2015

Dis-abling the body of Christ: toward a holistic ecclesiology of embodiment

Hale, Nancy Jill

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/16097

Boston University
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Dissertation

DIS-ABLING THE BODY OF CHRIST:
TOWARD A HOLISTIC ECCLESIOLOGY OF EMBODIMENT

by

NANCY JILL HALE

B.A., Binghamton University, 2005
M.Div., Boston University School of Theology, 2008

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2015
Approved by

First Reader
Dr. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, Ph.D.
Professor of Worship

Second Reader
Dr. Mary Elizabeth Moore, Ph.D.
Dean of the School of Theology
and Professor of Theology and Education
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I was putting the finishing touches on this dissertation, one of the members of the church I serve told me, “You can’t appreciate the spring until you’ve experienced the winter.” (In upstate New York, that’s a given.) In many ways, this project has taken me through the cold, isolating bitterness of winter. However, there have been many moments of warmth, compassion, understanding, and support that have guided me through even the coldest days and the darkest nights.

I am grateful for the knowledge, wisdom, and support—sometimes gentle, sometimes firm—that I received from Dr. Karen Westerfield Tucker. Her gracious teaching style and love for all things liturgical ignited in me a spark of passion for both my continuing studies and the flights of liturgical creativity I have been able to enjoy in my ministry. During the ups and downs of the seven years of my doctoral studies, I could always count on her to be a source of strength and hope. When things looked the bleakest, her warmth and humor compelled me to keep going. And when things were going well, I could almost hear her cheering me on from 250 miles away.

There were many others in my academic journey whose support was invaluable. Thank you to Dr. Mary Elizabeth Moore, dean of Boston University School of Theology, whose comments always encouraged me to refine and clarify my work; Dr. John Baldovin, whose knowledge and wisdom greatly inspired me; Dr. Bruce Morrill, who helped me grapple with the sometimes dense arguments of Chauvet and Schillebeeckx; Dr. Don Saliers, whose grace and generosity touched my heart; and Dr. Bryan Stone, who introduced me to John Howard Yoder’s wonderfully embodied ecclesiology.
Several of my friends and colleagues graciously found time to offer their assistance. I want to thank Rev. Tom Pullyblank, Rev. John Tyson, and Drew Cottle for their constructive criticism and excellent proofreading skills. There are so many others, spread across the country, whose words of encouragement and support came at unexpected moments via email, Facebook, and text messages. Thank you, my friends.

Because I did most of my research and writing from my home in an isolated area of central New York State, locating resources was always a challenge. The library staff at Boston University School of Theology patiently helped me search for online resources, and the library staff at nearby Colgate University in Hamilton, NY, where I was granted courtesy borrowing privileges, was always ready to help me locate print resources.

I cannot begin to thank the people of Broad Street United Methodist Church in Norwich, where I served as pastor during the course of my doctoral studies. Their support and cheerleading encouraged me to push ahead, even when it seemed impossible to do so. During my final year of writing, they gave me the incredibly gracious gift of a two-month educational leave, which I deeply appreciate. The ways that they joyfully embrace their call to be the body of Christ in Norwich, and the many ways they embody love, sharing, and mission to their community made it easier for me to balance my pastoral ministry with my schoolwork. I thank these wonderful followers of Jesus for always striving to fulfill their mission of “being God’s love to all people in all places.”

Finally, I am indebted to an incredible woman whom I never had the pleasure or honor of meeting in person. Dr. Nancy Eiesland’s powerful book *The Disabled God* not only transformed the way I understand my own identity as a person with a disability, but
also propelled me into the realm of disability studies. Dr. Eiesland passed away in 2009, and I cherish her encouraging emails, which I received during the last two years of her life. I hope that in some small way, this project is a tribute to her life, her work and her memory.

Nancy Hale

Norwich, NY
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM WITH THE BODY OF CHRIST......................... 1
   Statement and Significance of the Problem ........................................................................... 1
   Method of Investigation and Overview of the Project ......................................................... 12
   Sources and Limitations ......................................................................................................... 16

2. DISABILITY THEORIES AND THEOLOGY ......................................................... 21
   Disability Theories .................................................................................................................. 24
   Disability in the Scriptures ..................................................................................................... 40
   Disability Theology Today ...................................................................................................... 49

3. THE METAPHORICAL BODY OF CHRIST...................................................... 55
   What Did Paul Intend? ............................................................................................................ 55
   “The Body of Christ” as a Metaphor ..................................................................................... 71

4. BODY THEOLOGY ......................................................................................... 82
   “The Body” in Ancient Judaism .......................................................................................... 84
   Early Christian Body Theology ............................................................................................ 87
   “The Body” in Paul’s Theology ............................................................................................ 91
   Body Theology in Later Christianity .................................................................................... 94
   Body Theology Since the Twentieth Century ..................................................................... 101
   Toward a Holistic Body Theology ....................................................................................... 107

5. THE CHURCH AND EMBODIMENT .............................................................. 113
Developing Ecclesiology in the Church .......................................................... 115

Embodied Ecclesiology .................................................................................. 129

6. LITURGY AND THE BODY ...................................................................... 151

Liturgy as Ritual Action.................................................................................. 152

Liturgy as Formational................................................................................... 157

A Brief History of Bodies and Liturgy............................................................... 160

Bodies, Theology, and Practice ..................................................................... 168

7. AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF DISABILITY ................................................... 183

Ecclesiological Principles in the Context of Disability ..................................... 188

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................. 215
DISABLING THE BODY OF CHRIST:
TOWARD A HOLISTIC ECCLESIOLOGY OF EMBODIMENT

(Order no. )

NANCY JILL HALE

Boston University School of Theology, 2015

Major Professor: Dr. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, Professor of Worship

ABSTRACT

One of the primary images for ecclesiology is Paul’s “body of Christ” metaphor. The contemporary church, as the body of Christ, sometimes struggles with its sense of identity and mission as well as with its relationship with other social bodies in the world. This study examines the intersection of ecclesiology, disability, embodiment, and liturgy and offers possibilities for developing a general ecclesiology of disability that is grounded in human embodiment and embodied practices. The interconnections between disability theory and theology are explored, followed by an examination of the “body of Christ” metaphor, starting with Paul’s context and continuing with an analysis of how the metaphor functions linguistically. A review of how body theology developed and functioned in church history is presented, and then consideration is given to how the work of theologians such as Louis-Marie Chauvet and Edward Schillebeeckx is grounded in a theology of the body. A brief history of ecclesiology is followed by an assessment of the embodied ecclesiology of Chauvet, Schillebeeckx, John Howard Yoder, and Stanley Hauerwas. The relationship among embodiment, liturgy, and Christian formation is probed using the work of Don Saliers, Gordon Lathrop, and James K. A. Smith. Finally,
principles are proposed that answer the question, “What would it mean for the church to be a disabled body?” The intention of these principles is to help churches disable those beliefs and practices that keep them from being the message of the kingdom of God and from embodying the new social reality of the gospel that challenges the values of other social bodies in the world.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM WITH THE BODY OF CHRIST

The question for me is how does the description of “the body of Christ” help Christians better understand what we must be in order to face the challenges of being Church.

—Stanley Hauerwas

Statement and Significance of the Problem

On Monday, March 12, 1990, more than 1,000 disability rights activists and people with disabilities gathered in front of the U.S. Capitol Building to demand the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which would give equal rights to people with disabilities. The ADA had been passed by the Senate a year earlier, but was stalled in the House of Representatives. After a series of speeches, some 60 people cast aside their wheelchairs, crutches, and other assistive mobility devices and began crawling up the stone steps leading to the Capitol while chanting “ADA Now!” Other activists remained at the bottom of the stairs holding signs and giving encouragement to these “Capitol Crawlers.” As one crawler inched her way to the top, she said, “I want my civil rights. I want to be treated like a human being.” Two months later, the ADA was signed into law, marking a successful culmination to many years’ worth of activism that

---


addressed the gaps in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which did not recognize the rights of or offer protections for people with disabilities.

Since the 1990s, people with disabilities are more visible, more active, and more integrated into American society than ever before. But while much has been done to improve accessibility in public spaces—such as providing curb cuts, ramps, Braille signs, assistive listening systems, etc.—people with disabilities are still oppressed and ostracized. Disability carries a stigma and people with disabilities are often not considered legitimate or useful in a society that values able-bodiedness, independence, and productivity. This is true even in the church, where the contribution of people with disabilities is often limited to helping the church become more aware of its need to be physically accessible.³ But the concept of disability has much more to offer the church than supporting the decision to add a ramp or accessible bathroom; it can also help expand the church’s self-understanding of its identity, nature, and mission.

One of the most fundamental and familiar images of ecclesiology is the body of Christ.⁴ According to this image of the church, which is prominent in the letters of the apostle Paul, individual members are bound together in love and mutual care, and every member is considered indispensable to the body as a whole. It is in and through this body that the church fulfills its call to ministry, mission, and witness. The church is, in a very

³ Throughout this project, I use “church” to denote church in both its general and localized forms. I will use “Church” only when it is part of the name of a particular church community or denomination. And in order to emphasize the ecumenical aspects of this work, I will use “eucharist” except when it is capitalized in a direct quote.

⁴ See Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:13-27. All scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.
tangible sense, *embodied*: it is a social body that consists of individual human bodies. People experience God not only as individuals through their human bodies, but also (and perhaps more importantly) as a communal body that is the body of Christ.

But what does it mean for the church to be the body of Christ? What was Paul’s intention when he used that phrase in his epistles to different early church communities? What kind of “body” is the church called to become and proclaim as part of its mission? According to Paul Minear, the answer to these questions is neither readily apparent nor without controversy. Not only is Paul’s usage of the phrase “extremely flexible and elastic,” but the tensions and disagreements within the worldwide church make any attempt to find “ecumenical consensus” difficult, at best.⁵

Forty years ago, Jürgen Moltmann noted that behind “the struggle for a credible church and a more human society” and “the political and social crisis of the church in modern society,” there stands an “identity-crisis of Christianity.”⁶ This identity crisis is evident in the disunity of the church. Contrary to Paul’s vision, the body of Christ that is the church is anything but united in its doctrine, theology, structure, or understanding of its mission. In addition, there are varieties of interpretations of the nature and purpose of the church as it is constituted as the body of Christ. Some local congregations view their particular manifestation of the body as an insular community that stands against the wider culture and that is charged with helping people save their souls or get to heaven. Other congregations understand that their identity as the body of Christ means continuing the

---


physical ministry of Christ, akin to Teresa of Avila’s assertion that “Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” The state of disunity in the modern church, which is evident in the wide variety of doctrines, liturgical practices, and concepts of purpose and mission across the Christian spectrum, is the result of diverse histories and contexts, but it is also a problem of theology, ecclesiology, and even liturgy.

That the church is in crisis is evident in both its internal struggles and its sometimes antagonistic, sometimes mutually reciprocal relationship with the larger society, especially in the United States, where this project will focus. In addition to the problems of defining itself according to the body of Christ image, the church struggles with how it should relate to other social bodies. The major mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church continue to wrestle not only with internal issues of doctrine and praxis, but also with questions about their ministry, mission and identity in relation to the wider society. As noted above, some churches adopt a mentality of self-sufficiency in which the church members are expected to isolate themselves as much as possible from the surrounding society (and its inherent evils). Other churches assume an autocratic position of self-proclaimed privilege and power in relation to society and attempt to use that power to influence the policies, practices, and beliefs of the society at large (as can be seen in the annual “war on Christmas,” in which certain Christians try to force the United States as a whole to celebrate a religious rather than a secular version of Christmas).
Does the church exist primarily for the benefit of its members, or does it exist for the sake of the world? Which “model” of church-world relations is the right one? The New Testament does not offer one clear vision of how the church should be structured or how it should function. In fact, Paul Minear identifies some 96 images of the church found in scripture, including the people of God, the flock of God, the vine, the bride of Christ, and the body of Christ. Although not all of these images can operate as representations of the church, there is still enough variety in the New Testament to cause confusion. And yet, these biblical images play a significant role in ecclesiology because, as Avery Dulles notes, they have a tendency to become “self-fulfilling: they make the church become what they suggest the church is.” Because of the nature and focus of this project, the body of Christ model is the most appropriate model to consider because it lends itself to the discussion of embodiment and disability in a way that the other models cannot.

Paul Minear reminds us that the scriptural images of the church “did not grow out of a basically sociological, psychological, or moral comparison-and-contrast between the church and its surrounding societies.” Rather, the images evolved from the movement that started with Jesus’ proclamation of the coming kingdom of God. In other words,

---

7 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), identifies six models: church as institution, community (body of Christ), sacrament, herald, servant, and school of discipleship. Although Dulles does not offer these specifically as models for the church-world relationship, each model carries with it inherent suppositions and possibilities about that relationship.

8 Minear, *Images of the Church*.


Christology and eschatology led to ecclesiology. Because the church is founded on Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom, it is itself a “polis,” as Stanley Hauerwas notes, but unfortunately, “the church is constantly tempted to imitate the false politics of the world for its own life.”¹¹

All of this leads back to one of the primary questions for this study: what does the image of the body of Christ mean for the church and what does it mean for the relationship between the church and the world? Although scholars disagree whether Paul’s language should be taken literally (“the church is the glorified body of Christ”) or metaphorically (“the church is a body of Christ”),¹² the body motif invites (or, one could say demands) comparison with embodied human experience—the vehicle through which the church is constituted. But this leads to the question of whose experience? Whose bodies are definitive for drawing out the connections between the church and embodiment, and the church and the world? The church has traditionally relied on normative images of embodiment that result in theological projects that do not always include the embodied experience of those on the margins of society. Feminist theologians such as Sallie McFague point out the “androcentric, hierarchical character” of Christianity that situates male, strong, wealthy, powerful, and healthy bodies as the norm

¹¹ Hauerwas, In Good Company, 8.

¹² See Andrew Perriman, “‘His body, which is the church . . . ’: Coming to Terms with Metaphor,” Evangelical Quarterly 62, no. 2 (1990): 123-42.
for creation and for the church. Rebecca S. Chopp decries “the image of the ‘perfect’ body that forms our distorted beliefs and practices.”

According to the standards of our society, which are fueled by the popular media and advertising industry, a body is good and acceptable if it meets certain norms of height, weight, appearance, and ability. Although very few bodies meet all these criteria, some bodies fall so far short of the cultural vision of perfection that their embodied experiences are considered insignificant. For instance, the bodies of women, of people who exist in poverty, and of persons with physical or mental deficiencies are often relegated to the margins of society. Their experiences of embodiment are often considered less important than the experiences of people who have power or status, such as those who are male, wealthy, or able-bodied.

These concepts of bodily acceptability and importance have had detrimental effects on the church’s sense of its identity and mission. But the most harmful of these are not going unchallenged. Feminist theologians are critiquing the structure of patriarchy, liberation theologians are arguing for God’s preferential option for the poor, and disability theologians are pressing for the dismantling of interpretations of scripture that privilege able-bodied biases. All of these efforts recognize that the experience of marginal embodiment that diverges from societal “norms” can be beneficial to the church’s identity and its own ecclesiological experience of embodiment. These

---


contextual theologians are acknowledging how theology and ecclesiology must include the experiences of all bodies, not just those at a central place of power or status.

In particular, physical disability, which has a profound impact on the experience of embodiment, has much to offer the discussion of ecclesiology and the church’s self-image as the body of Christ. By considering itself through the lens of disability, the church can explore its relationship both to God and to other social bodies not from a place of power, but from a place of greater self-awareness of the significance of its own embodiedness.

Most studies that relate ecclesiology to disability focus on the topic of inclusiveness and accessibility of the church’s buildings, ministries, and liturgy. There are many fine examples of theological arguments for liberating the church from physical structures, theological concepts, and embodied practices that exclude or oppress people with disabilities. However, I am not aware of any projects that employ disability as an integral part of an ecclesiological model rather than a tangential issue that has bearing only on the church’s level of accessibility and hospitality. In this project, I hope to use the concept and experience of disability as the basis for developing an ecclesiology that I can offer to the church as a new way of understanding its embodiment, its identity, and its relationship to the world. The main questions I hope to answer include: What would it

---

mean for the church, as a social body and as the body of Christ, to be a *dis-abled* body?

In what ways is the church already constituted as a disabled body? In what ways should the church understand itself as a disabled body? How might that affect the way the church interacts with the world?

People with disabilities experience the world in particular and unique ways, which are often influenced by the ways they are perceived by the world (through misunderstanding, fear, and able-bodied privilege). Marginalization, impairment of physical ability, the need for interdependence, and being judged according to the world’s norms are common experiences to most people with disabilities, and these experiences affect their relationships with other people (and sometimes, with God). By affirming and identifying with these experiences, the church can find new, creative, and faithful ways to function in society as what French Roman Catholic theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet (b. 1942) describes as the church’s very essence, which is the sacramental mediation of Jesus Christ.16

According to theologians such as Chauvet and Belgian Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (1914-2009), embodiment is the means through which we receive revelation of God’s truth, and through which we are formed into the ecclesial

---

body of Christ. The body mediates truth—of God and of the world—to the self because it is the locus of the sensory experiences that are necessary for any knowledge of God and the world. If that body is defined by the norms of society, which may not represent that individual’s experience of embodiment, then the individual’s conception of himself or herself, and of reality and truth, may well be distorted.

This is no less true for the church as the body of Christ. Chauvet’s book *The Sacraments* is subtitled *The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*. In this play on words, Chauvet observes that the manner in which any mediated experience of God is perceived by an individual is at the mercy of both that individual’s human body and the body of Christ that is the church. That is, the ways that a person understands his or her body, combined with the ways the church understands itself as a body, can have a profound effect on the message that is mediated to that person through both bodies. In addition, if God and the world are mediated to the church as a whole through a model of embodiment that is based on the world’s definition of what constitutes an acceptable body, the truth of God and the church’s understanding of its nature and mission may be distorted as well.

One central question for this project is, “how might the concept of disability and the bodily experiences of people with disabilities be correctives to that distortion?”

---


18 Chauvet is not making a case for a separation of “body” and “self.” Rather, he argues that the body is the necessary channel of communication between the world and the individual; the body is “the primordial place of every symbolic joining of the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’” (*Symbol and Sacrament*, 147).
No discussion of ecclesiology and embodiment can be complete without also addressing sacramental theology. The church is constituted as a body primarily through the gift of grace found in the eucharist: “where the Eucharist is, there is the church with everything that makes it the body of Christ in [a] specific place.”  

In order to understand itself as the body of Christ, the church must look at the role the eucharist plays in the relationship between ecclesiology and embodiment, and in the relationship between becoming the body of Christ in the eucharist (“becoming what it receives”) and its mission to be the mediation of God’s presence in the world.

By re-evaluating the ways in which the church is constituted as a body and by exploring the physical, political, and theological aspects of disability, the church can develop an ecclesiology of disability: a self-understanding that the church is both formed as a disabled body and also called to reveal itself to the world in and through this disabled body. That is, the church incorporates and embraces aspects of the experience of disability both in its nature as a social body and in its relationship with other social bodies. In this, the church will be challenged to recognize a new model for wholeness that includes the concept and experience of disability and that can prepare the church to proclaim better the gospel of the Christ to whose body it bears witness.

---


**Method of Investigation and Overview of the Project**

This is constructive, interdisciplinary project that includes several components, including metaphorical language, ecclesiology, theology, and liturgy, which will be brought into conversation in the context of disability. It will be necessary to examine each component and to clarify the ways in which each will be used for this project in order to understand how the interaction between them can inform and challenge our perception of the nature of the church.

The first challenge is to define disability for the purpose of this study. Because the experience of disability varies widely between individuals, because it cannot be reduced to one simple definition, and because disability scholars differ in their interpretations of disability, a basic examination of disability is crucial in order to discover those definitions that will be relevant to this project, and that will help bring disability studies into conversation with other topics of study. In chapter 2, I first look at the different sociological, medical, and political models of disability and their significance for people with disabilities. Then I turn to the interplay between theology and disability. By employing some biblical exegesis, I investigate how scripture approaches the topic of disability, and then I examine how the church has interpreted particular passages of scripture. Finally, I turn to disability theology, a fairly new field of study that is grounded in the work of liberation theology. While liberation theology is a good starting point for disability theology, there are also limits in this relationship because liberation theology as a whole focuses on those who are poor and on dismantling systems that keep people living in poverty. But the experience of disability is highly variable and transcends any
one category of social-economic status (even though many people with physical
disabilities live in poverty). The marginalization experienced by people with disabilities
is not only economic; it is also a result of social systems that do not accommodate the
needs and concerns of people with disabilities—situations that may be overlooked by a
liberation theology lens.

The next area to explore is ecclesiology, focusing on Paul’s use of the phrase the
body of Christ, with an emphasis on trying to discover Paul’s intention in choosing that
image to describe the church. I will consider both the significance of “the body” in the
Stoicism of Paul’s cultural background and also the cultures of the Roman and Corinthian
churches to which he was writing. This will be followed by a brief survey of how the
“body of Christ” has been understood at different points in church history. Then I will
look at how metaphorical language operates in general and how the “body of Christ” in
particular functions both linguistically and metaphorically in its ecclesiological setting,
including what it both reveals and conceals as a metaphor.

In order to understand the significance of embodiment for the church, I explore
body theology in Chapter 4, first by tracing the evolution of ideas about the human body,
and especially the relationship between the body and the soul, through the trajectory of
ancient Judaism, early Christianity (including the influence of Platonic philosophy), the

21 According to the 2010 U.S. Census, approximately 46.5 percent of people aged 15 to 64 with
disabilities lived in poverty while 14.3 percent of people with no disability lived in poverty. Among those
aged 65 and older, 18.4 percent of those with disabilities lived in poverty compared with 5.0 percent for
those with no disability. See Matthew W. Brault, Americans with Disabilities: 2010, Household Economic
Status (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), 12, available online at

22 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.
later church, and the contemporary church. Then I turn to the works of Chauvet and Schillebeeckx, whose projects involve a holistic view of the body and its relationship to the church.

In Chapter 5, I take up ecclesiology and consider the relationship between the church and bodies. Because one of the primary scriptural images of the church is the embodiment of the risen Christ in this world, I will focus on how the church is an anamnetic, embodied performance of Christ’s life and ministry. That is, how the church’s outward and visible nature is defined by praxis that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and informed by the scriptural witness to Christ’s own embodied practices. After examining briefly the development of the relationship between the church and human embodiment from the early church period through the Second Vatican Council in 1962-65, I explore the development of a specifically and self-consciously embodied ecclesiology through the works of Chauvet; Schillebeeckx; John Howard Yoder (1927-1997), an American Mennonite who wrote from an Anabaptist perspective; and Stanley Hauerwas (b. 1940), an American United Methodist theologian.

In chapter 6, I look at liturgy and sacramental theology, and specifically to the pedagogical function of liturgy (and the sacraments) as ritual enactments of the scriptural narrative that is the basis for the church’s identity. The works of Catherine Bell and Richard D. McCall inform discussion of liturgy as ritual performance. In particular, McCall’s ideas that liturgy, as seen through the lens of performance theory, denotes a

[23] “Anamnesis has the capacity to facilitate the reintegration and reinvigoration of our conception of the relationship between the historical, sacramental, and ecclesial embodiments of Christ.” (Julie Gittoes, *Anamnesis and the Eucharist: Contemporary Anglican Approaches* [Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2008], 2).
“model for approaching all . . . reality which can only be . . . enacted” will be a starting point to discuss how liturgy is formational.\(^{24}\) The function of the liturgy on bodies will be explored through the works of E. Byron Anderson, an American United Methodist liturgical scholar who argues that liturgy is primarily catechetical; Don Saliers (b. 1937), an American United Methodist scholar who understands Christian worship as the ongoing prayer and worship of Jesus as enacted through his body—the Church—for the sake of and on behalf of the whole world; Gordon Lathrop, an American Lutheran professor of liturgy who perceives the potential for Christian liturgy to orient worshipers in the world; and James K. A. Smith (b. 1970), a Canadian-American philosopher of the Reformed tradition who builds on McCall’s ideas by interpreting Christian worship as an embodied act that trains our bodies to perform in the course of our daily lives the very practices we enact in the liturgy. The significance of sacramental theology and embodiment will invite Chauvet into the discussion because he describes liturgical practices, and especially the sacraments, as those embodied acts that form us into the “symbolic order” of the church, of which the body is the necessary mediation of God’s truth and presence for humans.

In chapter 7, I bring disability studies and theology, body theology, ecclesiology, and liturgical theology into conversation to begin constructing a general ecclesiology from the perspectives of disability and embodiment that will address the sociological and identity problems of the modern institutional church. That is, in response to the question,

“What would it mean for the church, as the body of Christ, to be a disabled body?” I formulate an ecclesiology of disability that can help the church understand itself as a communal body that is called, by its nature as the body of Christ, to mediate itself and God to the world through the experience of disability. Finally, I explore the significance and possible consequences of this model of ecclesiological embodiment for the church and its relationship to society, its identity, and its mission.

**Sources and Limitations**

The limitations of this project include the limitations that are inherent in the different fields that will be covered. The area of disability studies presents limits not only because there are many different definitions and kinds of disability, but by the fact that the experience of disability is subjective and varies from person to person. Because the experience of physical disability in general differs greatly from that of mental or developmental disabilities, this dissertation will focus primarily on the former. Although the experience of mental or developmental disabilities could contribute to a fuller understanding of the body of Christ, this study would be too broad if it were to include both physical and mental disability. Mental or developmental disability is primarily a matter of dysfunction of the mind or cognitive processes and of the relationship between cognitive ability and embodiment, issues that are beyond the scope of this project. Because the primary focus is embodiment, physical disability is a good starting point and an appropriate lens through which to construct an introductory ecclesiology of disability. However, the inclusion of mental and developmental disabilities in future work on this
topic would be beneficial because the embodied aspects of developmental and mental
disabilities could be explored as well as how the experiences of those types of disability
mediate the reality and presence of God.

Likewise, the areas of ecclesiology and sacramental theology are so broad that I
will need to limit my exploration of these areas to those works that deal with the main
assumptions I make about these topics, which include the significance of embodiment
and of defining the church as a set of embodied practices, rather than as an institution that
imparts the truth of the Christian faith through its doctrine and liturgy. That is, I will need
to narrow my focus on ecclesiology and on the nature of the sacraments to those aspects
that highlight the significance of the human body in faith formation and the experience of
the gathered community. In doing so, I will be focusing on the “outward and visible sign”
aspect of the sacraments, perhaps at the expense of the correlating concept of the “inward
and spiritual grace” of God’s presence that is mediated to individuals through the
sacraments in the church. My purpose is not to offer a theology of the sacraments per se
or a doctrinal ecclesiology. Although the sacramental theology in which I ground this
project may be incompatible with that of some traditions, my intent is to emphasize an
embodied theological approach to ecclesiology that can transcend some of the differences
in theological and doctrinal principles among various church traditions.

In addition, I will need to focus mainly on the church’s sacramental practice of
the eucharist because while baptism is a one-time entrance into the body of Christ, the

25 This concept and “a visible sign of an invisible reality” traces back to Augustine of Hippo, and
forms the basis for the theology of sacramental signification for many modern denominations.
eucharist is the ongoing embodied action that re-members the body and, therefore, has the most power to shape both human bodies and the ecclesial body. The idea that the church is constituted as the body of Christ through liturgy and the eucharist poses a challenge because most Protestants and some Roman Catholics do not have a sacramental understanding of the church. Thus, I will need to interpret the sacramental ecclesiology of some of my sources (particularly Chauvet, Schillebeeckx, and Orthodox priest and scholar Alexander Schmemann) in a way that can provide a more universal and accessible understanding of the nature of the church.

Similarly, I engage the relationships between the church and world without fully developing the global complexities that are shaped by culture and tradition. These variations are important, but this work is concerned with a more generalized picture of the church-world relationship, even while being self-consciously focused on the North American context and, even more particularly, on a United States Protestant location.

As a life-long United Methodist, I am limited somewhat by my own experience of church and its liturgical and sacramental practices. However, I took several courses during my graduate studies at Boston College with Jesuit professors who helped me realize that there is more in common between my tradition and Roman Catholicism than I had previously believed. In particular, the problems of ecclesiology rise above any particular theologies. I learned that “their” problems (of debates about theology or doctrine, or of the behavior of priests, for example), are also “my” problems because what affects one part of the body of Christ affects all in some way.
This project includes the works of Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox authors who were chosen not for their specific denominational theology or ecclesiology, but for their emphasis on embodiment and on the integral relationship between human bodies and the church as the body of Christ. Therefore, my conclusions will be offered not as a universal ecclesiological standard, but as a general ecclesiological reflection—a tool by which individual congregations or church traditions can examine their own sense of what it means to be the body of Christ. I hope that churches will take what is offered here and apply it more specifically to their own tradition, theology, and practices.

Finally, I am limited by my own experience with disability, and my own interpretations of how my disability (hearing loss) affects my relationship with God, with others, and with the church. I am aware that it is difficult, if not impossible, for someone who does not experience disability to speak knowledgeably about disability. But neither is it easier (or prudent) for one individual with a disability to speak on behalf of another person with either a similar or different kind of disability. Even within the narrower confines of one disability, such as hearing loss, there is a wide variety of experience. I am mindful, therefore, of Susan Wendell’s caveat about “the necessity of recognizing that the claim to speak for oneself does not relieve one of the responsibility not to overgeneralize on the basis of one’s experience and not to construe issues narrowly in the interest of promoting one’s own viewpoint.”

I also humbly acknowledge the accommodations and support I have received throughout my life—and particularly during my education—that

have enabled me to work, to study, and to function adequately in the hearing world. Even as a person with a disability, I still exist in a place of privilege that leads to biases of which I may not be aware. In the course of writing this dissertation, some of those biases have been uncovered, but I am sure others remain.
CHAPTER 2
DISABILITY THEORIES AND THEOLOGY

Historically, rather than naming ourselves, the disabled have been named by medical and scientific professionals or by people who denied our full personhood. So naming the experience of disability is no mere exercise in semantics or a matter of personal preference, it is part of the political work of empowerment.

—Nancy Eiesland

In his exploration of the relationship between human embodiment and human comprehension of the world, James K. A. Smith describes the necessity of a subconscious relationship with one’s body: “the successful functioning of our bodies requires that our bodily organs and operations recede and even hide in our acts of experiencing things in the world.” Mark Johnson notes that “we don’t have to work to ignore the working of our bodies. On the contrary, our bodies hide themselves from us in their very acts of making meaning and experience possible.” If correctly or normatively perceiving the world around us depends on this “hiddenness” of our bodies from conscious thought, then the experience of physical disability—in which the body and its impairment are often painfully and ubiquitously obvious—raises serious questions and concerns for society and for the church about the nature and significance of disability.

---


According to the *World Health Survey*, about 785 million, or 15.6 percent, of persons around the world over the age of 15 live with a disability.\(^4\) In America, almost one in five people, or twenty percent, have a disability.\(^5\) Of these 56.7 million people, approximately one-third have a physical disability that limits mobility, and another one-fifth have a sensory disability affecting sight or hearing.\(^6\) Until the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, people with disabilities were a mostly invisible segment of the population. Lack of accessibility prevented many of them from venturing outside their homes to work, shop, or simply enjoy life. Now, with ubiquitous curb cuts, Braille signs, assistive listening systems, and other accessibility aids in public spaces, people with disabilities are more visible and more involved in public life than ever before. However, in spite of being more conspicuous, people with disabilities still face ongoing exclusion and discrimination in many areas of their lives, particularly because of stereotypes, societal attitudes, and misunderstanding about their needs.

It seems that “disability” would be easy to define, or at least easy to recognize. For instance, the presence of a wheelchair or hearing aid or white cane or seeing-eye-dog seems clearly to announce the disabled condition of an individual. But disability defies


\(^5\) These statistics are from the *American Fact Finder*, <http://factfinder.census.gov>. Figures for disability in this report are from the 2010 U.S. Census, and exclude people in the military and people in institutions.

\(^6\) This chapter will consider only people with these kinds of physical disabilities. People with mental or emotional disabilities have needs that differ greatly from those of people with physical disabilities. In addition, mental or emotional disabilities raise questions for the church (for example, the relationship between mental capacity and profession of faith) that are beyond the scope of this project. To address adequately these questions would require a separate study.
simple definition or identification. For instance, it cannot be identified solely by visible accommodations such as wheelchairs or canes. A disability such as deafness or mobility challenges caused by a chronic health issue is invisible—that is, until some sort of social interaction reveals its presence. In addition, disability is not restricted to any particular social group but transcends barriers of class, socio-economic status, race, gender, and age. Although people from every socio-economic class can experience disability, the vast majority of people with disabilities live in poverty because of an inability to work or to find work that can accommodate their needs.

Finally, the level of disability can vary widely, even among people who have the same kind of bodily impairment. For instance, blindness is not defined simply by a complete loss of vision; a person with visual acuity of less than 20/200 in the better eye with the best possible correction is considered legally blind. Hearing loss ranges from a mild loss to complete loss of hearing function, and people can be considered deaf if they cannot understand spoken language even though they may have enough residual hearing to distinguish environmental noises.

Because of the variety of impairments and individual experiences, disability cannot be defined merely according to an individual’s physiology. Rather, to define and
understand disability properly, we must consider the entire embodied experience, including the social, psychological, and physical experience of a person with a disability.  

**Disability Theories**

Disability, especially physical disability, has been historically viewed as an abnormality and a freakish aberration of the human body. People with disabilities have been displayed as “monsters” by medieval kings and as “curiosities” by sideshow and circus exploiters such as P. T. Barnum. Serious study of disability has its roots in the medical field. From the earliest days of medicine, disabled bodies were prominent specimens in clinical settings as doctors and students tried to understand the nature of disability in terms of an impairment to a part of the body.

