

EXCERPT

IVP Academic

Disability and the Way of Jesus ***Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church***

May 28, 2019 | \$28, 224 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5239-0

What does healing mean for people with disabilities? Bridging biblical studies, ethics, and disability studies with the work of practitioners, Bethany McKinney Fox examines healing narratives in their biblical and cultural contexts. This theologically grounded and winsomely practical resource helps us more fully understand what Jesus does as he heals and how he points the way for relationships with people with disabilities.

The Intersection of Theology and Disability

Two things inspired this book: I love Jesus and I love my friends with disabilities. My life has been wholly transformed by experiencing Jesus' love for me and learning to follow his way. And I've also been profoundly shaped by sharing life and friendship with people with many types of disabilities. At the same time, over the years I have heard story after story of people seeking to follow in the way of Jesus today, specifically his works of healing, who end up harming some of the very people they want to heal. This didn't add up. Jesus met people who were blind, deaf, with chronic illnesses, physical pain, and paralysis—and after the encounter these individuals responded positively and were often filled with faith and gratitude. Yet many people today—also blind, deaf, with chronic conditions, mobility impairments, or other disabilities—have expressed how unhealing they have often found churches' "healing" practices to be. It is both baffling and heartbreaking that followers of Jesus seeking to "heal" as Jesus healed would be creating communities and practices that are anything but healing for many people with disabilities.

Especially over the past few decades, an increasing number of people with disabilities have emphasized how physical and social structures that exclude and devalue them can be at least as disabling as any impairment they may have. This is highlighted by a number of people who make a distinction between "impairment" and "disability." They use impairment to talk about a physical or cognitive characteristic where function is different than expected (usually connected to a medical diagnosis), and "disability" to refer to ways they are socially excluded or disadvantaged because of that impairment. So a theology and its related ecclesial practices that focus simply on bodily healing can feel antiquated at best, and at worst be truly harmful. That a number of interpreters in the disability community are hesitant or averse to centering the texts where Jesus encounters people with disabilities and changes their bodies, then, is unsurprising.

At the same time, just ignoring or avoiding the many texts having to do with healing in the Gospels may not be the most helpful way forward, especially for those of us who regard the Bible as authoritative for belief and practice. This book proceeds with the assumption of at least some degree of trust in the Bible as scripture; and is especially aimed at those of us who want to follow the Jesus of the Gospels in our various contexts today. So rather than throw Jesus out with the ableist bathwater, we will dive deep into the Gospel healing narratives to get a full sense of what was taking place, and how it matches our prevailing Christian notions and practices of healing or not.

How and why someone comes to explore an intersection of theology and disability usually includes details about the author or someone in their family having a disability, as these are often ways people first begin to think on the topic. In my case, though I do not identify as having a disability, as a woman with a larger body I have experienced stigma and stereotypes related to my body throughout my life, something people with visible disabilities experience as well. This is a point of personal connection. But my key entry point into conversations and wonderings about disability began mainly through friendship. In high school I became friends with a fellow student named Sam, and he and I, along with another friend, began to have lunch together a couple times a week. Sam was in the special education class and had some physical and intellectual disabilities.

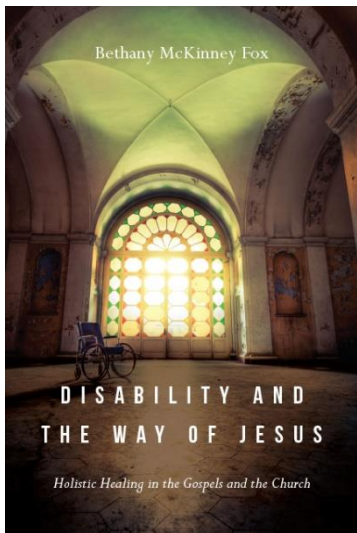


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At this point in my life, just a few years after my parents had gotten divorced, I remained quite shut down emotionally, which was my way of coping with the loss. In contrast, Sam was very emotionally free. When he was happy, sad, angry, or had any other feeling, he felt and expressed it openly and deeply; something I was unsure how to do with my own feelings at the time. I enjoyed being with him and experiencing how he interacted with his emotions and the world around him. He was gifted in a way that I was not; and even if I might not have been able to articulate it in this way at the time, his presence and friendship was both enjoyable for its own sake and restorative for my heart.

