

“The Body of Christ Is Disabled Without the Presence of People with Disability”: A Re-Evaluation

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Abstract: The statement, “the body of Christ is disabled without the presence of people with disability” is one that makes regular appearances in works of disability theologians and practitioners. The pithy aphorism is meant to serve as a prompt to remind church communities that they need to be places where people with disability can be active and contributing members. However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the statement is problematic and, as a result, ends up perpetuating the notion that disability is undesirable and to be avoided. This article outlines two primary objections to the use of the phrase and offers in its place an alternative way of understanding the place of people with disability both in the body of Christ and in our church communities.

Keywords: disability, ecclesiology, Pauline theology, body of Christ.

Introduction

“The body of Christ is disabled without the presence of people with disability.” This is a statement I have encountered on many occasions during my years of writing in disability theology and advocating for inclusive ministries in church contexts. This statement is meant to highlight that when people with disability are not present and participating in church communities then not only does the whole church miss out on the gifts of people with disability, but indeed, the church is disabled and unable to perform at its best. While I certainly agree that church communities need to be actively working to remove the barriers that prevent people with disability from participating in church communities and that everyone misses out when people with disability are not present in our church communities, is it really accurate to claim that the body of Christ is disabled without the presence of people with disability? This article seeks to re-evaluate the appropriateness of this claim in light of Paul’s presentation of the body of Christ, especially in 1 Corinthians 12. The article suggests that while people with disability are often absent from our church communities, they are not absent from the body

of Christ. As membership in the body of Christ is under the sovereignty of God, it is God alone who determines membership and placement in the Body. It is precisely because people with disability *are* in the body of Christ that people with disability should also be active and participating members in church communities. The article hopes to reconsider ways Paul's metaphor can be used to encourage and facilitate the full and active participation of people with disability in church communities.¹

The Body of Christ in Paul

Paul uses the metaphor of a body to describe those who are in Christ on a number of occasions in his letters.² Indeed, the body metaphor is so key to Paul's writing that James D. G. Dunn asserts that it is the "dominant theological image in Pauline ecclesiology."³ Paul, like other ancient writers before him, uses the image of a body to describe the members of a group,⁴ in this case, those who are in Christ. In its ancient usage, including in Paul's letters, the image of a body representing a group reminded members of the importance of unity and the potential damage to the whole body of discord and schisms among the members.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses several Greek words to describe the gifts given to members of the body of Christ. In particular, Paul refers to the gifts as *charisms* (1 Cor. 12:4), or grace-gifts. These are gifts that flow from God's grace and through their usage, continue to demonstrate God's grace amongst the members of the body. However, given the multidimensional nature of these gifts, Paul uses two additional words to describe them. Firstly, he refers to the gifts as *diakonia* (1 Cor. 12:5) which indicates that the gifts are to be used in service to God and to the other members of the body. Finally, Paul describes the gifts as *energyma*, or "efficient power."⁵ According to Paul, the gifts are a demonstration or display of power, not of human power, but of God's. Not only this, but they are an outworking of God's power which is for the benefit of the "common good" (*sympherō*) or the whole body. The purpose of the gifts, Paul explains, is to reveal or display (*phanerosis*) the Spirit at work in the whole body (1 Cor. 12:7).

Paul's aim in writing to the church in Corinth was to correct the Corinthians' treatment of and attitudes towards other members in the body of Christ. It is apparent from the contents of Paul's Corinthian correspondence that some members placed a higher value on some gifts, and therefore some members, over others. Paul writes to correct this view, reminding the Corinthians that all members are gifted by God, with

¹ The current article is an abbreviated and modified version of a book chapter published as Louise A. Gosbell, "A Disability Reading of Paul's Use of the 'Body of Christ' Metaphor in Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-31" in Peter G. Bolt and James R. Harrison (eds.), *Romans and the Legacy of St Paul. Historical, Theological, & Social Perspectives* (Macquarie Park, NSW: SCD Press, 2019), 281-335.

