

BOOK REVIEWS



Sarah Jean Barton, *Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability and the Practice of Christian Community*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022. 233 pages.

In *Becoming the Baptized Body*, Sarah Jean Barton sets out to partner with intellectually disabled church members to explore the experiences and practices of baptism. Through her research, she finds that too often baptismal practices lead to marginalization for those with intellectual disabilities. Barton argues that baptismal practices are actually profoundly suited to encourage the belonging and participation of disabled Christians in church life in both paedo- and credo-Baptist traditions. After a brief and helpful foundation in disability theory and theology, Barton shares the results of her ethnographic research, thus amplifying the voices of disabled Christians. The stories shared in this section are meaningful and revealing. Barton brings these stories into conversation with academic theology through the following chapters.

In chapters 3 and 4 Barton draws on scripture to highlight that baptism need not rely only on cognitive capacity. In particular, in chapter 4 (New Creation: Paul and Baptismal Identity) Barton demonstrates that “Paul’s narration of a baptismally rooted Christian identity demonstrates a deep concern for the flourishing of people across many forms of difference” (103). Baptismal identity should not be founded on cognitive ability or individual human capacity. Rather, our baptisms reveal our dependency on Christ and the making of us as “new creation” or, as Barton’s research participant James describes it, “It is truly in God that I become—I become *who I am*” (119). Diversity is normative in Paul’s vision of Christian identity as “new creation.”

In chapter 5, Barton explores how the liturgy embraces participatory baptism. Focusing on the 1979 Book of Common Prayer (with a wonderful history of this particular edition on p. 124), Barton demonstrates that the Episcopal baptismal liturgy avoids two traps—that of associating disability with sin as well as that of associating disability with sinlessness (or holy innocents)—though it falters in placing slightly too much emphasis on individual capacity and autonomy. Bringing the liturgical rite into conversation with Bonhoeffer, Barton draws out the importance of hospitality in Christian life to claim that churches who do not make space for disability in liturgical participation neglect the practice of hospitality (136).

In chapters 6 and 7 Barton dives into the practices of baptism. She highlights the multisensory and wordless engagement that takes place in baptism, which make it particularly suited for those with diverse cognitive capacities. Including disabled Christians in baptism reveals (rather than conceals or distorts) the truth about Christian life. These final sections bring forth concrete practices that readers could integrate into their church communities today.

Building on participatory research, Barton's study does "disability theology together" (183). Interviews with church members with intellectual disabilities, caregivers, and pastors are joined with traditional academic theology. Through analysis of scripture, liturgy, and practices, Barton reveals how the experiences of disabled church members both align with and shape the Christian doctrine and practice around baptism. This book offers a theoretical foundation that clergy and religious leaders can stand on while also offering concrete examples of how to embrace baptismal practices that welcome diversity and embrace cognitive difference. Many of Barton's practical recommendations focus on preparation for baptism and changes made to church life (such as embracing a "baptismal anniversary"). Readers who would like to embrace a disability-informed baptismal posture but who do not practice in the typical church setting will need to be creative in applying this research to their practice. For example, Barton does not attend to the possibility or practice of baptism in the hospital chaplaincy setting. What does it mean to practice participatory baptism in the context of the sick and dying? This practice might offer significant support for Barton's argument as baptism in chaplaincy has a long history and would be worth exploring.

Barton's exploration of scripture, liturgy, and practice makes this study of baptism truly well rounded. She explores various traditions while managing to be specific and detailed. The nuances of individual traditions are attended to well, which ultimately shows that the argument for participatory baptism carries through no matter the tradition. Thus, Barton reveals a surprising unity of practices and themes despite the many differences of tradition and individual experience (84). The nature of the study is limited to a particular region and mostly to mainline Protestant denominations, and Barton acknowledges this (83). This study opens opportunity for further exploration of more denominations of Christianity. It would be especially interesting to explore the perspectives of disabled Christians on baptism in Catholic, Orthodox, Charismatic, or "mega-churches" as well as how region and culture might change the results. Additionally, the focus on baptism in this text opens the opportunity to explore how disabled church members experience and shape other sacraments and elements of the worship service.

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