

# Correspondence

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## JOHN HASTINGS

### Disability and the resurrection body

Timothy Wall's article<sup>1</sup> was interesting if speculative. However his views on disability are open to challenge. It is stretching the word 'disabled' far beyond its usual meaning to describe Jesus's resurrection body as 'disabled' simply because he had marks on his hands and feet.<sup>2</sup> There is no suggestion in the resurrection appearances of Jesus that he was in any way physically disabled. Indeed, if he had retained the disability caused by crucifixion, the 'Road to Emmaus' appearance (Lk 24:13-32) could not have happened as described. Nor would it have been possible for Jesus to convince the disciples that he had been truly resurrected rather than merely surviving crucifixion (as argued by some sceptics).

It may be true that a physically disabled person may consider 'her mobility devices to be part of her body'<sup>3</sup> but that is surely a way of reducing cognitive dissonance; making the best of a bad job. Surely a disabled person would not insist on carrying her disability and mobility devices over into a resurrected body.

In the case of intellectual disability, the disabled person has a personal identity and personality but these are underdeveloped (to a degree determined by the severity of the disability). It seems reasonable that, at the resurrection, such an individual will be intellectually 'enabled' and therefore able to develop their identity and personality to the full. I do not accept that this requires dualism.<sup>4</sup>

It is relevant to consider Jesus's attitude to disability during his earthly ministry. For example, he healed a paralysed man (Mk 2:1-12), a man with a shrivelled hand (Mk 3:1-5), a woman with chronic haemorrhage (Mk 5:21-34), more than one blind man (Mk 8:22-26; 10:46-52) and a crippled woman (Lk 13:10-13). Jesus was proclaiming that the kingdom of God was near (Mk 1:15) and said that his healing miracles were evidence of the proximity of the kingdom (Mt 12:28). There is no record of his telling any disabled person that he or she would have to take their disability into the kingdom of God. That seems to me to clearly imply that no disabled

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1 Wall, T. 'Resurrection and the natural sciences: some theological insights on sanctification and disability', *Science & Christian Belief* (2015) 27, 41-58.

2 *ibid.* p. 58.

3 *ibid.* p. 56.

4 *ibid.* p. 56.

person will have to take his or her disability into their resurrection body, although no doubt they will carry their memories of disability into the resurrection life.

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**John Hastings was, until retirement, a Senior Lecturer in Nursing and holds degrees in Health Management and Physics.**

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## **TIMOTHY WALL**

### **A response to John Hastings**

I would like to begin by expressing thanks to John Hastings for his comments and for having this opportunity to clarify and develop some important points regarding disability arising out of my recent article. With regards to Jesus's resurrected body, there is, of course, a sense in which Jesus is not disabled; he experiences no disabling effects. Yet the wounds of crucifixion are still present and are still real wounds; after all Jesus instructs Thomas to 'put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it *into* my side' (John 20:27, my emphasis). Jesus is able to walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and even appear in a locked room (John 20:19-23), not because he is now able-bodied, but because he has a resurrection body. Perhaps this stretches the word 'disabled' too far, however I would argue that using seemingly paradoxical language is the only way we are going to be able to begin to describe God's new creation.

I do have to seriously question the idea that integrating disability into one's identity is simply 'reducing cognitive dissonance' and 'making the best of a bad job'. This view, somewhat problematically, seems to assume that the experience of disability is negative.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it also assumes there is a normative human experience, which is non-disabled. The variety of the human experience not only means that this is a fiction, it is also rather unhelpful, since it isolates and dehumanises those who are disabled. As I have argued, in the resurrection we are not conformed to a non-disabled ideal, but to Jesus whose body still bears the wounds of crucifixion.

It is also relevant to consider what it means to be disabled. Many scholars actually define disability in terms of social disadvantage and exclusion, rather than in biomedical terms. Although I think the two should be

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1 A theologian such as, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas, argues that those who have profound disabilities often are closer to the true human condition than those of us who prize our independence. For an introduction to Hauerwas' work on disability see Swinton, J. (ed.) *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas' Theology of Disability*, Binghamton: Haworth Pastoral Press (2004).

held together, it does indicate that the ‘problem’ of disability may not lie in the body of a disabled person, but in the attitudes and assumptions of society. In terms of social disadvantage, there will be no place for disability in God’s new creation. Yet if this is the case, why should the associated biomedical phenomena, no longer the marker of social exclusion or oppression but of participation in the true humanity,<sup>2</sup> not be present?

I recognise that the gospels do present many examples of healing and I do not want to question the idea that God heals people.<sup>3</sup> My point is that we should not say that *all* disability (speaking in biomedical terms) will be removed in the resurrection. The healing of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10 is perhaps relevant here. Jesus does not heal Bartimaeus immediately; rather having called him over, Jesus asks him ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ (Mark 10:51). The implication is that physical healing is not *necessarily* what the Kingdom of God looks like in Bartimaeus’s life.

I admit that speaking of the resurrection body is somewhat speculative, but no more so than much theology. Indeed, it is very necessary, for what we believe eschatologically reveals something about our ethics and practices now. By affirming that disability can be present within the resurrected life we are able to affirm that ‘full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability’.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Eiesland, N.L. *The Disabled God*, Nashville: Abingdon Press (1994), p.101.

3 Although it is relevant to consider what healing may entail in different contexts, especially with regard to the social-disadvantage model of disability.

4 Eiesland *op. cit.*, (2), p.100.