² E.g., 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Rom. 12:3-8; Eph. 4:1-16; Col. 1:15-20.

³ James D. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 548.

⁴ For examples see Gosbell, "A Disability Reading," 284-291.

⁵ Georg Bertram, "ἔργον, ἐργάζομαι, ἐργάτης, ἐργασία, ἐνεργής, ἐνέργεια, ἐνεργέω, ἐνέργημα, εὐεργεσία, εὐεργετέω, εὐεργέτης," in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Geoffrey W. Bromiley, transl.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 652-654.

each member arranged in the Body as God had wanted them to be. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to remember that no member should overvalue or undervalue their own gifts or the gifts of others because all members have been gifted and placed in the body by God's grace at his discretion. Not only this but as each member exists as part of a larger whole, each member is bound to one another with a shared purpose. Due to the connectedness of members, there should be "no division" among the members but each should have "equal concern for each other" (1 Cor. 12:25). As such, all the members must recognise their interdependence and mutuality as part of the larger whole.

Disability Readings of the Body of Christ metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12

Paul's body metaphor has struck a chord with theologians, practitioners, and ministry workers interested in issues of disability and inclusion in the church. Paul's representation of the body of Christ is appealing because it depicts the body as being comprised of many diverse members who, despite their differences, all have valuable contributions to make to the body. Not only does the metaphor speak to the importance of each individual member, but it especially emphasises that the members that appear to be "weaker" are indispensable to the body (1 Cor. 12:22). In a world where people with disability are often devalued and considered weaker, Paul's vision presents a new model of participation for people with disability. In fact, Paul's vision appears to present a completely inverted model where those who are usually considered weaker are declared indispensable (1 Cor. 12:22) and where "greater honor" is to be afforded to those who usually are without honor (1 Cor. 12:23). While Paul does not explicitly identify the "weaker" or "less honorable" members as people with disability, many disability theologians see in Paul's descriptions a connection with the experiences of people with disability whose gifts and contributions are often underestimated and unacknowledged.⁶ In addressing this issue, Amos Yong argues that while "there is no historical-grammatical reason to limit weakness to those with bodily impairments or disabilities...there is also no a priori reason to exclude such references."⁷ As Paul was exhorting the Christian community in Corinth to resist factionalism arising from economic, social or cultural differences, it stands that Paul would also have sought to denounce factionalism resulting from differences in bodily appearance or capacity. Given this is the case, Paul's vision of the body of Christ is often cited by disability theologians and practitioners as an important model of how church communities should function, including valuing the contributions and participation of people with disability.

Despite Paul's depiction of the body of Christ as a site of unity and mutuality, disability theologians and practitioners argue that this is not reflected in the lives of believers with disability. Instead, people with disability remain underrepresented in church communities in comparison to the numbers of people with disability in broader

⁶ E.g., Jeff McNair, "The Power of Those Who Seem Weaker People with Disabilities in the Church," *JCID* 3.1 (2014): 93–107.

⁷ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 91.

society.⁸ In addition, those with disability who do attend church services often remain on the margins rather than fully embedded in the life of the church. Carter et al. describe this phenomenon in an article on belonging in church communities for young people with disability. Carter et al. differentiate between people with disability *being present* at church rather than *having a presence*.⁹ The authors contend that simply being bodily present at a church service is not the same as being an active and contributing member of that church community where your presence is acknowledged and valued. Too often, people with disability may be present in churches but they do not feel like an integral part of the community, do not experience a sense of belonging in their church community, or have opportunities to use the gifts God has given to them.¹⁰

