Review Essay

Power and Powerlessness in Pentecostal Theology

A Review Essay on Amos Yong’s

Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity

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Introduction

Hittenberger: When our son Ben was diagnosed with Down Syndrome, we asked God, “What does this mean?” My wife Christine sensed that God was providing this response to our prayer: “In Ben, you will get to see the meaning of the Kingdom of God every day.” This has, in fact, been our experience, as this example will illustrate. On Ben’s first day at a new middle school, we stood together and watched his new classmates exit a special education bus. We heard a girl screaming in anguish. An aide and the driver tried to coax her off the bus. She refused to budge. One of the aides finally carried her off and set her down on the sidewalk, while she continued to scream. She seemed terrified and angry. Ben watched her, but didn’t change his expression. Then the girl seemed to catch a glimpse of Ben from the corner of her eye and there was a flash of recognition. Her screaming stopped and she stood up. She walked over to where we were standing and stood in front of Ben, looking into his eyes. Ben reached out his arms and put them around her shoulders, gave her a big hug,
and held her for about ten seconds. She stopped crying. I remembered then that they had been classmates a couple of years earlier. Ben and Elizabeth gathered with their classmates and headed off to middle school. As I walked to my car I thanked God. Ben was here to do his mission. In his powerlessness, God's power was being displayed. I came to this book hoping to find a theology that would give voice to our experience.

Mittelstadt: I grew up in the Pentecostal tradition. Today, I claim Pentecostalism as my tradition of choice in spite of periodic seasons of disappointment and disillusionment. I remain at “home” due in part to my consistent approach to theology as autobiographical: many of my academic aspirations serve to bring meaning and application to my experience. For example, as a response to my struggle with one-sided triumphalism so often dominant within our tradition, I wrote my dissertation on the role of the Spirit in contexts of suffering and persecution in Luke-Acts.2 While my analysis of persecution primarily offered theological solace, my ongoing encounter with Pentecostal triumphalism conflicted with a different kind of suffering closer to home. On a personal level, I recall my ongoing interaction with various family members and friends with a wide range of disabilities. I wondered why they are not healed. I pondered the possibilities of their encounter with God. At times, I questioned their value to a family, the church and society. Unfortunately, my participation within Pentecostal churches provided no forum for discussion and, to my own disappointment, I generally refused to initiate dialogue except for the occasional private conversation. But this is changing. As I have recently been diagnosed with epilepsy, I find myself wrestling with personal identity. I remember well my teenage years, when my friends and I would mock peers with seizures (and any kind of physical or intellectual disabilities). Today, while I live among loving and supporting family and friends, I also resonate more with those who are marginalized through no fault of their own.

Like Yong, our interest in disability reflects our own journeys. Yong wrestles not only with personal questions but also provides possibilities for meaningful theological understanding and response.

Synopsis

Amos Yong’s *Theology and Down Syndrome* is a deeply personal book, motivated in large part by his desire to make sense of his brother Mark's