As Deborah Creamer notes, scholars often draw a distinction between having an impairment and being disabled. An impairment is damage or abnormality to a physical form or function, such as sight, hearing, or mobility, which may be congenital or may be the result of an accident or illness. Disability is a consequence of the impairment, and is the difficulty encountered by the lack of the physical function. But an impairment does not necessarily denote a disability For instance, people who are culturally Deaf and rely

---

7 The terms used to identify disability have been in flux for decades. Such terms as “handicapped,” “disabled,” “physically challenged,” and even “temporarily able-bodied” (to identify the transient nature of disability) have been used interchangeably by various theorists. But, as some researchers point out, all of those terms are labels that reduce individuals to their experience of being disabled. I prefer to use the phrase “person (or people) with a disability” first, because it does not minimize or ignore the very real problem of disability, and second, because it draws attention to the fact the an individual is a person first; the presence of a disability is secondary to an individual’s embodied humanness.

on sign language consider themselves to be members of a linguistic minority, a language-based culture of deafness in which the impairment is not seen as a disabling condition. Of course, when people who are culturally Deaf interact with people who are hearing, the “disability,” as defined by hearing people, becomes obvious.

Starting in the 1940s, disability became the focus of much research in the fields of philosophy, biology, anthropology, linguistic studies, and sociology, to name a few, and several major theories of disability have been advanced. Many of these theories are “top-down” systems of representation in which disability is defined from the perspective of intellectual privilege:

The most authoritative representations of disabled persons arise from medical and/or therapeutic disciplines, and the social sciences. Anyone who is to be regarded as “in the know” about disability must show that they know that it is a problem and the more details they possess of the problem, the better. This is the “official textbook” of disability represented in our culture.

Disability is often represented as a “problem,” but scholars, disability activists and people with disabilities have not always agreed on where to locate the source of that problem. Those with the resources, power, and support have been the ones who offer definitions to which society pays heed, whereas those with perhaps the most important information to offer—that of the embodied experience of disability—have not had a voice in the conversation until recently.

---

9 The term “Deaf” with a capital D refers to Deaf culture, which uses sign language. The term “deaf” refers to people with various forms of hearing loss who do not use sign language and who do not consider themselves to be part of the Deaf community.

The earliest theories focused on biology, locating the problem of disability in the deviant body of the individual with a disability. This model, called the medical or \textit{functional-limitation} model, assumes that disability is defined by a body that does not work properly, and, therefore, attention is focused on what a person with a disability cannot do.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, disability is primarily seen as a medical or biological condition. Because the disabling condition is located in an individual body, disability is defined as a problem of impairment—of individual bodies that do not conform to normal expectations of human ability. Disability, then, is reduced to the capabilities of the individual body and to a comparison with objective norms that are identified by the medical community and society in general.

Because the definition for disability in this model is focused on the \textit{individual body of another person}, that definition becomes objective. That is, if a person displays certain physical conditions, he or she is automatically considered “disabled.” Under this model, anyone who cannot see or hear, for instance, is disabled, regardless of her or his ability to function in society. In addition, this definition of disability is something that is imposed on people with disabilities from the medical field, and does not take into account the perspectives of those whose experiences are being defined.

According to this model, disability is a defect in normal functioning, and the medical and psychological response is to focus on the physical functioning of the individual body: to “fix,” “correct,” or “cure” what can be remedied through surgery, drugs, or rehabilitation. The focus is always on what is “broken,” or on that which is

\textsuperscript{11} Creamer, \textit{Disability and Christian Theology}, 22ff.
undesirable and detrimental to an individual’s bodily health, as it is defined by normative standards of bodily function. While for some people the loss of physical function can be restored through medical intervention, for others only partial restoration is possible, and for still others no medical technology exists as of yet to restore any kind of significant function. The goal of the medical model is to restore enough function through medical intervention or the use of assistive devices so an individual can participate in society. However, because some people with disabilities cannot regain or overcome the loss of a certain bodily function, they are considered beyond help, and are sometimes institutionalized or relegated to the margins of society. When a disabling condition cannot be fixed in some way through medical intervention, then the focus often turns to the individual’s psychological process of adjustment. Disability is thus reduced to a pathology—a problem that resides either in individual bodies that do not fit an objective set of “norms” for physical functioning or in individual psyches that cannot adapt to the experience of disability.

Because the medical model draws attention to bodily function that is abnormal or undesirable, it adds to the experience of stigmatization for people with disabilities. The ways in which the model draws clear lines between what is normal or acceptable and what is not, and the ways in which it locates the problem in the individual with a disability, leads to labeling and disenfranchisement. As Deborah Creamer notes, “it is only a short step from saying that ‘you have a problem’ to believe that ‘you are a

---

12 Eiesland, The Disabled God, 58.
problem.”

13 This creates a vicious cycle: because stigma is caused by the “social disruption” or threat to the values of society (in this case, the value of a well-functioning body that participates in and contributes to the well-being of society), stigmatization leads to awkward and strained social interactions with society, which then leads to an even greater experience of stigmatization for people with disabilities. 14 It was common in previous generations to isolate or “hide” people with disabilities because of the level of discomfort they caused for able-bodied people, thus imbuing disability with not only a sense of stigma but of disgust. Stigmatization renders a person “not quite human,” which has resulted in people in the medical field advocating for gene therapy as a form of eugenics to remove disability. 15 But stigmatization is a social construct that occurs when “normal” people interact with those who do not fit a certain set of norms. Thus, the “problem” of disability extends beyond dysfunctional bodies. 16

Disability advocates, including people with disabilities, reacted against the medical model of disability with the critique that the model focuses exclusively on the physiology of disability while ignoring the sociological aspects of an individual’s

13 Creamer, Disability and Christian Theology, 24.

14 Eiesland, The Disabled God, 60.


16 Here, and throughout this project, I use “dysfunctional” to mean “deviating from norms of expected function.” Sometimes these norms are objectively defined, as in societal norms, and sometimes they are more subjective, as in an individual’s concept of his or her own bodily function or his or her ability to function in the world. I hope my use of the term will be made clear by the context in which I use it.
experience with disability. These advocates raised questions about whether the source of
disability is located in the bodily impairment or in something outside the body, such as
the way society is constructed and functions: Is disability “fundamentally a personal
tragedy” or is it “a form of social oppression”? Is disability something that is inherent
and inevitable for a person with an impaired body, or is it something imposed from
outside the body?

In the mid 1970s, when the voices of people with disabilities were finally being
heard and valued and the disability rights movement began, the social or minority group
theory of disability was proposed, which emphasizes “shared experiences of
discrimination and oppression.” In this model, disability is defined not by abnormality
in bodily function, but in the oppression, discrimination, and exclusion that people with
disabilities face. It is not lack of ability or bodily function that disables a person; rather, it
is the inability or unwillingness of society to accommodate, accept, and acknowledge the
worth and potential contributions of that person. For example, a person who uses a
wheelchair because of an impairment in bodily function only becomes disabled when he
or she confronts a building entrance that is accessible solely by a set of stairs. As Thomas
Reynolds notes, “as a loss of bodily function, impairment is socially transformed into a
disability, a restriction of activity that excludes social participation.”

---

17 Vic Finkelstein, quoted in Carol Thomas, “How is Disability Understood? An Examination of
Sociological Approaches,” Disability and Society 19, no.6 (2004): 571.

18 Creamer, Disability and Christian Theology, 25.

19 Thomas E. Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality (Grand
This model locates the problem of disability not in the condition of being physically impaired or disabled, but in the “systems of social relations and institutions”—inter-personal relationships, communities, schools, community organizations, churches—that work to marginalize and discriminate against people with disabilities. The problem of disability is still considered a problem of embodiment, but it becomes a problem of social and political bodies rather than a problem of individual bodies. The emphasis shifts from individual body parts that do not function properly to the macro-body of society that does not function to allow for full participation by all people.

However, the physical construction of society is not the only problem. According to some disability scholars, the most daunting problem that people with disabilities face is neither the loss of function from a physical impairment nor physical barriers. Rather, the biggest problem is the attitudes and values of society. Nancy Eiesland cites two of the most harmful attitudes: (1) paternalism, which stems from the stereotype that people with disabilities are weak and helpless, and results in things being done for or to people with disabilities, rather than with them; and (2) social aversion, which derives from fear or disgust and results in isolation, exclusion, and discrimination. These attitudes arise, in part, because people with disabilities are an offence to our cultural ideals, which define the body by expectations of beauty and perfection, by normative social interaction, and by sociocultural and economic productivity and usefulness.

---

20 Eiesland, The Disabled God, 62.

21 Ibid., 64.

As Creamer notes, this makes disability more than simply “a functional or theoretical concern—it becomes an issue of justice as well.”

The social construct of disability creates the unjust system of ableism which, like all “isms,” generates stereotypes that prevent people with disabilities from even having an opportunity to participate in society as capable, contributing citizens. According to this model, the solution to the problem of disability lies not in “fixing” the individual, but in addressing unjust social systems, working for systemic changes in societies, and advocating for equal opportunities for people with disabilities. In contrast to the medical model, which identifies disability as a personal tragedy, the social group model defines disability as a communal tragedy.

While this social group model is an improvement over the medical model, it does not go far enough to define disability as both a matter of individual bodies and social bodies. Some bodily impairments cause difficulty to the individual in their private daily lives outside the realm of public, social interaction. To claim that the main problem of disability lies in the way society is structured is to locate the problems people with disabilities face outside their bodies. But this minimizes the fact that some people have body parts that simply do not work the way they are designed to work and that present challenges in accomplishing even simple everyday tasks. As John Harris observes, one of the troubling claims of some scholars who support the social model of disability is that

---

23 Creamer, Disability and Christian Theology, 25.

24 Ibid., 25.
“once the social dimensions of disability have been resolved no seriously ‘disabling’ features remain.”

There is a fine balance between recognizing the limitations set up by society and recognizing the limitations caused by physical impairment and disability. For instance, even if some of the social barriers were broken down, and accessibility to places of employment were a given for people with disabilities, physical impairment could still cause problems. As Nancy Mairs notes, “Getting a job is one thing; getting to it is another. Not everyone can run out the door, a coat in one hand and a piece of toast in the other, jump onto a bicycle or into a car, and join the morning rush to the office.”

Carol Thomas argues that if we simply equate the problem of disability with the restrictions imposed by social barriers, it becomes easy to claim that “impairment does not cause restrictions of activity because . . . all restrictions of activity are caused by social barriers.”

When the daily lived experience with impaired bodily function is devalued, “there is little room for people with disabilities to have a negative or even ambivalent relationship to their impairment.”

When society is the cause of the problem, then people with disabilities are encouraged to minimize the problems within their own bodies. This

---


28 Creamer, Disability and Christian Theology, 27.
can lead people to deny that their bodies do not function well, which then leads to severe psychological problems. In speaking about my own experience with hearing loss and denial, I wrote:

I think denial is part and parcel of any experience with disability, but in the case of hearing loss, it is easier to pretend that you don’t have a disability. Hearing loss is an invisible disability; there’s no wheelchair or cane or limp to give you away. In fact, if you are skilled enough in pretending, you can coast right along, fooling people into believing that you don’t have a disability at all. But pretending and living in denial only get you so far and can cause a lot of grief along the way.  

Some scholars are working on the social group model of disability in order to discover the proper balance between the ontology of the individual body and the epistemology of social constructs: “Disability . . . is an emergent property, located, temporally speaking, in terms of the interplay between the biological reality of physiological impairment, structural conditioning, and socio-cultural interaction.”

Edwards and Imrie note that in the field of disability studies, “an understanding of the interrelationships between disabled people’s bodily function, and broader socio-cultural values and practices, is underdeveloped.” R. B. Jones, a pediatrician who worked extensively with children with disabilities, draws a comparison between “disability” and the now-disparaged term “handicapped.” He also makes a critical distinction between the two that highlights both the connection and the distinction between the medical and the social models of disability:


30 Simon Williams, quoted in Thomas, “How is Disability Understood?” 577.

Most of my patients did have physical impairments, which although rarely curable, did usually need treatment. These physical impairments often prevented them from carrying out actions, walking for example, with which their unimpaired peers had no problems. They were disabled. For many, society’s response to their impairment and disability, inadequate education, rejection by their family or community for example, caused further problems; they were handicapped.32

Thus, the theoretical conversation is being propelled in a direction that looks at disability holistically, taking into account bodily impairment, psychological adjustment, self-image, interpersonal relationships, and the relationship between people with disabilities and the larger society.

While the social group model has gained greater acceptance than the medical model, some scholars feel that neither is adequate to explain the experience of being a person with a disability: “Both the medical model and social model seek to explain disability universally, and end up creating totalizing, meta-historical narratives that exclude important dimensions of disabled people’s lives and of their knowledge.”33 One inadequacy of both models is that they construct disability as an absolute category defined as part of various binary systems: disabled/non-disabled, functional/non-functional, normal/abnormal.34 Persons are either disabled or not, their bodies are either functional or not, or normal or not. Postmodern theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Emmanuel Levinas claim that binary logic such as this keeps people in


34 Creamer, Disability and Christian Theology, 31.
subjugation and oppression. Luce Irigaray claims that the less significant term (in this case, “disabled” or “abnormal”) has value only insofar as it is the negation of the dominant term (“able-bodied” or “normal”). The lesser term, then, has little intrinsic value; it serves only as a sign of what is not good or desired. In addition, the medical and social models both emphasize difference: the medical body highlights the difference within a dysfunctional body as compared to “normal bodies” while the social model highlights the difference of people with disabilities as they are members of a minority group who face stigmatism and oppression.

Deborah Creamer suggests that while neither of these models is adequate, we cannot reject them, but must further expand the conversation in such a way that honors and includes the lived experiences of people with disabilities. She speaks of the “fluidity” of disability and notes that, from the experience of an individual, the self-conception of his or her “disability” may change from day to day. For instance, some days my hearing loss makes me feel disabled, especially when I miss important parts of conversations or misunderstand something over the telephone. There are other days when the accommodations I use, including a cochlear implant, a hearing aid, special phones, neckloops, and assistive listening systems, allow me to participate more fully in my daily activities and ministry. Thus, any objective and absolute definition of disability will not reflect my lived experience. While other people with disabilities may not be able to

---

35 See Irigaray’s work on the “otherness” of women in Speculum of the Other Woman (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985) and This Sex which is Not One (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

36 Creamer, Disability and Christian Theology, 31.
experience the same level of participation, there are times when they feel “more or less disabled than in other situations.”

Creamer proposes a third model to supplement the insights gained by the medical and social models, which she calls the *limits model*. She describes this as a deconstruction of the idea of “normal” embodiment and physical functioning and a recognition that “limits” are a “common [and normal] aspect of being human,” and by extension, of being embodied. The starting point for this model of theoretical reflection is the idea that limitation is a natural and common part of being human. The “problems” arise when we value some limits and devalue others, or when we make accommodations for some but not for others. In addition, this model surpasses the binary construct of disability and attends to “the fluidity of human embodiment.”

This is not to say that we should accept all limits as normal. Nor is it to say that we should not continue to fight limits that are artificially or unjustly imposed, such as exclusion from a community because a body does not function as it might. Rather, the limits model demonstrates that the proper starting point for an anthropological examination of disability is not the idea of normality as it is defined in relation with the binary terms “able-bodied” and “disabled.” Instead, theoretical (and theological) reflection on the problem of disability must begin by rejecting this binary logic and the

---

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 93.
concept that there is some ideal “norm” of embodied experience. As Jennie Weiss Block notes, even our understanding of what is normal is itself limited. Although he is addressing health and sickness rather than disability per se, Jürgen Moltmann’s words support the idea of finding a holistic interpretation of disability:

We cannot measure “health” merely against the system of values of the particular society in question. We also have to note the agreement and the contradictions between the bodily Gestalt of human beings and their social environment. “Health” must be defined in several dimensions if the concept of health is to be conducive to the life of human beings. It must find its definition in the flux of the history between the person and society, society and nature, past and present, immanence and transcendence.

In other words, disability cannot be defined solely by any one model unless that model includes both the objective and the subjective.

Thomas Reynolds offers what he calls a “more holistic definition of disability” that rests in the intersection between “involuntary bodily impairment, social role expectations, and external physical [and] social obstructions that come together in a way that preempts an intended participation in communal life.” In this definition, both forms of embodiment—individual and social—are held together in identifying the problem of disability. In addition, Reynolds critiques not only the social definition of what is normal regarding physical embodiment, but what is normal in terms of social participation. He argues that the relationship between physical and social embodiment is a circular logic in

40 Ibid., 116.


43 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 27.
which a “society’s conception of normalcy informs and governs exchanges between persons, producing a system of conventions resistant to or incapable of accommodating the non-normal.”

The experience of disability expands the definition of normal embodiment, not only because of the socially-constructed view of what is “normal,” but also because people with disabilities often use devices that compensate for the loss of biological function of certain body parts. Many people with disabilities consider devices such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, and white canes as an extension of their bodies. Nancy Eiesland describes the experience of a woman who was born without lower extremities and uses an electric wheelchair: “[She] subverts the notion that she has a ‘natural’ body and other ‘unnatural’ accoutrements. Her body doesn’t stop with the bones and flesh. She incorporates devices that promote her self-definition as a healthy, mobile, and intact woman.” Nancy Mairs, who has multiple sclerosis and uses a wheelchair, writes poignantly about her experience of “incorporating artificial body parts that compose her ‘bones and braces body’”: “I don’t think about my brace any more than I think about my cane. I’ve incorporated them, I suppose: made them, in their necessity, insensate but fundamental parts of my body.” This lived experience of embodiment that includes both

44 Ibid.

45 Nancy Eiesland notes that while some technological devices are accepted by people with disabilities as part of their embodied experience, other devices that “frustrate their sense of body” are rejected, thus supporting the idea that the experience of disabled embodiment is very subjective (The Disabled God, 47).

46 Ibid., 38.

biological and artificial parts complicates any attempt objectively to define the embodied experience of disability. Perhaps, then, the proper starting point for a holistic definition of disability is neither a dysfunctional physical body nor a dysfunctional social body, but the lived experience of persons with disability.

This turn to the subjective and focus on the personal experience of disability is evident in the work of Stanley Hauerwas, one of the first scholars to advocate for people with mental disabilities through academic research and study:

People who really care about the mentally handicapped never run out of things to say, since they do not write “about” the mentally handicapped precisely because they do not view the mentally handicapped as just another “subject.” They write for and, in some sense, with the mentally handicapped. To be able to write for and with the mentally handicapped requires that you know people who are mentally handicapped. By “know” I mean you must be with the handicapped in a way they may be able to claim you as a friend.\(^{48}\)

In his work with people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, Hauerwas examines the ways that disability affects our understanding of what it means to be human, to live as humans in the coming reign of God, and faithfully to embody and live out Christian ethics. He challenges the notion in “liberal society” that people with disabilities are “poor” and “weak” and in need of charity. He also debunks the idea that authentic and “normal” personhood requires independence, rationality, and the ability to “develop a purposeful life-course without any necessary reference to others.”\(^{49}\) Thus,


Hauerwas’ work was among the first to take disability studies into the realm of theological studies, a topic to which I now turn.50

**Disability in the Scriptures**

The historic witness of Christianity regarding a variety of human conditions and experiences has been both contradictory and oppressive. For instance, the Hebrew Scriptures consider fertility as a sign of God’s favor; infertility, at best, is a temporary situation that can be “corrected” by the eventual blessing of having children.51 Regarding the scriptural witness and disability, Nancy Eiesland writes,

> The primary problem for the church is not how to “accommodate” disabled persons. The problem is a disabling theology that functionally denies inclusion and justice for many of God’s children. Much of church theology and practice—including the Bible itself—has often been dangerous for persons with disabilities.52

Eiesland points out one such disabling theological concept: “The persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned: the defiled

---

50 *Responsibility for Devalued Persons: Ethical Interactions Between Society, the Family, and the Retarded* (Springfield, Ill.: C.C. Thomas, 1982). Although not a specifically theological work, Hauerwas’ arguments are grounded in his larger vision of Christian ethics. Early studies of disability that are explicitly theological and ecclesiological include Hauerwas’ *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) and Brett Webb-Mitchell’s, “Crisis in Church Communities: The Challenge of Integrating People with Disabilities” (ThM thesis, Harvard Divinity School, 1985).


evildoer or the spiritual superhero.”

Deborah Creamer is even more critical of the Christian tradition regarding disability:

It is important to note that religion, particularly Christianity, has frequently been cited as a source of destructive stereotypes about people with disabilities. Traditional understandings of God validate detrimental explanations for and analyses of disability. Models of omnipotence support images of dis-ability, and models that fail to challenge such assumptions implicitly perpetuate them.

Because Christian tradition has its roots in scripture, the proper starting point for our consideration of disability theology is the Bible. According to Julia Watts Belser, the Hebrew scriptures provide a “strong ethical foundation for affirming the humanity and dignity of people with disabilities.” The ancient Israelites were commanded to “not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind” (Lev. 19:14), which reveals an obligation to treat people with disabilities with justice and decency. In his examination of disability and Jewish Law, Tzvi Marx observes that compassion toward people with disabilities is at the heart of the Jewish tradition. This was a marked contrast to the later Greek (as formulated by Plato and Aristotle) and Roman (as stated in the legal document the Twelve Tables) practice of infanticide as a response to children born with disabilities. However, Marx also notes that the Jewish tradition is not consistent, and the “instances of apparent indifference, even callousness” toward people with disabilities are found side-by-side with passages that call for their just and humane treatment. Even these latter

---

53 Ibid., 70.
54 Creamer, Disability and Christian Theology, 79.
passages, which speak of a concern for people with disabilities, are laden with paternalism and pity. Rebecca Raphael observes that in laws designed to protect them, people with disabilities have no voice, and are treated as passive recipients of other people’s charity. In other words, the power belonged solely to the able-bodied, while people with disabilities had little or no agency in their interactions with society. 57

Several scholars have pointed out how certain interpretations of scripture have promoted what Amos Yong calls an “ableist worldview that continues to stigmatize, marginalize, and exclude people with disabilities.” 58 Furthermore, Yong bemoans the “flat representations of disability that have been lifted from the biblical test by generations of ableist interpreters.” 59 He begins his study of the Bible and disability with statements found in the Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus. The “idealized” vision of priestly bodies raises particular concerns for the issue of disability. In one passage (Lev. 21:17-23), priests with any number of physical impairments, including blindness, lameness, having one limb too long, a broken foot or hand, eye blemishes, or a crushed testicle, are prohibited from entering the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. Although these priests were permitted to perform other priestly duties outside that most holy place, the code asserts that these blemishes would profane the sanctuaries of God (Lev. 21:23). Thus, holiness—the call which God gives to the people of Israel—seems incompatible


59 Ibid., 47.
with physical impairment and disability, which somehow distorts and desecrates the divine image and the sacredness of the sanctuary.  

There are several references in Deuteronomy chapter 28 that link physical impairment with curses for disobedience, such as this passage: “The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, with ulcers, scurvy, and itch, of which you cannot be healed. The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind” (vss. 27-28). This and other passages from this section of the covenantal blessings/curses seem to link disease or disability with “purposive divine action intended to deal with and respond to the disobedience of God’s people.”

In some passages in the Bible, disability is correlated with sinfulness or divine retribution. For instance, in the Book of Job, the title character is afflicted with a disabling condition. Directed by the principle of covenantal blessings and curses, Job’s friends repeatedly link his condition with some sin he must have committed: “As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed” (Job 4:8-9). By the end of the book, Job’s self-proclaimed innocence is finally borne out and his health is restored. But as Yong notes, this only further supports the idea of divine blessing for obedience and curses for sinfulness, since Job, being free of sin, sees his curses converted into blessings.

---

60 Eiesland, The Disabled God, 72.

61 Yong, The Bible, Disability, and The Church, 23.

62 Ibid., 37-38.
There is no single, cohesive representation of disability in the New Testament. On the one hand, disability is sometimes equated with sinfulness. In Mark 8:17-19, Jesus likens the disciples’ hardened hearts to being unable to see or hear. In John 5:14, Jesus heals the man who lay beside the pool of Bethesda and then tells him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.” In addition, in the story of the man born blind, the immediate reaction of Jesus’ disciples to the blind man is to ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). These passages seem to support the common belief that people with disabilities have done something to deserve their condition. Finally, in the Gospel of Luke, a paralytic man is brought to Jesus, who says to the man, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you” (Luke 5:20). When the religious authorities complain about Jesus’ authority to forgive sins, Jesus responds, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’?” (Luke 5:23), which seems to suggest that healing and forgiveness of sins are the same.

On the other hand, some New Testament passages seem to release people with disabilities from the responsibility for their impairments. For instance, in the story of the man born blind, Jesus rejects the disciples’ assumption that the blindness was a result of sin: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (John 9:3).

The Gospel of Luke records Jesus’ paradigmatic statement in the synagogue at Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of
sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-19).

All four gospels record stories of Jesus healing people who are blind, deaf, lame, leprous, and “demon-possessed.” It seems, then, that Jesus’ healing of disabling conditions is the core of the Gospel. As Yong observes, “the gospel has meant relief for people with disabilities [and . . .] the good news refers to the healing power of God.”

A worldview that considers properly functioning bodies to be normal and acceptable interprets these healing stories as affirming that the healing of bodily impairment is salvific. However, Jesus was doing more than curing dysfunctional physical bodies. In Jesus’ day (as, to some extent, in ours), people with various disabilities were social outcasts, relegated not only to the margins of society, but to a subsistence lifestyle supported by begging for alms by the side of the road (as in the story of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10). Healing for these people was not confined to the recovery of bodily function; healing meant re-integration into the community as a full participant in social and religious life. As Kathy Black notes,

The biblical healing texts were intended to be liberating events for those whom Jesus healed. Though they had been excluded from the worshiping community and from society at large because of their disability, Jesus’ acts allowed them to

---

63 Demon possession was a common understanding in Jesus’ culture of what we would call mental illness. Thus, there is a strong (albeit culturally-conditioned) correlation between evil or “uncleanness” and mental illness that affects some modern people’s understanding of the causes of mental illness.

64 Yong notes that this central healing ministry was continued by Jesus’ followers, as recorded in the Book of Acts.

65 Yong, The Bible, Disability, and the Church, 59.
be full participants in their religious, secular, and domestic spheres. The healing was liberating because it meant incorporation back into these communities.\textsuperscript{66}

In modern society, which is still very much grounded in the medical model of disability, “healing” is so frequently connected to “curing” that the two are conflated, and this sense of restoration to community as healing is lost. Thus, restoration to community is seen as a byproduct of fixing dysfunctional physical bodies through medical and technological means.

In some New Testament passages, disability is portrayed as a kind of virtuous suffering which one must endure in order to gain the rewards of the next life. For instance, Jesus’ admonition to “take up your cross” is sometimes interpreted to mean that people with disabilities should gratefully accept the “burden” of their disability in order to be faithful disciples. What follows is the idea that people with disabilities should passively accept their situation and silently endure the injustices committed against them by society.

The Apostle Paul has sometimes been used as an example of the ideal of “virtuous suffering.” Yong suggests that Paul may have been the first disabled theologian.\textsuperscript{67} In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes,

\begin{quote}
You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me (Gal. 4:13-15).
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{67} Or at least the first theologian to develop a “theology of weakness” that was certainly influenced by his own experience of physical impairment and suffering.
In addition, Paul lifted up his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7), which some biblical scholars believe was a disability, as a sign of divine grace: “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ” (2 Cor. 12:10). Like Job’s friends, Paul suggests that physical impairment, disability, and/or suffering is a means of grace that is to be gratefully received and accepted in order to be a faithful disciple and to gain eternal rewards.

Christianity has often regarded people with disabilities as instruments on which to hone its charitable skills. This view is grounded in the biblical mandate to care for the poor, and especially in Jesus’ words that describe the nations that care for those who are in need and are marginalized: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). Too often, the church considers people with disabilities, along with other disenfranchised people, as “the least of these” to whom they are to minister. Jennie Weiss Block argues that if people with disabilities are members of “the least of these” it is not because of their physical impairments and disabilities, but because of the way they are treated by society.68 Thus, the church has a long history of reducing people with disabilities to objects that are ministered to rather than people who are allowed to participate in the ministry of the congregation. This tendency to slip into the imbalance of power in caregiving seems to be a natural human trait that is unfortunately encouraged by the Christian witness. According to Yong, “most non-disabled people will easily understand

---

68 Block, Copious Hosting, 51.
how to ‘lend a helping hand’ to the profoundly disabled but have little inkling of what it means to minister *with* them.”

The Bible also fosters the belief that people with disabilities could be cured or healed if only their faith were stronger. In several of the gospel healing stories, Jesus affirms that the faith of the individual is the channel of healing. The gospels record several instances when Jesus tells the one who was healed, “Your faith has made you well.”

Finally, even the eschatological hope of a redeemed and perfected world complete with transformed bodies encourages the church to devalue the experience of disability. Paul’s eschatological affirmation of “perishable bodies [that] must put on imperishability” (1 Cor. 15:53) implies that anything associated with perishability, including disease and impairment, will be eradicated in the world to come. The author of the Book of Revelation affirms that in the world to come, “there will be no more . . . mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

Yong argues that the apostle Paul’s “depiction of the resurrection body suggests why there will be no more sadness in the new earth”: these new bodies will be raised in honor and power because the dishonor and weakness of physical bodies—including the experience of disability—will be eliminated. Thus, says Yong, disability has “no place

---

69 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 113.

70 Examples include the story of the centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant (Matt. 8:5-13); the story of the woman with a hemorrhage who was healed when she touched Jesus’ garment (Matt. 9:20-22); and the story of the healing of two blind men (Matt. 9:27-31).

71 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 119.
in God’s new creation.”\textsuperscript{72} But Yong notes that “some impairments are so identity-constitutive that their removal would involve the obliteration of the person as well.”\textsuperscript{73} So while the promise of transformed bodies without impairment seems hopeful, it actually diminishes and ignores the embodied experience of people with disabilities.

\textbf{Disability Theology Today}

The church’s understanding and theological interpretations of disability, which has been through the lens of able-bodied experience, have reinforced the marginalization and oppression of people with disabilities. Since the 1990s, theologians have been reframing disability theology in ways that honor and privilege disability. Nancy Eiesland was one of the pioneers in the field of disability theology. In her seminal work \textit{The Disabled God} (1994), she constructs a “liberatory theology of disability” in which she calls for a reimagining of religious symbols because symbols “establish and maintain beliefs and values.”\textsuperscript{74} Because current religious symbols and images (such as Christ, the suffering servant, and the ideal of embodiment that reveals the divine image) are grounded in able-bodied values, Eiesland challenges the Christian community to find new symbols that can confront oppression and stigmatization: “Resymbolization entails the deconstruction of dominant symbolic meanings and a reconstitution of those symbols,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 121.  
\textsuperscript{74} Eiesland, \textit{The Disabled God}, 91.
\end{flushright}
making them both liberatory for the marginalized group and unsettling for the dominant group.”³⁵

To Eiesland, the incarnation of Jesus addresses both issues of embodiment and contextual symbolism. She argues that the images of Jesus as the suffering servant or as a model of virtuous suffering cultivate a bias against disabled embodiment and experience. She offers a resymbolization of Jesus—a “contextualized Christology”—as the “disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side, and the imago Dei.”³⁶ This image both demonstrates how God is present with people with disabilities and unmasks “the ways in which theological inquiry has frequently instituted able-bodied experience as the theological norm.”³⁷ This disabled God is symbolically located not in the Holy of Holies where physical impairment is considered a desecration, but at the margins of society with people with disabilities. As Yong notes, this disabled God in the resurrected Jesus shatters the expectation of human perfection in the earthly body of Jesus in which there was no sin or blemish.³⁸ This new symbol forces Christians to reconceive the disabled body as one in which God is present and active, and to reimagine traditional ideas about holiness, wholeness, and power.

Jennie Weiss Block proposes a “theology of access” that is grounded in the social model of disability and that has a specific focus on the inclusion of people with

³⁵ Ibid., 98.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 99.

³⁸ Yong, The Bible, Disability, and the Church, 125ff.
disabilities in the body of Christ. Her framework does not offer a theology of disability, per se, but rather an ecclesiology of inclusion, friendships, and interdependence. Likewise, Kathy Black advocates for inclusion through her “theology of interdependence” in which she argues for a redefining of the church’s traditional understanding of God’s omnipotence. Rather than being in control of everything that happens in our world, God is intimately interdependent with all of creation. God does not cause disability, but God does call us to “work interdependently with God to achieve well-being for ourselves and others.”

Deborah Creamer laments both the “invisibility” of the experience of disability from modern contextualized and liberatory theologies—even those that focus on the body—and the inadequacies of the disability theologies proposed by Eiesland, Block, and Black. Starting with the embodied theology of Sallie McFague and using her own limits model of disability, Creamer constructs a theological understanding of disability that “critically reflects on the full range of human experience of embodiment, including disability, as primary source material.” For Creamer, limits are unsurprising, intrinsic, and good (or at least not evil) aspects of being human. Instead of focusing on what we lack (what she calls being “limited”), this model begins with the understanding that

79 Black, 38.

80 Creamer (Disability and Christian Theology) acknowledges the contributions of these disability theologies, but she also notes their limitations: Eiesland’s disabled God (The Disabled God) may not be accessible theologically to people who have “ambivalent” relationship with their disabilities or to those who actively seek to overcome or experience healing from their disability; Block’s theological argument (Copious Hosting) is too focused on barriers, and falls short once those barriers are removed; and Black (A Healing Homiletic) fails to address properly questions of power in her image of interdependence.