According to many disability theologians and practitioners, this underrepresentation and marginalisation of people with disability in church communities has resulted in an incongruity, a divergence between Paul's vision of the body of Christ and how the members of the body of Christ live in community as the people of God. This incongruity is often represented by the aphorism "a church without the disabled is a disabled church." It is reasoned that without the presence and full participation of people with disability, church communities are weakened or disabled and therefore, not functioning at full capacity. Writing in 2016, Carter et al. claimed that over 100 denominational resolutions and position statements articulated this sentiment, and it is likely that this number would have significantly increased since then.¹¹ This view likewise appears in works of academics writing on disability theology. Thomas E. Reynolds, for example, asserts the importance of people with disability in church communities claiming that "excluding one member of the Body of Christ mars its image...Christians are less than whole without one another, without the contributions that all make the household of God."¹² Likewise, Barbara J. Hedges-Goettl suggests that "[f]or the Church to be whole, all must be included," even stating explicitly that "[t]he church is disabled when persons with disabilities are not included."¹³

However, upon closer inspection, this statement becomes problematic, even counterproductive, to the pursuit of better inclusion of people with disability in church communities. This is because what the aphorism implies is that if the body of Christ is disabled, then this is not only undesirable but something that must be fixed. On one hand, scholars claim that disabled bodies are acceptable and have something important to offer church communities. On the other hand, if the body of Christ is disabled, then

⁸ For example, when Australian church attendees were asked about their experience of disability, nearly half (45%) responded that they had "no connection" with a person with disability (Carole Gan et al., "Disability Inclusion, Provision and Care: Trends in Local Churches from 2016 to 2021," [NCLS Research Report 48; Sydney, 2023], 32).

⁹ Erik W. Carter, "Being Present versus Having a Presence: Dimensions of Belonging for Young People with Disabilities and their Families," *CEJ* 13.1 (2016): 127–146.

¹⁰ Carter et al., "Being Present," 127–146.

¹¹ Carter et al., "Being Present," 128.

¹² Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 237.

¹³ "Thinking Theologically about Inclusion: Disability, Imago Dei and the Body of Christ," *JRDH* 6.4 (2002), 7–30, here 15.

there is something terribly wrong and the church's "disability" must be eradicated so that the Body can function at full capacity. Without realising it, what this aphorism does is perpetuate the notion that a disabled body is undesirable, limited in its function, and something that requires fixing: a message that is at odds with the message of the giftedness and importance of disabled members by disability theologians.

On a few rare occasions, the paradoxical nature of this claim has been noted by scholars writing in disability. William C. Gaventa, for example, appears aware of the potential incongruity of this claim and thus contends that even with missing members, the body of Christ "can still function and flourish."¹⁴ However, he still maintains that the whole is only "blessed and empowered by reconnecting with overlooked, forgotten, pushed away, and discarded parts."¹⁵ Gaventa indicates that the body of Christ in its present form – that is, without those with disability – is still in need of healing.¹⁶ McCloughry and Morris likewise acknowledge this paradox. On one hand, McCloughry and Morris maintain that "to exclude disabled people is to mar the image of God,"¹⁷ they simultaneously appear to lay the blame for the paradox in Paul's own adoption of the body metaphor rather than in any interpretive issues. McCloughry and Morris thus claim that Paul's expectation of the body: "seems to have in mind a non-disabled person's body for the church—a symbol of health and 'perfection' in which every part is working properly. This metaphor is one that aims to include, but the very metaphor itself has the power to exclude."

The rationale behind claiming that the body of Christ is disabled without the presence of people with disability is a desire to see people with a disability included and using their gifts in Christian communities. It is a recognition that all members of a church community miss out when people with disability are not present using their gifts to serve and to be served by others. These scholars write in the hope that by acknowledging the present "deficit" in the body caused by the absence of people with disability, other church members will seek to fix the floundering body of Christ by actively working towards the participation of people with disability. However, the contradictory messaging of this position – whereby disability is at once acceptable and unacceptable – results in a confused message and one that ultimately only reinforces disability as an undesirable experience. While I am fervently committed to supporting churches in working towards creating more inclusive communities for people with disability, I am not convinced that the claim that the church is disabled without the presence of a disability is helping this cause. My two main objections to this position are outlined below.

¹⁴ William C. Gaventa, "Preaching Disability: The Whole of Christ's Body in Word and Practice," *Review and Expositor* 113.2 (2016), 225–242, here 239.

¹⁵ Gaventa, "Preaching Disability," 242.