At the same time, Sam struggled too. He struggled knowing how to interact with other students at school, especially those he might have an interest in romantically; so, my friend and I offered what basic advice we could in that area. But the point is this: it was a friendship of mutuality, with each of us enjoying and learning from the other. I was grateful for that friendship, and because of it began to notice that the ways I heard others talk about people with intellectual disabilities—as objects of charity or pity, or as “little angels” who did not have complex personalities—did not fit with my own experience. It made me angry that their vocations within the body of Christ and their gifts were often overlooked, especially since my own life and faith had been so enriched through my friendship with Sam, and later, many other folks with intellectual disabilities. It seemed clear that our communities and churches were worse off without people with intellectual (and other) disabilities as integral parts of our common life, sharing their own gifts and receiving the gifts of others. And so it became my calling and vocation to nurture churches and communities where this could and would happen.

—Adapted from the introduction

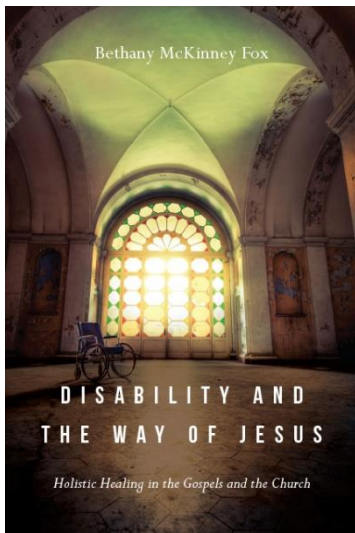


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Q & A

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Bethany McKinney Fox (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is the director of student success and adjunct professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary. She has worked previously at San Francisco Theological Seminary, First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, and L'Arche Wavecrest. Fox lives in Los Angeles, where she is a founding pastor at Beloved Everybody Church.

Constructing an Ethic of Healing

What or who inspired you to write *Disability and the Way of Jesus*?

Bethany McKinney Fox: Following in the way of Jesus has been the beautiful adventure of my life. At the same time, I have noticed that many of my friends and colleagues with disabilities have been wounded by people trying to follow in the “healing” way of Jesus who offer words and practices that are anything but healing. This puzzled me. How could healing be harmful? People Jesus interacted with (and healed) had such positive responses, but such is not always the case for many people with disabilities in churches today. It felt important to build an ethic of healing in the way of Jesus (and to give concrete ideas for churches) that was truly healing today, particularly for people with disabilities (since they were the ones featured many of the actual biblical texts and bear the brunt of the unhealing “healing” practices).

What is the main message of this book?

Bethany: My thesis is that Jesus was not just curing bodies but transforming lives on many different levels, and to follow in this healing way faithfully today requires care and thoughtfulness—and awareness of the different cultural understandings of health. Reading the Gospel healing texts through multiple perspectives, as in my book, helps us to see that. The distinctiveness of my work is that I take the further step of constructing a holistic ethic of healing that is faithful to the way of Jesus explored in the Gospels that can be lived out in churches and Christian communities today. I call this constructive piece the Seven Marks of Healing in the Way of Jesus. Whereas most books in this field tend to be either academic and theoretical (written by theologians) or only about the how-to of ministry (written by practitioners/educators), my book bridges the gap between the two.

What are some key takeaways from *Disability and the Way of Jesus*?

Bethany:

1. A deep dive into the biblical healing narratives from multiple interpretive angles (medical doctors, people in the disability community, pastors – including a pastor with disabilities and pastors who do disability ministry) noticing how context influences (and adds to) their interpretations.
2. Articulating a constructive, holistic, faithful ethic of healing. The Seven Marks of Healing in the Way of Jesus guides churches and Christian communities to follow in the way of Jesus, especially in how they engage and include people with disabilities and become true communities of healing.
3. A thorough exploration (and concrete example) of what it looks like to construct an ethic based on the life and ministry of Jesus, bridging the differences of time and culture. I employ another ethicist’s method called analogical imagination, and my book is an excellent way to see this ethical bridging work in action.



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