

My Body is not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church **(Media Review)**

Kenny, A. (2022). *My body is not a prayer request: Disability justice in the Church*. Brazos Press.

Reviewed by Scott Barrett¹

“To assume that my disability needs to be erased in order for me to live an abundant life is disturbing not only because of what it says about me but also because of what it reveals about people’s notions of God” (Kenny, 2022, p. 4). Written by Dr. Amy Kenny, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Brazos Press, 2022) is Kenny’s “scream” (p. xii) to be seen, known, and included in the life of her faith community.

Applicable to a broad audience, Kenny writes to cultivate awareness in those who do not currently have disabilities and to amplify the experiences of those who are currently disabled. Kenny thoughtfully weaves personal narratives about her life with mobility impairing chronic illness, daily life, and communities of faith into a compelling call for inclusivity in organizations and in our individual relationships. *My Body is Not a Prayer Request* provides a helpful companion to dated religion and disability books, joining a growing field of “own voice” disability literature like *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (Hardwick, 2021) and *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity* (Bowman, 2021), that set a vision for inclusion in faith communities and reflect a social justice model of disability and theology. For readers familiar with disability literature, disability justice, and the social model of disability, Kenny’s voice of advocacy will resonate well. For readers who are new to these ideas, this book will provide necessary but challenging thoughts to consider.

Using humor as a persuasive rhetorical device, Kenny invites the reader into many aspects of her life story while also providing the thoughtful, articulat-

ed argument that you would expect from an English Professor and Shakespeare scholar. Kenny shares her personal narrative with specific themes in each chapter to create a thoughtful thesis that moves beyond memoir. She wants the reader to know that individuals with disabilities are whole people, not something or someone to be fixed. Kenny articulates the challenges her physical impairment causes in her life and the challenges created by some of the people she interacts with throughout her life. Through her writing, Kenny works to change the perspective that her body, and others like hers, is a broken thing that must be fixed for her to live a whole and fulfilling life. She argues that in a Christian worldview, a disabled body bears the *Imago Dei* (Image of God) just like a nondisabled body. This important message is for both the nondisabled person who judges others as inadequate and to the disabled person who feels that they or their body are not enough. Kenny hopes to move both readers to the perspective that each of us is enough, regardless of what our bodies can do. “I am not confined to a wheelchair,” Kenny writes. “I have not *lost* a battle to a disease. I am many things, but a tragic defeat is not one of them” (p. 3).

Concluding each chapter with a top ten list like, “Top Ten Recommended Remedies,” “Top Ten Disability Denials,” and the “Top Ten Reasons I’m Disabled,” Kenny’s experiences come to life through the stories she tells. For some, Kenny’s experiences in faith communities or these jaw-dropping “Top Ten,” real-to-life statements will come as a surprise. For others, they serve as a gut check to consider where they may have said, thought, or done something ableist or excluding to individuals with disabilities. At the conclusion of each chapter, questions encourage the reader to reflect on their own perspectives and to practically apply their learning.

After helping the reader identify the problems of trying to simply fix the broken, Kenny articulates a new vision for how communities can move from accommodating to including in programs, structures, and language. Proposing the principle of “baking” disability inclusion into plans rather than adding inclusive practices later provides a practical step for communities to consider. “Constructing buildings and communities with disabled people in mind from the outset produces a culture of belonging that does not discriminate against bodily difference. This model of disability is liberating, because it invites all of us—

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disabled and nondisabled people alike—to contribute to our neighbors’ inclusion and flourishing regardless of physical differences” (p. 12).

While this book is written specifically about individuals with physical disabilities, I believe the ideas can be transferred to other disabilities and disability experiences as well. Kenny’s call to see individuals as more than broken things to be fixed or problems to be solved is not limited to physical impairments. The ability to see all humans as inherently valuable can be applied to any situation, relationship, or interaction. Someone navigating mental health challenges, ADHD, or dyslexia is not simply a prayer request that we hope God will fix.

Published by Christian publisher Brazos Press, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request* is written from a Christian perspective. For people who consider themselves Christians, Kenny provides a path for understanding and growth that moves towards inclusion and will likely resonate well with their faith experiences. However, the thoughtful reader will be able to apply the concepts and their individual curiosity to grow and meaningfully engage the ideas presented for a wide variety of religious, spiritual, or cultural experiences. The baggage that cultural norms can pass along to a disabled individual should be examined as Kenny so adeptly does with Christian culture. Readers can be encouraged to reflect on how their own culture and background have impacted their perspective on disability. Ableism, the medical model of disability, and disregard for an individual’s humanity are not limited to individuals who espouse the Christian faith.

My Body is Not a Prayer Request, invites curiosity and reflection. When focused on the higher education setting, this book will provide individuals who are unfamiliar with faith communities or the experiences of students coming from faith backgrounds with perspective on the experiences (and often baggage) these students have as they enter higher education. As practitioners and mentors guide students and emerging adults with disabilities in the development of their disability identity, Kenny’s writing could be a helpful guide and resonant voice to make sense of their experiences. Across a college campus (public, private, faith-based, or any other kind), *My Body is Not a Prayer Request* could serve as a helpful tool for initiating conversations and dialog about ableism, faith, and inclusive communities.

Kenny’s “Benecription” at the end of the book offers an exhortation to nondisabled people that res-

onates. “May you feel convicted to change what you can in your community. May you not rely on excuses or allow fear to prevent you from including disabled people at every opportunity. May you choose courage over cowardice” (p. 185). Whether you are a person of faith or not, I believe this charge and the rest of Kenny’s writing have an opportunity to challenge your perspectives and spur you on towards choosing courage.

References

- Bowman, D. (2021). *On the spectrum: autism, faith, and the gifts of neurodiversity*. Brazos Press.
- Hardwick, L. (2021). *Disability and the church: a vision for diversity and inclusion*. InterVarsity Press.

About the Author

Scott Barrett received his B.S. degree in Elementary Education from Taylor University, his M.A. in Educational Ministries from Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from Indiana State University. His experience includes working in Residence Life across multiple faith based higher education institutions and serving in academic support at Taylor University where he currently serves as the Coordinator of Accessibility and Disability Resources. His research interests learning theory, college student mental health, and the experiences of students with disabilities on college campuses. He can be reached by email at: Scott_Barrett@Taylor.edu.