounded body of Christ” (Brian Brock ^{GND}).^[9] People with disabilities are not objects of inclusion but subjects of community. John Swinton ^{GND} distinguishes between structural inclusion and existential belonging: the church becomes the church when it creates spaces of representation and belonging, thereby transforming itself.^[10] Hans Reinders ^{GND} speaks of a theology of the gift, in which relationship itself becomes the place of divine presence.^[11] A church that not only includes people with disabilities but transforms itself by their perspective becomes a place of lived recognition.
- *Anthropology*: Dis/ability theology questions anthropological ideals that define humans primarily as autonomous, rational, and capable beings. Instead, Hans Reinders ^{GND} emphasizes dependence and relationship as fundamental human conditions that apply irrespective of autonomy and performance.^[12] Hanna Braun ^{GND} sees human structural vulnerability as the core of being created in the image of God.^[13] Amy Jacober ^{GND} shows that the experience of disability must not be marginalized theologically, but taken seriously as an opportunity for insight.^[14] Anthropology thus becomes an examination of diversity, finitude, and social resonance – not beyond, but in the midst of concrete physicality.
- *Soteriology*: Traditionally, salvation is often equated with healing, as the restoration of wholeness or the overcoming of deficiency. Dis/ability theology contradicts this narrow view and opens up alternative understandings: Sharon Betcher ^{GND} interprets salvation as the transformation of social structures of exclusion. In her critical-political theology, she emphasizes that salvation does not mean individual “correction,” but rather the empowerment to participate in a more just community.^[15] Thomas Reynolds ^{GND} describes salvation as shared vulnerability: it is not about the elimination of differences but about community that is sustained by mutual dependence and recognition.^[16] Jennie Weiss Block ^{GND} understands redemption as a radical form of hospitality, a sense of belonging that is not earned but given and which does not overcome difference but affirms it.^[17]
- *Eschatology*: In dis/ability theology, hope does not aim at perfection but at lasting recognition of difference. The wounds of the risen Christ (John 20:27) are exemplary in this regard: they do not signal a deficiency but rather identity, relationship, and lived history. They bear witness to divine faithfulness, which does not leave concrete life behind, but affirms it as part of redeemed reality. Salvation thus appears not as a return to an idealized primordial state, but as a transformation toward a community that bears and shares diversity. In this context,

Thomas Reynolds  speaks of a “vulnerable community” in which dependence is understood not as a flaw but as a fundamental structure of interpersonal and God-human relationships. ^[18]

5. Open Questions and Current Challenges

Dis/ability theology has redefined central fields of dogmatics and thereby provided decisive impulses for an inclusive, relationship-oriented understanding of theology. However, the debate is not over. Rather, it continues to challenge theology and the church to question their view of humanity, their vocabulary, and their practices.

How does our understanding of what it means to be human change when we recognize not autonomy and performance, but dependence, relationships, and vulnerability as the basic conditions of human existence? How can medical, social, cultural, and legal models of disability be related to each other in a theologically differentiated way, without premature harmonization, but also without devaluing individual perspectives?

How can theology respond to experiences that defy simple categorization such as mental illness, invisible impairments, or the long-term effects of trauma? What avenues are opening up for an intersectional theology that does not isolate disability, but reflects on it in conjunction with gender, race (cf. art. Racism), age, and social status (cf. art. Classism)?

Finally, what does it mean to think of the church not only as an institutionally accessible space, but as a spiritually pluralistic, physically diverse, and theologically adaptive community in which difference is understood not as an exception but as a constitutive element of community?

Recommended Literature

Brock, Brian, *Wondrously Wounded. Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, Waco 2019.

[Systematic theological foundation of a church of diversity. Brock understands the body of Christ as an inclusive space of spiritual gifts beyond normative ideas of perfection.]

Brock, Brian/Swinton, John (Eds.), *Disability in the Christian Tradition. A Reader*, Grand Rapids 2012.

[Important sourcebook for the history of Christian interpretations of disability. The volume brings classical theological texts into conversation with disability theology and shows how concepts of embodiment, healing, sin, suffering, and human dignity have been shaped within the Christian tradition.]

Creamer, Deborah B., *Disability and Christian Theology. Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, Oxford 2009.

[Introduction to a theology of limitation. Creamer argues against normative concepts of wholeness and develops constructive theological alternatives.]

Eiesland, Nancy L., *The Disabled God. Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Nashville 1994.

[A classic work on dis/ability theology. With the figure of the “disabled God,” Eiesland presents an alternative Christology that interprets woundedness as a sign of divine solidarity.]

Jacober, Amy E., *Redefining Perfect. The Interplay Between Theology and Disability*, Eugene 2017.

[Jacober criticizes common Christian notions of perfection, especially with regard to salvation and physicality. She develops a theology in which disability is not viewed as a deficiency to be overcome, but as a part of living in the image of God.]

McLachlan, David, *Accessible Atonement. Disability, Theology, and the Cross of Christ*, Waco 2021.

[Constructive study on atonement theology from the perspective of disability. McLachlan critically examines classical interpretations of the cross and develops an account of salvation that does not depend on ideals of bodily perfection, cure, or normative wholeness.]

Melcher, Sarah J. et al. (Eds.), *The Bible and Disability. A Commentary*, Waco 2017.

[Comprehensive biblical commentary from the perspective of disability studies and disability theology. The volume offers exegetical and theological reflections on disability across the biblical canon and is especially useful for connecting dogmatic questions with biblical hermeneutics.]