¹⁶ Gaventa, "Preaching Disability," 242.

¹⁷ Roy McCloughry, *Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability* (London: SPCK, 2002), 77.

Those who are in Christ are in the Body of Christ

Earlier in the article, I suggested that one of Paul's main aims in writing about the body of Christ in his Corinthian correspondence was to ensure that the members were united and working together in mutuality. Paul used the metaphor of a body to help the members of the Corinthian church understand each member's relationship to all the others and the body as a whole. By God's divine appointment, each person in Christ has a role to play in the body of Christ and gifts they have been given to fulfill this role. However, it is not merely the placement of members in the body that God controls but indeed the body's membership itself as God "placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Cor. 12:18). Membership in the body of Christ is not determined by other members' approval or acknowledgment but by God alone. As I have argued elsewhere, "[f]or Paul, participation in the body of Christ is inevitably and inextricably linked with being a follower of Christ."¹⁸ Every person who is in Christ is in the body of Christ and has been placed in the body at God's discretion. Every member of the body has been gifted and has a role to play in using their gifts in service to God and to all the members of the body.¹⁹ No member has the ability to exclude or marginalise other members from participation in the body because "God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Cor. 12:18). While Paul certainly suggests that disregarding or undervaluing others' gifts certainly leads to disunity, it does not lead to a member's expulsion from or non-participation in the body of Christ. This also means that Paul in no way would have envisioned the possibility of members of the body of Christ living outside of or apart from the rest of the body. Just as a human eye or ear cannot function apart from the rest of a physical body, so it is with the body of Christ. For Paul, being in Christ meant being in the body of Christ, a reality that could not be altered by beliefs about or the treatment of other members of the body: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor. 12:27).

If it is the case that Paul sees membership in the body wholly as God's domain, how can it then be claimed that there are some members of the body of Christ who exist apart from the rest of the body or that there are those who are in Christ but are somehow no longer in the body of Christ? It seems to me that this view arises from a lack of clarity with respect to the language of "the body of Christ" and of "church" (or "the church"). While the concepts are similar, they are not identical. However, these concepts are often used interchangeably and often with a quite narrow and specific idea in mind, that is, the physical meeting together of believers in a localised context, for example, in a "church" service. However, as not all members of the body of Christ can ever all meet physically in one place in the present world, localised meetings of believers only ever include a small number of members of the body of Christ. While it is important for believers to meet in

¹⁸ Gosbell, "A Disability Reading" 317.

¹⁹ As Brett Webb-Mitchell asserts, "the gifts and services of this body extend to one and all, regardless of one's seeming ability or limitation" "Educating Toward the Full Inclusion in the Body of Christ: People with Disabilities Being Full Members of the Church," *JRDH* 14:3 (2010): 256–268, here 264.

formal church services or bible study groups (Heb. 10:24-25), the meeting together of those in Christ is not what Paul means by being in the body of Christ. While believers meet in localised contexts to worship together *as* the body of Christ, being *in* church or *at* church is not the same thing as being in the body of Christ. This is significant because it means that when someone is missing from or not participating in a local church community while their absence is significant for that community, it does not mean that a person is no longer a member of the body of Christ.

The recognition that an absence from church services does not mean an absence from the body of Christ is important for all people, but especially for those with disability, chronic illness, and mental health issues for whom it is not always possible to be present at physical church services. Due to my own chronic health issues, I did not attend a physical church service for the whole of 2022. While this absence was challenging for many reasons, it did not mean that I was no longer in Christ, nor did it mean I had stopped using the spiritual gifts I have been given by God to use in the body. This is a concept we should have a greater understanding of now more than ever having lived through the extensive lockdowns associated with the Covid-19 global pandemic in 2020-2021. In that time, most believers could not meet for church services during that time, however, absence from church buildings did not result in eviction from the body of Christ. To indicate that those who are not physically present due to disability are no longer in the body of Christ is not only theologically problematic, but it is exclusionary and only compounds the hurts and losses that are already experienced by absent members. Instead, we must keep reminding all believers that those who are in Christ are in the body of Christ even when they are not physically present.

