

UNIVERSITATEA „AUREL VLAICU” DIN ARAD  
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ INTERDISCIPLINARĂ  
FACULTATEA DE ȘTIINȚE UMANISTE ȘI SOCIALE  
DOMENIUL DE DOCTORAT: TEOLOGIE  
PROGRAMUL DE DOCTORAT „TEOLOGIE  
EVANGHELICĂ”

# **TEZĂ DE DOCTORAT**

## **REZUMAT (RO)**

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**CREAT DUPĂ CHIPUL ȘI  
ASEMĂNAREA LUI DUMNEZEU**  
**Către o teologie a dizabilității**

**CREATED IN THE IMAGE AND  
LIKENESS OF GOD**  
**Towards a Theology of Disability**

## **THESIS OUTLINE**

Introduction

Chapter 1: Disability in Christian History

Chapter 2: Disability in Contemporary Theology

Chapter 3: The Biblical Perspective on Disability

Chapter 4: Towards a Theology of Disability

Conclusions

Bibliography

Appendix: The Association for Empowering Special Abilities  
(ACAS)

## **ABSTRACT**

The thesis titled “Created in the Image and Likeness of God: Towards a Theology of Disability” explores the intersection between theology, spirituality, and Christian practice on one hand, and the experience of disability on the other. The central concern of this research is to examine how the Church and the Christian community can embrace and value people with disabilities through an inclusive theological approach, rooted in dignity, equality, and compassion. The thesis analyzes disability in various theological and cultural contexts, beginning with a historical view of disability in Christian thought and progressing to contemporary theological perspectives on disability. The goal of the thesis is to propose a theological and hermeneutical framework for understanding disability, one that leads to a holistic, inclusive, and positive perspective. This perspective envisions people with disabilities as valuable expressions of the diversity of God's creation, included in a holistic understanding of the concept of *Imago Dei*, where disability is viewed not as a limitation but as an intrinsic aspect of human identity.

The central direction of the thesis, therefore, is to construct a theology of disability that is well-grounded in Christian tradition yet adapted to contemporary challenges and sensitivities. Starting from the recognition of the intrinsic worth of each individual, including people with disabilities, the work explores the idea that disability is not merely a medical condition or a physical limitation but a complex component of the human condition. The aim is to integrate a holistic theological perspective in which people with

disabilities are acknowledged and valued within religious communities and society. Disability is thus viewed as a complex relationship between an individual's medical condition and the social and cultural context in which they live. Factors contributing to this relationship include community attitudes, accessibility of resources, and the spiritual, social, and emotional support provided to the person with disabilities. The thesis emphasizes that a Christian theology of disability must incorporate these elements, thereby transforming collective attitudes toward the marginalized.

The thesis is structured into four main chapters, framed by an Introduction and Conclusion. Additionally, the thesis includes a case study in which the author presents a practical approach to applying the theological vision of disability in a contemporary context.

Beginning with a discussion on the evolving perception of disability in society, the **Introduction** addresses the need for theological research and reflection on disability. The primary purpose of this work is identified as the development of a theology of disability that upholds the dignity of each individual and influences the way the Church relates to people with disabilities. Such a theology is particularly relevant in the contemporary context, as it brings a unique perspective to the dialogue on the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. While cultural and political discussions emphasize the need to combat marginalization and promote an inclusive and just society, these aspects must also be addressed theologically. Thus, theological reflection on

disability raises questions such as: What is the relationship between theology and the experience of disability? How is the perception of disability influenced by theological thought? How is theological thinking influenced by disability? Can a theology of disability foster an attitude of active inclusion, ensuring that all members of society are valued and supported equally? What practices and structures are necessary to address disability so that Christian communities (and beyond) become spaces where people with disabilities can participate authentically in community life?

Without a doubt, such questions and others like them are necessary and justify this work. Methodologically, however, not all questions can be addressed within a single scholarly work. Therefore, the objective of this thesis is to develop a (theological) framework that promotes inclusion and dignity for people with disabilities, exploring the biblical, historical, and theological dimensions of this subject. The methodology of the thesis is thus interdisciplinary, combining historical, theological, and exegetical perspectives and placing the discussion—especially regarding the practical application of the promoted theological values—within the contemporary social and cultural context.

In this context, the thesis analyzes:

1. Teachings and attitudes towards disability in Christian history.
2. The perception of disability in contemporary theology.
3. The representation and treatment of disability in biblical texts.