Powell, Lisa D., *The Disabled God Revisited*. Trinity, Christology and Liberation, London 2023.

[Powell develops Eiesland's image of the "disabled God" further into a Trinitarian theological doctrine of God, in which God is not conceived as autonomous, but as being oriented in God's self-realization toward relationship, incarnation, and impaired humanity.]

Reinders, Hans S., *Receiving the Gift of Friendship. Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, Grand Rapids 2008.

[Reinders develops a theological anthropology based on relationship and reciprocity. He argues that people with severe disabilities are recognized in their humanity through the gift of friendship and that these relationships offer key insights into understanding human existence.]

Reynolds, Thomas E., *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Grand Rapids 2008.

[Reynolds develops a theological anthropology and eschatology in which disability is understood not as a deficit but as an expression of relational abundance and divine presence. He is concerned with a hope that does not overcome difference but affirms it.]

Swinton, John, *Becoming Friends of Time. Disability, Timefulness and Gentle Discipleship*, Grand Rapids 2016.

[Reflects on the relationship between time, rhythm, and spirituality. Swinton advocates a theology of patience and of relationship-oriented discipleship – beyond performance based norms of time.]

Yong, Amos, *Theology and Down Syndrome. Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*, Waco 2007.

[Systematic reflections on disability and theology from the perspective of an Evangelical theologian. Yong combines Pentecostal spirituality with academic reflection.]

Yong, Amos, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church. A New Vision of the People of God*, Grand Rapids 2011.

[Biblical-theological contribution to disability theology. Yong rereads biblical texts on disability, healing, and community and develops a vision of the church in which people with disabilities are not objects of care but constitutive members of the people of God.]

Citations

- ¹ Cf. Hirschberg, Marianne, Modelle von Behinderung, in: Waldschmidt, Anne et al. (Eds.), *Handbuch Disability Studies*, Wiesbaden 2022, 53–67.
- ² Cf. Hirschberg, Modelle.
- ³ Cf. Dederich, Markus, Behinderung im Wandel der Zeit. Sozial- und begriffsgeschichtliche Anmerkungen, in: Eurich, Johannes/Lob-Hüdepohl, Andreas (Eds.), *Behinderung. Prekäre Lebenslagen als Herausforderung für Theologie und Kirche*, Heidelberg/Berlin 2011, 13–34.
- ⁴ Cf. Swinton, John, Who Is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability. Challenges and New Possibilities, in: *IJPT* 14 (2011), 273–307, 293.
- ⁵ Eiesland, Nancy, *The Disabled God. Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Nashville 1994.
- ⁶ Cf. Powell, Lisa D., *The Disabled God Revisited*. Trinity, Christology and Liberation, London 2023.
- ⁷ Cf. Yong, Amos, Disability, the Human Condition, and the Spirit of the Eschatological Long Run. Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Disability, in: *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 11/1 (2007), 5–25.
- ⁸ Cf. Creamer, Deborah B., *Disability and Christian Theology. Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, Oxford/New York 2009.

- ⁹ Cf. Brock, Brian, Disability. Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body, Grand Rapids 2021.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Swinton, John, From Inclusion to Belonging. A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness, in: Betcher, Sharon L. et al. (Eds.), A Healing Homiletic. Preaching and Disability, London, 2012, 183–197, and Swinton, God.
- ¹¹ Cf. Reinders, Hans S., Receiving the Gift of Friendship. Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics, Grand Rapids 2008.
- ¹² Cf. Reinders, Gift.
- ¹³ Cf. Braun, Hanna, Der vulnerable Mensch als Ebenbild Gottes. Eine Grundlegung für inklusive Sprechweisen in der theologischen Anthropologie, Stuttgart 2023.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Jacober, Amy E., Redefining Perfect. The Interplay Between Theology and Disability, Eugene 2017.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Betcher, Sharon V., Spirit and the Politics of Disablement, Minneapolis 2007.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Reynolds, Thomas E., Vulnerable Communion. A Theology of Disability and Hospitality, Grand Rapids 2008.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Block, Jennie Weiss, Copious Hosting. A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities, New York 2002.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Reynolds, Thomas E., The Broken Whole. Philosophical Steps Toward a Theology of Global Solidarity, Albany 2008.

Citation Style

Hamilton, Nadine: „Dis/Ability (Systematic Theology)“, Version 1.0, in: Online Lexicon for Systematic Theology, ISSN 3052-685X, 1 May 2026. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-116701>

Metadata

DOI	https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-116701
Creative Commons Licence Type	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs CC BY-NC-ND (4.0)
peer reviewed by	Ulf Liedke
Translator(s)	Jacob N. Cerone
Collection of Articles	Anthropology
Index Theologicus (IxTheo)	Body of Christ , Dependence , Disability , Grace , Imago Dei , Relation , Salvation , Vulnerability
Subject Headings (LOC)	Body of Christ , Dependence , Disability , Grace , Imago Dei , Relation , Salvation , Vulnerability
Keyword	Body of Christ , Dependence , Disability , Grace , Imago Dei , Relation , Salvation , Vulnerability

Mentioned People

Ulrich Bach, Sharon V. Betcher, Jennie Weiss Block, Hanna Braun,
Brian Brock, Deborah B. Creamer, Nancy L. Eiesland, Johannes Eurich,
Amy E. Jacober, Ulf Liedke, Lisa D. Powell, Hans S. Reinders,
Thomas E. Reynolds, John Swinton, Amos Yong

KEYWORDS

Body of Christ

Dependence

Disability

Grace

Imago Dei

Relation

Salvation

Vulnerability