81 Creamer, Disability and Christian Theology, 54.
limits, or boundaries of what is possible, are a necessary and appropriate part of creation: all persons have limits, some of which “are viewed as more normal (I cannot fly) than others (I cannot run).” Creamer also demonstrates that the proper starting point for theological anthropology is not the idea of normality as it is defined in relation with the binary terms “able-bodied” and “disabled.” Instead, theological reflection on the problem of disability must begin by rejecting both this binary logic and the concept that there is some ideal “norm” of embodied experience.

Both Eiesland and Creamer offer a theological basis for reimagining the nature of God through the lens of disability studies and through the embodied experience of people with disabilities. Eiesland’s reconceptualization of the primary symbol of the church—the risen Christ—works to shatter perceptions of normalcy and wholeness. Jesus’ resurrected body is neither perfect nor whole (as society would define “wholeness”), and it demonstrates that disability “does not contradict the human-divine integrity.” Thus, the resurrection of Christ’s body cannot be considered as a victory of “perfection” over “imperfection.” Rather, the resurrection is a vindication of the justice of God—a justice that favors those on the margins whom society would consider “imperfect.” That which we might call “imperfect” is gathered as is into the life of God through the resurrection of the embodied Christ. The signs of our earthly embodiment—our scars, diseases, and disabilities—are not erased in the resurrection life. Likewise, Creamer invites us to

---

82 Ibid., 96.
83 Ibid., 116.
84 Eiesland, The Disabled God, 101.
imagine a God that includes limits because, as she notes, a God without limits implies that “the more limits we have, the less we are like God. If God is unlimited, then the less limited are more like God, and the more limited are less like God.”

Each of these reflections on disability attempt to locate disability within an accessible (pun intended) theological framework, but none of them are broad enough both to provide a strong systematic theology of disability and to include subjective and objective experiences of disability. Nancy Eiesland’s challenge to the church to find new religious symbols that respect and include disability is admirable, but her image of the disabled God in a sip-puff wheelchair may be, at best, irrelevant, or at worst, disturbing, to people with other forms of disability or no disability. On the other hand, Jennie Weiss Block’s “theology of access” has much to say about theological anthropology, but little to say about God and about how our subjective and objective experiences of disability affect our understanding of God. Deborah Creamer’s idea of limits as an inherent and universal human experience seems expansive, but her argument that “if each of us lives long enough, we will become disabled” both minimizes the lived experience of disability that, for some people, is a daily reality, and equates disability with the deterioration of the body as we age. While Kathy Black’s “Theology of Interdependence” does not offer a theological system, it does begins with the assumption that disability exists without trying to either universalize or particularize it. She does not try to explain why disability exists.

---

85 Creamer, Disability and Christian Theology, 112.

86 Ibid. 96.
Rather, she explores how all people—whether or not they have a disability—are to be in relationship with each other and with God.

Although these theories about disability and theological reflections on disability are varied in their focus, in their location of source material, and in their conclusions, they are all grounded in the basic premise of embodiment. Some theories emphasize the physical body, while others highlight social bodies. The concept of the body is central to both the experience and study of disability and also to the church’s understanding of its nature, purpose, and mission. Therefore, I turn next to an examination of the body in ecclesiology, and particularly to the metaphorical body of Christ that is the church.
CHAPTER 3
THE METAPHORICAL BODY OF CHRIST

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

—Romans 12:4-5, NRSV

One of the most fundamental images of ecclesiology is Paul’s description of the church as the body of Christ. As with any metaphor, the body of Christ lends itself to various interpretations and applications. Paul’s use of the metaphorical “body” could be interpreted as ontological reality for the church, as a functional description of the church, or as a portrayal of the fellowship and unity of the Christian community (koinonia). Also, as with any metaphor, the “body” is both like and unlike, and both reveals and conceals, aspects about that which it is meant to describe (the church). In order to understand the body of Christ metaphor for the purpose of this thesis, we must look briefly at its intended meaning in the writings of Paul and its function as a metaphor according to linguistic theory.

What Did Paul Intend?

It can be difficult to determine precisely what Paul meant when he used the phrase “the body of Christ.” Paul, of course, was no systematic theologian. His use of the phrase occurs in three different epistles sent to three different congregations in three different communities. Paul Minear warns us against trying to find a “single inclusive definition of
the image” because “the body of Christ is not a single expression with an unchanging meaning. Paul’s thought remains extremely flexible and elastic. In some passages the church is explicitly identified with Christ’s body, but in other passages this identification becomes very tenuous indeed.”¹ With this caveat in mind, I move ahead to discover Paul’s motivation and intention for using the phrase the body of Christ.²

When Paul told the church in Corinth “you are the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27), did he mean to affirm that they were the literal body of Christ, or was he referring to the Corinthian church as a figurative body, a community of believers who are connected to Christ? The first interpretation was affirmed by Augustine and later by the Roman Catholic Church:

Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself. Do you understand and grasp, brethren, God's grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ.³

According to Augustine, one of the ways Christ can be understood and named is “as the whole Christ in the fullness of the church, that is, as head and body, according to the completeness of a certain perfect humanity, the man in whom each of us are limbs.”⁴

The second concept—that the church is the figurative body of Christ—is held by several Protestant denominations:


² We will examine the distinction that Paul makes between “body” and “flesh” in chapter 4.


The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men.\(^5\)

We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ.\(^6\)

Did Paul use the body of Christ image to describe the ideal relationship between members of the Christian community as one that functions to promote mutual support and interdependence, or as one that represents an ontological reality (unity)? Does the phrase carry an ethical component? Or, is our tendency to read Paul’s phrase as metaphorical anachronistic? Did Paul not mean for it to be metaphorical at all, but to be an actual representation of the church as the physical, earthly body of Christ with each member acting as a different part of that body? Scholars have offered arguments in support of all of these possibilities.\(^7\)

In order to determine Paul’s intention in using the phrase “the body of Christ,” we can make comparisons with other themes in his writings, examine his Christology, and look at his cultural milieu and the situations he was addressing in his letters to the churches in Rome and Corinth. While a detailed examination of all these issues is beyond the scope of this work, I focus briefly on the two latter issues: the cultural influences on Paul’s theology, and the circumstances faced by the Roman and Corinthian churches.


\(^7\) For instance, John A. T. Robinson (The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology [London: SCM, 1952]) argues that the church is literally and concretely the “risen organism of Christ’s person” (p. 50). Robert Gundry, while affirming that the church is associated with and connected to Christ as his body, rejects the idea that the church is substantially the same as Christ’s risen and glorified body (SOMA in Biblical Theology [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976], 223ff).
Paul was well-traveled and in his missionary journeys, he was exposed to different philosophical schools and various religious cults and movements. According to Robert J. Banks, Paul did not just experience these sometimes-competing schools of thought; he “adopted a deliberate policy of accommodation to them.”\(^8\) This is not to say that Paul shaped his emerging Christian theology to conform to these varied systems of belief; rather, he was “always taking such beliefs and practices into account and making them the starting point for his own message and behavior.”\(^9\) Thus, Paul’s theology should be studied in the context of the cultures in which he lived and worked.

Paul used the phrase the “body of Christ” in his letters to churches in the cities of Rome and Corinth where the question of Christian identity was paramount. Paul may have used the body image to help these early Christians understand and establish that identity. Michelle Lee writes, “The early Christians constructed an alternative social world apart from the larger society. This social world applied not only to the physical structure of the Christian communities, but to the ways in which they perceived themselves and their relationship to the world.”\(^10\) In this sense, the newly emerging churches were seen as communities that stood in contrast to wider society and in which members would need to learn new ways of understanding themselves and their relationships to each other, to God, and to the society around them.

---


\(^9\) Ibid.

The Christians in Corinth and Rome were struggling to discover their new identity in societies that were very diverse, cosmopolitan, and polytheistic. In order to solidify the church as a community of faith, new distinct boundaries in behavior, loyalties, and relationships had to be established. Wayne Meeks observes that “Pauline Christianity, like other forms, required ‘conversion’ of those who entered. Conversion is a radical process of re-socialization. It entails strong symbolic and social boundaries separating the group of converts from the macrosociety.” In addition, through this process of re-socialization, “the sect was intended to become virtually the primary group for its members, supplanting all other loyalties,” such as to the emperor, the system of government, and even to one’s family or friends. Meeks also notes that the boundaries for this community had to be somewhat permeable, or else the process of evangelism and conversion would stop.

The churches in Rome and Corinth were set among societies that were steeped in Roman culture, which meant religious and cultural diversity and individualism were...

---


14 This idea of permeability has roots in the early philosophical idea of *poroi*, which were necessary channels or passageways in the body through which the body receives and perceives influences and sensations from the outside. Banks notes that this concept “is one expression of the ancient assumption that the surface of the body is not a sealed boundary” (*Paul’s Idea of Community*, 18).
highly valued. The ideals of the nascent Christian community—monotheism, unity, and mutual cooperation—ran counter to these Roman values, placing Christians in danger of persecution or, at the very least, suspicion from the political authorities. In addition, the new relationships that Christians were creating among themselves meant that old relationships with family members and friends would change. This was another source of potential danger for the churches: “One of the most powerful causes for the hostility of the Roman literary classes toward . . . Christianity was precisely the fear that they would disrupt households and, consequently, undermine the social order.”

Boundaries became important for more than just securing an identity: “The notion of the boundary-protected community indicates the members’ need for protection and belonging.” Paul’s body image thus functioned to foster not only unity, but also a sense of safety from the world within well-defined boundaries. This safety is ensured, in part, by the behavior of each individual part of the body: “the body metaphor . . . can be used to argue for behavior which supports common advantage.” In the case of Corinth (and presumably other early Christian communities), one of the chief advantages of the body image is protection from a potentially hostile (and non-Christian) world.

According to Wayne Meeks, there are five indicators of group boundaries, including rules and rituals of purity, membership sanctions, the development of

---

15 Penner, “Paul, Corinth, and Us.”


18 Lee, Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ, loc. 1018.
autonomous institutions, reports of specific kinds of interactions with macrosociety, and special language involving separation. Michelle Lee argues that Paul’s use of “body” language corresponds to the indicator regarding special language: “The identification of the community as Christ's body both identifies the group and separates it from those who are not part of the ‘body.’”

At points in his letters to the churches in Corinth and Rome, Paul seems to draw strong boundaries between the ideal Christian identity and the identity that the larger society (or “the world”) would impose on the believers. For instance, he warns the Roman Christians, “Do not be conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2). And to the Corinthian church, he writes, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God” (1 Cor. 2:12). As Meeks observes, “In the Pauline letters, a variety of terms distinguish Christians categorically from everyone else. Even the most neutral terms used for non-Christians, hoi exo (‘the outsiders’), makes the sense of separation unmistakable.” Paul’s rhetoric seems to favor a way of being and acting for the Christian community that is independent of the ways of the world. For Paul, then, the church is (or should be) distinct and separate from the world with clear boundaries that govern the ways Christians relate to the world.

---


22 Although Paul also warns against the impossibility of breaking all ties with the world: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons—not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world.” (1 Corinthians 5:9-10, my emphasis).
In addition, Paul is also using body imagery for the community of faith to address a lack of unity among the believers, especially in Corinth. In his first letter to that community, Paul confronts the problem head-on:

For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided? (1 Cor. 1:10-13a).

For Paul, this experience of disunity in the Corinthian church clashed with his understanding of a properly functioning social body, which was influenced by “the learned school of Stoicism, for which one pillar of thought was unity and harmony.”23 In his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes the egalitarianism of the social body that is the church, which stands in contrast to the highly stratified Greco-Roman culture: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).24

According to Banks, there was a long rhetorical tradition dating from at least the first century C.E. that assumed the city-state was a social body in which “strife, discord, or a civil disturbance [was] a disease that must be eradicated.”25 More often than not, philosophers and politicians believed this disease, or illness, resulted not from an external

23 Kim, Christ’s Body in Corinth, loc. 462.

24 Scholars are not in agreement as to whether this egalitarian situation was an accurate description of the early Pauline communities, or simply Paul’s ideal vision for the church. E. Schüssler Fiorenza (In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins, (New York: Crossroad, 1983) argues that the social body of the church was a “discipleship of equals” (180), while John H. Elliot (“The Jesus Movement Was Not Egalitarian but Family-Oriented,” Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches 11, no. 2) counters that there is “no historical instance of an egalitarian movement and no historical analogue for the situation Schüssler Fiorenza imagines” (204).

agent, but from “an imbalance in the body’s internal constituents.” In particular, discord in the social body was the product of “the disruption of the natural concord of the different groups and classes that make up the body politic.” Stoic philosophers believed that the health of the body was threatened when the hierarchy was disrupted; that is, when the “upper” and “lower” classes were at conflict over social issues such as more civic privileges for the larger lower class. In other words, friction within the social body ensued when the lower classes failed to recognize and honor their proper place in the hierarchical system. As Banks points out, one favorite device of Stoic rhetoricians was to “show how the political hierarchy of the city mirrors the harmonious hierarchy of the cosmos [which] works well because each cosmic entity knows its place in the cosmic body.”

In spite of his egalitarian vision, Paul recognized that, like other body politics, the church was inherently hierarchical. Dale Martin argues that the analogy of the human body for a social body “usually functioned conservatively to support hierarchy and to argue that inequality is both necessary and salutary.” Even within his extended depiction of the church as the body of Christ, Paul notes that there is both differentiation

26 Ibid., 39.
27 Ibid.
28 See Ibid., 39ff.
29 Ibid., 40.
and stratification within the body, although he quickly asserts that this ordering of the social body is God’s doing:

The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect . . . but God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body (1 Cor. 12: 22-25).

Although it is not clear what Paul means by this reference to “weaker” members, we can infer that, at least in this passage, the measure of respect and honor afforded to individual members is more a matter of roles within the body than some kind of social or economic status: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues” (1 Cor. 12:28). It is important to note that Paul is at the same time affirming a natural, God-given hierarchy while also questioning the assumptions of Roman-Greco culture about the hierarchy of social bodies. Here Paul makes it clear that any difference in status lies in the perception of the individual members, rather than an ontological reality: “The members of the body that seem (or are judged, or are supposed) to be weaker.” Thus, the “normally conceived body hierarchy is actually only an apparent, surface hierarchy.”

But Paul knows that this hierarchy, while necessary, is also dangerous for the body, for later in the same letter, he corrects those who claimed more importance for themselves than even the significance of their gifts (in this case, glossolalia) would

---

31 Ibid., 94.
allow: “Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church” (1 Cor. 14:4).

Indeed, Paul addressed several problems within the nascent Christian communities that were caused, in part, by the mixed social status of the people in the community and the failure of people of these different strata to honor their interdependence and to use their differentiation to promote unity, which were Stoic ideals.\(^{32}\) Meeks points out the conflict at Corinth over meat that was offered to idols (1 Cor. 8-10): in this passage, the “strong” were the socially powerful who, after converting to Christianity, “may have had reason to accept invitations to dinner where meat would be served,” while the “weak” were the poor who rarely ate meat.\(^{33}\) For Paul, the disease of disunity in the body caused by friction between the classes lay squarely on the shoulders of those who were more wealthy because they failed to show proper respect and honor to those who were poor. This is most evident in his diatribe against the “strong” and powerful who ignored the egalitarian nature of the Lord’s Supper: “For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” (1 Cor. 11:21-22). For Paul, the well-being of the church requires recognition of and respect for the essential and ontological unity of the body: “For all who eat and drink


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 69.
without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (1 Cor. 11:29). Robert Banks says that while “the body” in this passage has generally been interpreted as the presence of Christ’s body in the bread, it is also an appeal to the community to receive one another and thus affirm, in this action, the community’s solidarity. 34 It was incumbent, then, upon the stronger or more powerful members of the church to recognize the non-hierarchical nature of the body of Christ so to ensure unity in Christ. Paul’s concern about the church’s lack of unity in the Corinthian church may also be grounded in his concern for protection against the threats from outside the community:

Paul’s statements to the Corinthians to end their factionalism reveal not only a functional concern for the preservation of the community and the dangers that come from disunity. The concern for unity is built upon an ontological understanding that the Corinthians are a people who stand apart from the world by the mind of Christ. 35 Meeks points out that these early Christian communities held beliefs about what is “real and valuable,” particularly the ideas of radical monotheism and a crucified, divine Messiah, that were in significant ways different from the beliefs held by the surrounding societies. 36 These communities existed in cosmopolitan, pagan societies, and the risk of synchretism was always a concern. In several of his letters, Paul tells these converts of the significance of their conversion to a new way of believing and living. He reminds the Thessalonians “how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9), and he instructs the Corinthians to recall that “even though there may be so-

34 Banks, Paul’s Idea of Community, 59.
35 Lee, Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ, loc. 4603.
36 Meeks, The First Urban Christians, 91.
called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:5-6). Any dissent that might arise among the members of the group over their beliefs and practical application of these beliefs was a threat to the unity and cohesion of the group. Unity would reinforce their beliefs and practices, while disunity would put their beliefs, practices, and, indeed, their entire religious system in jeopardy.

The unity that was necessary between the members of the church was preceded only by the unity between the members and Christ. Paul reinforced this relationship between the believers and Christ through identification of the community with the actual body of Christ. Paul reminded the members of the church at Corinth that they were “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Cor. 4:10).

There are two interesting points to note regarding Paul’s description of the church as the body of Christ. First, Paul makes a distinction between the church as Christ’s body (Christos sōma) and the church as a particular gathered assembly (ekklēsia). Banks suggests that Paul’s use of the plural form for church (ekklēsiai), for example, when he refers to the churches of Asia, or Macedonia or Judaea, demonstrates Paul’s conception of the church as a particular gathered assembly; “the idea of a unified provincial or

---

37 Herman Ridderbos notes that some scholars believe this unity in Christ was possible only insofar as the members of the community experienced unity with one another (Paul: An Outline of His Theology [Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1975], 363).
national church is as foreign to Paul’s thinking as the notion of a universal church.”

Thus, Paul may have used the body image as a rhetorical device to stress the unity of all these particular churches in Christ.

Second, when Paul uses the body image, he speaks almost exclusively about the inner structure of the body, and does not describe any outward orientation or working of the body toward other social bodies or the surrounding society. In light of Paul’s broad missionary and outreach efforts, this image of an inwardly-focused body is ironic, but it may be another rhetorical strategy to strengthen the boundaries of the community and to reinforce the members’ sense of identity and unity.

Paul also carried that image of Christ’s body into the ritual practices that served to strengthen the unity of the social body of the church: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These bodily acts, the origins of which are attributed to the bodily actions of Jesus in his own baptism and his final meal with his disciples, were symbols of “enormous generative power” that promoted cohesiveness and highlighted the bodily nature of the community.

The influence of Stoicism for Paul challenges the idea that he used the phrase “the body of Christ” metaphorically. While modern people use the image of a body as a metaphor—a “social body” is an aggregate of individuals, heavenly “bodies” are planets and stars, etc.—ancient thinkers did not make such distinctions. Banks notes that in the ancient world, “the human body was not like a microcosm; it was a microcosm—a small

---

38 Banks, Paul’s Idea of Community, 30.

39 The relationship of baptism, holy communion, and the social body will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.
version of the universe at large.” And, conversely, Plato depicted the cosmos as a single, tangible, living thing. Thus, “body” was used to describe both the reality of any entity as a microcosm—a whole, living system—and the relationship between these bodies that created the macrocosm. For instance, the workings of the human body were understood as part of the working of the cosmos as a whole.

So it is likely that Paul’s intention in using the phrase “the body of Christ” to refer to the church would have been more literal than metaphoric. The Stoic philosophers believed the universe existed as a body, but “they did not just speak of the body ‘metaphor,’ for, with them, being a ‘body’ was a fundamental component of the nature of existence.” In addition, Stoics understood society or the state as a literal body “in which each member had his part to play.” It is plausible that the Christians in Rome and in Corinth, many of whom were Gentile converts, were familiar with the Stoic concept of the body as an ontological (and necessary) reality, and would have understood Paul to be using “the body of Christ” to denote a new, literal state of existence.

Robert Jenson, a twentieth-century American Lutheran theologian, interprets Paul’s phrase very literally, and very functionally:

---

40 Banks, Paul’s Idea of Community, 16.

41 Although, as Andrew Perriman notes, there is a fine line between the literal and the metaphoric, because “metaphor can refer legitimately to something that is real” (“‘His body, which is the church . . .’: Coming to Terms with Metaphor,” Evangelical Quarterly 62, no. 2 (1990): 140).

42 Lee, Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ, loc. 1145.

But what can Paul mean, speaking so of Christ’s body? The obvious first suggestion is that he speaks of the “body of Christ” as he speaks of “bodies” generally. In Paul’s language, someone’s “body” is simply the person him or herself insofar as this person is available to other persons and him or herself. In Paul’s ontology, such personal availability may or may not be constituted as the biological entity moderns first think of as “a body”; for Paul, a “spiritual” body, whatever that may be, is as much or more a body as is a biological body.44

That is, the church is the body of Christ because it is only through the embodied experience of church members that Christ can be made present (available) to the world.

While there are certainly ethical, pneumatological, and apocalyptic elements in Paul’s description of the church as the body of Christ, it seems that by stressing the ontological and even literal aspect of the metaphor, Paul could clearly address the urgent situations he encountered in Corinth and Rome. These emerging Christian communities needed to understand themselves as a cohesive social body with clear boundaries that would cultivate a sense of identity over and against a potentially antagonistic world.

Because this project emphasizes embodiment and constructive ecclesiology, the use of Paul’s concept of the body of Christ must also lend itself to the idea of physical embodiment. Thus, for my purposes, I describe the body of Christ that is the church as a social body—a community—that helps to establish Christian identity by formation through bodily practices into ways of acting, understanding, and being that are contrary to the values of the surrounding society. The unity of this social body is a gift of God through Jesus Christ, and is something the members of the community are challenged to recognize, claim, and live into. Finally, the body of Christ, which is an ontological reality and which represents a new state of existence, has boundaries (“skin”) that are clearly

identifiable in order to set the community apart from the world, and yet porous enough to allow mutual interaction between the church and the world.

“The Body of Christ” as a Metaphor

Metaphors are always rhetorical. That is, by making comparisons between the topic (the subject of the metaphor, in this case, the church) and the vehicle (that to which the topic is compared, in this case, the body of Christ), metaphors aim to challenge the ways people understand or perceive a topic. A metaphor does not simply describe a comparison, however; it “uses similarity in order to say something about its subject.”

According to Sallie McFague, we employ metaphorical thinking when

the familiar meets the unfamiliar, and in the process of trying to understand the unfamiliar, tries out various perspectives on it—sees it as something else—which it “is and is not.” We make judgments which have to undergo revision as we come to clearer recognition of the process by which the new, unfamiliar thing is both like and unlike what we already know.

Unlike a simile, which outlines an indirect correspondence of similarity between two seemingly unrelated topics (“the church is like the body of Christ”), a metaphor forces us to look for meaning beyond the words and the comparison. A simile functions more to define one topic in light of another by comparing similarity; a metaphor uses similarity to describe a topic on a deeper level. As Andrew Perriman notes, Paul is saying “neither that the church is identical with the body of Christ nor that the church is similar to the body of Christ.”

---

45 Andrew Perriman, “‘His body, which is the church . . .’: Coming to Terms with Metaphor,” Evangelical Quarterly 62, no. 2 (1990): 134. Emphasis his.

Christ”; rather, he is making a statement about the church.\(^{47}\) The problem, as noted above, is that we cannot be certain what Paul meant to say about the church when he called it the body of Christ. While some metaphors are intentionally left “open” to interpretation by readers or hearers, most metaphors require the “recovery of the speaker’s [or author’s] intended metaphorical meaning.”\(^{48}\)

Behind any metaphor lies not only the speaker’s or author’s intention, but also a wealth of culturally-conditioned meanings, symbols, and interpretative mechanisms. Paul’s body metaphor is laden not only with the Stoic notion of the body, as noted above, but also with the Stoic understanding and use of metaphorical language. Stoic philosophers regularly employed allegorical methods of interpreting texts. For instance, Philo, a contemporary of Paul, used these methods to interpret the Hebrew scriptures.\(^{49}\) But these philosophers would also shift freely from using literal language to using language that is more figurative. Philo did not disregard literal interpretations of scripture while using his allegorical method. For instance, in his interpretation of the creation story in Genesis, he both protected its historicity while expounding its allegorical meaning.\(^{50}\) Paul himself uses a similar process in his description of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (Gal. 24:21-31), a story which he affirms as historical fact while using figurative language to

\(^{47}\) Perriman, “His body which is the church,” 134-35.


\(^{49}\) An allegory can be described as an extended metaphor because within an allegorical story are individual metaphors.

interpret it. Thus, the use of both allegorical (and, by extension, metaphorical) and literal language was common to Paul and his contemporaries, and both were often combined as a rhetorical or interpretative device.

In the modern age, the boundaries between literal and figurative language are more precise. We tend to draw sharp distinctions between figurative and literal language, tropes, and ideas. According to A. C. Bridge, contemporary Biblical scholarship assumes that “in the doctrine of the body of Christ, theology is faced with an ontological either-or: either the New Testament is speaking of a literal, material reality, or it is using mere metaphors.” Janet Soskice observes that because of the “legacy of historical criticism . . . and literalism, it is an accepted principle that in the twentieth century we have lost the living sense of the biblical metaphors which our forefathers had.” Thus, modern readers do not have the same capacity or willingness to perceive metaphorical language as did the people of Paul’s time. As Marcus Borg notes, prior to the modern period, the metaphorical meaning of the Bible mattered most to readers, who did not make the distinctions between literal and metaphoric as precisely as we tend to do today. In addition, the Enlightenment’s emphasis on science and verifiable facts, coupled with a “higher degree of authority [that was] attributed to the Bible,” led people to interpret

---


scripture as factually true and infallibly authoritative. It is only within the last 150 years or so that an attempt has been made to “correct” this overly literal reading of scripture. The progressive theology movement that has developed during the last twenty years is devoted, in part, to the recovery of a metaphorical interpretation of the Bible. Thus, many modern readers may not be able or willing to understand that Paul is speaking metaphorically about the church because they tend to work out of that dichotomy regarding metaphorical or symbolic language—it is either literal or metaphorical. It can never be simply a statement about the nature of something, and for many years, the tradition of the church has leaned toward the literal interpretation.

Therefore, it is likely that the phrase “the body of Christ” no longer functions metaphorically for modern readers. It has become what John Witvliet calls a “frozen metaphor” that functions as a “conventional, fixed, idiomatic” phrase that is likely to be “enshrined in dictionary definitions.” Gail Ramshaw notes that such metaphors are

---


55 Scholars who advocate for a metaphorical method of reading the Bible include Marcus Borg, N. T. Wright, John Dominic Crossan, Matthew Fox, and Barbara Brown Taylor.

56 Some scholars suggest that there is a spectrum between the literal and the metaphorical. See Philip Wheelwright, Metaphor and Reality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962).


overused and have become literalized (that is, a part of normal, everyday speech). Moreover, in its most common current use, “the body of Christ” operates only on a superficial level that does not take into consideration certain aspects of the nature of the church. As Kim observes, “the fossilized ‘body of Christ’ . . . precludes other possibilities of meaning.”

There are several reasons why a metaphor tends to become literalized or to be interpreted as a literal statement of the relationship between the topic and the vehicle. A metaphor remains vibrant if we find that the comparison it makes is “literally absurd” and makes no obvious sense. To put it another way, we comprehend metaphors as metaphors and not as literal speech when they violate “selection restrictions.”

Topics (the first term) in a metaphor are always conditioned by certain restrictions, and when the comparison with the vehicle (the second term) violates any of these restrictions, we look instead for a metaphorical interpretation. For instance, the phrase “You are the salt of the earth” (Matt 5:13) presents an immediately recognizable violation of restrictions: “You” identifies a living subject, while “salt” is a mineral, and the two have little in common. When a quick scan for a literal meaning reveals absurdity—we cannot actually be salt (unless we are Lot’s wife!)—we recognize this as a metaphor. However, in Paul’s phrase,
“you are the body of Christ,” there are no immediately identifiable restrictive violations that would trigger a search for metaphorical meaning. The topic “you” and the vehicle “body of Christ” are more similar than dissimilar in that they both represent living organisms, and so the phrase is more likely to be interpreted literally.

The phrase “you are the body of Christ” has also lost its metaphorical potency because of the scriptural and ecclesiological context in which it is currently used. According to Gibbs, “metaphorical meaning can be ignored if the literal meaning . . . makes sense in context.”63 While on the surface, a group of people comprising a body does not seem to make sense, the context of this comparison increases the possibility of interpreting this phrase literally. Gibbs argues for the “powerful role of authorial intentions in the immediate process of metaphor understanding.”64 For instance, people are more likely to process the metaphorical meaning in phrases that were written by famous poets than in those generated by a computer, which “lacks intentional agency.”65 Because the source of Paul’s phrase is scripture, which is authoritative for the church, because Paul is viewed as one of the most authoritative authors of scripture, and because there is a strong tendency among Christians to read scripture in a literal sense rather than metaphorically, Paul’s words are taken more literally, even when a metaphorical interpretation seems more plausible.

63 Ibid., 585.

64 Ibid., 586.

65 Ibid..
Metaphors also become literalized if they lose their sense of “tensive quality” or “emotional tension,” or if they no longer exhibit a “surprising similarity within a situation of considerable and obvious dissimilarity.” Here again, authorial intent is paramount. Because we are dealing with scripture, we are more prone to see the similarities between our situation and Paul’s words than we are willing to see the dissimilarities. Because the scriptures are our story, and because Paul’s words represent the ideal nature of the church, we want to identify with what Paul describes. Because we want to be the body of Christ, we do not look for “obvious dissimilarity.” We also cannot—or will not—comprehend any sort of literal absurdity in this phrase, so we tend to see it not as a metaphor, but as a literal description of the faith community that is the church.

Comparisons are more likely be understood metaphorically when the shared features of the topic and vehicle are highly salient for one, but not for the other. Conversely, a comparison will likely be interpreted literally when the shared features are highly salient for both terms. For instance, the shared features of “you” (as the church) and “the body of Christ” include a living (or resurrected) reality, faithfulness to God, cruciformity, and ministry to the poor and disenfranchised—all of which are highly salient for both—and which lead to a more literal relationship between the two.

Finally, we may tend to literalize the metaphor because the vehicle—the body of Christ—is itself an absurd phrase, at least since Jesus’ ascension, in that it is something intangible, invisible, and ultimately inexpressible in concrete terms (unless, of course, it

---


refers to Christ’s actual physical body). For a metaphor to function most effectively as metaphor, both topic and vehicle must be concrete. The metaphorical sense is derived from the relationship between the two, which is abstract.

As all this demonstrates, we are likely to find or even create literal meaning for “the body of Christ.” But as with any metaphor, when it becomes literalized, it loses some crucial features of metaphorical function. One such function is the ability to “both reveal and conceal . . . both lie and tell the truth”; the meaning and significance of a metaphor “depends upon the interplay of this similarity and difference.”\textsuperscript{68} But in this interplay, certain aspects or characteristics of the topic and/or the vehicle are emphasized while others are hidden. For instance, Witvliet notes that the phrase “God is a rock” “\textit{highlights} God’s steadfastness or faithfulness or dependability, but \textit{hides} the sense that God is active, living, and dynamic.”\textsuperscript{69} Putting this in more direct terms, any metaphor has the potential to both highlight and hide certain aspects of the topic or vehicle.

From the discussion above of Paul’s intention, we can see at least some of what the phrase “you are the body of Christ” highlights or reveals about the nature of the church: that it is (ideally) a cohesive social group, identified by a strong, shared faith, that stands in opposition to other, potentially threatening social groups. But what does Paul’s comparison (or statement) conceal or hide about the \textit{churches}, about the \textit{body}, and about the \textit{body of Christ}? The most obvious hidden aspect of the metaphor is the question of physicality: how can many distinct human bodies constitute one body? If we assume that

\textsuperscript{68} Witvliet, “Meta\textsuperscript{ph}or in Liturgical Studies,” 20.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 21. Italics his.
Paul intended for the church to be a community with strong boundaries, and that he used the body imagery as part of his rhetoric to that effect, we can draw a correlation between the boundary of the body (the skin) to the boundaries of the church (new ways of being and relating to the world). This presents two problems hidden in the metaphor: (1) the physicality of the human body makes it impossible to transcend the boundary of skin to be incorporated into a new, different body; and (2) as noted above, the church’s boundaries need to be somewhat permeable, or else the process of conversion and growth in the body (numerically) would cease. Although skin is permeable to air and moisture, it is not permeable to the experiences or mutual embodiment of other people.

Paul attempts to describe the relationship between individual bodies and the body of Christ by associating each individual body to a different part of Christ’s body: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). Paul goes on to explain that each part of Christ’s body has a necessary function, just as does each part of an individual body: “But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body” (1 Cor. 12:18-19). Paul’s fluid language—shifting back and forth from referring to a physical body to referring to the body of Christ—does not always facilitate our ability to discern what the metaphor conceals.