4. Outlining a theology of disability in the contemporary context.

**Chapter 1** examines perceptions and practices regarding disability by tracing Christian history and thought, beginning with the Patristic period (with theologians such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas), through the medieval period, the Reformation (e.g., Luther and Calvin), and up to prominent modern theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth.

This chapter demonstrates that in a social and cultural context where disability was often viewed negatively and associated with divine punishment, Christianity offered a different approach. Inspired by the teachings of Christ, Christian theologians emphasized the dignity of every individual, regardless of their physical condition, thus making care and respect for people with disabilities a moral and spiritual obligation.

**Chapter 2** explores how contemporary theology addresses the experience of disability, promoting inclusion and underscoring the intrinsic value of each individual. Some contemporary theologians argue that disability is part of God's divine plan and can be an expression of God's will. Others see disability as a challenge for the Christian community to create a supportive and accepting environment. In this view, disability is understood not as a "deficiency" to be corrected, but as an opportunity to develop relationships of solidarity and mutual understanding. Theologians such as Thomas Reynolds and Amos Yong advocate for a "theology of radical

inclusion”, in which each community member is essential, regardless of their abilities.

The theological studies discussed generally critique approaches to disability that focus exclusively on healing and rehabilitation. Rather than viewing disability as a “defect” of the body, these studies promote a view of disability as part of human identity, which enriches the community and brings unique perspectives.

In **Chapter 3**, the discussion shifts to an exegetical analysis of several biblical references to disability, reinterpreting these texts through the lens of an inclusive, holistic theology. The chapter examines how disability is addressed in both the Old and New Testaments. Although some Old Testament passages view disability as a consequence of sin or an imperfection, the general perspective presented is based on examples demonstrating that God accepts and integrates people with disabilities. For instance, in Exodus 4:11, God tells Moses that He is the creator of the human body, disabilities included, suggesting that these are part of the divine plan.

In the New Testament, disability is often associated with the miraculous healings of Jesus. These healings demonstrate divine power and compassion, but they also have a deeper significance: they symbolize the restoration and reintegration of marginalized people into the social and spiritual community. For example, in the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-7) and the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12), we see that Jesus not only restores physical health but also



lifts the marginalized person, restoring dignity and social status.

Thus, in line with exegetical studies addressing disability, the thesis proposes a reading of biblical texts that recognizes the value and uniqueness of people with disabilities in God's plan, viewing them as examples of the diversity and complexity of divine creation, fully bearing the *Imago Dei*.

Finally, **Chapter 4** proposes a theology of disability based on inclusion and respect for the dignity of each person. Starting from the biblical concept of humans created in the image of God – *Imago Dei* – the thesis emphasizes the need for a holistic approach that embraces all aspects of a person's life, including their disabilities. The proposed theology rejects passive charity, encouraging instead a partnership between the Christian community and people with disabilities, thereby facilitating the transformation of Christian communities into spaces characterized by solidarity and authentic participation for all believers. This theology of disability invites Christian communities to become models of social justice, promoting a culture of dignity and inclusion that truly reflects the love and compassion of God.

In Conclusion, the thesis states that a theology of disability must be inclusive, emphasize justice and equity, and affirm the dignity of all, through the promotion of fundamental Christian values of love, compassion, and respect for each person. This theology provides an alternative view of disability, one that transcends the limitations of a purely

medical approach and promotes inclusion and respect for human diversity.

The **Conclusion** highlights that an inclusive theological approach to disability can contribute not only to improving the quality of life for people with disabilities but also to strengthening the Christian community as a whole. By fostering relationships of solidarity, support, and mutual respect, the Church can become a model of inclusion and dignity for the entire society.

Finally, the thesis encourages the continuous development of research in disability theology, considering the diversity of cultural and religious contexts and current global challenges. This research provides new perspectives and resources for addressing complex disability issues, thus supporting a vision of humanity that reflects the loving and just nature of God.

In the **Appendix**, the author describes the activities of the Association for Empowering Special Abilities (ACAS), an organization involved for several decades in assisting people with disabilities, showing how promoting a holistic biblical view of human identity and the role of Christian communities in society can result in transformative practices for both the people assisted and the individuals and communities who, through their involvement, become more aware of mutuality, love, human well-being, and the common good—all foundational elements of the perspective promoted in this work.