

[MJTM 23 (2021–2022)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

David McLachlan. *Accessible Atonement: Disability, Theology, and the Cross of Christ. Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021. xiii + 193 pp. Hbk. ISBN 9781481313674. \$39.99.

In his *Accessible Atonement*, David McLachlan takes up his place in the ongoing dialogue between disability studies experts and Christian theologians. Various works have already covered significant ground at this intersection, from Nancy Eiesland's now classic *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) and Amos Yong's highly generative *Theology and Down Syndrome* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007) to more recent volumes like Amy E. Jacober's *Redefining Perfect* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017). Much has already been done to bring systematic theology's various subfields into conversation with the inherently intersectional work of disability studies. However, at the convergence of these various streams of thought, there has been little direct attention given to the atoning work of Jesus Christ in light of disability concerns, let alone a sustained treatment of the topic. It is this gap which McLachlan aims to begin filling, and he does so through two primary moves consisting of three chapters each.

The first of these two moves McLachlan calls "Current Interactions," and so Chapters 1–3 examine the ways in which disability theology and atonement theory have been related up to this point. Chapter 1's ("Disability Theology and the Cross") groundwork laying efforts focus on a reconsideration of the *imago Dei* and what follows from it. Drawing from Eiesland, he suggests that we begin from a place which "disrupts our typical *imago Dei* and presses uncomfortably the possibility of God's identifying fully and directly (not sentimentally or condescend-

ingly) with those with disabilities” (17). In so doing, we can view disability as a kind of revelation inasmuch as it “reveals to us what it truly means to be human, which is that we are vulnerable and dependent, something those without disabilities have simply learned to hide” (19). A reconsidered *imago Dei*, inclusive of disability, informs the way we view “four major themes being pursued across the field of disability theology—exploring what it is to be human, what accessibility is really about, how we read the Bible, and what it means to talk of healing and salvation” (31). And so, McLachlan writes, “the inquiry here is asking, within all that, what business they are also doing with the cross, that cornerstone of Christian faith and life. It is asking in what way those themes are shaped by the cross as they pursue their objectives, or what challenges they are raising for how we understand the cross and God’s initiative of atonement there” (31–32). As such, the remainder of the book returns time and again to these themes in staying its theological course.

Chapter 2 “Making Sense of the Atonement: Models, Theories, and Metaphor” begins homing in on how we think of the atonement more specifically. Particular attention is paid to models of the atonement, three of which are described in the chapter as the “prevailing” ones currently on offer: sacrifice, justice, and victory (45). McLachlan describes several types of models, settling on theoretical models as those most within his rhetorical crosshairs. He writes that a theoretical model “comprises a whole system or object with a high degree of correspondence to the features of the subject, but with which one is more familiar. That high degree of correspondence means that the theoretical model offers rich resources for developing connections and hypotheses” (42–43). However, McLachlan views current models of the atonement to be lacking as they stand, at least as he understands them. This he makes clear in Chapter 3 (“Seeking Connections: First Steps in a Response”) when he highlights the way each model, especially taken on its own, faces difficulties in accommodating the lived experiences of disabled persons. For example, he notes the way in which a sacrifice model “although co-opting the idea of perfection metaphorically in terms of sinlessness, perhaps inadvertently suggests identification with a Jesus

claimed unhelpfully to be blemish-free in all respects” (57). That is to say, we might end up with a Jesus who paradoxically eliminates part of the very *imago Dei* (i.e., disability) which he intends to redeem.

It is in the initiation of his second move that McLachlan’s hopeful reconstrual of the atonement begins to take shape. However, Chapter 4 “Atonement as Participation: An Inherently Inclusive Account” aims not to propose just another model among rivals as the means for drawing disability into the heart of Christian theology. Instead, it offers a “theological protocol” (74). McLachlan writes that “theological protocols help to guide and discipline the way in which the metaphorical resources of each model are deployed” (75). The particular protocol he suggests is termed “atonement-as-participation” (74), participation here being understood as a concept relevant to “the way we understand God himself to be acting, and in the way we can speak of ourselves as human beings having knowledge of God, and access to the benefits of the atonement” (75). There are two essential parts to this participation: first, that “through *creation ex nihilo* God is responsible for the involvement of nothingness and perishability in creation, and for the risk and contingency that result from that” (79); and second, that “at the same time God is willing in accompanying his creation, for the consequences of that contingency, both moral and otherwise, to befall him” (79). He contends that this understanding of participation aids in setting up a theological protocol which both addresses his concern to center the experiences of disabled persons and still maintains the traditional loci of atonement theorizing (e.g., the forgiveness of sins).