Paul builds on this image and notes the indispensability of each part of the body: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor. 12:21). While Paul’s intention is to highlight the necessity
of each person’s contribution to the community, this ideal of a well-ordered, efficiently functioning body hides what is a reality for many people: a body that does not function well, and in which certain parts may be considered dispensable because they do not contribute to the overall well-being and stability of the body. In a nutshell, what is hidden or denied in Paul’s use of the “body of Christ” metaphor is the experience of disability. When Paul affirms that any weakness in the body is the perception of the members of the body (1 Cor. 12:22), he is also denying the reality of physical dysfunction within the body, thus recalling our discussion in chapter 2 about the ways that the experiences of people with disabilities are often defined and given value on the basis of the perceptions of able-bodied people.

The way the “body of Christ” metaphor hides disability is amplified by the modern church’s image of the resurrected body of Christ as a glorified and perfected body. Although scripture does not give an accurate portrait of the nature of Christ’s resurrected body, his post-resurrection appearances in the gospels give us some clues. While Christ’s body was still recognizable in its physical features (although at times, it was not instantly recognizable), while it still bore the scars of crucifixion, and while his body could still be seen and touched, it also transcended physicality in that Christ could pass through solid walls and appear suddenly in a room. That is, the limits of physicality

---

70 Paul uses two Greek words, sōma and sarx, to indicate different aspects of embodiment. It is significant that Paul uses sōma in his phrase the “body of Christ,” because, as I demonstrate in chapter 4, sōma represents Paul’s vision of a heavenly embodied existence, while sarx denotes an earthly and temporary state of human existence. Thus, the body of Christ is, according to Paul, a perfected state in which, presumably, bodily disability is not present.
(and hence, disability) were overcome in the resurrection. If the church identifies itself with Christ’s resurrected, glorified body, and if the church sees this freedom from the limitations of physical embodiedness as an ideal state, then there may be no room in the body of Christ for disability, or at least no allowance for the experience of disability within the church’s concept of its nature and mission.

---

71 This is very different from Nancy Eiesland’s view that, in his resurrected body, Christ’s scars represent not an triumph over the limits of physicality but an incorporation of human embodiment into the glory of human perfection (The Disabled God, 100).
CHAPTER 4

BODY THEOLOGY

Embodiment is the end of all God’s works.

— Friedrich Oetinger

God and humankind encounter each other in the body.

— Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel

Jessica Harren, a Lutheran pastor, shares the way her early Christian experience shaped the way she regarded her body:

It was a devastatingly simple revelation: Jesus had a body. You would think that being raised in the Lutheran church would have helped me to internalize this message. By the time I was in high school, my church celebrated communion every Sunday. The communion ritual in the Lutheran church involves someone handing you a piece of bread and saying, “This is Jesus’ body, broken (or given) for you.” I heard that every Sunday and never understood what it meant.

What I understood the church to be saying was that God cared about my soul, how much I helped others, and how much time I spent praying and reading the Bible. What I heard was that I was to give the shirt off my back, which for me meant giving up several hours of sleep. What I did was try to prove to God that I was worthy of love by making straight A’s regardless of the physical consequences. The church taught me that my soul and my body are separate things, and that my soul mattered more than my body. The culture around me told me that my soul and academic career were more important than my body. My body had to be controlled and subdued for me to know God. The pain caused by

---


these messages began to be healed when I began to understand one simple revelation: Jesus had a body.4

Christianity has had a love/hate relationship with the human body. At worst, the body has been understood as something of a “necessary evil” from which the spirit is to find escape at death. At best, the body has been characterized as a necessary means to an end (as the vehicle for salvation and preservation of the soul). Even when theologians affirmed the goodness of the body, there were always feelings of ambiguity and tension. For example, John Climacus, the seventh century Abbot of Sinai, describes his feelings toward his own body:

By what manner of rule shall I bind this body of mine . . . How can I hate him when my nature disposes me to love him? How can I break away from him when I am bound to him forever? How can I escape from him when he is going to rise with me? He is my helper and my enemy, my assistant and my opponent, a protector and a traitor . . . I embrace him. And I turn away from him. What is this mystery in me? What is the principle of this mixture of body and soul? How can I be my own friend and my own enemy?4

Indeed, these questions have been answered—directly or indirectly—in different ways during various periods of Christian history. Kallistos Ware observes that “in Eastern and Western Christendom, there has never been a single universally accepted doctrine of human personhood.”5

Theology has long wrestled with the question of what “personhood” is and where it is located. Is the essence of human nature—the divine image in which humanity was

---


created—found in the human soul or spirit? Or is it found in the mind, with its ability to reason? Or in the body itself, the outward expression of an individual’s humanity? What is the nature of the body, and what is its relationship to God and to the world? In order to answer these questions, I look briefly at the conception of the “body” in ancient Judaism, early Christianity including Paul’s theology, and later Christianity. Then I consider the work of modern scholars in the emerging field of body theology.

“The Body” in Ancient Judaism

From the beginnings of Western philosophy, the human body and the soul were considered distinct elements of the human being. But because the human body was considered weak, mortal and vulnerable, philosophers, especially Plato, valued the soul over the body: the soul is strong and the body is weak. The soul is the vessel of the divine image while the body, in all its weakness, desecrates that image. The soul is that which separates humans from animals and thus enables them to have a unique relationship with their Creator. The true nature of the human individual rested in the intellect or mind, which was imprisoned in a material body. The immortal soul is “freed” from the mortal body at death, which Plato called “the separation of the soul from the body.”

Although these philosophical ideas about the dualism of the body and soul influenced Christian theology, there is little evidence of such a clear dichotomy in ancient Judaism. John Robinson notes that there is no theologically significant Hebrew term for

---

“body.” The Hebrew word most often translated as “body” is basar, which is more appropriately understood to mean “flesh” rather than “body.”

Jürgen Moltmann argues that in the Hebrew scriptures, “the human creature always appears as a whole.” He cites the shema, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5) as evidence that “a reduction of the ‘human act of living’ to thinking and willing, and its localization in the soul or brain, are unknown. There is no ‘primacy of soul.’” Robert Gundry writes, “man is an animated body rather than an incarnated soul.” As is often said, a person does not have a body; he or she is a body.

Hebraic covenantal theology helps us understand this representation of the relationship between soul and body. The Israelites understood themselves to be bound to God not as individuals, but as a people; the covenant was given, received, and enacted by the community. John Robinson remarks that “the flesh-body was not what partitioned a man off from his neighbor; it was rather what bound him in the bundle of life with all men and nature, so that he could never make his unique answer to God as an isolated individual, apart from his relation to his neighbor.” The ancient Hebrews did not think

---


8 Moltmann, God in Creation, 256.

9 Ibid., 257.

10 Gundry, SOMA in Biblical Theology, 119.

theologically about the body in terms of the significance of its composition, but rather with reference to its relationship to God. There are no seeds here of Western philosophic ideas about the relationship between “form” and “matter” or about the body as a source of differentiation of one person from another.

Although ancient Hebrew theology does not support a clear separation of body and soul, neither does it conflate soul and body to the point that there is no distinction between the two. As Johannes Pederson observes, ancient Judaism considered that

> the flesh is the weaker . . . the soul the stronger. The soul is more than the body, but the body is a perfectly valid manifestation of the soul. Soul and body are so intimately united that a distinction cannot be made between them. They are more than ‘united’: the body is the soul in its outward form.\(^\text{12}\)

Thus, soul and body are so interconnected and interdependent that the human person is at the same time an animated body and an embodied soul; the difference between soul and body is a difference in function rather than in form. Even when the Hebrew scriptures refer (sparingly) to life after death, it always involved resurrection of the body rather than immortality of a disembodied soul: “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise” (Is. 26:19a).

This holistic anthropology does not mean that ancient Judaism had a generally optimistic view of the human body. As noted in chapter 2, men with physical impairments and other bodily defects were prohibited from serving as priests or from entering the Holy of Holies. To the ancient Israelites, the body had the potential to honor or desecrate the holiness of God. The purity laws reveal a preoccupation with maintaining

---

the body’s potential toward holiness. Impurity, which could be caused by a variety of voluntary or involuntary bodily actions such as eating or menstruating, or by illness or physical impairments, became an impediment between God and the community, thus necessitating the impure individual to be isolated and ritually cleansed. Bodily purity and integrity were symbolic of the purity and integrity of the body politic, against which there were ongoing threats by hostile nations.¹³

For the Israelites, who were a threatened minority, individual bodies were representative of the body of Israel as a whole. Exercising control over individual bodies through purity rituals increased the sense of creating tight social boundaries that differentiated the Israelites from neighboring polytheistic nations. This was especially true for diaspora Jews; although they could not enjoy the social cohesion of living in Israel, they could still maintain a sense of distinction from their pagan neighbors through their bodily practices and rituals.¹⁴

**Early Christian Body Theology**

Christianity developed in the midst of cosmopolitan societies that were steeped in both ancient Hebraic theology and Greco-Roman philosophy, and, as Ware noted, there was no consensus on the theological significance and meaning of the human body.

---


¹⁴ This became a source of conflict when both the apostle Paul and Jesus called these bodily rituals into question. While Jesus challenged the religious leaders’ interpretation and application of these laws, Paul outright abolished some of the laws, including circumcision, for proselytes. By doing so, Paul was asking the Jewish followers of Christ to give up the distinctive bodily practices that fostered their sense of shared cultural and religious identity.
However, by the time the New Testament started to take shape, the relationship between soul and body in Christian theology was being influenced by Hellenic Judaism, which was itself steeped in Platonic ideas. Death, in particular, is defined in Hellenistic Jewish literature by the Platonic notion of the soul separating from the body. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes a distinction between looking at another person lustfully (with the eyes) and committing adultery in the heart (or soul). But he goes on to proclaim that body parts such as eyes or hands that cause a person to sin are dispensable, and it is preferable to lose that part than to lose one’s soul to “hell” (Matt. 5:27-30). This idea that hell is the death of both soul and body is supported by Jesus’ statement, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). Death of the body is one thing; it is earthly death and normal. But death of both body and soul is worse; it represents eternal condemnation. Other passages in the New Testament also reveal a strong bias toward the Platonic notion of death as the final separation of soul and body. For instance, the author of James writes, “the body without the spirit is dead” (James 2:26), and in the parable of the Rich Fool, God says, “This night your soul is required of you” (Luke 12:20, RSV).

In early Christianity, the duality of body and soul is evident not only in death, but also in life. Jesus’ words to his sleepy disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, “The spirit

---

15 In chapter 9 of SOMA in Biblical Theology, Gundry offers ample evidence for the influence of this dichotomy in intertestamental Hellenistic Judaic literature.

16 Although both the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and King James Version (KJV) translate the Greek word Ψυχή here as “soul” in the whole of chapter 12, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and the New International Version (NIV) translate it as “soul” in verse 19, and as “life” in verse 20.
indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38, NRSV), have become an aphorism that describes the perceived reality of this soul/body dichotomy, and especially the idea that the body is often an impediment to the will of God that works in the soul. However, Jesus’ views about the body are more complex than this seemingly simple statement reveals.

Jesus, the Incarnate One, revealed a profoundly embodied, prophetic ministry in which he did not adhere strictly to the predominant Hebraic theology of bodily purity and holiness. Jesus breached the purity laws many times by touching those who were unclean (such as lepers and the woman caught in adultery) and by allowing impure persons to touch him (such as the woman with the flow of blood and the woman who anointed his feet). He also rejected laws regarding bodily actions such as eating and working on the Sabbath. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus explains to his disciples that it is not what goes into the body (as in certain restricted foods), but rather what comes from within, from out of the heart, that defiles a person and makes that person impure. In this, Jesus makes a distinction not so much between body and soul, but between the inner person and the outer person. In addition, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus confronts the religious leaders who criticize his healing of a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath by saying, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep!” (Matt. 12:8-13). Where the religious authorities placed burdens on bodily actions

17 The Greek term that is translated here as “flesh” is sarx, which Paul uses to define that aspect of human embodiment that is prone to sin and separation from God, as distinguished from the “body,” or sōma, which symbolizes the bond between humanity and God. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
that at times denied a person’s humanity, Jesus placed a greater value on the entire human person (including the body) than on the ritual laws designed to keep the body “pure.”

The way Jesus cared for injured, diseased, and impure bodies reveals the great value he placed on the human body. The body of the woman with the hemorrhage, which is labeled “impure” by her society, becomes the site of God’s healing power. The unwanted bodies of those who were blind and deaf and lame become the vehicles through which God enacts transformation and restoration to community. Jesus relocates the natural separation between humans and God from the potential impurity of the body to the failure to value the body, especially the body that is unwanted, outcast, and unloved. In fact, Jesus’ own body was the single greatest instrument for the revelation of God’s grace and power, not only in his death and resurrection, but also in his life. As Isherwood and Stuart note, Jesus was “not a philosopher simply engaging the minds of people on his wanderings through the land.”

It was Jesus’ holistic authenticity—the way his spiritual teaching and his embodied expressions of God’s truth were in harmony—that helped make his message so compelling. This bodily integrity affirms, as Karl Barth puts it, “the oneness and wholeness in which the constitution of man is visible in this man [Jesus].”


“The Body” in Paul’s Theology

It is difficult to discover a clear, cohesive theology of the body in Paul’s writings. For one thing, Paul uses the Greek term *sōma* to refer to various bodies: the physical human body, the body of Christ which was killed and resurrected and through which salvation is assured, the body of Christ that is the Church, and the body of Christ in the eucharist. But Paul also uses another term, *sarx*, which some Bible versions translate as “body” and others translate as “flesh.”

At first glance, Paul’s writings seem to embrace the Hellenistic duality of the human being as a distinct body and a distinct soul. A brief survey of his writings reveal passages in which Paul assumes a clear separation between the physical and the spiritual. For instance, Paul laments to the Corinthians that he knows “that while we are at home in the body (*sōma*) we are away from the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6). To the Colossians, he writes, “In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body (*sōma*) of the flesh (*sarx*) in the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11).

But a closer look at Paul’s theology reveals a different sort of dualism. As noted above, Paul uses two Greek words, *sōma*, which is most often translated as “body,” and *sarx*, which can be translated as “flesh” or “body” or “human being.” Paul uses these two terms in different contexts and for different purposes, but both of them stand for the whole person “under the aspect of the flesh” as opposed to simply the physicality.

---

20 There seems to be no consistent method by which different versions of the Bible translate these words. However, the KJV more often tends to translates *sarx* as “flesh” while the RSV, NRSV, and NIV translate *sarx* variously as “flesh,” “body,” “human nature,” or “sinful nature,” among others.
(material nature) of bodily existence. As Robinson explains, “in essence sarx and sōma designate different aspects of the human relationship to God. While sarx stands for man, in the solidarity of creation, in his distance from God, sōma stands for man, in the solidarity of creation, as made for God.” For Paul, the sarx represents the earthly, and thus temporary, state of human existence while the sōma represents the possibility of future and heavenly existence. That is why Paul can say “flesh (sarx) and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50) while at the same time saying, “so it is with the resurrection of the dead . . . It is sown a physical body (sōma), it is raised a spiritual body (sōma)” (1 Cor. 15:42, 44). Where Paul makes a clear distinction, then, is between these “different aspects” of humanity’s relationship with God, which are the inward and the outward expressions of each human body. Ware explains that “when Paul does choose to assert a contrast, this is not between body (sōma) and soul (psyche), but between flesh (sarx) and spirit (pneuma).”

Although Paul often refers to the weakness of the flesh (sarx), he does not imply that the body (sōma) is evil, even a “necessary evil.” On the contrary, his views on the body are highly favorable. The body by itself is prone to sin because of its physical needs, but the will, the heart, and the mind can control these bodily impulses and desires. As noted above, the conflict is not between the body (sōma) and the soul; the conflict is between the soul, or inner person, and sin “with the body caught in the middle and

---


22 Ibid., 31. Emphasis his.

23 Ware, “My Helper and My Enemy,” 93.
dominated by sin” rather than by the spirit or will of the inner person.\textsuperscript{24} The body is the outward expression of sin as it works against a person’s will or inward desires. Sin takes root in the inner person, but takes form in the outer person or body. But even here, Paul is not presenting a duality between physical and non-physical, as Gundry notes: “Because of the unity of the inner man and the outer man in a living human being, the whole ‘I’ becomes a sinner.”\textsuperscript{25}

Just as the body is the place where sin becomes evident, it is also the site of redemption, both in this life and in the life to come. Paul claimed a prominent place for the body in the process of redemption and of being conformed to Christ in the earthly life:

\begin{quote}
Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:15a, 19-20).
\end{quote}

However, Paul also put high value on the body’s role in future redemption. The body is not disposable; rather, it is a very necessary seed for its own future transformation:

\begin{quote}
But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain (1 Cor. 15:35-37).
\end{quote}

In Paul’s theology, the body is more than a material “outer shell” for the soul or inner person. It is the essential means by which the person experiences God, for better or for worse, both in this life and in the next. Unfortunately, the vital distinction that Paul

\textsuperscript{24} Gundry, \textit{SOMA in Biblical Theology}, 138.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 140.
makes between *sōma* and *sarx* is often overlooked. According to Ware, when theologians and preachers conflate these two ideas, the church loses much in a sound theology of the body.\(^\text{26}\)

**Body Theology in Later Christianity**

Although Paul did not embrace the radical Hellenistic dualism of soul and body and instead placed value on the body, Christian theology after the first century C.E. developed in an empire steeped in Platonic philosophy, and reverted somewhat to a denigration of the body in favor of the soul. Gnosticism, which spread throughout the Middle East during the second and third centuries, took the duality of the body and soul to its extreme by rejecting not only the human body, but also anything in the material world as completely fallen and unredeemable. Some versions of Gnosticism taught that the goal of humans, which were divine souls trapped in physical bodies, was to escape from the prison of the material world. Manicheism, a major Gnostic heresy, was condemned in the fourth century, but versions of this dualistic movement continued to flourish throughout the first millennium, and some remnants of Gnostic thought are still evident today in certain esoteric Christian sects. Gnosticism, with its tendency to devalue the body, raised questions about Christology. Although it was not a sect in itself, Docetism was a train of Christological thought that rejected the idea that Jesus was truly

---

\(^\text{26}\) Ware, “My Helper and My Enemy,” 94.
incarnate—that the eternal logos inhabited a physical body—and affirmed that “the flesh was unsuitable for Christ.”

Throughout the patristic and medieval periods, theologians held ambiguous views about the human body. Ambrose, Augustine, and other early church fathers rejected the extremes of Gnostic duality but still believed that the body was in some way an impediment to a person’s relationship with God. Asceticism and celibacy became the highest form of Christian life and the primary ways of dealing with bodies that, because they had physical needs and desires, were the scourge of the human will. For Augustine in particular, asceticism was not so much an answer to Gnostic duality as it was a way to realize “effortless interiority, in which the soul is at home in the body and in control.”

For Augustine, the body is utterly fallen, partly because of its material nature, and partly because of the inability of the soul and the body to maintain a properly functioning relationship. One result of this fallen nature is that “man who would have become spiritual even in his flesh . . . became carnal in his mind.” Thus, humans were created to be a unified entity in which flesh and spirit were inseparable in function, but original sin created a rupture in the ideal operation between soul and body. Humans would not experience bodily suffering—pain, growing old, and death—“if our natural being were in


every way and in every part obedient to our will,” which, of course, is impossible because of the rupture between body and will.30

Augustine also places high value on the aesthetics of a well-proportioned physical body. Any deformity in the body was a sign of the fallen state of humanity: “of course, the sole purpose of deformity is to give yet another proof of the penal condition of mortals in this life.”31 These deformities would be removed in the final resurrection.32 Thus, Augustine believes that the intention of God was to gift humans with aesthetic, well-formed, and well-functioning bodies.33

In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas uses Aristotelian philosophy to describe the nature of the human body and particularly its relationship to the human soul.34 In his Summa Theologica, he clearly sets out a theology of the body and soul that is different from the Platonic views that had held sway for some twelve centuries:

Since, then, sensation is an operation of man, but not proper to him, it is clear that man is not a soul only, but something composed of soul and body. Plato, through supposing that sensation was proper to the soul, could maintain man to be a soul making use of the body.35

30 Ibid., XIV.15.s

31 Ibid., XXII.19 (p. 1060). Augustine made it clear that deformity, or disability, was simply a sign of our fallen nature, but was not evil in and of itself.

32 Except for deformities from wounds received in martyrdom. Augustine believed these wounds would remain as “proofs of valor” (see City of God, XXII.19).

33 Augustine’s understanding of “aesthetic” was based on the notion of beauty that valued perfect bodily proportions and bilateral symmetry, and was closely related to the idea of virtue.

34 In fact, as a theologian, Aquinas affirms that his only interest in the human body is in its relationship to the soul.

Although Aquinas affirms that humans are both soul and body, and that both are necessary parts of the whole being, he still reveals some duality between the material and the immaterial. For instance, he affirms that the soul does not cease to exist once the body dies because it is an incorruptible form. He also locates “personhood” in the intellect: “For we find an intellect whose relation to universal being is that of the act of all being.”

This intellect differs from the body in both form and function, and operates independently of the body: “Now it is manifest that the intellectual principle in man transcends matter; for it has an operation in which the body takes no part whatever.”

The Reformation generally focused on the inward, spiritual experience (as seen in the emphasis on justification by grace, rejection of the intermediary role of priests, and the significance of providing access to scriptures), but the theological significance of the human body did not escape the Reformers’ notice. For many of them, the body was the carrier of God’s image and was in as much need of redemption as the soul.

Martin Luther followed the misreading of the Pauline “duality” of human existence:

Man is composed of a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily. As regards the spiritual nature, which they name the soul, he is called the spiritual, inward, new man; as regards the bodily nature, which they name the flesh, he is called the fleshly, outward, old man. The result of this diversity is, that in the Scriptures opposing statements are made concerning the same man; the fact being that in the same man these two men are opposed to one another; the flesh lusting against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.

_________________________

36 Ibid., I/79.2.
37 Ibid., I/118.2.
But at the same time, he asserts that the body is neutral in that it plays no part in either justification or condemnation:

It is certain that absolutely none among outward things, under whatever name they may be reckoned, has any weight in producing a state of justification and Christian liberty, nor, on the other hand, an unjustified state and one of slavery.  

It is difficult to find a clear theology of the body in Ulrich Zwingli’s works, but his emphasis on the true humanity of Christ and his denial of any real presence of Christ in the eucharist reveals the value he placed on corporality. Because he believed the body of Christ had ascended to heaven, it could not possibly be physically present at the table. Luther contended that this was a corruption of the doctrine of the incarnation, and he argued for the “ubiquity” of Christ’s body. But Zwingli responded by calling “ubiquity” a contradiction because although Christ is everywhere, his body cannot be everywhere without ceasing to be a body, in any proper sense of the term. Zwingli seems to have taken the idea and significance of physical embodiment very seriously.

Of all the reformers, John Calvin had perhaps the most pessimistic view of the body. He is clear about the duality of human nature while placing greater value on the soul: “there can be no question that man consists of a body and a soul; meaning by soul, an immortal though created essence, which is his nobler part.” He found it “absurd” that

39 Ibid., 145-46


41 Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” in Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings, ed. Timothy F. Lull. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 25ff.

the image of God extended beyond the soul to the body: “seeing that the soul is not the totality of human nature, are we not obliged to find it absurd that, in view of this, humanity should be called God’s image?” Some scholars argue that Calvin’s abhorrence of dancing reveals his denigration of the body, but others point out that Calvin was more concerned that dancing was a threat to the proper ordering of the relationship between the sexes, which was itself a gift from God.

The ways in which most Reformers rejected both the Roman Catholic tenets of chastity as a Christian virtue and also compulsory celibacy for priests reveals a somewhat beneficial view of the body and human sexuality. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Puritans encouraged healthy sexual relationships within marriage, but, like Augustine, they also believed that bodily desires were dangerous to their relationship to God, and so these desires must be controlled through certain practices that were suggestive of ancient Levitical purity laws, such as the timing of sexual intercourse and the need to avoid excess in eating or drinking. Although bodies themselves were not corrupt, the ways that bodies gave in to desires could lead to corruption of the whole person.

In the modern period, the primacy of the soul over the body was strongly affirmed by the twentieth-century Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, who wrote extensively on the relationship between the body and the soul, and who was one of the most

43 Ibid.
45 Isherwood and Stuart, Introducing Body Theology, 70.
influential Protestant theologians of his time. Barth asserted that the human being was a unity of material body and immaterial spirit: “Through the Spirit of God, man is the subject, form and life of a substantial organism, the soul of his body, wholly and simultaneously both, in ineffaceable difference, inseparable unity, and indestructible order.” But, as Barth notes, there is no equality between the two; the human being is essentially “soul and body in ordered unity.” Within this unity was a particular and necessary order, a divinely-ordained hierarchy, in which there is a “higher and a lower, a first and a second, a dominating and a dominated.” For Barth, the starting point for theological anthropology is “the formula of the primacy of the soul.” The difference between soul and body is both ontological and functional: “there is control on the one side, i.e., that of the soul, and service on the other, i.e., that of the body. As this takes place man is fully man in the unity and differentiation of his soul and his body.” Barth makes the relationship between the body and soul clear when he asserts that the body “is ruled by the soul and serves the soul.”

These ideas from various eras in church history have left Christianity with the legacy of an ambiguous relationship with human bodies. In the great variety of forms, doctrines, and practices of contemporary Christianity can be seen elements of the ideas of

---

46 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2.46, p. 325.
47 Ibid., 347.
48 Ibid., 332.
49 Ibid., 418.
50 Ibid., 419.
51 Ibid.
Plato, the Gnostics, Augustine, Aquinas, the Reformers, Barth, and others. There has never been a unified theology of the body in the history of the church, a fact that is being recognized and confronted by current theologians.

**Body Theology Since the Twentieth Century**

Body theology emerged as a field of study in the 1960s. Various strands of liberation theology helped propel the need to create a theology of the body that offers hope of redemption for oppressed, battered, and tortured bodies in this life. Brian Wren’s poignant hymn “When All is Ended” speaks of this desire to proclaim redemption in the here and now, as compared to in some future life:

> Then do not cheat the poor, who long for bread,  
> with dream-worlds in the sky or in the head,  
> but sing of slaves set free, and children fed: Alleluia! Alleluia!^{52}

Science is continually creating new motivations for looking at the body through the lens of theology and faith. Issues surrounding the end of life and euthanasia, genetic testing and modifications, abortion and in vitro fertilization, and other medical questions force us to look at the human body in ways that are vastly different from the ways our ancestors understood the body and its relationship to the soul, to creation, and to God. Modern technology has opened new avenues for understanding embodiment. As Mary Timothy Prokes observes, beginning in the twentieth century, technology has turned the

---

^{52} Brian Wren, “When All is Ended,” in *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), #703, stanza 4.
body into “a major artifact.”⁵³ Age-old questions such as “what is the human body?” and “where is the essence of our humanity found?” seem more urgent—and more complex—than ever before. Feminist theologians and disability scholars have urged us to look at various aspects of the body and how those aspects define—or do not define—what it means to be human.

Other ideological and scientific shifts in contemporary society have changed the way we understand the body. Biological advances in the ability to extend life, restore diminished physical function, and delay the effects of aging have put great value on bodies that are strong, virile, and physically beautiful and capable. Although there are still clear components of the body/soul or body/mind dualism in modern Western culture, the longstanding preference for the soul over the body has been reversed in some ways. So much time, effort, and money are spent on preserving the body and its youthfulness (and usefulness), that the ancient desire for the soul to be freed from the restraints of the body is no longer the primary concern for many people. “Salvation” of the soul has been replaced by “preservation” of the body however that may be possible. Rather than death being welcomed as freedom for the soul, it has become something to be avoided (or at the least, delayed). No longer is the body something to be “disciplined and made an instrument of the soul.”⁵⁴ Popular culture not only affirms a clear body/soul dichotomy, but also places more value on the material than the spiritual.

⁵³ Prokes, Toward a Theology of the Body, 4.

⁵⁴ Moltmann, God in Creation, 245.
However, this emphasis on preserving the body is more prevalent in secular culture than in the church. In fact, many churches hold views closer to Karl Barth’s hierarchical concept of the soul/body relationship. Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann describes this kind of dichotomy in theological anthropology as the “fundamental opposition of the spiritual to the material.”\textsuperscript{55} When one dimension of life is valued over the other, both lose their value. When the spiritual is valued over the material—that is, when the church values the human soul over the human body, as is often the case in contemporary Christianity—then the matter of physical life (in the body) becomes “ultimately unredeemable and religiously meaningless.”\textsuperscript{56}

In this unbalanced duality in which the body is subordinate to the soul, saving souls becomes more important than saving bodies. William T. Cavanaugh identifies the use of torture during the Pinochet regime in Chile during the latter half of the twentieth century as a particularly egregious example of privileging the soul over the body, which he cites as an ecclesiological problem. Cavanaugh notes that Roman Catholic ecclesiology in Latin America was strongly influenced by Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), a French Catholic neo-Thomistic philosopher. According to Cavanaugh, Maritain held that “Christianity was needed not only to distinguish the spiritual from the temporal but to subordinate the latter to the former.”\textsuperscript{57} In other words, in Maritain’s ecclesiology, the

\textsuperscript{55} Alexander Schmemann, \textit{For the Life of the World} (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1963), 14.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 18.

church’s relationship to the physical realm is only tangential and ephemeral; the ideal church “has her roots in the sky of the supernatural life.” 58 As Cavanaugh observes, this concept led the Roman Catholic leadership during the Pinochet regime to accept “an arrangement whereby the state would have charge of the body and the church would care for the soul.” 59 This allowed the Roman Catholic Church to ignore (or at least fail to act in light of) the torture that the regime was inflicting on many Chilean people. Furthermore, it did not provide the church with the resources to resist the unjust oppression of the regime.

A similar but somewhat less abhorrent situation exists in the case of disability. The state, through legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), is granted control over the disabled body, while the church accepts its charge to care for the soul (which, depending on the theological tradition of the particular church, may or may not be “diseased” because of the disabled condition of the body). This separation of control over the body and soul becomes more evident when we remember that churches (along with other non-profit groups) lobbied for and were granted blanket exemption to the ADA mandates. The church, it seems, was more than happy to relinquish its care for people’s bodies in favor of its self-proclaimed mission to care only for people’s souls. 60

---


59 Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist, 57.

60 Although financial concerns were the primary reason given by churches when they lobbied for exemption, it is probable that this fundamental theological dichotomy of body/soul played a role in allowing the churches to act in what many people with disabilities have called an unethical manner.
The issue of physical disability, then, is very much a critique of the church’s theological anthropology.

Contemporary body theology evolved, in part, as a reaction against the kind of duality that has shown preference for the soul and has devalued people’s embodied experiences. Feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Lisa Isherwood, Elizabeth Stewart, and Sallie McFague have developed theologies of the body that address the oppression of women, which they believe is grounded in the fundamental issue that women’s bodies are different from the ideal image of the human body that patriarchy has promoted. Christianity has been the vehicle for much patriarchal oppression, starting with the story of Eve’s creation, which sets up a hierarchical system that is inherent in creation and that is based on bodies that are physically and biologically different.

Body theology is a “bottom up” theology that begins with the experience of embodiment in its efforts to determine the proper relationships between humanity, creation, and God. All humans are embodied. However, that unavoidable fact reveals the complexity of doing body theology: as Mary Timothy Prokes observes, because embodiment is such a familiar experience, it does not seem necessary to explore the nature and significance of the body beyond those “commonly held descriptions and understandings [that] have often been presumed sufficient for theological purposes.”\(^{61}\) It is only when “significant ‘paradigm shifts’ occur” that new questions arise that demand

\(^{61}\) Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body*, 27.
faithful answers. In the cases of liberation theology, feminist theology, and disability theology, the emergence of voices that have long been ignored or silenced demands a theological study of bodies that do not fit the patriarchal or societal ideal of strong, functional, male bodies.

While feminist theologians focus their theology of the body on sexual oppression and gender inequality, other theologians (notably men) have developed, as part of broader theological projects, a theology of the human body that challenges traditional duality and that upholds the body as a fundamental and necessary part of our ability to relate to God and to the world. Jürgen Moltmann offers a direct challenge to Barth and other theologians and philosophers who value the soul, mind, or reason over the body by presenting a holistic theological anthropology. In his book God in Creation, Moltmann writes:

> We shall therefore view the relationship between soul and body . . . as a perichoetic relationship of mutual interpenetration and differentiated unity; but we shall not introduce one-sided structures of domination into it. We are neither starting from the assumption of the primacy of the soul, nor assuming the primacy of the body. This presupposes theologically that the presence of God in the Spirit is not localized solely in the consciousness or in the soul, or in the subjectivity of the reason and will; but that its place is the whole human organism—that historical Gestalt which people, body and soul, develop in their environment.

Rather than describing the human being as an embodied soul, or ensouled body, Moltmann argues for both a differentiation and essential interrelationship between body and soul:

---

62 Ibid.

63 Moltmann, God in Creation, 258. Emphasis his.
If we do define the anthropological differentiation in a person’s relationship to himself as “soul and body,” then the body “informs” the soul just as strongly as the soul informs the body. The body talks continually to the soul, just as the unconscious continually influences what is conscious. If we assume a one-sided relationship of domination by the soul over the body, we thereby suppress the responding language of the body, and make the body mute.\footnote{Ibid., 259.}

Moltmann goes on to explain that the essence of human life is derived from the ways a person—body and soul—interacts with his or her environment.\footnote{He uses ideas from Gestalt psychology, which affirms that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, to develop his theological anthropology but, as he explains, he does not intend to “make dogma out of Gestalt therapy itself” (note 40, chapter 10, p. 353).} The influences on one’s developing personhood include the person’s genetic structure, the society and culture into which the person was raised, the persons’ individual and communal history, and the “sphere of transcendence” that represents religion and “accepted values.”\footnote{Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 259.}

\textbf{Toward a Holistic Body Theology}

Because disability involves embodiment in such a profound way, any theological project involving disability demands a holistic theology of the body in which the body is seen not only as an integral whole in and of itself, but also as a part of the larger communal bodies that play a role in shaping and defining the nature of disability. If Friedrich Oetinger was right and “embodiment is the end of all God’s works,”\footnote{Quoted in Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 244} then embodiment is not ancillary to theological anthropology, but is the very place we should start and finish in our attempt to discover the relationship between the physical body,
God, and creation. A holistic theology of the body can be found in the work of two twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologians, Louis-Marie Chauvet and Edward Schillebeeckx. Although their projects involve ecclesiology, Christology, and sacramental theology, the role of the human body and its relationship to social bodies figures prominently in their arguments.