The Body of Christ is disabled

My second objection to the claim that the body of Christ is disabled without the presence of people with disability has to do with the nature of the body to which members belong. While McCloughry and Morris claim that the metaphor of the body of Christ results in a paradox because Paul himself viewed the body of Christ as a “non-disabled person’s body...a symbol of health and ‘perfection,’”²⁰ there is nothing in Paul’s description of the body of Christ that would indicate that this is the case. If anything, I would suggest that Paul’s view of this body would be the complete opposite. Paul’s understanding of the body of Christ would likely have been shaped by his knowledge of the historical body of Jesus which, as Susanne Rappman observes, Paul knew to be “a wounded body; nailed to the cross, bruised and disabled.”²¹ In Paul’s reflections on Christ’s physical body, while he acknowledges it as glorious and resurrected, it is simultaneously crucified, marked, and broken (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:24). It is a body of contradictions: at once limited and vulnerable while at the same time a full embodiment of the wonder and power of God. These truths are also reflected in Paul’s experiences of his own body.

²⁰ McCloughry, *Making a World of Difference*, 77.

²¹ Susanne Rappmann, “The Disabled Body of Christ as a Critical Metaphor - Towards a Theory,” *JRDH* 7.4 (2003): 25–40, here 25.

In his reflection on his hardships, Paul recognised his limitations and weaknesses as the means through which God would show his power and ability: God's power "made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). If Paul considered this to be true of his own body, then surely he would have also considered this true of the body of Christ also. The body of Christ is not disabled because of the absence of people with disability, but it is by its very nature disabled: comprised of members who are all limited and incomplete but through which God's power can be made perfect through human weakness.

While it is unlikely that Paul thought of himself as participating in a perfect, idealised body, it is possible that readers of Paul's text – both historically and in the present world – do envisage this body as one that is strong and physically perfect. For many modern readers of Paul, contemporary ideas of bodily perfection, so heavily influenced by Hollywood and social media, continue to shape believers' understandings of bodies both eschatologically and in terms of our participation in the body of Christ. As Rappman contends, "The bruised, scorned, rejected and dying body on the cross differs in almost every aspect from the idealized and objectified images of the body that permeate the Western world."²² Despite this reality, many believers continue to resist the notion of Christ's body being weakened, limited, or disabled in any way. As such, conjuring an image of the body of Christ that is disabled by the absence of some of its members is both jarring and highly provocative. If believers consider the body of Christ a symbol of strength and power, it stands to reason that to claim the body is disabled by the absence of people with disability might spur some people into action to try and "fix" the church's disability. Believers may want to act to ensure Christ's body is not weakened or disabled through the absence of any of its members. Once again, while it is unintentional, the claim that the body of Christ is disabled without the presence of those with disability perpetuates the view that disability is undesirable and should be avoided. However, if the body of Christ is by its very nature disabled, a body comprised of limited and incomplete human beings whose incompleteness is only made functional by the power of God, then this completely reframes our notions about the body of Christ and the kind of community members are a part of.

Conclusion

Disability theologians who assert that the body of Christ is disabled without the presence of people with disability do so with a desire to see changes take place that will ensure people with disability can be active and flourishing members of church communities. There is a recognition that when people with disability and their families are excluded from or marginalised within a church community, there is a deep sense of grief and loss for them that they do not get to experience the fullness of what it means to belong to a loving and accepting community. When they are absent or marginal, people with disability miss out on the support and connection a church community can provide which can be life-giving for people who too often find themselves on the

²² Rappmann, "Disabled Body of Christ," 26.

margins of society. However, it is not just people with disability who miss out when they are absent from church communities: all the members of our church communities miss out even though they might not all be aware of it. When people with disability are absent from our church communities, we all miss out on what it means to learn from others who are different to ourselves. We all miss out on learning what it means to honour one another as God's image bearers in spite of, or indeed while embracing, those differences. In addition, if each member of the body is given their own gifts to use to demonstrate or reveal something of God's spirit (1 Cor. 12:7), then we also miss out on the demonstration or revealing that comes when people with disability get to use their gifts in our communities.