Chapter 5 “The Cross as the Foundation for Disability Theology” and Chapter 6 “Continuity of the Traditional Models” both aim to support this contention. The former weaves together several theological strands to suggest that the atonement can “become the cornerstone of Christian disability theology and the place from which it can most effectively argue its case” (132). For example, McLachlan writes of how his theological protocol could aid us in avoiding an eschatology which presumptively proposes a “homogenization of bodies” rather than considering that they might all, in their diversity of abilities, “have a fully

valid place... just as they are” (111). But he writes that novelty in a theological protocol is not enough, for “it is all very well to propose such an idea, but its usefulness also hangs on whether a clear line can be drawn that connects it with those powerful models of the cross as Jesus’ sacrifice, justice, and victory” (135). As such, McLachlan spends the book’s final chapter tugging on through lines connecting more traditional understandings of the atonement to his protocol so as to reveal its place, and legitimacy, in the broader systematic theological exercise.

There are certainly things to commend in McLachlan’s work. The notion of a theological protocol as a norming tool for subsequent modeling is valuable, and his work to carefully center the actual, lived experiences of disabled persons through personal testimonies/narratives (rather than mere theorizing) throughout should be lauded. Moreover, his attempts to maintain historical continuity with the Christian theological tradition even as he aims to propose something both wholly new and, at times, even rather opposed by various thinkers (e.g., Augustine and Aquinas, who both thought that disability in the resurrection was a rather abhorrent idea) are founded in quite good impulses. However, and unfortunately, there are also rather severe problems to be found within the book as well.

Chief among these is that McLachlan’s usage of the term “model” comes off quite confused. At issue is that models require mechanisms to drive them in order to truly be models, but his construal of the term is devoid of this feature. As such, when McLachlan describes at length the so-called “justice, sacrifice, and victory models” of the atonement (e.g., 45–51), he is not actually talking about models at all. Rather, what he describes are more like motifs, metaphors, or themes. When McLachlan contrasts theological metaphors from models he writes that the former are “momentary figures of speech that capture single ideas” (42), whereas the latter are “traditions that have been developed more fully over time” (42). In so doing he makes his mistake painfully clear, for models are not defined in any way by their longevity. This mistake muddies the waters for what his theological protocol really is at bottom, for his attempts to distinguish it from other rival modes of inquiry regarding the atone-

ment rest on a cracked foundation. For a better treatment of theological models of the atonement one would be well-served by Oliver Crisp's little book *Approaching the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).

Looking more directly at McLachlan's protocol, it is disappointing that he proposes "atonement-as-participation" (Ch. 4) without significantly engaging any contemporaries who also detail participatory accounts of the atonement. W. Ross Hastings's *Total Atonement* (Philadelphia: Fortress Academic, 2019), Crisp's *The Word Enfleshed* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016) and *Analyzing Doctrine* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), and Eleonore Stump's *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) all heavily involve such concepts as Christ's participation in human suffering, frailty, and so forth in ways which would have been helpful to clarifying the nature of the protocol, but none appear anywhere in the book. To give a more specific example, McLachlan's work to describe how God must be, in some sense, held responsible "for the risk and contingency that result from" (79) creation would have been enhanced had he at all dialogued with Marilyn McCord Adams's *Christ and Horrors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), for she has a keen interest in God's responsibility for what ills befall creation. Alas, no such engagements appear.

Indeed, the whole "how" of the protocol is desperately under-defined. While atonement-as-participation is merely meant to norm theologizing about the atonement, not to give anything like an exhaustive account, even the way in which this norming is supposed to occur is largely mysterious. McLachlan writes that what he proposes is "that the atonement, through the cross of Jesus Christ, is God's deepest, once-for-all participation in the contingency and risk of creation" (101). But such a construal of what the atonement actually *does* is so thin that it is largely unclear what sorts of models we might expect a theologian operating within the bounds of this protocol to actually produce. This seems problematic given there are clearly certain models with which McLachlan takes a bit of issue. For example, he recommends against a kind of penal substitutionary model which would view itself as "taking precedence over other models or be-

ing in some way the overarching model to which others are subservient” (145) even though he hopes to maintain continuity with such models’ usage of justice imagery. But it is not apparent that this sort of totalizing penal substitutionary model could not still fulfill the barebones requirements of his protocol, leaving what precisely the protocol does for downstream theological models hazy.

All of this having been said, it should be made clear that none of these shortcomings abrogate the positive aspects of McLachlan’s work. Instead, they merely restrict the audience to whom *Accessible Atonement* might be most useful. Sadly, it is difficult to recommend the book to pastors or most other ministerial practitioners without significant familiarity with systematic theology, given that they may be rather misled by some of its conceptual work (e.g., its misunderstanding of theological models). The same goes for interested lay persons as well as undergraduate students, who likewise might be better served by other readings in order to get better bearings before approaching this material. However, those with greater experience in theological studies (e.g., graduate students, faculty, and ministers with advanced degrees) are much easier to recommend as an audience. Despite its weaker points, they will likely both find much to consider here and, moreover, will have the tools to do so effectively.

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