Schillebeeckx focuses on Christology and ecclesiology and affirms that neither can be properly examined without understanding the ways Christianity is deeply embodied. Starting with the example of God’s power made manifest in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Schillebeeckx argues that grace—God’s saving power—is experienced primarily in and through the body. The effects of grace on the soul are always contingent on its reception through the body as the body interacts with the larger world: “The human body and its contacts with the world around are realities through which and in which the soul grows to personality, just as they are the realities through which the soul expresses its personal development.”

Schillebeeckx realizes that while the body is necessary for revealing the inner self to the world, it acts, in its corporeality, both to reveal and conceal that inner self:

The inward man manifests itself as a reality that is in the world through the body. It is in his body and through his body that man is open to the “outside” and that he makes himself present to his fellow men. Human encounter proceeds through the visible obviousness of the body, which is a sign that reveals and at the same time veils the human interiority.

---


69 Ibid., 15.
In addition, the body and soul (or the physical and the spiritual), although ontologically separate, work in a mutually interdependent way that cannot be deconstructed into distinct actions:

In human activity a person’s own bodiliness is an aspect of the active subject. The bodily expression is not merely the manifestation of a free spiritual act after it has already been fully achieved in pure interiority; the spiritual act can only be achieved in incarnation . . . Every personal act is one and undivided; in it the interior element is made visible at the same time as it is given its fully personal and human character by its opposite pole, the bodily element.  

For Schillebeeckx, the Christian life is a series of encounters with God that are mediated through one’s body.

Chauvet expands this idea of the body as mediation. He constructs a sacramental theology in which he highlights the significance and role of the body in shaping the human experience of self, God, and the world. Chauvet posits that the body is the mediator of all reality, both internal and external, including nonmaterial reality: “the most ‘spiritual’ happens through the most ‘corporeal.’” Starting with the field of linguistic theory, and especially the work of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, Chauvet explains that metaphysics has always valued the spoken word over the written word: “The letter presents itself as a mute body and opaque material,” while the voice has “an immediate proximity to the soul” and to our “sense of being.” But, as Chauvet notes, Derrida

---

70 Ibid., 198.

71 Although Schillebeeckx does not use the phrase “mediation of the body,” his work clearly points in that direction.


73 Ibid., 144.
argues that this “logo-phonocentric” view of the relationship between the voice and the written word has caused the metaphysical tradition to understand anything that is exterior or material as an obstacle to the truth.\textsuperscript{74} Chauvet pushes back against instrumentalist conceptions of language and applies his arguments to the duality of the body and soul:

For the decision to describe either the body or language as an instrument presupposes an anterior existence, at least of the logical order, of humanity in relation to its “tools”; it presupposes an ideal human essence that, since its fall and exile, has been thus imprisoned in the empire of the sensible.\textsuperscript{75}

Chauvet points out that just as the written word is not a mere instrument of the voice, nor is the material an instrument of the spiritual, neither is the body a mere instrument of the soul. “Corporality,” he says, “is the body’s very speech.”\textsuperscript{76}

Chauvet notes that there is an “unavoidable law of the mediation of matter, the body.”\textsuperscript{77} There is no subject—and no truth—outside this mediation of the body. In addition, the body mediates truth and reality both from the world to the self and from the self to the world:

Against traditional logocentrism and its visceral reaction against all exteriority, one must respond that the “outside” is the mediation of the “inside” of the subject; there is no “dualistic competition” between the two . . . The body is the primordial place of every symbolic joining of the “inside” and the “outside.”\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{76} Chauvet, \textit{The Sacraments}, 146.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 145.

\textsuperscript{78} Chauvet, \textit{The Sacraments}, 145, 147, emphasis his.
Furthermore, just as language (written and oral) “constitutes human beings as subjects” through the mediation of reality, so too does the body constitute people both as individuals and as members of a particular culture through the mediation of that culture’s values, history, and language. This two-way mediation—of the world to the interior person and of the interior person to the world—is by necessity limited by the material form of the mediation, which is the body. While the body mediates reality to the individual, the body also mediates the individual to the world. There is no “pure,” unmediated knowledge passed between the individual and the world, or, by extension, between humans and God.

Chauvet calls this mediation of reality the *symbolic order*, which is the “symbolic network of the culture which fashions us” in and through our bodies.79 This symbolic order also structures our bodies. That is, individual bodies are “spoken” by the corporate body of culture in which they exist. Individual bodies thus become “arch-symbols” of the entire symbolic order: in each body, the interior and the exterior, the self and the world, the individual and the corporate are joined together.80

Chauvet sums up his emphasis on the significance of the body by quoting Stanislas Breton: “‘Revelation’—Christian as well as Jewish—could become the word of God only by an ‘exodus’ into the ‘body’ of writing.”81 Theology as a whole is possible

---

79 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 84.

80 Ibid., 151.

81 Ibid., 151-52.
only when it begins with the necessary mediation of the body: “The anthropological is the place of every possible theological.”

Because the context for this project’s constructive ecclesiology is disability, it is necessary to employ a theology of the body that is holistic and has the potential to find value in the experience of disability. Any duality that privileges the soul or mind over the body as the locus for the imago Dei or for the mediation of God’s word and presence cannot provide the basis for an ecclesiology that respects dysfunctional bodies. Therefore, I ground this project in the body theology of Schillebeeckx and Chauvet, who argue for the primacy and necessity of the body for any encounter with God or reception of grace. In addition, Chauvet’s point that the body mediates all reality between the self and the world in a reciprocal way will figure prominently in an ecclesiology that emphasizes the importance of the human body and the experience of disability.

As previously seen, body theology has not received much attention until recently. For people with disabilities, it is a vital subject for continuing conversation, as is the relationship between bodies and the church. So I now turn to the topic of ecclesiology to explore how individual bodies constitute and relate to the communal body that is the church.

---

82 Ibid., 152, emphasis his.
CHAPTER 5
THE CHURCH AND EMBODIMENT

[Church] is constituted by word and sacrament, as the story we tell, the story we embody, must not only be told but enacted.

—Stanley Hauerwas

For persons with a disability, the experience of the relationship between embodiment and the church is often borne out of their struggles with a dysfunctional body:

Any church that provides a positive approach to the body is healing in my world—a church where my body is accepted as it is, a church where it is okay to feel physical pleasure and pain as part of God’s creation, a place where my body is not denied as a part of me that does not matter, or a place where I am not accepted only when I overcome my bodily limits. The church that is healing for me is a place where Jesus’ body being broken open is the kingdom of God breaking into my painful body and connecting me with God and others—the church as a place where denial of the body or release from it are not salvation but healing is.

Ecclesiology is, first and foremost, a matter of embodiment, which ideally should be the foundation for all ecclesiological principles and formulations. But from the earliest days of Christianity, the church has struggled to define its ontology and mission. The church has always affirmed its inherent connection to God through Jesus Christ but has

---


never developed one single, universal ecclesial model.³ This means that the many
different churches around the world do not share a cohesive vision of their nature,
purpose, or mission, which leads to sometimes contradictory expressions of that purpose
and mission and to conflicting interpretations of the gospel. In fact, until the early
fourteenth century, ecclesiology as a distinct branch of theology was unknown. Until
then, the church was defined in generalized theological terms and as a “presupposition of
theological speculation rather than [theology’s] primary focus.”⁴ That is, early church
theology was based on an assumption of the church as a reality, but was not directed at
defining the church in theological terms. Many of the traditional descriptions or
definitions of “church” have centered on the existential and theoretical concept or nature
of the church but have not provided details about the role that human bodies and
embodied experience plays in the church. Neither has the church clearly and definitively
established its relationship to and responsibility for human bodies. As Nicholas Healy
posits, any theological method “should be determined as much as possible by its subject
matter if the latter is not to become irremediably distorted.”⁵ An ecclesiology that takes
seriously the experience of disability must treat human bodies not as passive subjects, but
as the innate substance of which the church is created and through which the church

³ Avery Dulles, in Models of the Church (New York: Doubleday, 1987), describes six
ecclesiological models that are in use in some form in the contemporary church. But he admits that his
project is far from inclusive. The difficulty of definitively identifying the nature of the church stems, in
part, from the mystery of the church, which is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (9, 24).


⁵ Nicholas M. Healy, Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology
carries out its mission. Just as the issue of disability calls for a holistic theology of the body, so does it require a holistic ecclesiology in which the totality of the human experience finds representation within the church, the body of Christ.\(^6\)

I start this quest for such an ecclesiology with a very brief foray into some historical and traditional understandings of what defines the church. Then I look at the ecclesiology of some modern theologians who make the human body very much an integral component of the church and its mission.

**Developing Ecclesiology in the Church**

By the time the gospels and epistles of the New Testament were written, the church was already a reality. Each author of these books and letters wrote for an established community that was being defined and shaped by the practices, theology, and culture of the society in which the community was based. Ecclesiological ideas found in the New Testament, then, did not arise *ex nihilo*, but were reflections on how these nascent congregations had already started to develop their own ecclesiology. Hence, there are several images or concepts of the church in the New Testament.

The earliest description of church comes from the apostle Paul, whose use of the phrase “the body of Christ” was examined in chapter 2. But other passages in the New Testament offer glimpses of the early church’s self-understanding. Following his depiction of the story of Pentecost—the “birth of the church”—in the Book of Acts, Luke

\(^6\) Chapter 7 will offer the specific approaches to and definitions for both the “body of Christ” image and ecclesiology for the purposes of this project.
offers concrete descriptions of how members of the body of Christ live out their communal life in Christ:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people (Acts 2:42-47).

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (Acts 4:32-35).

In several of his epistles, Paul describes the nature and purpose of the church as a “royal priesthood” that is to reveal God’s glory among the Gentiles through acts of honor and self-control (1 Peter 2); as a community endowed with diverse gifts for the purpose of building itself up and to bring its members to faith and knowledge of Christ (Ephesians 4); and as a reconciled body of people who consent to the Lordship of Christ as their head (Colossians 1).

Robert J. Banks cites several images that Paul used to refer to the Christian community. As noted in chapter 3, Paul used ekklēsia to describe specific, regular gatherings of the community that were not necessarily part of a larger unit. ⁷ In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul mixes metaphors in one richly-laden passage:

---

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:19-22).

Here, members of the community are “citizens,” “household members” and building blocks of the reality of God’s presence. Paul employs other metaphors for the church taken from the world of agriculture: “For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field” (1 Cor. 3:9). But throughout his writings, Paul “shows a distinct preference for the ‘body’ metaphor, drawn as it is from the sphere of human existence.”

While these biblical foundations conveyed ideas about both the ontology and the functionality of the church, early Christian theologians quickly took up the task of identifying the operative structure of the church, more often than not as a response to the rise of heretical and schismatic factions, and to the threat of persecution. Protecting the unity of the church and providing assurance to the faithful became paramount. The first century bishop Clement of Rome emphasized that there was “a church of God” that was to be patterned after the priestly hierarchy of ancient Israel. In the face of disunity and conflict in the Corinthian church, he advised the leaders in Corinth about the proper conduct and relationships within the church’s hierarchy and especially obedience to the bishop. Ignatius of Antioch also upheld the authority and necessity for a properly-ordered and divinely-instituted hierarchical structure in order to maintain the unity of the

---


church. While neither of these men would equate the church with the ecclesial hierarchy, they did plead for church unity and harmony through obedience to that hierarchy.

Beginning in the second century, as the church became more global and diverse, theologians began to emphasize that church unity was evident primarily in shared beliefs of the one, true, apostolic faith. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130-ca. 202) wrote that “the church, although scattered in the whole world, carefully preserves [the apostolic faith], as if living in one house. She believes these things everywhere alike, as if she had but one heart and one soul, and preached them harmoniously, teaches them, and hands them down, as if she had but one mouth.” Around the same time, theologians such as Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215) and Origin (184-254) were influenced by Neoplatonism and its emphasis on the soul having priority and power over the body. This gave rise to a dualistic vision of the church: the visible church on earth was an imperfect reflection of the true church in heaven.

During the episcopacy of Cyprian (bishop of Carthage ca. 248-259), the Decian persecution threw the unity of the church into question. Emperor Decius decreed that Christians must make a sacrifice to the Roman gods or face death. Some Christians obeyed the emperor’s edict while others went into hiding. The effect on church unity and identity was traumatic; those who had capitulated to the emperor, including some

---


bishops, were considered “lapsed,” and drew the ire of those who had remained faithful to their Christian beliefs. Cyprian responded to this crisis by emphasizing the need for all bishops to demonstrate unity among themselves in order to uphold and defend the unity of the faithful. For Cyprian, the office of bishop was a cornerstone for the church’s identity and structure: “the church was established upon the bishops. They could be judged by no one except God. To criticize the bishop was rebellion.”

A significant shift in ecclesiology occurred in 312 C.E., when Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity for the Roman Empire and created a close association between the church and the empire. This Constantinian model of the church set off conflicts between increasingly powerful bishops of traditional Christianity and adherents of Christian sects such as Arianism. The threat from these heretical sects led to several ecumenical councils at which the true Christian faith was codified in creeds. The Nicene Creed, revised in 381 C.E. by the First Council of Constantinople, includes four “marks” or distinguishing characteristics of the church: the true church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These historic creeds (including the Nicene and Apostles’ creeds) focused solely on the right belief (or “catholic faith”) that was the theological foundation of the church; there is no mention in any of them about the right praxis of the people in the church. Because of this emphasis on the mental assent to a set of standardized beliefs, the creeds have helped shape the church’s self-identity by relocating the essence of the

---


13 While Constantine’s *Edict of Milan* allowed the practice of Christianity alongside other religions in the Empire, it was not until 380 that Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the Empire.
church from the practices of people in a community of faith to a reality that can be identified by an objective set of marks or features (a “litmus test” of faith).

One particular conflict within the church at this time involved the Donatists, who believed that the true church could not include sinners because they contaminate the rest of the faithful. If the church did not expel sinners, according to the Donatists, it would no longer be the church of Christ. In reaction to this, Augustine of Hippo declared the true church was a mixture of “carnal” and “spiritual.” However, because some of these sinners in the church would not receive salvation because of their lax commitment or incomplete conversion, Augustine was forced to adopt a dualistic ecclesiology in which he distinguished between the terrestrial or visible church and the celestial or heavenly church. The former is an institution that is confined by time and history, but the latter is a mystery that transcends those barriers.

In 410 C.E., Rome was sacked by the Visigoths and many Roman Christians wondered if their rejection of traditional pagan religions for Christianity was the cause of this tragedy. In his seminal work *The City of God*, Augustine describes two cities, one earthly, and one heavenly, that co-exist in the world but are in conflict and stand in stark contrast to one another. Only the heavenly city, whose citizens come from diverse backgrounds and cultures and are on a pilgrimage in the world, living lives of righteousness and love toward God and neighbor, will be victorious. In other words, Augustine argued, the true focus for the church was the spiritual, heavenly realm, even

---

14 Certain sins were of particular interest to the Donatists, including murder, adultery, but most importantly, the Donatists were concerned with apostacy, or the act of leaving the Church or renouncing the Christian faith in times of persecution, or of betraying fellow Christians to the authorities.
though it was, by necessity, on a sojourn through the earthly, political, and sensual realm of this world.

Ecclesiology as a formal doctrine in the medieval period remained undeveloped. Although theologians focused on theological concepts such as salvation, the incarnation, and the sacraments, textual evidence for substantial ecclesiological discourse is scant.  

At various times leading up to the Reformation, the medieval church focused on the papacy and hierarchy in general, relations between the church and the growing Nation-States, and the sacramental nature of ecclesial experience. Perhaps the most significant development in ecclesiology was the increasing union of the political and religious spheres in Europe, and the founding of Western Christendom, as symbolized in the coronation of Charlemagne as “Emperor of the Romans” in 800 C.E. Almost immediately, there was backlash to this blurring of the boundaries between church and state, and in the eleventh century, church reforms resulted in a strengthened, autonomous papacy, and an increasingly centralized and bureaucratic form of church government.

In reaction to what they perceived was an overemphasis on the ecclesial hierarchy that obscured the true apostolic church and in response to abuses of sacramental and ecclesial authority, the Reformers developed a variety of models of ecclesiology. Martin Luther defined the church as “a Christian holy people” (a priesthood of all believers) who

---

15 James R. Ginther, “The Church in Medieval Theology,” in The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church, ed. Gerard Mannion and Lewis Seymour Mudge (London: Routledge, 2008), 48. Ginther argues that although there seems to be a “silence of ecclesiological discourse” in the Middle Ages, when theological historians examine “accounts of ecclesial events and texts,” they can discern the Medieval vision of church. However, this “bottom-up” vision that can be derived from the accounts of how medieval Christians identified their relationship to and experience of church is different from a formal ecclesiology (49).
have justifying faith in Christ. This church can be recognized by concrete signs, including: the word of God is preached, believed, professed, and lived; the sacraments are “properly” administered according to Christ’s institution; the office of the keys (forgiveness and admonishment) is exercised publicly; and the people willingly endure suffering and evil of all kinds. Luther thus moves ecclesiology into the functional sphere, as opposed to the structural and hierarchical definition of the Roman Church.

The theological differences between Luther and the other Reformers centered primarily on the practices of the church, and especially the sacraments. However, their divergent ideas also created differing ideas about the nature of the church. For Ulrich Zwingli, who believed that Christ could not be actually physically present in the eucharist, the church became the location for that presence. In this shift of “real presence” from the eucharistic elements to the community of believers, Zwingli emphasized the church as the “real” body of Christ. It was the faith of the community, gathered in Christ’s name, that marked Christ’s presence, and, hence, marked the church. Martin Bucer embraced the importance of education, and identified the church as the location for the education that leads to salvation: “it is necessary for every church of Christ to have . . . ministers who both can and will, with utmost zeal and perseverance, instruct and advance toward eternal salvation, each and every member of the congregation in their care, by the administration both of doctrine and of the sacraments and discipline of

---


Christ.”\(^{18}\) Balthasar Hubmaier stressed the importance of the human response to grace and the church’s willingness to follow Christ’s example of ethical, human actions and to exist as a community of mutual love, accountability, and peace. Hubmaier’s *Form for the Supper of Christ* included a pledge of “fraternal love” in which members of the church promised to love and serve their neighbors, even to the point of laying down their own life and blood.\(^{19}\) Hubmaier understood the church to be grounded in this fraternal love: “If one is thus inclined toward his neighbor, he is now in the true fellowship of Christ, a member of his body, and a fellow member with all godly persons.”\(^{20}\)

Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), Archbishop of Canterbury and a leader in the English Reformation, developed with Thomas Cromwell an ecclesiology that created a national church under the leadership of the British monarch, who was the “vicar of Christ.” The *Act of Supremacy* (1534) granted King Henry VIII the honors and responsibilities of being the only supreme head on earth of the church in England, thus solidifying England’s complete split from the Roman Catholic Church. Cranmer helped create the doctrinal basis for the Church of England, which was adopted in 1563 as the *Thirty-Nine Article of Religion.* Article XIX offers a functional definition of the Church of England: “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to

---


\(^{20}\) Ibid.
Christ's ordinance.” This ideal ecclesiology was challenged during the course of various British revolutions and the ongoing battle between those who were devoted to the Roman Church and those who were invested in the Protestant Reformation, but it survived to be the foundation of the modern Anglican Church.

The Roman Catholic Church had been undergoing its own reformation for years, but it responded specifically and officially to the work of the Reformers with the Council of Trent (1545-63). The threats of competing theologies and models of the church forced the Roman Church to tighten its own ecclesiology. According to Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), one of the primary figures in the counter-reformation, the true church “is the community of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and conjoined in the communion of the same sacraments, under the government of the legitimate pastors and especially the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman pontiff.” The church is, then, a *societas perfecta*, a visible, self-sufficient institution that has all the necessary means—profession of faith; reception of the sacraments; and submission to an apostolic hierarchy—to achieve its end, which is the universal salvation of humankind. The true church exists wherever the relationship between the laity and the hierarchy is proper. There is no mention here about the relationship between the people and God, or among the people themselves. Bellarmine

---


realized that this external, objective, visible, and institutional definition of the church failed to address the internal work of God in the hearts and souls of the faithful, so he also made a dualistic distinction between the body and soul of the church. A person might belong to the body, by making a profession of faith, receiving the sacraments, and submitting to the papal hierarchy, but may not necessarily belong to the soul of the church, since that is accomplished inwardly by the work of the Holy Spirit. This Roman Catholic ecclesiology, which placed much value in the church as a properly ordered institution, was affirmed by Vatican I in 1870.

In eighteenth-century England, John Wesley was developing his ideas about the church as an interdependent connection of particular, localized or national bodies. In his sermon “Of the Church,” he writes, “A particular Church may, therefore, consist of any number of members, whether two or three, or two or three millions. But still, whether they be larger or smaller, the same idea is to be preserved. They are one body.” Wesley was not so much concerned about the functional definition of “church” regarding proper preaching and administration of the sacraments as laid out in the Articles of Religion, which he calls a “remarkable addition,” and he was unwilling to exclude from the church those particular congregations or denominations which did not faithfully and consistently fulfill the proper functional roles. Rather, Wesley identified the true church as

---


24 Ibid., sec. 18.
assemblies of people who have “one Spirit, one Lord, one hope, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”  25

During the period between the two Vatican Councils, the Roman Catholic Church rediscovered the Augustinian vision of the “mystical body of Christ.” In his encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943), Pope Pius XII upheld both the invisible and visible natures of the church and united them by describing the church as a dual, mystical unity of the church members both with Christ and with each other. This mystical union is held together by the strong, apostolic (and Roman) hierarchy.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) affirmed what had been adopted at the First Vatican Council, but also offered an expanded ecclesiology in two significant documents, *Lumen Gentium* (“Light of the Nations”) and *Gaudium et Spes* (literally, “Joy and Hope,” but more familiarly, “The Church in the World”). The church, which is identified as a “mystery” and called “the People of God,” is “constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him.”  26 Although the ecclesial hierarchy remains, the church is also dependent on the ministry of the laity.  27

In contrast to the tendency to locate the church in its structure or external “marks,” Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) maintained that the nature of the true church is neither found nor visible in its “earthly-historical” existence:

25 Ibid., sec. 19.


27 See *Lumen Gentium*, chapter IV, The Laity.
We can, of course, see the members of the Church, and its officials and constitutions and orders, its dogmatics and cultus, its organizations and societies, its leaders with their politics, and its laity, its art and press-and all these in the context of its history. Where else is the Church visible if not in these? If it is not visible in these, it is obviously not visible at all. But is it really visible in these? Not immediately and directly. This something which claims to be the Church, and is before us all in these manifestations, may well be only the semblance of a Church, in which the will and work of man, although they allege that they are occasioned and fashioned by God, are striving to express only themselves. What is visible in all this may be only a religious society. And if we assume, not only that this is not the case, but that what we have here is really the true Church, it is not self-evident that this will be visible as such in all these things; that its actuality will be eloquent truth. As it cannot create or confer its reality, the same is true of its visibility. It can only be endowed with it.28

Barth goes on to affirm that the historic creedal marks of the church (First Council of Constantinople, 381)—that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—cannot be applied “to anything but the divine operation which takes place in the Church. None of them can be sustained in respect of a phenomenon which is only the sum of what seems to be something in itself, pretending to be the Church, as a human work ostensibly occasioned and fashioned by God.”29 According to Ian McFarland, the result of Barth’s arguments is “an abstraction of the church from history that is all but total.”30 Thus, Barth can “insist that the ‘earthly-historical’ reality of the church is finally unnecessary” and can promote a strict dichotomy between human embodiment and the body of Christ that is the church.31


29 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 67, p. 617.


31 Ibid., 230.
In a sharp divergence from Barth’s arguments, Robert Jenson, a twentieth-century American Lutheran theologian, merges the human and divine “bodies” in the church to the point where there is no distinction. In addition, the church exists as the actual risen body of Christ because, as Jenson argues, a body is a person “insofar as this person is available to other persons.” As Jenson writes, “That the church is the body of Christ . . . means that she is the object in the world as which the risen Christ is an object for the world, an available something as which Christ is there to be addressed and grasped.”

Throughout the early and medieval periods, ecclesiology was an informal field of theological study. The church was concerned primarily (although not exclusively) with its structure and the relationship between civil and ecclesial authorities. In addition, many of the major ecclesiological ideas during this time were formed in response to (and often in opposition to) some threat to the church’s unity and self-understanding. However, starting in the nineteenth century, a contextual ecclesiology began to emerge that takes seriously the significance of human embodiment for the church.

The apostle Paul used the body of Christ image to help the early church recognize itself as a concrete, organic unity of diverse individuals who are called to use their varied gifts to do the work of God as a Spirit-empowered community. But as this brief examination of developing ecclesiological ideas demonstrates, even though the church’s existence would always be dependent on the community of believers, its self-definition became increasingly abstract and centered not on the people in the church, but on its

---


hierarchical structure, or its relationship to the broader society, or its doctrine, creeds, and sacramental practices. Even when influential theologians such as Augustine acknowledged the human nature of the church, it was only to affirm the duality of the church in which the embodied human experience was simply a vehicle to help the church to arrive at its true home in the heavenly realm.

**Embodied Ecclesiology**

As noted above, if ecclesiology is to be relevant to the topic of disability, and if we are to work toward an ecclesiology of disability, then we need to find a model of ecclesiology that respects and values all forms of embodiment. Avery Dulles argues that “to be fully effective, images [of the church] must be deeply rooted in the corporate experience of the faithful.”\(^{34}\) Yet many of the church’s traditional ecclesiological models treat human bodies only as passive recipients of what the church dispenses. Bodies (of the laity, at least) are valuable to the church only insomuch as they receive the sacraments, or hear the preached word, or submit to the ecclesial authorities. Bodies are necessary to receive grace, but are not often valued as active agents in the transmission of that grace or in the actual formation and continuation of the church.

Modern systematic ecclesiology finds roots in the work of Johann Sebastian Drey (1777-1853), a faculty member at the University of Tubingen. Drey’s work was not overtly ecclesiological, but he did give the church a fundamental role in the development of theology. For Drey, the church was not just the guardian and dispenser of the things

about which theology is concerned; the church was also the concrete expression of theological ideas. As Michael J. Himes notes, “this meant that the church’s history was not simply illustrative of its doctrine, it was doctrine embodied.”

Embodied ecclesiology is a contextual ecclesiology. Whereas most of the traditional models or definitions of the church were grounded in a theology “from above,” embodied ecclesiology begins “from below,” from “within the social, cultural and historical context of everyday human experience and existence.” Such a contextual ecclesiology is in some ways a reaction against traditional ecclesiology, which Nicholas Healy believes is highly systematic and theoretical and “focused more upon discerning the right things to think about the church rather than oriented to the living, rather messy confused and confusing body that the church actually is.” In fact, Healy believes the church does not have an essence that is simply given. Rather, the church “is constructed and reconstructed by the grace-enabled activities of its members as they embody the church’s practices, beliefs, and valuations.”

Several examples of contextual ecclesiology have emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century. Each of these ecclesiological frameworks starts from the experience of embodiment. Letty Russell describes a vision of the church using what she calls the

---


38 Ibid., loc. 77. Emphasis mine.
“feminist (round) table principle,” by which she seeks to “talk back” to a community whose self-understanding has been shaped by patriarchal domination, an imbalance of power, and the exclusion of the voices those on the margins of society.\(^{39}\) Jung Young Lee describes the “authentic church” as one that redefines the margins of human existence as central to its life and mission, and that eschews the “centralist” tendencies and desires of power, status, and domination.\(^{40}\) Leonardo Boff advocates for church to be an association of “grassroots Christian communities” that counter the often impersonal and juridical relationships between members of a church that is massive, bureaucratic, and extols “uniformity.”\(^{41}\) Pamela Dickey Young creates an image of churches as “communities of eros”—themselves contextualized by individual denominations and congregations—that address the challenges to traditional, institutional, hierarchical and exclusivist models of the church that are raised by a “post-Christian world.”\(^{42}\)

The idea of embodiment as an expression of the church’s most essential nature gained support in the late twentieth century through the work of theologians from varied traditions and backgrounds. For the purpose of examining the relationship between embodiment and ecclesiology, I focus primarily on the Roman Catholic theologians Edward Schillebeeckx and Louis-Marie Chauvet, John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite who


writes out of the Anabaptist tradition, and Stanley Hauerwas, who is part of the Methodist
tradition.

The theological projects of Edward Schillebeeckx strongly influenced the work of
Vatican II (1962-65), although his work was not without controversy. In reaction to the
top-heavy, juridical models of the Roman Catholic Church that developed out of Trent
and Vatican I and that sought to define the church over and against the rising tides of
Protestantism and modernity, Schillebeeckx focused on developing a sacramental model
in which the church is the sign for the world both of Christ, who is the Ur sacrament (the
initial or primary sacrament), and also of the salvation Christ offers the world. In order to
understand his ecclesiology, it is necessary to examine some of the underlying theology.

Schillebeeckx begins his work by exploring the early Christian community’s
experience of Jesus and the salvation that the community found in and through Jesus. He
points out that the writings of the New Testament are culturally embedded and
interpretative witnesses to those experiences of the early Christians. As such, ideas such
as grace and salvation are interpreted in various ways in the New Testament, always
according to the social and historical situation of the people for whom the gospels or
letters were written—many of whom were minority groups who were under threat of
persecution and who held particular cosmological views. This means that those specific
interpretative experiences cannot be imported as dogmatic “truth” into modern times
when Christians no longer compose a beleaguered group that exists on the fringes of
society, and when the passing of many centuries have generated new ways of
understanding ourselves and our world.
Concrete human experience is a foundational part of Schillebeeckx’s argument. He notes that theology has always included elements of both faith and experience, but human experiences are often “stunted, manipulated and interpreted one-sidedly,” by external authorities such as the church. The authority of human experiences is grounded not so much in the doctrines or structure of the church as in the authenticity of those experiences in their particular historical and cultural setting, and in an interpretation of those experiences that takes into account both the setting and tradition that precedes it.

Regarding the New Testament, Schillebeeckx notes that the texts as we have them today—canonized and made normative for all Christians—were themselves individual witnesses to the varied experiences of faith and salvation in Christ of varied communities of faith. He suggests that some part of this “dynamic” nature of the early church and its experiences was lost once the texts were canonized: “these texts took on a new significance over and above their content.” The experiences behind the texts were no longer the most important hermeneutical aspect of the texts. Rather, the authority of the texts was shifted from the experiences described in the texts to the texts themselves. Thus, a dynamic, existential authority changed to a formal, static, and institutional kind of authority that can no longer accommodate the continuing integration of human experience into the story of the text.

Schillebeeckx is arguing against the church’s tendency to make certain historical experiences absolute references for the practice of the Christian faith. Just as God’s acts

---


44 Ibid., 67.
in Jesus were concrete and historical, so are the ongoing acts of God in (and beyond) the church. The church, then, does not exist as a supracultural ideology. Rather, it is always and everywhere being constituted through God’s actions through the Holy Spirit in concrete, historical, and cultural human experiences. Schillebeeckx notes how the tendency of the church to reduce the Christian faith to a set of propositions negates or minimizes the experiential nature of faith: “One can say that Christian faith as proclaimed by the churches today is no longer endorsed by and from human experiences.”

For Schillebeeckx, the church is, above all else, “essentially discipleship of Jesus: following in the footsteps of Jesus to turn many people into a community which bears witness both to the kingdom of God and to Jesus’ own career.” Christ is head of the church not as some disembodied spiritual essence, but as the concrete (albeit historically conditioned) revelation of God, whose career revealed the essence of God’s intention for all people: liberation from the “shame at being outcast” and restoration of their “worth as human beings, as children of God.”

The true mission of the church is a continuation of Jesus’ message of salvation—the proclamation of the kingdom of God, which is the “biblical expression for God’s being unconditional and liberating sovereign love, in so far as this comes into being and reveals itself in the life of men and women who do God’s will.”

---


46 Ibid., 155.

47 Ibid., 113.

48 Ibid., 111.
mediation of this message, which can only happen in and through the embodied experiences of the faithful in particular times, places, and situations:

The church is not the kingdom of God, but it bears symbolic witness to that kingdom through its word and sacrament, and in its praxis effectively anticipates that kingdom . . . by doing for men and women here and now, in new situations (different from those in Jesus’ time), what Jesus did in his time: raising them up for the coming of the kingdom of God, opening up communication among them, caring for the poor and outcast, establishing communal ties within the household of faith and serving all men and women in solidarity.\(^{49}\)

The church exists not as a set of doctrines or as a hierarchical system (although Schillebeeckx notes that these are necessary to the church’s organization and mission), but as historical and concrete manifestations of the embodied acts of Jesus carried out by communities of people. The church, then, is an ongoing story of embodied actions that are intrinsically ethical and faithful to Jesus’ proclamation and revelation of the kingdom.