When disability theologians and practitioners make the claim that the body of Christ is disabled without the presence of people with disability, these are the things they mean. They recognise these losses and wish to facilitate the reconnection of marginal or non-participating church members by encouraging church communities to be more proactive in incorporating people with disability into the life of the church. These writers long for church communities to be places where people with and without disability can reflect the unity in diversity that Paul's body metaphor models, where all members live in mutuality and interdependence, using their gifts to serve God and one another and allowing others to serve us. These are all things I am also deeply committed to. However, by claiming that the body of Christ is disabled without people with disability, the message we end up sending is confused and contradictory. Firstly, we must remember that when people with disability are absent from church services or buildings, they are not absent from the body of Christ. The membership of the body of Christ is God's domain and in his control. No member is excluded from the body because of the attitudes of or treatment by others. Neither is someone absent from the body of Christ simply because they are absent from physical church buildings or services. Such a claim is not only at odds with the representation Paul offers of the body of Christ but is particularly hurtful for those who cannot participate in church services because of their disability or chronic health issues. Those who are in Christ are in the body of Christ and this is not contingent upon a person's physical attendance in a church community.

Secondly, we must also remember that the body we are members of is not a Hollywood-esque body that is physically strong and perfect, but it is, by its very nature, a disabled body comprised of human beings in all their weaknesses and limitations. If we think of ourselves as participating in a body that is strong, fit, and healthy, then it would make sense that we are afraid of what it would mean for this body to become disabled because of non-participating or absent members. In this scenario, we would want to do all we can to try and preserve the integrity of the body. We would aim to include people with disability in church communities not out of a commitment to their participation in the body but out of a fear of the inadequacy of the body to fulfil its purposes in their absence. However, when this is the case, when we see the body of Christ as a symbol of our combined strengths and abilities, then, as Kathryn Porten suggests, we are likely to "become distracted from building God's kingdom by a culture that promotes the

achievement of personal goals.”²³ However, when we recognise that that body into which we have become members is, by its very nature, already disabled, then our view of our role and others within this body will be transformed. As Susanne Rappmann notes, “the church [is] a disabled and bruised community where God is present in shortcomings.”²⁴ This is a body through which we come together in our strengths and our weaknesses, with our gifts as well as our limitations, and it is in the midst of all this that God makes the body effective as his power is made perfect through our weakness.

For those of us committed to seeing church communities become places of welcome and belonging for people with disability, and to cultivating communities where people with disability can flourish, we need to be mindful of the words we use and the tactics we employ to go about these processes. Rather than calling upon Christian communities to seek out those with disability to prop up a weakened or failing body, we should instead be driven by a commitment to seeing our church services and communities serve as a reflection of the fullness of the body of Christ, in all its diversity, as God has declared it to be.

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²³ Kathryn Porten, “Many Members: One Body,” *Covenant Quarterly* 81.1 (2023): 19-30, here 21.

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«Тіло Христове – неповносправне без присутності людей з інвалідністю»: переоцінка

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Анотація: Твердження «Тіло Христове – неповносправне без присутності людей з інвалідністю» регулярно з'являється в роботах богословів і практиків, які займаються питаннями інвалідності. Цей лаконічний вислів має на меті нагадати церковним громадам, що вони повинні бути місцем, де люди з інвалідністю можуть активно і з користю для інших брати участь у житті Церкви. Однак, якщо придивитися ближче, то стає очевидним, що це твердження є проблематичним і, як наслідок, увічне уявлення про те, що інвалідність небажана і її слід уникати. Ця стаття окреслює два основні застереження щодо використання цього твердження і пропонує замість нього альтернативний спосіб розуміння місця людей з інвалідністю як у Тілі Христовому, так і в наших церковних спільнотах.

Ключові слова: інвалідність, еклезіологія, Павлове богослов'я, Тіло Христове.

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