Understanding Disability Theology: Rereading Disability Not as “Deficiency” but as a “Theological Subject”

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1. Introduction

Written for readers interested in disability theology, this article summarizes paradigms for understanding disability, focusing on the theological perspectives presented by Prof. Joon Woo Lee (Division of Social Work, Kangnam University; Adjunct Professor, Department of Social Work, World Mission University) at a recent Zoom meeting. Going beyond a simple introduction to theory, the discussion offers direction on how the church and those in the field can theologically interpret disability and put that understanding into practice. The article also notes that deeper study is available through an upcoming related course (the *Understanding Christian Disability Studies and Ministry* certificate program).

2. A Theological Paradigm Shift on Disability

Prof. Lee points out that the church’s understanding of disability has been overly weighted toward a “healing-centered model.” In other words, the traditional view that sees disability only as “a condition to be fixed” does not necessarily align with the overall flow of Scripture.

Prof. Joon Woo Lee presents the key turning points in how we view disability as follows:

- Disability is not a deficiency but one aspect of human existence included within **the image of God (Imago Dei)**
- People with disabilities are not “objects of healing” but **constituent members of the Kingdom of God**
- More important than physical or mental change is **one’s spiritual relationship and state of faith**

From this perspective, disability is not a problem to be eliminated; rather, it functions as important theological material that helps the faith community understand the Kingdom of God.

3. Biblical Interpretation: Reframing the Meaning of Disability

Prof. Lee emphasizes reinterpreting disability through biblical texts, citing the following representative examples:

- **Jacob's limp (Genesis 32):** The physical change is not a failure but a transformation of identity bestowed after wrestling with God

  As Jacob crossed the Jabbok limping, God gave him a new name: "Israel." God bestowed the holy name of Israel upon him just as he was, bearing the marks of disability.

- **The man born blind in John 9:** Disability is not the result of sin but "a channel through which the works of God are displayed"
- Throughout the Gospels: Rather than simply removing disability, God's will is revealed within the person's very existence

This interpretation dismantles the existing theological frame that defines disability as an "abnormal condition" and positions disability as an important component of the story of the Kingdom of God.

4. The Responsibility of the Church and Community: Inclusion and Respect

He emphasizes the following as the core attitudes the church should hold toward people with disabilities:

- Recognizing people with disabilities not as "recipients of care" but as **equal members of the faith community**
- What matters more than the disability itself is **the person's heart toward God and the reality of their faith**
- For pastors and church leaders, understanding disability theology is not optional but an **essential educational task**

5. Disability Theology and the Future: Expanding Technology, AI, and Care

Disability theology is not confined to theological discourse; it is increasingly being integrated with technology and social welfare practice.

He introduces the following research directions:

- Research on care assistance using AI and robotics
- Environmental and sensory-based approaches to reducing challenging behaviors in people with developmental disabilities
- Research on augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices and sensory compensation technologies

- The principle that technologies supporting people with disabilities must be designed on a **“human-centered” foundation**

In other words, what matters more than technological progress itself is how that technology supports human dignity and the restoration of relationships.

6. Conclusion: Key Insights of Disability Theology

Disability theology converges on the following three core pillars:

1. Disability is not something to be eliminated but **a mode of existence with theological meaning**.
2. The church should understand people with disabilities not as “those to be helped” but as **subjects who together make up the Kingdom of God**.
3. Disability theology is **an expanding field of practical theology** connected to technology, care, and education.

Notice

This article summarizes some of the key perspectives from the “Disability Theology and the Church” lecture in the *Understanding Christian Disability Studies and Ministry* course. A more systematic and in-depth understanding can be gained by participating in the related certificate program and educational offerings. This will be an important learning pathway that goes beyond theological understanding toward real-world application and integrated practice.

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