Schillebeeckx’s emphasis on embodiment and human experience was beneficial to Louis-Marie Chauvet’s work on the sacraments and the human body. Chauvet’s theology was explored in the discussion of body theology, and his emphasis on the body as the necessary mediation of all knowledge and experience was noted. As embodied (and social) creatures, we can never escape the need for mediation of our bodies, but Chauvet’s “symbolic order” that mediates reality also includes social, political, and historical institutional bodies. We “come-to-being” only through this multi-faceted mediation. Because all knowledge and experience is by necessity mediated through a symbolic order, no one has direct access to God. The church, then, serves as one of the necessary agents of mediation for knowledge and experience of God.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 157.
Chauvet presents a model that illustrates just how the church functions as the symbolic order—or as the sacramental mediator of the faith—in which Christian identity is formed and Christians “come-to-being.” The foundation for this model is the tripartite base of scripture–sacraments–ethics, none of which can rightly stand alone. It is in the interplay between these three that the symbolic order of the church takes shape. To focus on one element at the expense of the others (or to overemphasize the importance of one over the others) is to reduce the church and the faith to what Chauvet calls a “quasi-substance” and a neurotic “point of fixation.”

Chauvet’s model brings a new depth of meaning to Paul’s phrase “the body of Christ.” Situating that image or concept as part of the symbolic order that is the mediator of all reality leads us to discover that “the body is the primordial and arch-symbolic form of mediation.” That is, the church, as Christ’s body, is more than an ontological reality and more than a mystical relationship: it is also a functional reality—the primary and necessary form of mediation of the Christian faith for the members of the body. That is, saying that the church is the body of Christ does not simply imply a state of existence; it also affirms that the church functions to “transport us immediately into the world of Christianity to which [we] belong.”

Integral to Chauvet’s concept of mediation is the idea that while the body mediates reality to the individual, the body also mediates the individual to the world.

---


51 Ibid., 110.

52 Ibid., 112.
During Jesus’ earthly ministry, his body was both the means by which he experienced the reality of God’s presence and power, and the means by which the world experienced the reality of God’s presence in Jesus’ life and being. The church, as Christ’s body, now functions in a similar way of reciprocal mediation. As the body of Christ and as the living, embodied sacrament of Christ, the church is the locus of mediation both for the revelation of its self (or its nature or its mission) to the world, and also by which it can most fully know the world. Thus the church learns not only what it is in relation to God through Christ, but it learns what the world is through the lens of that relationship. But beyond that, the church, as a sacrament of Christ, also “mediates God to the world” through its embodied existence.  

Similar to Schillebeeckx, Chauvet notes the role that culture, history, and ideology play in the shaping of human experience. The symbolic order is a system of connections between the different elements and levels of a culture, a system forming a coherent whole that allows the social group and individuals to orient themselves in space, find their place in time, and in general situate themselves in the world in a significant way—in short, to find their identity in a world that makes “sense.”

The symbolic order is “the mediation through which subjects build themselves while building the real into a ‘world’ where they can live.” The church, then, must by

---

53 As Schillebeeckx notes, the church is both “the visible realization of saving reality in history,” thus mediating God to the world, and “a visible communion in grace,” thus mediating God to the members of the body (Christ: The Encounter, 47).

54 Chauvet, Symbol, 84-85.

55 Ibid., 86.
necessity be a “concrete local community [that is] in its actions, statements, appearance the living sign of what it celebrates.”\textsuperscript{56}

The church to Chauvet is, at root, not just a mediating symbolic order; it is fundamentally a \textit{sacramental} mediation because in its liturgy, its \textit{kerygma}, and its mission, it is a sacrament of Jesus Christ. When people assent to this unique mediation of the church, they “renounce seeing/touching/finding him by undeniable proofs. Faith begins precisely with such a \textit{renunciation of the immediacy} of the see/know.”\textsuperscript{57} In all that the church says and enacts, it is making Jesus’ presence real; it is the “active sacramental mediation of his action.”\textsuperscript{58} In this sense, the church is “the fullest sense of the word ‘sacrament.’”\textsuperscript{59} But the church as sacrament has meaning only in its relationship to the world. It must always be open to the reign of God that exceeds it while being a sacrament of that reign and while showing the marks of that reign in the midst of the world.

The communal nature of the church, for Chauvet, is its very essence. The church is not a conglomerate of individuals who have professed faith in Jesus and have banded together. “The gospel is communitarian by its very nature.”\textsuperscript{60} The gathering of the congregation is the major characteristic and primary mark, or “fundamental sacrament”


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 26.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 32.
of Christ in the church. It is in this fundamental act of gathering that Christians are shaped by the symbolic order of the church through the embodied acts of hearing the word, receiving the sacraments, and mediating themselves (“speaking” themselves) to each other and to God through their bodies.

John Howard Yoder (1927–1997), an American theologian from the Mennonite tradition, argues that the church has historically misunderstood its message and its mission. He reframes ecclesiology by defining the church as a set of practices rather than an ontological entity:

The work of God is the calling of a people, whether in the Old Covenant or the New. The church is then not simply the bearer of the message of reconciliation, in the way a newspaper or a telephone company can bear any message with which it is entrusted. Nor is the church simply the result of a message. That men and women are called together to a new social wholeness is itself the work of God, which gives meaning to history, from which both personal conversion (whereby individuals are called into this meaning) and missionary instrumentalities are derived.

In other words, the church does not have a message; it is the message. It is a herald, in its embodied acts, of the “new humanity [that] is itself the purpose that God had in all ages, the gospel now to be proclaimed.”

Yoder does not deny that church exists as a body itself, but he affirms that the body is visible only through the communal life of Christians. However, for the church to be true to its identity and calling from God, that communal life must be distinct: “the

---

61 Ibid., 34.


63 Ibid.
The distinctness of the church of believers is prerequisite to the meaningfulness of the gospel message.\textsuperscript{64} The church is a sociological reality that must retain (or recover) its distinctiveness and separation from the world or the powers of the world.

Yoder argues at length against the Constantinian model of ecclesiology that has prevailed in one form or another since the fourth century when the church became intricately associated with the authority and power of the empire. This association, which Yoder says was a misinterpretation of how the church should relate to the world, caused the church to believe that its purpose was to sanctify the existing structures of society. Although the church’s relationship to society (or the world) shifted as time went on, it never reached the full state of “disestablishment” that Yoder believes is necessary in order for the church to be the church.

Yoder demonstrates that the contemporary church is part of the establishment through his argument that, in the West at least, the church plays the role of “chaplain” and is expected to bless the existing power structures. The church has thus become nothing more than “an administrative branch of the state.”\textsuperscript{65} Furthermore, many people (Christians included) place the locus of salvation in these power structures. Thus, the church loses its ability to proclaim the unique salvific action of God in human history and its own unique eschatological nature.

According to Yoder, the Constantinian model of church-world relations has caused the unnatural and unnecessary division of the church into visible and invisible

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid. Emphasis his.

\textsuperscript{65} John Howard Yoder, “The Otherness of the Church” in The Royal Priesthood, 60.
realms. In the early centuries of Christianity, the church was visible in that it was a fellowship of believers who saw themselves as set apart from the world and who remained faithful to Jesus Christ as their Lord regardless of the risks or the cost. But once church and state became fused, the visible church and the visible realm of the world also fused, and the church also became invisible; that is, it existed in the spiritual realm, as the “soul of the existing society.”^66

Another consequence of Constantinian ecclesiology, according to Yoder, was that the church came to understand its purpose as the responsibility to sanctify all of creation. This sanctification came through the church’s proclamation that all society was “Christian” by association (and through enforced baptism). Thus, the existing structure of society was “Christianized” and approved by the church’s authority (as it was derived through the church’s association with the state). But Yoder argues that this is a faulty view of the incarnation: God does not sanctify things as they are, but calls the church to discern what can remain and what must change.

Yoder notes developments in church history that began to alter the relationship between church and world. While the Reformers managed to deconstruct the universalism of the church/empire association (even though it was never truly universal), they did not do much to separate the church from society. After the Reformation, there was no longer a strong church/world connection, but the church still aligned itself with varied localized power structures. Even in our modern secular age, when we admit that the majority of society can no longer be called Christian, the church is still entwined with

---

^66 Ibid.
the power structures in such a way that it is invisible and, Yoder argues, makes the church impotent in its witness to the Gospel.

Against all this, Yoder argues for the “deconstantinization” and disestablishment of the church. The true church would then be one that is visible, distinct, and free from all associations with existing structures in society. It would be a “believers’ church,” a “covenanted fellowship” of people who have pledged to follow the lordship of Jesus Christ.67 It would be distinct from society and would follow “the posture of Abraham,” which is the posture of radical obedience to God in its communal, embodied acts. It would have a strong enough understanding of its own identity that it would be able to resist the temptation to sanctify the power structures of the world.

Yoder points to several New Testament passages that affirm the distinctiveness of the church. The “new world” in 2 Corinthians, the “one new humanity” in Ephesians, and the “royal priesthood” and “holy nation” in 1 Peter demonstrate that the nature of the church is at once communal and distinct.68 The church, as a community of believers, is called to be a new social reality that is independent of other social structures, and is “by its very existence” God’s message to the world.69 Above all, “the church’s responsibility to and for the world is first and always to be the church.”70

---


68 Ibid., 74.


Yoder develops marks (what he calls the *Notae Missionis*) of the church that stand in contrast to the traditional marks (as adopted by Roman Catholic and Reformation theologians) which, he says, “pointed almost exclusively to characteristics that could be measured by looking right at the management of the church’s liturgy or its business.”

For Yoder, the true marks of the church are found not in doctrine or correct administration of the sacraments or in any hierarchical ritual or structure: “the real tests of whether the church is the church calls for measurements to be taken not in the meeting, nor in the administrative structure but at the point of the relation of church and world.”

Again, the church–world relationship is the central feature for Yoder’s ecclesiology. Yoder believes the true marks of the church are found in the embodied acts of the congregation and in the way the members of the congregation order their lives and relate to one another: in the Christological paradigms of servanthood, love of enemies, and forgiveness, and in witness, fellowship, holy living, and cruciformity in the form of loyalty to Christ despite the risk of suffering. Furthermore, the true church is able to live out its witness without needing to exact change in society or enforce its ethics within society, and without needing to measure its effectiveness. The true church realizes that it should not seek to control the power structures, but should continue to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to Christ, in whom all hope is grounded.

---

71 John Howard Yoder, “Let the Church Be the Church” in *The Royal Priesthood*, 171.

72 Ibid.

73 Yoder, “A People,” 75ff.
Finally, and perhaps most importantly for our purposes, Yoder argues that the true church acknowledges its “minority posture,” its weakness in the eyes of the world. The church must recognize that we cannot oblige the world to be Christian. Should we not recognize repentantly that we ought never have wanted to Christianize the world in this way, from the top down, through the prestige of governmental backing and wide social acceptance? Now that the church has become weak may we not recognize with joy that her calling is to be weak?74

The significance of the church’s “acceptance of minority status” is that it no longer needs to feel obligated to “tailor [its] moral standards to the needs of the people who are running the world.”75 This minority status does not necessitate “social cynicism” or “withdrawal,” but a “profound intellectual orientation”—an orientation that puts less emphasis on traditional qualitative signs of church (such as the number of people in the pews) and more emphasis on helping (perhaps fewer) people orient their lives—both as individuals and as a community—around the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord.76

Yoder’s ecclesiological model is inherently and fully incarnational and embodied: the church does not proclaim the message of the gospel; the church embodies the message and thus becomes the message itself. The church must understand its relationship to the world in light of this understanding of incarnation and embodiment. Like Jesus Christ, the church is called to bear witness to the powers of the world while maintaining its own faithfulness and integrity to the message of the gospel that it enacts.

74 Yoder, “Let the Church Be the Church,” 175.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 176.
Stanley Hauerwas (b. 1940), an American theologian and ethicist, argues forcefully for the church to keep the experience of embodiment at the core of its self-understanding and its mission:

I fear that part of the problem [of the church’s ability to understand its own identity] is the very presumption that theology constitutes “thought” which then must seek embodiment. Once theology becomes “thought” the church has already accepted modernity’s disembodiment of the Gospel . . . In short, we have few ways to resist what seems unavoidable . . . namely, the “spiritualization” of the church.77

This “spiritualization” of the church, which Hauerwas defines as “the attempt to make Christianity intelligible without that set of cultural habits called church,” is desired by the “capitalist social order” that needs the church to be purely focused on spiritual matters so as not to present a challenge to the embodied practices of that social order.78 In other words, contemporary society wants to relegate the practice of religion—and by extension, the church—to the spiritual realm, where it does not concern itself with embodied experiences, especially of those whose bodies are devalued because of their positions at the margins of the primary social order.

This tendency toward spiritualization of religion and the church begins with what Hauerwas describes as a faulty Christology: “Christian ethics has tended to make ‘Christology’ rather than Jesus its starting point [beginning with] some broadly drawn theological claims about the significance of God becoming man, but the life of the man


Hauerwas believes that any Christology that emphasizes Jesus’ ontological nature (as defined by traditional doctrine) often leads to a failure to recognize the significance of his embodied existence as a prophetic leader and “teacher of righteousness.”

Hauerwas notes that recent scholarship into the quest for the “historical Jesus” has revealed that Jesus’ teaching was focused not on proclaiming his own ontological status, but on the ways God’s kingdom was revealed in his own embodied acts of healing, teaching, and relating to others (especially those on the margins of society). Christology, then, is an essentially embodied concept that, as the foundation for the church’s identity as the body of Christ, necessitates an ecclesiology that values bodies and, specifically, the way God’s kingdom is revealed in and through embodied acts.

For Hauerwas, discipleship (and Christian ethics) is learning to be like Jesus, but not by mere imitation of what Jesus did. Rather, individuals learn from each other how to be like Jesus. They learn this not by parroting Jesus or through some ecclesial portrayal of Jesus, but by becoming actors in the narrative of salvation and being formed into the life (both the resurrected and the embodied life) of Jesus. The place where this all happens is the church, which is “constituted by word and sacrament as the story we tell,

79 Stanley Hauerwas, “Jesus and the Social Embodiment of the Peaceable Kingdom,” in The Hauerwas Reader, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 117. Although his focus here is specifically “Christian ethics,” his points about Christology can be effectively applied to ecclesiology as well.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., 121.
the story we embody, [which] must not only be told but enacted."\textsuperscript{82} The church is, in effect, an alternate culture that “forms bodies to inhabit the world in a distinctive fashion.”\textsuperscript{83} Therefore, the mission of the church is to witness to a new form of humanity—a new form of communal life—that is itself part of the ongoing story of God’s salvation: “The church is both the witness to [the presence of Christ] and the public and communal form the indirect presence of Christ now takes.”\textsuperscript{84} The salvation that God enacts through the church is “being part of a people constituted by material practices” that shape embodied practices and makes those bodies “part of God’s great communion.”\textsuperscript{85}

Like Yoder, Hauerwas argues against the ways that the church has become too closely aligned with society and the ways it “is always tempted to imitate the habits of those in power.”\textsuperscript{86} The answer, for Hauerwas, is for the church “to be a body constituted by disciplines that create the capacity to resist the disciplines of the body associated with the modern nation-state and, in particular, the economic habits that support that state.”\textsuperscript{87}

Just as Yoder believes the church \textit{is} the message (as opposed to \textit{having} a message), Hauerwas believes the church doesn’t \textit{have} a social ethic; the church \textit{is} a social ethic, a

\textsuperscript{82} Stanley Hauerwas, “The Church as God’s New Language,” in \textit{The Hauerwas Reader}, 149.

\textsuperscript{83} Hauerwas, \textit{Sanctify Them}, 165.

\textsuperscript{84} Hauerwas, “The Church as God’s New Language,” 159.

\textsuperscript{85} Hauerwas, \textit{Sanctify Them}, 165.

\textsuperscript{86} Hauerwas, “What Could It Mean,” 27.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 26.
body politic, that is dependent on human embodiment (and the power of God) for its existence and its purpose.

Furthermore, the relationship between individual bodies and the ecclesial body is essential. The church needs to offer “community disciplines through which the story of our baptism is embodied in all that we do and are. We require practices through which we learn that we do not know who we are, or what our bodies can and cannot do, until we are told what and who we are by a more determinative ‘body.’”88 Because the experience of disability is so often defined and controlled by other, more determinative bodies, this idea of the church as a subaltern community that is in its own way determinative of the value and function of human bodies is important for the purposes of this project.

In order to develop an ecclesiology of disability, I need to define the relationship between human bodies and the ecclesial body in a way that is holistic, inclusive, and faithful. I start with the assumption that human bodies in all their varied forms and levels of ability, and all types of embodied experience, are intrinsic to the identity and mission of the church. The ecclesiologies explored here are helpful for an attempt to find this holistic ecclesiology of disability because they place value on the experience of embodiment for the church. Schillebeeckx, in particular, argues that human experience is both authoritative and critical to the church because it is grounded in embodiment rather than in systems or authorities that are completely external to particular, ongoing historical

88 Ibid., 24.
and cultural settings. Embodied human action—praxis—is the conduit of the church’s message, which is bearing witness to the kingdom of God.

Chauvet takes this idea of the church as manifestations of embodied acts a step further by stressing the necessity of the body for the mediation of experience, including the experience of God, the Christian faith, and the Christian community. The church is, by extension, a functional reality that mediates the presence of God both to its members and to the world through embodied acts.

Yoder places human action at the center of the church, and affirms that the church’s nature and mission is to embody a new kind of social wholeness that bear witness to the gospel, which is itself a new social order. In fact, Yoder believes that the body that is the church is visible only through these embodied acts, lived out in a new, distinct form of Christian community, which is the very message with which the church is entrusted.

Finally, Hauerwas calls the church to begin its theology—to contextualize its theology—from the starting point of embodiment, rather than from the starting point of “belief” or “spiritual matters.” He pushes back against any attempts to confine the significance of the church’s message to matters of the soul or spirit, and he argues for a Christology that begins with the person of Jesus rather than theological claims about Jesus’ nature. That is, Christology—the foundation for the church—and ecclesiology should be embodied rather that abstract concepts.

These emphases on the experience of embodiment for the church will help develop an eccesiology of disability that will enable Christians to carry out a “re-
imagining [of] the Church as the body of Christ [that] means that we are in and participants of the worlds of love that are unique to the resurrected body of Christ.” A holistic ecclesiology of disability includes the concerns and experiences of bodies with physical impairments and incorporates those concerns into an understanding of what it means to be the church.

I have explored several body-centric ecclesiologies in which the body of Christ is the medium through which the church performs the ongoing narrative of salvation that God works not just on souls, but on whole persons, bodies and all. Now I turn to the unique practices of the church that, by their performative nature, inscribe that narrative and that message on individual bodies.

---

CHAPTER 6
LITURGY AND THE BODY

We are more concretely homo liturgicus . . . those animals that are religious
animals not because we are primarily believing animals but because we are
liturgical animals—embodied, practicing creatures whose love/desire is aimed at
something ultimate.

— James K. A. Smith

When I initially attended services, I would often be alerted by an usher that I need
not go forward for the Eucharist. Instead I would be offered the sacrament at my
seat when everyone else had been served. My presence in the service using either
a wheelchair or crutches made problematical the “normal” bodily practice of the
Eucharist in the congregation [which was filing to the front of the sanctuary and
kneeling at the communion rail]. Yet rather than focusing on the congregation’s
practices that excluded my body and asking, “How do we alter the bodily practice
of the Eucharist in order that this individual and others with disabilities would
have full access to the ordinary practices of the church?” the decision makers
would center the (unstated) problem on my disabled body, asking, “How should
we accommodate this person with a disability in our practice of Eucharist?”
Hence receiving the Eucharist was transformed for me from a corporate to a
solitary experience; from a sacralization of Christ’s broken body to a
stigmatization of my disabled body.

To be human is, first and foremost, to be embodied. The Christian faith affirms as
much when it places the incarnation at the center of its belief system. It seems obvious
that a truly Christian liturgy demands a truly Christian anthropology that values all forms
of human embodiment. But, as noted previously, the church has not always presented a
holistic vision of embodiment, especially when it comes to forms of embodiment that

1 James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand

2 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville:
Abingdon Press, 1994), 112.
may deviate from what society considers “normal.” Of course, our anthropological views are always influenced by the values of the culture in which we live.

I have thus far explored the relationships between embodiment and theology and embodiment and the church, and I have identified theological and ecclesiological concepts that are grounded in and give value to the experience of embodiment. As I turn to the liturgical practices of the church as the body of Christ, I seek to discover the same links between what we do in worship and what we do with our bodies. In particular, I look at liturgical practices in such a way that the actions of the liturgy become formative not only for minds or spirits, but for both individual bodies and the body of Christ as a whole.

**Liturgy as Ritual Action**

Before an examination of the way liturgy forms people through embodied acts, it is necessary to explain how liturgy functions as ritual, which, when enacted, has the power to help “human beings come to consider themselves truly human.”\(^3\) This ritual nature of liturgy is “tangible evidence that there is more to religion that a simple assent to beliefs.”\(^4\) Thus, liturgy, when properly enacted as ritual, includes the whole of the human person, including the body.

---


Perhaps one of the most important aspects of ritual performance is its ability to promote social solidarity. As has been seen, solidarity or unity of the early Christian church was a concern to early Christian communities. Catherine Bell argues that “religion is a set of ideas and practices by which people sacralize the social structure and bonds of the community.”⁵ For the early Christians, who were adopting a set of beliefs and practices that were very different from those of the surrounding society, the ritual practices of worship enacted in the community would provide a “buffer” against the suspicion and antagonism of both the Jews and the pagans.

Bell points out that the act of being bound to the community through ritual is not necessarily a “conscious act of affiliation.”⁶ Rather, the collective experience of embodied enactment of the rites and stories of the faith reveals both the community’s relationship to the transcendent God and the presence of the immanent God within the community. In addition, ritual helps shape people’s perception of themselves as individuals and as a community, has the potential to maintain the community’s ethos, and can restore unity and harmony after a conflict. In fact, Bell says ritual can be the “actual mechanism for constantly re-creating, not just reaffirming, this unity.”⁷

Bell cites a theory of British anthropologist Max Gluckman, which posits that “ritual is the occasion to exaggerate the tensions that exist in the society in order to provide a social catharsis that can simultaneously affirm unity and effect some semblance

⁵ Ibid., 24.
⁶ Ibid., 25.
⁷ Ibid., 39.
of it.”

One could look at the rituals of the liturgy—especially the prayer of confession, the peace, and the eucharist, in which Jesus shares his broken body with the community—as acts that portray the brokenness of the church and then ritually (and bodily) give expression to both a healing of that brokenness and a tangible sense of unity.

Symbols always play a vital role in any ritual enactment of religion. Bell observes that rather than responding to the sacredness of a symbol, religious ritual “effectively creates the sacred” in that symbol, thus imbuing the symbol with more value than “the mere sum of its parts” and allowing the symbol to point to something beyond itself. This created sacredness applies not just to symbolic objects, but also to places and people. In the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, then, the sacredness of the water or cup and bread is created by the ritual actions of the prayers, the application and reception of water, the sharing of the elements and the action of the Holy Spirit. In doing so, the community itself is set apart as a holy people. As Richard D. McCall maintains, the liturgy attempts to “accomplish what it represents”—that is, to form a holy people through their participation in the act of making the holy real and accessible through both material symbols and bodily actions.

In recent years, attention has been given to looking at the liturgy as performance. Bell notes that one of the qualities that make a ritual effectively performative is communication on multiple sensory levels: “the power of performance lies in great part

---

8 Ibid., 38.

9 Ibid., 157.

10 Richard D. McCall, *Do This: Liturgy as Performance* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 57.
in the effect of the heightened multisensory experience it affords: one is not being told or shown something so much as one is led to experience something.”\textsuperscript{11} As anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff writes, “not only is seeing believing, doing is believing.”\textsuperscript{12}

According to McCall, as a performative, embodied act, liturgy “is an instance not only of theological content but of the immediate presence of that which it performs.”\textsuperscript{13} Liturgy becomes the performed—and embodied—theology of the people as they enter into the presence of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to which the liturgy witnesses. As McCall contends, the liturgy “implies the performance of an action that accomplishes in the present the end for which the narrative is remembered and of which the narrative is the shape and meaning.”\textsuperscript{14} This is anamnesis—not simply dramatic reenactment of past events, but making real in the present moment the significance and power of those events. It is the “social construction of reality.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, in the ritual performance of liturgy, the power of salvation history, especially as revealed in Jesus Christ, is made real in the actions of the worshiping community. Because God has effected that salvation history through the claiming and creation of a people called to be a “holy nation,” the liturgy helps the church reclaim and recognize once again that sacred identity, which is rooted not in the community’s memory or belief, nor in individual

\textsuperscript{11} Bell, \textit{Ritual}, 160.


\textsuperscript{13} McCall, \textit{Do This}, 63.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 87.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 61.
spiritual experience, but in the communal acts of embodiment. As Alexander Schmemann posits, liturgy is “an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals.”\(^\text{16}\)

Richard Schechner makes a crucial distinction between “aesthetic drama,” in which the audience is separated physically and conceptually from the performers, and “social drama,” which involves all people who are present, although in different degrees. His description of how these two types of drama function as transformative acts addresses the importance for worship to invite people to be participants rather than to be spectators:

In aesthetic drama everyone in the theater is a participant in the *performance* while only those playing roles in the drama are participants in the *drama* nested within the performance . . . The function of aesthetic drama is *to do for the consciousness of the audience what social drama does for its participants*: providing a place for, and means of transformation. Rituals carry participants across limens, transforming them into different persons.\(^\text{17}\)

Liturgy, then, is a performance within which is nested a drama of salvation history. In order to function as a ritual that transforms bodies, and not just consciousness, it must be not just a “theological show,” but also a social drama in which everyone is given opportunity to embody the ritual acts of worship.

Liturgy as performance is a combination of words, material things, and actions, but enactment is primary. Dom Gregory Dix proposes that the liturgy can only be


properly identified by verbs of doing: taking, blessing, breaking, giving.\textsuperscript{18} This embodied enactment of the shape of the liturgy is the liturgy’s “very essence,” which brings the material, humanity, and words together in an intentional act that is the “only adequate locus for confronting the reality of human life in time and space, and thus the only adequate locus in which to meet the God whose Word is made flesh to dwell among us.”\textsuperscript{19} Such ritual practices “show the essential role that a ‘turn towards the body’ has as we identify with the One who came incarnate and enter into the gestures of God with our bodies as part of the body of Christ.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Liturgy as Formational}

\textit{Lex orandi, lex credendi.} This shorthand Latin phrase, translated as “the law of prayer constitutes the law of belief,” has become an axiom in liturgical studies to support the idea that there is an inherent relationship between the way a Christian community worships and that community’s theology and way of believing.\textsuperscript{21} This principle has been interpreted in different ways, often according to ecclesiastic tradition. Some theologians argue for the normative nature of the church’s prayer (and by extension, liturgy), which leads to faith and to doctrinal and theological claims, while others consider liturgy as an

\begin{flushright}
\begin{enumerate}
\item See Gregory Dix, \textit{The Shape of the Liturgy} (London: Continuum, 2007).
\item McCall, \textit{Do This}, 88.
\item Heidi Miller Yoder, “The Spiritual Practice of Ritualy Enacted Narrative: Expanding Pilgram Marpeck’s Understanding of Action in the Lord’s Supper,” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2011), 84.
\item The full Latin phrase is \textit{legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi}, which is taken from a fifth-century writing of Prosper of Aquitaine. See \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church} (VA: Bishopric of Rome), 1124.
\end{enumerate}
\end{flushright}
extension and expression of the church’s theology, which is primary. Still others see a
more reciprocal relationship: “worship influences doctrine, and doctrine worship.”
Some theologians discern other “laws” at work in the relationship between prayer and
belief. Kevin Irwin expands the formula by adding lex vivendi (the law of living), while
Don Saliers adds lex agendi (the law of ethical action).\(^2\)\(^3\) That is, there is an inherent
relationship between belief, prayer (or worship), and living. E. Byron Anderson contends
that “if liturgical sacramental practice is constitutive and normative for the nature and
identity of Christian persons and communities, then it is oriented toward the life of such
persons and communities in and with the world.”\(^2\)\(^4\)

If one of the “aims” of liturgy is to shape us to live ethically and faithfully, then
the formation offered by liturgy must take place in our bodies: “to learn, to know, is to be
transformed—it is to implicate our selves, our very bodies in the actions and practices of
learning and coming to know.”\(^2\)\(^5\) Furthermore, if we are learning, through our
participation in worship, to live faithfully as embodied creatures, we need to know how to
conduct ourselves, relate to others, and respond to sometimes challenging situations
outside the realm of the gathered community. Debra Dean Murphy says that “such
knowledge demands our transformation—not in the sense that our minds are changed or


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 28.

our intellects are conditioned (though this is certainly part of it), but in the deeper sense that we are constituted differently.”26

Brett Webb-Mitchell challenges what he sees as normative practices of Christian formation that are based on the distinction between mind and body and that focus on educating the mind rather than the body. He suggests that the church restores “body” (as in the body of Christ that is the gathered community) as “the primary context in which we educate Christians, and that we reiterate the truth that education of Christians is a community practice of the mind, body, and spirit of Christ.”27 He describes the “gestures of the body” as an “embodiment of a storied-knowledge” that form Christians similar to how the experience of apprenticeship forms someone into a craft.28 These gestures require that the members of the body of Christ be transformed from an individualistic viewpoint to one that is communal and interdependent. That is, the gestures of the body of Christ require no less than a collaborative effort. While Mitchell depicts gestures that include interactions that extend beyond the act of worship, he also notes that baptism and eucharist both function to pattern individuals into the gestures of the community through an identification with and sharing in the body of Christ that is the church.

26 Ibid., 323.


28 Ibid., 275.
Some religious leaders have criticized the tendency to focus on the didactic aspects of the liturgy. As John Westerhoff claims, to use the liturgy in this way is “to do it violence.”

However, Murphy argues against that, saying,

In contrast, to admit the intimate connection between knowledge and action, between learning and bodily practice, is to recognize that, for Christians, worship is the site at which our formation and education are initiated and completed (insofar as they can ever be complete). What we do, how we act, in the liturgical assembly shapes us in particular and powerful ways and is both formative of identity and catechetical in the most basic sense.

With this assumption as a guiding principle, I now examine how the concept of embodiment affects and informs this relationship between liturgy, theology, and life.

**A Brief History of Bodies and Liturgy**

Throughout its history, the church has recognized the intrinsic and necessary relationship between embodiment and the practice of worship. However, the value that the church assigned to bodies and the degree to which bodies were permitted or expected to participate in worship varied at different times and within different church traditions.

The word *liturgy* comes from the Greek term *leitourgia*, which was originally a political or legal term used to describe a service that was rendered on behalf of the people and for the good of the people by a duly-appointed representative. In Christianity, the apostle Paul used the term to describe actions of the people such as the collection of gifts by congregations in Macedonia and Greece the churches in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 9:12).

---


30 Murphy, “Worship as Catechesis,” 324-25.
Elsewhere in the New Testament, it refers to a priestly, mediating ministry. Eventually, it came to be known as the celebration of worship in the gathered community, and especially as the texts, rituals, and orders used for worship. It is common for modern-day liturgical scholars to use liturgy to mean “the work of the people” (the literal meaning of leitourgia), as in the work done in the course of worship by the people in the gathered assembly. For the purposes of this chapter, I look at liturgy specifically as the “work of the people” in worship through bodily actions, which can reveal how the church viewed the significance and value of bodies in relationship to the liturgy at particular times and contexts in church history. The following is not meant to be either an exhaustive overview of liturgical history or a study of liturgical rites. Rather, certain examples of liturgical texts will be explored—especially those that describe the actions of the laity—to determine the ways that members of the community were expected to be involved in the liturgy through the actions of their bodies.

Little is known about the particulars of bodily participation in the worship of the early church. The only evidence we have is from the New Testament, and there are certain passages that scholars believe may contain parts of hymns (such as the Canticles in Luke 1:46-55, 68-79 and 2:29-32) or creedal formulations (such as Phil. 2:5-11) or implied examples of liturgical rubrics (such as the information Paul shares about the Lord’s Supper in 1 Cor. 11:23) or general instructions (such as Paul’s notes to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 14:26ff). In spite of these allusions to the forms of worship in the early church, the New Testament does not offer explicit descriptions or instructions for the “work of the people” in worship.
By the Patristic Period (approximately from the second to the fifth centuries), a variety of liturgical orders with rubrics began to be produced by different communities in different areas around the Middle East. Although we cannot ascertain whether these documents were descriptive or proscriptive (that is, whether the documents describe either what communities at the time were actually doing or an idealized form of liturgy that attempted to shape the way people worshiped), we can assume that they reveal at least the expectation, if not the actual reality, of bodily participation in worship.\(^{31}\) One of the earliest documents from this era, *The First Apology of Justin Martyr* (ca. 155), describes a weekly communal gathering of believers who participate by greeting one another with a kiss, by shouting “Amen” to show their assent to the prayer of thanksgiving offered by the one presiding over the assembly, by sharing the bread and wine with all who are present, and by standing together to offer prayers. In addition, the elements of the eucharist are carried to those who are unable to join the assembly. According to Justin, bodies, even when they were absent, were an important part of the church’s worship.

When Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313, Christian liturgy developed rapidly, integrating many forms and symbols from Roman civil society.\(^ {32}\) During this time, people continued to participate in the liturgy in various ways such as offering prayers and receiving the eucharist. But other, highly participatory (and public) forms of worship, called stational liturgies, developed in the fourth century in cities such as


\(^{32}\) In this project, I focus on Christianity as it developed in the West (Roman Christianity).
as Jerusalem and Rome. In Jerusalem in particular, the stational liturgies took advantage of Constantine’s program of building churches or shrines at sites in and around the city that were considered important places in Jesus’ life and ministry, especially regarding his death, burial, and resurrection. Stational liturgies were celebrated at these sites on a regular basis, including on Sundays. The sites and the design of the stational churches were planned with procession in mind, and they were well situated to accommodate pilgrimages. People flocked to Jerusalem in order to visit each of these sites in the context of liturgical celebrations. Our best evidence of these stational liturgies comes from the travel diary of Egeria, who visited Jerusalem in the late fourth century. From her description, we can see that the sites of the Holy Week liturgies approximately matched the sites of Jesus’ Passion, and that the bodily participation in the liturgies was rich and full: as the people processed to and gathered at each location, they offered prayers, hymns, and antiphons. These stational liturgies represented the increasingly public nature of Christian worship and the civic importance of Christianity. Because they revolved around the ecclesial leader in each city, they also revealed the desire for visible, embodied unity in the church as one flock under one leader.

In the medieval period (approximately the fifth through the fifteenth centuries), the liturgy was increasingly “performed for [private] devotional purposes rather than as an action of the whole people of God engaged in their public work.”\textsuperscript{33} Significant bodily participation in the mass was confined to the priests, and the laity became more

\textsuperscript{33} Frank C. Senn, \textit{Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 212.
disengaged from the fuller kind of bodily participation that had been seen previously. As Senn observes, the architecture of the great Gothic cathedrals that were being erected during this time encouraged the separation of clerical bodies and laic bodies and discouraged any substantial kind of a shared embodied worship event:

The priest was separated from the choir, engaged in his private devotions while the choir was singing extended chants of the mass. The choir was separated from the people who were also engaged in their own devotions while mass was being offered. Thus, all were gathered in separate spaces within one building, separately pursuing their own devotions. The notion of liturgy as a communal public work was becoming very tenuous indeed.34

Opportunities for the laity to offer their bodily actions in the liturgy were even further reduced by the rise of the spoken liturgy (“low mass”) in which there was no singing, and by the increasingly popular practice of elevating and processing the eucharistic elements, which gradually encouraged people to be “content to gaze at the sacrament rather than to eat or drink it.”35

McCall notes that the performance of elevating the host from its “burial place” shows how “spectatorship was to become, by the late Middle Ages . . . ecclesiastical ritual. The liturgy increasingly became a presentation to the people rather than [bodily] enactment by the people.”36 The clericalization of the tenth and eleventh centuries was manifest in this belief that the priests acted (performed) on behalf of the people. As a result, the actions of the liturgy became more and more isolated from the people.

34 Ibid., 221.
35 Ibid., 226.
36 McCall, Do This, 13.
were still important to the liturgy, but bodily participation no longer functioned as a sign of the shared work of the people or of the unity of the gathered community.

During the Reformation, Protestant churches enacted liturgical reforms that increased the bodily participation of the laity. For instance, people were invited and expected to use their bodies to sing hymns and to eat the bread and drink the wine. However, the use of cheap, mass-produced books for worship had a counter effect on full-body participation. As worship became more text-oriented and as texts supplanted embodied rituals, ceremonies, and events, “worshipers came together not to perform liturgical actions, for which the space had to kept open to accommodate moving bodies, but to hear and read text, for which pews were probably a welcome convenience.”37 In general, reformation liturgy emphasized one bodily action in worship over all others: the act of hearing the word in the liturgy and the preaching.

The Counter Reformation of the Roman Catholic Church, which culminated in the Council of Trent in 1545, produced a few reforms to church practices such as the plan to produce a catechism and to revise the Breviary and Missal under the guidance of the pope. However, the Council passed no decrees that would correct the failure to encourage a fuller level of bodily participation by the laity in the Mass. Although several council members advocated for changes such as offering communion in both kinds, the Council made no recommendation on these matters.

In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment ideals affected the worship practices in many church traditions as churches turned to Rationalism to understand Christian faith

37 Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 301.
and practices. “Church leaders valued public worship only to the extent that it was edifying to the people.”\textsuperscript{38} Liturgy became more didactic and less sensual. Sermons became longer, liturgical prayers were shortened or eliminated, and the sacraments were celebrated with much less frequency and “with little enthusiasm.”\textsuperscript{39} In addition, as knowledge became grounded in perception, the ability for religious signs and symbols to mediate any significant knowledge or truth came under suspicion. While the Reformation emphasized the act of hearing as the most important aspect of bodily participation in worship, the Enlightenment reduced the body’s significance—in worship and in the Christian faith as a whole—primarily to the use of reason.

The Wesleyan movement of the same period was an exception to the effect of the Enlightenment on liturgy and bodily participation. Senn points out that Methodist worship was “countercultural” in two ways: first, it was “enthusiastic” and encouraged frequent celebrations of communion and a great deal of hymn singing, and second, it emphasized the actions of baptism, eucharist, and prayer as “means of grace.”\textsuperscript{40} This is significant because it demonstrates that John Wesley believed that God acts in and through bodily liturgical actions to impart grace in a special way.

In the twentieth century, the Liturgical Movement brought both a scholarly and pastoral interest to the liturgy. Some of the aims of this worldwide movement, which began in the Roman Catholic Church, were revitalization of the church through the

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 541.


\textsuperscript{40} Senn, \textit{Christian Liturgy}, 549
liturgy and restoration of active participation of the people by reclaiming the liturgy as the “work of the people.” In 1963, the Second Vatican Council promulgated the document the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, which affirmed greater participation of the laity in the liturgy as a celebration of the whole church. The Liturgical Movement spread to other denominations and has resulted in a variety of liturgical reforms that include enculturating the liturgy to particular times and places in order to make it more culturally expressive, vibrant, and participatory, and encouraging a stronger connection between liturgy, social justice and ethics.

According to Geoffrey Wainwright, the years since the Liturgical Movement began its work have represented an “anthropological turn” in liturgical studies and practice.\(^{41}\) Since the 1990s, there has been a concentrated effort to explore the relationship between liturgy and embodiment. A common theme in this effort is the idea that the embodied practices of Christian worship are inherently formative. E. Byron Anderson argues that the liturgy itself is catechesis: “Christian worship is a cluster of practices in which persons and communities are formed intentionally and unintentionally in particular understandings of self and church.”\(^{42}\) Anderson maintains that these embodied practices should “not only make a person and community feel a certain way but transform or convert that person and community as well.”\(^{43}\)


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 40.
transformed by what it does, bodily, in worship. As Catherine Vincie observes, “there is a relationship between a society’s identity, its values and its beliefs and its ritual performances.”

Whether we intend it to be so or not, the liturgy is always forming us in both conscious and subconscious ways. The words we hear or say, the bodily actions we perform, and the repetitive ritual acts we practice all shape us as individuals, as a community of faith, and as a people of God. Even though liturgy is (or should be) primarily the praise of God by the gathered community, it also always teaches and forms.

I will now look at the work of several scholars whose work addresses the relationship between worship, theology, and bodily practice, and who focus on the importance of bodily ritual action for Christian worship and formation.

**Bodies, Theology, and Practice**

Don Saliers examines liturgy as an enacted, culturally-embedded expression of the theology of the worshiping people that both shapes and is shaped by the real human situations in which the enactment takes place. He believes the liturgy is the “primary theology” of the community, and worshipers come to know God through “full and active” participation in worship rather than through a “cognitive mastery of texts.” In addition, knowing God is “profoundly affectional,” and prayers and other ritual acts are ways that

---


we relate and respond to—and thus more fully know—God.\textsuperscript{46} Saliers argues that it is the acts themselves—the water bath, sharing the common meal, praying, singing, celebrating—that reveal the “future-present” of God.\textsuperscript{47} This is true, in part, because Christian worship is the ongoing prayer and worship of Jesus as enacted through his body—the Church—for the sake of and on behalf of the whole world.

The guiding principle for Saliers’ work is “liturgy as rite and as prayer is thoroughly eschatological.”\textsuperscript{48} That is, liturgy that is honest and faithful is grounded in the hope of God’s future and in the understanding of the implication of that future for the present. Saliers is quick to admit that eschatology as a lived and enacted theology has been prone to misinterpretation, which results in eschatology being seen as escapism or as culturally irrelevant. But he also notes that the twentieth-century liturgical renewal movement has helped reorient Christian thinking to eschatology.\textsuperscript{49} No longer relegated to a chapter in a book on systematic theology, eschatology is now the lens through which all of Christian theology and practice (including, and perhaps most especially, worship) can be understood. True eschatology is a “radical openness toward the future” and is a realization of the “already but not yet” aspect of a future that has already been

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 97.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 85.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 50.
accomplished in Jesus Christ but is yet to be realized in its fullness in the kingdom of God.  

Saliers demonstrates the importance of the enacted aspect of liturgy in his examination of the four modes of prayer (thanksgiving, confession, adoration, and intercession), which act as “schools” that form people into authentic ways of “being before God.” More than just texts (whether ancient or modern), these forms of prayer are themselves “languages”—of gratitude, of speaking the truth in love, of remembering who God has promised to be, and of a cry on behalf of the world—that give voice to the community’s awareness of the human condition and that are an appropriate response to a hurting world. An eschatological perspective of prayer reveals that the fullness and the power of such prayers can only be realized over time as the people of God gather, pray, and worship in spirit and in truth. Eschatology, after all, speaks to the ways God acts in history, and the forming of the people into the truth of the gospel and the vision of God’s future is an ongoing part of that historical reality. Thus, immediate affective experiences during times of prayer and worship are only steps in the “transformative power of God’s self-giving in and through liturgical action” that shapes people’s thoughts, feelings, and awareness of God and the world over time.  

While Saliers is very interested in the anthropological aspects of Christian worship, he is quick to stress the Christological center of worship: “our liturgy is Christ’s

\[50\] Ibid., 51.  
\[51\] Ibid., 31.  
\[52\] Ibid., 38.
before it is ours.”

When the community worships, the people are doing so in and through Jesus Christ; they are participating in what is, in effect, Christ’s ongoing sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God, and Christ’s ongoing prayers of intercession for the world (as in John 17). Thus, it is not enough simply to imitate Christ. Through the liturgy—and over time—people must be shaped into Christ’s life and into his proclamation of God’s kingdom.

Liturgy, therefore, is inherently ethical. In fact, Saliers expands the notion of liturgy into liturgy as cultus (leitourgia) and the liturgy carried out by the people in the world (diakonia).

Liturgy does not only proclaim what Jesus said and did as witnessed in the New Testament; it also proclaims that in the gathered community, Christ is still acting, saying, and doing, still proclaiming the coming of the kingdom until God’s reign is fully realized. Worshipers are shaped as an eschatologically-minded people by their participation in Christ’s prayers and presence.

Thus, the result of the formation offered by the embodied liturgy is itself an aspect of embodiment. As noted above, Saliers points to the relationship between Christian worship and ethics, with “ethics” being a concrete way of living rather than a theoretical conception. What a community does in worship—how the people pray, how they enact baptism and the eucharist, how they relate to one another in the Peace—forms how they concretely embody the “pattern of affections and virtues revealed in the pattern

---

53 Ibid., 182.

54 Ibid., 180.
of God’s self-giving in Jesus Christ.”55 This pattern requires constant “re-entry” into the Christ-pattern, the story of God revealed in Christ that is retold and re-membered in Christian worship. Saliers posits that mere imitation of Christ is not enough; “what is needed is an actual reorientation of life, a process of conversion of the heart and social imagination to the rule and reign of God that Jesus proclaims and embodies.”56

Saliers describes one prerequisite for what he considers “authentic” worship: the tension between human *pathos* (broadly defined as human suffering) and divine *ethos* (the self-giving of God to humans, especially in the liturgy). Authentic liturgy occurs when the two meet in the texts, the forms, the prayers, and the style of worship. Worship that does not bring human *pathos* into contact with divine *ethos* can become a “self-serving flight from what is real.”57 Saliers argues that the divine nature includes human *pathos*, as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If the liturgy is to help us more fully understand both ourselves and God, then we must be willing to bring the fullness of our *pathos* to our worship. An eschatological perspective necessitates this offering of our human condition, for God’s future is predicated on and directly pertains to that human condition. Eschatology is not an escape from *pathos*; rather, it proclaims the triumph of God over it.

---

55 Ibid., 174.

56 Ibid., 175.

57 Ibid., 24.
One argument that directs Salier’s examination of the actual practice of worship is that liturgy is “radically dependent on what is not verbal for meaning and significance.”58 He argues that the key question is not so much, “What do the texts say in terms of theology and doctrine?” but, “What are the people saying and doing in using these texts?” Again, it is the embodied, enacted theology of liturgy that is both primary and formational.

Gordon Lathrop describes the relationship between liturgy and ethics as the “geography” of the liturgy; Christian liturgy offers “maps” for orienting worshipers in the world.59 Liturgy, as an “enacted map,” is a communal interpretation of God, humanity, and the world that all people need in order to live in the world.60 Lathrop points out that there are many such maps, such as those created by the media, advertising, and social and political systems, that orient and guide us away from God. Properly understood and properly used, the “tools” for liturgical geography—baptism, communion, hearing the word, singing hymns, praying—can act as a correction to these deceptive orientations and can orient bodies toward what Lathrop calls the four cardinal directions in Christian liturgy: toward God, toward one another in the assembly, toward the needy, and toward the earth.61 But too often, the orientations we have allowed our religious rituals to give us have been almost exclusively interior orientations to the self, a map of the human heart without a

58 Ibid., 140.
59 Gordon Lathrop, Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 56.
60 Ibid., 59.
61 Ibid., 63.
macrocosm, without exterior references except to a . . . “heaven.” Such orientations have nothing much to do with mapping the community of life outside our windows. And leave largely unchallenged and untransformed the maps created by television, daily news, advertising narratives, highway systems, racial categories, and national boundaries.62

James K. A. Smith makes a case for the primacy of the body in any kind of orientation or formation. The body, he says, is not just essential to human identity, it is also the locus of the very core of human identity.63 Smith notes that behind every pedagogy is a set of assumptions about what it means to be human. Thus, there is a reciprocal relationship between the form of the liturgy and its inherent anthropology: what we believe we are as humans shapes our liturgy, which in turn shapes (or reinforces) our anthropology.

Smith argues against any dualistic anthropology or theology that would favor the mind (or soul) over the body. Such dualistic models of Christian theology and faith are inadequate because they “fail to actually counter the cultural liturgies that are forming us every day” and because they “are inattentive to the centrality of embodied, material, liturgical practice.”64

Smith challenges two forms of theological anthropology that are inadequate for true Christian formation. The first is the “person–as–thinker,” which focuses on the cognitive aspects of human identity (as per Descartes’ assertion, *Cogito ergo sum*—“I think, therefore I am”). This, according to Smith, “accounts for the shape of so much

---

62 Ibid., 59.

63 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 32.

64 Ibid., 33.
Protestant worship as a heady affair fixated on ‘messages’ that disseminate Christian ideas and abstract values.\(^{65}\) This kind of liturgy not only reinforces the dualism between mind and body, valuing the former over the latter, but also is inaccessible to some people who do not have the cognitive ability to grasp abstract ideas and doctrinal statements. Thus, it teaches us that some people are somehow less than human by reason of their cognitive abilities.

The second faulty anthropology is the “person–as–believer,” which leads to an individualist model that locates belief as something that has little or no attachment to bodies.\(^{66}\) Without the need for bodies, Smith says, there is little need for church: “as Hauerwas rightly notes, when Christianity is turned into ‘a belief system,’ it is reduced to something ‘available without the mediation by the church.’”\(^{67}\) Smith argues that it is not just human bodies that are necessary for this formation through certain practices, but social bodies as well: “Practices don’t float in society; rather they find expression and articulation in concrete sites and institutions—which is why and how they actually shape embodied persons. There are no practices without institutions.”\(^{68}\)

Smith offers an alternative, non-cognitive anthropological model: the person as an embodied agent of desire and love. Rather than orienting ourselves to the world in the realm of thought or ideas or beliefs as disembodied thinkers or believers, we are oriented

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 42.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 45.

\(^{67}\) Ibid.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 62.
to the world through our desires, our passions, and our love—all of which are features of embodiment. We “inhabit the world . . . as more affective, embodied creatures who make our way in the world more by feeling our way around it.”69 In other words, human experience precedes reflection on that experience; our involvement with the world enables us to think about the world. Most of the time, our involvement with the world is forming us in ways that transcend our conscious thought.

Being agents of desire and love means that what we love defines our human identity. We are shaped most profoundly not by what we think, or by our conscious reflection, but by what we desire—what we love most deeply. This desire or love animates us and orients us to the world in particular ways, and is always directed to a teleological end that is manifest in a concrete vision and not just abstract ideas. For Christians, the “goal” of desire should be the goodness of God’s kingdom, in which life is grounded in community and all persons are free to flourish as God intends.

According to Smith, this (or any other) desire “becomes operative in us (motivating actions, decisions, etc.) by becoming an integral part of the fabric of our dispositions,” which he defines as habits that are non-cognitive, almost automatic actions.70 And this is why taking embodiment seriously is so important: these habits are both inscribed in us and performed through our bodies rather than our minds. As Smith says, “we are selves who are our bodies; thus the training of desire requires bodily

---

69 Ibid., 47.

70 Ibid., 55.
practices in which a particular *telos* [the kingdom of God] is embedded.”  

We orient and train our desire and our *telos* through our participation in bodily practices in which that *telos* is embedded.

Liturgy, then, has the potential to offer us the rituals and practices that “mold and shape our precognitive disposition to the world by training our desires” toward a Christian worldview. Liturgy has the power to inscribe this vision within us through the communal practices of baptism, holy communion, prayer, singing, and other embodied acts of worship, all of which are aimed toward the kingdom of God, both as “already” and as “not yet.” Christian liturgy can also help us understand how other, competing liturgies such as those utilized by popular culture or materialism or capitalism (which Smith defines as “rituals that are formative for identity [and] that inculcate particular visions of the good life”) orient us to ends that are antithetical to the kingdom of God.

To be human means being created in the image of God. But this image, as Smith suggests, is not a property of being human, nor is it some “thing” that we carry within us, such as morality. Rather, the *imago Dei* is the responsibility given to each Christian to reveal God’s image to the world after the pattern set by Jesus, who was the fullest (and most human) revelation of God to the world. Liturgy provides us with a set of patterns—patterns of prayer, of ritual, and of sacramental action—that are the practices of a

---

71 Ibid., 62. Emphasis his.

72 Ibid., 59.

73 Ibid., 86.

74 Ibid., 164.
community of faith that does not simply imitate Christ, but is formed into the very life of Christ by imagining of the stories of his life, by participating in his sacramental presence, and by sharing the divine love through acts of caring, greeting, and respecting one another in worship.

The concept of *lex orandi, lex credendi* is implicit in Smith’s ideas about the formative value of liturgy. He argues that just as our perceptions of and interactions with the world precede any theorizing we undertake, so too does our experience of liturgy precede our theological reflection. Christian liturgy does not express a particular worldview; rather, it represents “an understanding that cannot be had *apart* from the practices.”75 This is an anthropology that starts from the experience of embodiment: bodily practices inform the “social imaginary” (the vision, the desire, and the love), which in turn leads to the cognitive aspects of theory, doctrine, and knowledge.

The inherent relationship between embodiment and liturgy is evident in what Smith calls the “sacramental understanding” of the world: an understanding that “God inhabits all [the] earthy stuff, that we meet God in the material resources of water and wine, that God embraces our embodiment, embraces us in our embodiment.”76 Smith believes the sacraments—“unique channels of grace”—are “intensifications,” through material, embodied events, of the omnipresence of God in creation.77 In this conception of sacramentality, Smith cites Alexander Schmemann, who writes, “Because of the sort

---

75 Ibid., 69.

76 Ibid., 140.

77 Ibid., 141.
of animals we were created to be, we need water and oil, bread and wine in order to be in communion with God and to know Him.”

Schmemann (1921-1983) was an Orthodox priest and scholar, and although in this project I focus on the Western church, some of Schmemann’s critiques are directed at the ways in which the Western church understands the relationship between itself, its liturgy, and its sacraments. Schmemann believes that the Western church is accustomed to seeing the liturgy and the sacraments as an “act of the church and within the church,” rather than seeing the church itself as the liturgy and “as the sacrament of Christ’s presence and action.” Schmemann critiques this tendency of the Western church to define liturgy narrowly as a cultic act that is in some way separate from the whole of human life. He defines leitourgia as “an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals.” Liturgy is the “sacrament by which [the church] ‘becomes what it is,’” and that is, a sacrament of God’s presence to the world.

In previous chapters, I looked at Louis-Marie Chauvet’s theology of the body and ecclesiology, both of which emphasize the necessity of the body as the essential means of mediating all reality, including nonmaterial, or spiritual, reality. Building on that concept, Chauvet describes the sacramentality of the economy whereby “the anthropological is the

---

78 Quoted in ibid., 143.
79 Schmemann, For the Life of the World, 21.
80 Ibid., 25.
81 Ibid., 26.
place of every possible theological.”82 The sacraments “inscribe the faith in the body of the participants.”83 That is, each individual human body is the place where the liturgy and the sacraments are at work in a symbolic network that comprises what Chauvet calls the “triple body” of culture, tradition, and nature, each of which play a role in defining the whole self of an individual. Faith is made manifest in bodies through the mediation of these other bodies: the social body that is the church, with its set of values and its specific, culturally embedded Christian worldview; the traditional body within the church, which could be described as the historical witness to the life of Jesus Christ as revealed in the scriptures; and the cosmic body of the universe, from which the material, sacramental elements are received as gifts from the creator. All of these bodies mediate spiritual reality—the grace and presence of God—to individual bodies in the sacraments.

The sacraments are intrinsically and essentially corporeal, and “thus serve as a buffer which repels every temptation a Christian might have to ignore body, history, society in order to enter without any mediation into communication with God.”84 Thus, to “become a believer is to learn to consent to the corporality of the faith” and to give up the idea that we can have any experience of God that is direct, transparent, and unmediated.85 As Chauvet argues, “there is no faith unless somewhere inscribed, inscribed in a body.”86


84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., 153.

86 Ibid., 154.
The relationship between bodily formation and the liturgy is reciprocal. According to Stanley Hauerwas, “to learn to worship . . . God truthfully requires that our bodies be formed by truthful habits of speech and gesture. To be so habituated is to acquire a character befitting lives capable of worshiping God.” Smith and Lathrop point out the danger of alternate liturgies orienting our desires toward other gods. Hauerwas sees the added danger of “narcissistic” Christian liturgies that shape us to seek gods that make for good evangelism and church growth—gods that appeal to people’s perceived needs for personal fulfillment or earthly success, for instance. In such churches, the eucharist is often neglected or absent. However, Hauerwas believes that the eucharist is the remedy for such dis-orientation: we can worship God as Christians only by “submitting our bodies to a training otherwise unavailable if we are to be capable of discerning those who use the name of Jesus to tempt us to worship foreign gods.” He notes that the question is not whether churches are choosing “contemporary” or “traditional” worship; the question is whether, in that worship, they are forming people to be part of a eucharistic community that embodies the story of salvation—a story of self-emptying and self-giving—as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Liturgy as a whole, and the sacraments of baptism and eucharist in particular, are by their very nature embodied events experienced in community. In some traditions, they are constitutive practices of the church. They are means of grace that are mediated

---


88 Ibid.
through human bodies by the reenactment of a story of God’s loving acts toward humanity—forgiveness, reconciliation, and an embodied self-giving in Jesus Christ. The ethics inherent in the sacraments—the dying and rising to new life signified by baptism and the celebration of a new kind of human community signified by the eucharist—are embodied experiences that are engraved in our whole selves by the presence of the One whose own embodied experiences we share.

The body is not simply a vehicle for the infusion of grace through the liturgy and especially the sacraments. Nor is it simply the place in which ethics are inscribed by the liturgy. The body mediates the reality of God to ourselves and to others. In the words of David Brown, the body functions “sacramentally in initiating experience of the divine” and has the potential to “open human beings up to the possibility of experiencing God or the divine through them.”

---

CHAPTER 7
AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF DISABILITY

*The body language of the church . . . does not always agree with the church’s verbal proclamation, either because body language is not considered to be important, or because no consensus has been arrived at in the Gestalt [or total pattern of the lived life].*

— Jürgen Moltmann

*The church is the community of God’s marginal people.*

— Jung Young Lee

Why is it important to look at ecclesiology from the perspective of disability? As I have shown, the concept of embodiment is not only important but also essential to the church because bodies are the primary form and locus of mediation for reality and truth. Because the church is grounded in the incarnation of Jesus Christ—the truth, values, and justice of God’s kingdom revealed in a human body through concrete and particular bodily actions—embodiment is of primary significance for the church. The body of Christ that is the church is no mere spiritual reconfiguration, representation, or remembrance of Jesus Christ. It is a new kind of community that is shaped chiefly through its liturgical rituals into ways of relating to the world that reveal the kingdom that was proclaimed by Jesus Christ. Just as God’s saving grace was once made known in and

---


through a human body, it continues to be made known in and through the human bodies that, together, form the body of Christ in its many particular, concrete, and historical manifestations.

Bodies are the site of Christian formation. Through the physical actions of the liturgy and the sacraments, individuals are shaped into the Christian narrative and apprenticed into a pattern of communal living that becomes a new humanity and a new social construct that is, above all, faithful to God’s ways as revealed in Jesus Christ. The church is a body politic that is dependent on human embodiment (along with the power of God) for its existence and for carrying out its mission.

Likewise, the practices of the church—the liturgy and the sacraments as well as mission and ministry—are dependent not only on the gracious presence of God, but also on the actions of human bodies. Liturgical ritual creates the sacred in the material symbols of bread, wine, water, and oil—a sacred essence that is not a suprahistorical, disembodied reality, but is made visible through the embodied acts of the community. The anamnetic dimensions of the church’s liturgical practices depend on bodies to make real and present the story of the events that those practices signify. Otherwise, anamnesis is reduced to a mere reenactment or remembrance of something that is past, and no longer accessible in a physical sense.

But why disability? The concept and experience of disability can inform and enrich the ways the church understands embodiment in relation to God and to the world. Because disability draws attention to the body in such a profound way, because it calls into question and offers a critique of traditional concepts of bodily function and ability,
and because its definition is rooted in the way impaired bodies interact with the societies in which they live, the concept of disability can also help the church discover faulty expressions of its relationship to human bodies, its nature as the body of Christ, and its relationship with the world.

The challenge is to construct an ecclesiology that includes ideas of human embodiment, the church as the body of Christ, and the formative aspects of the liturgy, all held together in the context of disability. If it is true that all reality and truth are mediated through both the individual body and social bodies, then this project can be framed in the question of how a disabled body—or how the embodied experience of disability—can mediate the truth about God, humanity, and the world both to the church and to the world. Or, to borrow again the words of Stanley Hauerwas, “how does the description of ‘the body of Christ’ [now perceived as a disabled body] help Christians better understand what we must be in order to face the challenges of being Church?”

Any contextual theological project needs to be grounded both in the lived experience of the community in which the project is situated, and in a set of principles that guide the construction of the new theological paradigm and/or practice. In his work on evangelism, Bryan Stone refers to the ecclesial habitus as an “alternative way of living and seeing” in which “belief is acquired as a way of life and over time.” In this concept

---


of *habitus*, “the body adopts a particular habitual way of relating to the environment” through the embodied experiences of everyday life.\(^5\) In other words, a *habitus* is the mostly unconscious system of dispositions—deeply embodied (as opposed to cognitive) ways of comprehending and relating to the world—that is acquired through social “experiences which shape the stance we adopt in the world.”\(^6\) A *habitus* is not static, but is always in flux as our social location and embodied experiences change, and functions to orient an individual in his or her own particular social location and according to his or her own embodied experience of and interaction with social bodies.

It can be argued that the most familiar *habitus* in the church (here painted in very broad, general terms within the North American context) is one of able-bodied dominance and privilege because the society in which the church is situated is “dominated by non-disabled bodies” and favors “the corporeal status of non-impaired people.”\(^7\) Thus, the church’s context—its *habitus*—shapes its practices in particular ways that may or may not be faithful to the church’s true identity and purpose. These practices, in turn, shape individuals in the same way.

It is important, then, for the church to develop its own determination of the value and function of human bodies. The challenge is to identify an ecclesial *habitus* that shapes bodies—both individual bodies and the communal body that is the church—to be

\(^5\) Deborah Marks, *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1999), 129.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Claire Edwards and Rob Imrie, “Disability and Bodies as Bearers of Value,” *Sociology* 37 (May 2003): 249.
an embodiment of Jesus Christ’s life and ministry and a revelation of the kingdom of God as a new social order in which all people are freed from oppression to flourish as God intends. The “specific shape of our material embodiment [such as the experience of disability] plays a significant role” in the way the whole person “perceives and interprets the world.”

8 An ecclesiology of disability—or a *habitus* that is grounded in the context of disability—can offer the church a way to evaluate and transform its identity and practices so it can be the church it is called to be.

Such an ecclesiology of disability is based on the constructive elements of this project that have already been explored, including the theological and anthropological significance of embodiment, the identity and nature of the church as the body of Christ, and the formational value of the liturgy. Before beginning to develop this ecclesiology, I need to revisit the ways in which I approach these concepts and offer an interpretation of their relationship that guides this work.

The body of Christ that is the church is a physical, literal social body—a community—that defines itself by its ritual enactment of the scriptural narrative and its communal practices as modeled by Jesus Christ. The embodied practices of this community both distinguish the church from the world and also form its members into a distinctive Christian identity that takes root not just in the cognitive aspects of belief, but in actions of the whole body. The Christian faith is inscribed in the bodies of individuals through the use of symbols and the ritual actions of liturgy that create a new social reality

---

for the church. This new reality—the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus Christ—is not an end for the church, but is the means by which the church reveals the kingdom to the world. Finally, the body of Christ is not defined as an institution (although it has institutional aspects) or solely by a set of doctrines (although these are important to the church’s identity). Rather, it is defined by its manifestation as a concrete, historical revelation of God’s work in the midst of the faith community.

Ecclesiological Principles in the Context of Disability

With this concept of the relationship between church, body, and worship in mind, I can begin to name some of the principles that are fundamental to an ecclesiology that is rooted in the context of disability. The guiding question is, “What would it mean for the church to understand itself as a disabled body?” That is, how might the context and embodied experience of disability inform and transform the church’s identity, sense of mission, and relationship to the world? There are many implications in identifying the church as a disabled body, some of which I will now attempt to name.

As noted in chapter 1, the ecclesiology offered here is designed to be a very general tool for individual churches or denominations to use to examine, in light of their own theology, practices, and institutional structure, what it means to be the body of Christ. Therefore, in what follows, I use “church” not to suggest that this project presents a universal, comprehensive ecclesiology. In fact, I alternate between “church” and “churches” to demonstrate how these principles of an ecclesiology of disability could be
used in particular, concrete, and contextual ways that are appropriate to each part of the body of Christ that is the universal church.

In addition, I utilize the term “society” in the following principles to represent broadly those social bodies that are distinct from the church. I use “society” in the same way that Hauerwas uses the term “world,” which for him signifies those aspects of broader human society that do not bear witness to the kingdom of God (which is the task of the church). 9 Because the intention is to offer a general ecclesiology, the concept of “society”—these other social bodies—is open to interpretation according to specific cultural, doctrinal, or ecclesial settings. For instance, “society” could represent a political philosophy, popular culture, or the predominant ethos of a particular social community, any of which can be recipients of the prophetic word that is constituted by the embodied practices of the church.

**The first principle of an ecclesiology of disability is the refusal to let society define the identity or purpose of the body of Christ.** Some of the main difficulties faced by people with disabilities are caused by the ways they are judged and labeled by those who are not disabled (such as those in the medical or therapeutic fields), and by the ways they are defined by a set of norms that are based on what Amos Yong calls an “ableist worldview.” 10 Disability is thus identified as a particular kind of bodily impairment that differs in some way from “normal” bodily functioning as defined by that

---


worldview. These norms are grounded in both what society values—physical ability, attractiveness, independence—and in what society finds undesirable—loss of function, reliance on medical devices or on other people, inability to be productive. Because people with disabilities violate these norms, society often views their experiences as insignificant and their bodies as irrelevant. In his definition of disability, Thomas Reynolds critiques society’s ideals of “normal” both in terms of bodily function and social interaction, and notes that “society’s conception of normalcy informs and governs exchanges between persons, producing a system of conventions resistant to or incapable of accommodating the non-normal.”

At times, the church allows itself to be defined according to some set of societal norms, and allows its ecclesial habitus to be shaped by the values of society. For instance, the so-called “Prosperity Gospel,” in which churches teach that financial blessings are a sign of God’s favor, has its roots in the ethos of the “American Dream,” which promises that the opportunity for success and prosperity is available to anyone, regardless of social class or economic status. Societal norms also affect the church in the way that some churches structure their worship services as spectator events that supposedly appeal to people who enjoy cultural events such as concerts or movies. For many people, church has become something you go to, a performance, rather than something you do, such as embodying the message of the gospel. The phenomenon of “church shopping” among potential worshipers can lead churches to create a worship event that appeals to what the

---

church leaders believe these consumers want or desire from church. Thus, the needs and desires of a consumerist society sometime become the defining principles for how churches understand, shape, and promote their identity and purpose.

An ecclesiology of disability challenges the church to reject the idea that the norms of society should define the church, especially when those norms are contrary to the lived experience of the church as the body of Christ. In the United States, strongly held cultural values such as materialism, consumerism, and patriotism are antithetical to the alternative social body that is the church, which is marked by Jesus’ radical generosity, rejection of material wealth, and loyalty to God alone.

Disability advocates emphasize the need for people with disabilities to define themselves according to their own experiences and their own narratives rather than according to a set of objective standards for what is acceptable or appropriate or desirable. Similarly, the church would benefit from intentionally defining itself according to its own experience as the body of Christ and according to the norms of its own narrative—the gospel of Jesus Christ—especially when the scriptural standards are contrary to those standards that are valued by the competing narratives of society.

An important corollary to this principle is Hauerwas’ argument that the church needs to help individuals learn the true value of embodiment in a way that differs from the societal norms of embodiment. A quote from chapter five bears repeating here: The church needs to offer “community disciplines through which the story of our baptism is embodied in all that we do and are. We require practices through which we learn that we do not know who we are, or what our bodies can and cannot do, until we are told what
and who we are by a more determinative ‘body.’”12 Thus, the church can challenge and change the tendency for both human bodies and the ecclesial body to be defined by those powerful social bodies outside the church.

The next principle follows from this notion of cultural ideals: **if something in the church’s teachings or practices does not meet society’s expectations or measure up to the values of society, it does not mean that something needs to be changed or fixed.** According to the objective standards of what constitutes a normal and properly functioning body, the medical or functional-limitation model of disability locates the problem of disability in the body that does not function the way it should. Disability then becomes a matter of abnormal function—a problem that needs to be fixed through surgery, therapy, or assistive devices. The focus is on what is broken in the body of the individual and how to fix it.

But not every person with a disability wants to be “fixed,” at least according to the way society would expect or approve. Neither is every kind of disability “fixable.” In addition, “fixing” people with disabilities—by providing wheelchairs or hearing aids or guide dogs, for instance—does not solve the problems of inaccessibility to public spaces and barriers to being active members of society. Without a corresponding transformation of society’s structures, services, and attitudes, no amount of “fixing” a dysfunctional

---

body will achieve the level of inclusion and accessibility that is the true problem of disability.  

In recent years, churches have been led to believe that there is something broken about their ministry, worship, discipleship practices, or concept of mission that must be fixed, and there is no shortage of church “self-help” books designed to correct these problems. Of course, some churches have become broken in some ways, such as by their attempts to cling to glory days of the past when attendance was high and finances were strong, or in their staunch rejection of trying something new because “we’ve always done it this way,” or by impulsively trying new things simply for novelty’s sake, or in their tendency to become focused on maintaining the institution at the expense of making disciples. These attitudes, which can hinder a church’s mission, can and should be addressed and changed when possible.

But sometimes society decides that the body of Christ is dysfunctional and that the church is somehow broken. Both Yoder and Hauerwas offer visions for how the body of Christ should function: as an alternative culture with distinctive bodily practices that forms people into a new, radical way of living that is marked by the gospel of Jesus Christ and includes servanthood, forgiveness, love of enemies, fellowship, and holy and sacrificial living. However, these “bodily practices” may well seem dysfunctional to a world steeped in the ideals of individuality, competition, and a human sense of justice that involves punishment and retribution.

---

13 Here and throughout this chapter, I use “dysfunction” in the objective sense that something does not function properly according to the norms of society.
The bodily acts of the liturgy and the sacraments may also seem dysfunctional or even useless to those outside the church. As Romano Guardini reminds us, participation in the liturgy requires individuals to “surrender” their independence and “renounce” their own ways in order to enter into the fellowship of the social gathering that is the liturgy. Because the liturgy is not a “spectator” event, but is rather a formative, constructive participation in the new reality that is the body of Christ, it requires sacrifice—the sacrifice (at least to a point) of ego and the desire for personal spiritual fulfillment—and the willingness to be transformed from an independent being into a member of the body of Christ who is dependent both on God and other members of the body.

Contemporary society still clings to the Reformation and Enlightenment emphases on the spoken word and the value of cognitive formation, which is a faulty anthropology that denies the necessity of bodily participation in the ritual actions of the church. The word—or, in our increasingly visual culture, the image—are the preferred means for learning and for receiving information. In such an atmosphere, the formative bodily practices of the church may seem antiquated or inefficient, and thus, may be another example of the church’s “brokenness.”

---

14 This may be a remnant of our society’s Enlightenment-influenced distrust of the ability of signs and symbols to mediate truth. As William Willimon cautions, “We must overcome our Enlightenment distrust of matter, symbol, sign, and gesture.” (Worship As Pastoral Care [Nashville: Abingdon, 1979], 100).


In the case of disability, society wants to “fix” broken, dysfunctional bodies to make them more acceptable, more “normal,” and easier to manage. The same is often true with the way society views the church. Sometimes society wants the church to “fix” what seems broken to make it easier for people to deal with the church’s worship or ministries. For instance, traditional forms of worship that rely on historic liturgical forms may seem irrelevant to the modern world. Likewise, society see brokenness in the church’s teaching of biblical principles such as sacrificial giving, loving enemies, and living in humility, which go against the highly valued principles of self-expression and personal success. The challenge for the church is to discern which aspects of their ministry, worship, and mission, if any, are truly broken because of some internal problem, such as conflict within the congregation or weak leadership, and which aspects only seem broken because society says they are broken.

What follows from this is the concept that, as a disabled body, the church needs to recognize and accept its own “dysfunction” in its relationship with the world. As noted in chapter two, it is important to identify the limitations inherent in the bodily experience of disability. There is a fine line between the medical and social models of disability, and between locating the experience of disability in bodily impairment or in social systems that fail to accommodate impairment. Simply addressing those limitations that are a result of society’s failure to become accessible to people with disabilities denies the daily lived reality of disability. Even with the best accommodations, the bodily impairment of physical disability can still manifest itself as a limiting experience. For instance, wheelchairs do not restore full mobility and hearing aids do not restore normal
hearing function; there are still limits and restrictions on ability. Denial of these
limitations—and of the presence of bodily impairment and difference—can lead to
psychological, social, and even physical problems if persons with disabilities either reject
the ways they are disabled (which is, in a way, rejecting a fundamental part of themselves
as embodied creatures) or if they try to extend themselves beyond what is feasible or
prudent.

When society assesses the church according to its own standards and values, it
regards the church as dysfunctional in that the church’s embodied practices stand in stark
contrast to what society considers “normal.” However, it is in this place of difference that
the body of Christ is called to live and work. As Bryan Stone notes, “the church’s
difference from the world, far from diminishing its ability to offer a credible witness to
the world, is a necessary condition of that witness and is intrinsic to the church’s
invitation to the world to accept that witness as truth.”17 Moreover, the church’s witness
is that this difference from the world—which it embodies in its communal life—is both
possible and desirable.

This place of difference can be described as a social location of minority status or
marginality, both of which are inherent to the experience of disability. That is, the
normative condition of the body of Christ is to exist on the margins as an actual, social
minority. This is not to say that marginality or minority status is the “natural” or
preferable experience of people with disabilities, but it is the habitus that people with
disabilities inhabit—a reality that the church must acknowledge. This marginal status

challenges any concepts of triumphalism in the church. Both Schillebeeckx and Yoder contend that it is important for the church to recognize its “minority posture” and weakness in the eyes of the world so the church can be freed from any obsession over the need to occupy a central place in society and to fulfill society’s expectations of a social body that occupies such a place. For instance, Hauerwas affirms that the church “cannot merely identify with the ‘cause’ of the poor, [it] must become poor and powerless.”\(^\text{18}\) But throughout its history, the church has often desired to be at the center, a social location that is marked by power, authority, status, wealth, exclusivity and the desire to dominate or control others through the use of a “correct belief system.”\(^\text{19}\) In other words, the church has often chosen to be situated in the very place from which the oppression and marginalization of people with disabilities originates. Thus, as a disabled body, the church must realize that in occupying a centralist position, it is, in a way, suppressing its own ability to be the body of Christ that it is called to be, because disability is always a marginal and marginalizing experience. In fact, advocacy for the inclusion of people with disabilities must be accomplished from the margins, for once it moves to the center, it becomes a part of those very systems that advocacy would confront and challenge. Any concept of the church being at the center is therefore a fallacy and a denial of the reality of its embodiedness as a community that is called to live in the margins of society.

For much of its history, the church has been used to being in a central position. With Constantine’s legitimization of the church in the fourth century, the church was


\(^{19}\) Lee, *Marginality*, 124-25.
invited to share in the secular government’s values of status, wealth, and power. As long as the church has been complicit with the power of the state, it has been unable to function fully as the body of Christ and to work toward freeing people from the abuse of that power. In addition, the evaluative metrics of the state became the standards for the church, which measured its effectiveness in terms of financial success, large numbers of members, and occupying a place of respect in society.

In this “post Christendom” era, the church has been stripped of its mutually beneficial association with the government and is facing the challenges of an increasingly multi-cultural, secular, and pluralistic society. We have seen the “emancipation” of the church, which is “the loss of the church’s grip or influence on society and culture.”

Thus, the church is wrestling with the loss of the social status and power it once enjoyed. Hostile debates and accusations being thrown about in the “war on Christianity” in the United States demonstrate the fear of those who perceive the church’s current social location as a significant loss. In relation to physical disability, “loss” (of bodily function, of productivity, of a sense of meaning and purpose) is defined according to how it relates to some essence or ability that is valued. Yong describes the rhetoric used to depict disability: “dis-abled, in-capacitated, in-capable, ab-normal, and so on.” As a disabled body, the church can realize that if it has lost those things that are held in value by society, then it is doing exactly what it is called to do: to be an alternative social body in which the values of the gospel shape communal life.

---


21 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 10.
Another principle of our ecclesiology of disability requires the church to reject binary categories that label, oppress, and stigmatize. Physical disability is defined frequently according to the binary construction of disability/able-bodied: one is either disabled or able-bodied, either normal or abnormal, either functional or dysfunctional. As noted in chapter two, binary constructs such as these contain a dominant term—something that is valued by the dominant bodies in society—and a less significant term, which is a negation of the dominant term. That is, the less significant term only has value insofar as it emphasizes the dominant term, or that which is valued. When people with a disability are defined according to a binary in which the dominant term is valued by society, they will be devalued by their association with the weaker term, and thus marginalized and stigmatized. People with disabilities, then, only serve to highlight the able-bodiedness that is preferable.

Within the experience of disability, the definition of physical ability and functionality is much more fluid and subjective than an objective binary would suggest. Among individuals with disabilities, there is a great variety of functionality and, even within one particular disability, there is a wide range of ability. Thus, there are important nuances in the definition of disability (important in that they have great bearing on an individual’s embodied experience) that are hidden by the binary construct.

The church sometimes falls into this trap of using binary constructs to teach that one is either Christian or not, either saved or not, either worthy or not, in order to determine who is part of the body of Christ and who is not. However, because Christian formation is a bodily, and not just a cognitive, event, it is also a process (some would say
a life-long process). Worship and participation in the sacraments are the ongoing orientation of the individual to God, to the community, and to the world. According to Saliers, the church embodies a “pattern of God’s self-giving in Jesus Christ” in the liturgy and sacraments—a pattern that requires constant re-entry into and re-membering of the narrative of God’s acts in Jesus Christ. Chauvet describes the liturgy and the sacraments as working within a symbolic network of culture, tradition, and nature, which is always in flux and is always being manifested in new ways. Thus, there is no point in time when a person can be identified as “Christian” or “saved,” and binary constructs, which make no allowances for nuanced definitions, are antithetical to the idea of Christian formation in the church through ongoing embodied practices.

The church also needs to refrain from using binary constructs to define itself or its mission. For example, if the church identifies its mission as being a herald of the kingdom of God, which is the dominant or valued ideal, then anything that is not specifically oriented to proclaiming the kingdom is devalued. But God is present and active even in those situations, persons, and experiences that lie outside the realm of “proper” or “acceptable” Christian practice. In addition, while the church is called to be distinct from the world, it must take care not to make such a sharp distinction between itself and the world that the world as a whole is rendered less valuable than the church.

An ecclesiology of disability challenges the church to recognize that the “problem” of the church, as identified by society, is not always located in the church itself but is sometimes is located in the relationships between the church and other

---

**social bodies.** As discovered in chapter two, the social or minority group model of disability defines disability not by some abnormality of bodily function, but by the unwillingness of society to accommodate, accept, and respect people with disabilities. The problem is not situated in the body of the person with a disability. Rather, it is situated in the social bodies (communities, organizations, etc.) that exclude people with disabilities. For Deborah Creamer, this makes disability an issue of justice.\(^{23}\) That is, the injustice of societal structures and attitudes, which are themselves a product of the ableist worldview, continue to exclude people with disabilities from participating in the life of the society. The solution, according to this model, is to address the unjust systems and work for systemic social change.

For the church to be a disabled body is, first, to empathize with people with disabilities who are excluded because of unjust social systems, and then, to understand how these systems keep the church itself from working for necessary systemic changes. As is the case with physical disability, the malfunction in the relationship between church and society is located in the ways that society devalues or even stigmatizes the church in its life and work because the norms and values of the body of Christ are not easily accommodated into the norms and values of society. The challenge for the church is to identify and confront any barriers in society that hinder the work of justice and God’s kingdom. However, although the point in addressing these unjust systems from the perspective of disability is to encourage society to accommodate and respect disabled

bodies, that is not the point for the church. Rather, the church’s purpose is to identify and work to dismantle any system that is contrary to the justice of God as embodied in the church.

Sometimes the relationship between church and society is harmful not as a result of exclusion, but of an overly close association. As seen in the discussion of John Howard Yoder’s ecclesiological work in chapter 4, the church is sometimes so strongly identified with society—and especially with the power structures in society—that it is reduced to the role of a “chaplain” that is expected to sanctify those power structures, even when those structures are unjust and contrary to the church’s mission.24 Thus, we see American politicians who, citing their association with the church, call for policies that are contrary to the gospel of justice for all people, such as harsh penalties for immigrants (even children) or for cutting food assistance programs to the most vulnerable. This “social” church of these politicians—which is sometimes the only “church” that some people see—sanctifies discriminatory and unjust policies that help protect the status quo of those in power. As a disabled body, the church must stand in solidarity with those on the margins and confront any abuses of power that result from disordered church-society relations and that are carried out in the church’s name.

The next principle encourages the church, as a disabled body, to recognize its need for interdependence with society, rather than complete isolation from society. Many people with disabilities rely on some kind of assistance from other people, even

when they use assistive devices and even if the number of physical barriers in their daily lives is minimal. Personal independence—at least the way independence is defined and valued by society—is simply not attainable for many people with disabilities. Physical disability demands a realization of the limitations that are imposed by bodily function that is impaired in some way. It is in these limitations that we—both people with disabilities and people who are able-bodied—discover the need for interdependence.

A properly-ordered and well-functioning relationship between the church and other social bodies requires that the body of Christ maintain boundaries that are well-defined enough to maintain Christian identity, and yet permeable enough to allow mutual interaction between the church and society. As Yoder argues, the church must be distinct enough from the world so that the new social reality of the church is plainly visible. But at the same time, as Schillebeeckx points out, the church must recognize its limitations as a particular, historical, and regional social body that cannot transcend the history that includes the world as a whole. The limitations of the church imply that it must recognize its need for interdependence with the world, because the world is itself an ongoing revelation of God. Chauvet posits that the fact that the church has these limitations confirms that the reign of God exceeds the boundaries of the church and its practices. The church as the body of Christ mediates the presence and truth of God only insofar as it is open to the presence and action of God in the world. Because the world is the
“sacrament” of God’s presence, says Schmemann, the church should “live in the world seeing everything in it as a revelation of God.”25

That the church must have an interdependent relationship with the world is evident in Chauvet’s concept of the “symbolic order,” which mediates reality not only through individual bodies (of the human person or of the church), but also through the myriad of social, political, and institutional bodies in which the individual (or church) is situated. When social structures and institutions become independent from other social bodies, they “give the impression of being unchangeable natural regularities.”26 But because the church at any given place and time is dependent on the historical, contextual, and cultural milieu of human embodiment, it must be open to change and cannot allow itself to become an independent, static reality that exists outside the always changing experiences of humanity.

Don Saliers argues that authentic worship brings human pathos into contact with the divine ethos. In order for the church to offer the fullness of the human condition to God in worship, the church must first be able to recognize and understand human pathos as it exists in the world. Thus, the church must be able to receive from the world even as it is able to give to the world. As Schmemann claims, the church is not “being in itself,” but “the new relation of God, man and the world.”27


27 Schmemann, For the Life of the World, 68.
An additional principle affirms that **disability can help the church understand its nature is by challenging the church to reject any need for perfection**. Nancy Eiesland observes that acceptance of disabled bodies carries with it an acceptance of imperfection as a form of wholeness, goodness, and beauty: “Instead of flagellating ourselves or aspiring to well-behaved ‘perfect’ bodies, we savor the jumbled pleasure-pain that is our bodies.” 28 With her image of the disabled God, Eiesland offers a new model of wholeness in Jesus Christ, who “reconceives perfection as unself-pitying, painstaking survival.” 29 In other words, for people with disabilities, imperfection is simply an acceptable reality in which life is lived.

For the church, the ideal of perfection is sometimes what Schillebeeckx calls a “subtle vice” that is manifest in the form of “unassailable laws,” universalized dogma, or attempts to redeem humanity from the fall from the perfection of Eden—a state of perfection that the church sometimes teaches was/is God’s intention for humanity. 30 This striving to experience (or recover) a state of perfection for the church or for individuals “injures already vulnerable fellow men and women” by excluding those for whom such perfection is impossible, or whose lived experience falls far outside what constitutes perfection. 31 Schillebeeckx confronts this false image of perfection by noting that in Jesus

---


29 Ibid., 101.

30 Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 117.

31 Ibid.
Christ, there is a “redefinition of what it is to be human.”\textsuperscript{32} This is precisely the calling of the church: to redefine human relationships, to demonstrate new ways of being in the world, and to reveal God’s unconditional love and acceptance of humanity, which does not require that we return to some primordial state of perfection. The church can accept the imperfection of individual bodies and its own communal body as a new state of wholeness that is a necessary and survivable reality in which the church can live and work as the body of Christ in the world.

In the Methodist tradition, there is an emphasis on the idea of “Christian perfection.” John Wesley taught that such perfection was attained when the “humble, gentle, patient love of God and our neighbors” was not only present in a person’s life, but ruled that person’s every thought and action.\textsuperscript{33} While the true notion of perfection in Christ lies in the disposition of one’s heart toward God and other people, and is thus independent of the human body’s ability to function, the ideal of perfection that invades the contemporary church is influenced by society’s view of perfection that includes “normal” and appropriate bodily function.

Although Wesley does not specifically include physical disability in his description of how Christians are not perfect, he does assert that no one can be made so perfect in this life to be free of what he calls “infirmities,” which include “slowness of understanding, confusedness of apprehension, slowness of speech, ungracefulness of

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 126.

pronunciation” and “a thousand nameless defects either in conversation or behavior.”

Any of these “infirmities” could result from a physical disability. Therefore, according to Wesley’s view, Christian perfection does not include the healing or “fixing” of such dysfunction. In other words, the only perfection to which the church should strive is that of being perfect in love, which is a kind of perfection that does not depend on the functionality of individual bodies and that is accessible to all people through the grace of God.

**An ecclesiology of disability requires the church to claim a holistic theological anthropology in which it rejects any dichotomy of body and soul.** This kind of duality, particularly when the soul is deemed more significant than the body, devalues people’s real-life embodied experiences, especially those experiences that deviate from the “normal” or ideal image of embodiment. In the case of disability, this binary anthropology often leads to a diminishing of the experience of disability as a “cross to bear” or as “virtuous suffering” from which the individual with a disability will be released someday. Critiques of this dualism contend that the body is vital to the construction of human knowledge and experience not because it is a container for the mind or soul, but because persons come to know reality and truth primarily through bodies and only secondarily through cognitive reflection on bodily experience.

---


35 Wesley, however, affirms that “from these [infirmities] none can hope to be perfectly freed till the spirit returns to God that gave it” (“Christian Perfection,” section I.7). Thus, Wesley seems to believe that imperfections of bodily function, while unavoidable in this life, are in need of a kind of bodily perfection that God offers upon death.
A holistic, non-dualistic anthropology from the perspective of disability would affect the church in several ways. First, it would encourage the church to take seriously concepts of the mediation of the body and the formative aspects of the liturgy. But more than that, it would force the church to recognize the variety of ways that God’s presence and grace are revealed in and through bodies. Different kinds of disabilities mediate the same reality but through different means. A person with vision loss will depend more on auditory and tactile information; someone with hearing loss will be more visually oriented; and a person in a wheelchair will receive information most often from a position of non-access or restricted access. Each individual’s experience of reality will be shaped according to his or her bodily abilities and functions, but their experiences are no more or less “worthy” than those of able-bodied persons. In fact, disability can actually enhance a person’s perception of the world in some ways. For instance, people with hearing loss often rely on visual cues, which can make them much more aware of things like signs and symbols than other people. What they lack in auditory information they can make up for (at least in good part) in visual information. As a disabled body, the church must resist the temptation to absolutize or universalize one particular form of mediation. Different forms of worship, different theological understandings of the sacraments, and different organizational structures can all lead to valid experiences of God’s presence. In addition, as noted above, the church can often become aware of God’s presence and purposes not in itself, but in the world.

*Finally, an ecclesiology of disability demands liturgical practices that value bodies and their different forms of action and function, and that also support the*
**preceding principles.** People with disabilities are perhaps more aware of their bodies than those who are able-bodied. They often make daily choices by first referring to their body: Will this choice be possible with my bodily impairment? Will it be difficult? Or is it outright impossible? Able-bodied persons “don’t have to work to ignore the working of [their] bodies.” However, people with disabilities cannot ignore the working of their bodies—their identities are, to a point, rooted in the non-working parts of their bodies.

As the quote from Jürgen Moltmann that opens this chapter notes, if the church does not value its body language—that is, what it does with its communal body—then what the church proclaims verbally may not coincide with what the church does bodily. Yet the integrity between word and action, which is a chief mark of Christ’s faithfulness to God, is precisely the primary calling of the church as the body of Christ. Attention to the importance of the body is critical to the church’s ability to be (embody) the message of the gospel rather than simply proclaim that message. Therefore, the church’s ritual practices must reflect the significance of bodies to the church’s identity and mission.

The eucharist is the predominant embodied act of the church, and the communion table is the primary ritual location where the value of bodies can be recognized and revealed. Bryan Stone contends that “as the church gathers around a common table . . . a new space is created where bodies once separated and placed in opposition to one another (Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free) are now united. This it does by

---

enacting a participation in one another.”37 Stone further argues that if such communal bodily practices become secondary in the church to an emphasis on a personal, inward relationship with God, then the “visible social body” of the church becomes irrelevant.38 The eucharist is a defense against this devaluing of bodies because, as William T. Cavanaugh argues, the church’s ritual practice of the eucharist is what makes the church “publicly visible as the body of Christ in the present time, not secreted away in the souls of believers.”39

The most obvious consequence of giving proper attention and respect to the body would be increased focus on the accessibility of the church’s ritual practices for all bodies, regardless of ability or functionality. The eucharist is the celebration and anamnestic reenactment of Christ’s death and resurrection, in which the imperfection of human existence—including the imperfection of bodies that are limited by impairment—is not overcome, but is gathered up in Christ’s post-resurrection body, which still bore the scars of physical impairment. Thus, in the eucharist, the church celebrates God’s acceptance and inclusion of all bodies—able-bodied and disabled. If it is to fulfill its function to make the church what it is called to be, the eucharist must be accessible and open to all people. If the church can recognize the ways that people with bodily impairment are excluded from various social and communal practices, it can better understand and prepare for the ways its own “dysfunctional” body practices (which differ

37 Stone, Evangelism After Christendom, 207.

38 Ibid.

greatly from those that are sanctioned by society) will, by necessity, be excluded from certain social practices and experiences.

What would liturgy look like for the disabled body of Christ? Although a full scheme is beyond the scope of this project, I offer a few suggestions. To develop liturgy and liturgical practices that are rooted in the context of disability, principles would need to be identified that respect the challenges that disability poses for those with bodily impairment. For example, in her development of intentionally feminist liturgy, Mary Collins observes five principles that are fundamental to the concepts of feminist theology:

First, feminist liturgies ritualize relationships that emancipate and empower women. Second, feminist liturgy is the production of a community of worshipers, not of special experts or authorities. Third, feminist liturgies critique patriarchal liturgies. Fourth, feminist liturgists have begun to develop a distinctive repertoire of ritual symbols and strategies. Fifth, feminist liturgists produce liturgical events, not liturgical texts.40

Similar principles could guide the shape of a liturgy of disability. These would include focusing on ways to empower people with physical disabilities; recognizing and appreciating the contribution of all human bodies to the body of Christ; critiquing any “alternative liturgies” that devalue bodies on the basis of society’s definition of a worthy or acceptable body; and challenging any practices in the church that equate disability with sinfulness or unworthiness.

One important way a liturgy of disability can function for the body of Christ is by making the embodied practices of the liturgy, and especially the eucharist, full-body experiences. That is, the celebration of the eucharist should be an act of the whole body

of Christ that includes the whole bodies of those gathered. The four-fold action described by Dix—taking, blessing, breaking, giving—can be an action of the entire community. In many Christian traditions, only those authorized to preside can enact certain parts of the eucharistic liturgy. But whenever possible and appropriate, the gathered community as a whole should find ways to perform the bodily acts of the eucharist that, in themselves, form people into the gracious life of the Christ who is present among them. Pastors and priests can discern how to help the church as a whole to take, bless, break, and give to one another so they can, as the body of Christ, do the same for the world.

Just as there is no universally applicable definition of disability, and just as there is no one experience of disability, so too there is no one universally applicable definition of what it means to be the body of Christ in a particular place and time. The nature of embodiment means that the church will always be contextual. I hope that these general principles for ecclesiology will be able to transcend differences of theology, doctrine, and practice.

So what are the next steps? First, this project can be further contextualized according to the needs, social location, and missional situation of local churches. Second, this ecclesiology can be broadened to include the contexts of mental, cognitive, and emotional disabilities. Third, liturgists can start to consider how new forms of liturgy—

---

41 Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Continuum, 2007). Dix’s work has been questioned (for instance, there is disagreement about whether “taking” denotes the placement of the communion items on the altar, or the action of the presider or celebrant taking the elements in his or her hands). However, this fourfold shape of the eucharist has been adopted into the understanding of eucharistic practice by many 20th-century churches.
prayers, hymns, litanies, and most importantly, embodied actions—can help support the *habitus* of the disabled body of Christ. Finally, this general, practical ecclesiology can be brought into conversation with more theoretical and organizational models of ecclesiology to see how the concept and experience of disability might help shape church structure and polity.

Gordon Lathrop observes that “going to church can be going to a celebration of our own unchallenged identities and worldviews.” 42 If the body mediates truth, then it follows that how a particular body is defined and how that definition shapes that body’s experience of itself and the world will affect how that body both mediates and perceives truth. It is hoped that this ecclesiology of disability will help dis-able the church’s tendency to seek central positions of power and status; to be complicit in an “ableist” worldview; to privilege the human soul over the human body; to seek or insist on perfection; to depend on simplistic, binary categories of definition and meaning; and to let itself be defined by or conformed to the norms of society.

The best that can be hoped is that all churches can *dis-able* those beliefs and practices that keep them both from being the message of the kingdom of God—a kingdom in which all people experience full participation in the human community—and from embodying the new social reality of the gospel that challenges the values of other social bodies in the world. This project calls churches—each one a unique community that embodies the narrative of God’s acts in Jesus Christ—to recognize how the study and theology of disability and embodiment can help them discover their true nature as the

---

body of Christ, provide the means for Christian formation through embodied practices, maintain a healthy, faithful, and interdependent relationship with the world, and carry out their mission in their particular context as marginal, alternative communities that understand the significance and value of all experiences of embodiment.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Disability, General issues


**Disability, Theology of**


________. “Encountering the Disabled God.” *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (March 2005): 584-86.


________. *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church.* Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986.


________. *Dancing With Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God’s Children*. Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996.


**Ecclesiology**


Gaillardetz, Richard R. “Church as Communion, Universal and Local.” *Church* 13 (Fall, 1997): 5-10.


**The Study of Metaphor**


*The Pauline “Body of Christ”*


Martin, Dennis D. “Menno and Augustine on the Body of Christ.” *Fides Et Historia* 20, no. 3 (October 1, 1988): 41-64.


Perriman, Andrew. “‘His Body, which is the Church . . .’: Coming to Terms with Metaphor.” *Evangelical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (1990): 123-42.


Tilley, Terrence W. *Story Theology.* Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1985.

*Theology and Embodiment; Liturgy and Embodiment*


225


Liturgical and Sacramental Theology


**Miscellaneous**


NANCY JILL HALE  
Curriculum Vitae

PERSONAL INFORMATION
9 Wales Drive  Norwich, NY  13815  
607-334-8829  nhale@frontiernet.net  
Born: 1961 in Cherry Hill, NJ

EDUCATION
Ph.D.  (2015)  
  Major: Theological Studies; Subconcentration: History and Hermeneutics  
  Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA  
  Dissertation topic:  
  “Dis-abling the Church: Toward a Holistic Ecclesiology of Embodiment”

  Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA

B.A.  Major: English, Summa Cum Laude  (2005)  
  Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY

  Broome Community College, Binghamton, NY

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS
The Order of Saint Luke, The United Methodist Church  
North American Academy of Liturgy

SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS
Dempster Graduate Fellowship, General Board of Higher Education & Ministry The United Methodist Church (GBHEM, UMC) 2009-2012  
Gallaudet Graduate Fellowship, Gallaudet University 2009-2011  
Frank D./Bertha Howard Fellowship, Boston University School of Theology 2008-2011  
Order of Saint Luke Hoyt Hickman Award for excellence in liturgical studies and leadership, 2008  
Student Leadership Award, Boston University School of Theology, 2008  
Blair Memorial Scholarship for social justice ministries, Wyoming Annual Conference, The United Methodist Church (WAC, UMC), 2007  
Howard Bonniwell Warren Scholarship, Boston University School of Theology, 2005  
Brandenburg Scholarship, GBHEM, UMC, 2005-2007  
Merit Scholarship, Boston University School of Theology, 2005-2007  
Gift of Hope Scholarship, GBHEM, UMC, 2004-2005  
Claudia Bernardo Award for Excellence in the Humanities, Binghamton University, 2005  
Sertoma International Scholar, 2004-2005
PUBLICATIONS

Articles
“Women and Disability.” Newsletter of the Anna Howard Shaw Center, Boston University School of Theology 26.2 (Spring 2010).

Chapters in Books

Book Reviews

ACADEMIC LECTURES AND PRESENTATIONS

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
2015 Adjunct Professor, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School
Taught class on “Liturgy and Disability”
2013-2014 Certified Lay Ministry Program, Upper NY Conference, (UNY), UMC
Taught sessions on Call and Covenant and United Methodist Polity
2009-2015 Lay Speaker School, UNY, UMC
Taught courses on United Methodist Polity, Worship, and Basic Lay Servant Ministry
2011 Provisional Elder Process, UNY, UMC
Taught sessions on sacramental theology and worship.
2010 Teaching Assistant, Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA
Introduction to Worship class, Dr. Don Saliers.
2009 Teaching Assistant, Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA
Introduction to Worship class, Dr. Karen Westerfield Tucker.
EXPERIENCE IN LITURGICAL DESIGN
Student Worship Assistant, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, responsible for planning weekly worship for the School of Theology community (2007-2008)
Designed worship (including a Great Thanksgiving Prayer with original musical responses) for Oneonta District Gathering, UNY, UMC
Member, worship planning team for National Council of Churches Centennial Gathering, New Orleans, LA, November 2010
Designed Disability Awareness Worship Service that has been used at Marsh Chapel, Boston University; a Wyoming Annual Conference session; and several churches.

PARTICIPATION IN GRANT-FUNDED PROGRAMS
“Case Studies from the History of Worship: Prospects for Research and Pedagogy in a Variety of Theological Disciplines,” Calvin Institute Summer Seminar (Lilly Endowment) Summer, 2010

MINISTERIAL CERTIFICATION
Ordained as Elder, UNY, United Methodist Church, 2010
Commissioned as Provisional Elder, Wyoming Annual Conference, UMC, 2008
Licensed as Local Pastor, Wyoming Annual Conference, UMC, 1998

CHURCH EXPERIENCE
Senior Pastor, Broad St. United Methodist Church, Norwich, NY, Jan. 2012-present
Associate Pastor, Broad St. United Methodist Church, Norwich, NY, 2008-2011
Licensed Local Pastor, various churches, Wyoming Conference, UMC, 1998-2008

CHURCH RELATED SERVICE
Co-chair, Accessibility Concerns Committee, Upper New York Conference (UNY), UMC, 2011-present
Registrar, Oneonta District Certified Lay Ministry Process, UNY, UMC 2013-present
Member, Annual Conference Rules Committee, UNY, UMC, 2010
Member, Oneonta District Lay Speaking Committee, UNY, UMC, 2010-present
Member, Oneonta District Committee on Ministry, UNY, UMC, 2010-present
Member, Annual Sessions Committee, UNY, UMC, 2009-present
Disabilities Concerns Coordinator, WAC, UMC, 2008-2010
United Methodist National Committee for Ministry to Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People, chairperson of grants sub-committee, 2008-present
Member, Committee on Health and Welfare, WAC, UMC, 2004-2010