

Many Members: One Body

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As it is, there are many members, yet one 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.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable (1 Cor 12:20–22, NRSV).

The Apostle Paul clearly emphasizes that every member of the body of Christ is needed to build kingdom churches, including those who may appear to be the weakest. The question is, do we genuinely believe this to be true? In his book *Living Gently in a Violent World*, the late Catholic priest and founder of L’Arche¹ Jean Vanier asks us to consider whether anyone truly believes this. He stresses that God’s message in 1 Cor 12:22 is at the “heart of faith” of what it means to be the church.² The church, however, often excludes from the heart of the body of Christ

¹ Jean Vanier, Founder of L’Arche: <https://www.larcheusa.org/who-we-are/jean-vanier/>.

² Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 74. “Jesus came to create a body. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, compares the human body to the body of Christ, and he says that those parts of the body that are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the body. In other words, people who are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the church. I have never seen this as the first line of a book on ecclesiology. Who really believes it? But this is the heart of faith, of what it means to be the church.”

those whom our culture perceives as weaker.³ In 2007, late Covenant pastor and disability advocate Jim Swanson preached the following in a sermon at North Park Theological Seminary.

People with a variety of disabilities are lost to much of the Church. Far off, cast off, exiled. They are lost to the worship life of the Church. They are lost to the fellowship life of the Church. They are lost to boards and committees. And lost to the roster of the ordained and commissioned....God knows where they are, and to God, the Church is incomplete until all of us are found and placed together in community. Without this completeness valuable gifts are also lost to the fellowship.⁴

Spending time with people considered cognitively challenged is often thought to be too frustrating. We find it easy to ignore them and limit our involvement to making sure someone else is caring for their basic needs. As Swanson points out, this leads to them being lost to the church. In this, everyone loses. Hans Reinders, professor of ethics and mental disabilities explains, “What ultimately prevents people with intellectual disabilities, from full participation in our society is the fact that they are generally not seen as people we want to be present in our lives....They are rarely chosen as friends.”⁵

When teaching his students how to build a healthy Christian community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned that “the exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from a Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ.”⁶ Bonhoeffer continues later in this text, “In Christian community, everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain....The elimination

³ Based on year 2018 data from the Center for Disease Control, Ryan Faulk of the organization Joni and Friends, writes: “Multiple studies show that, all things being equal, people with disabilities are less likely than their peers to attend church even once a month. Of the 61 million American adults living with some sort of disability, there are about 2.25 million who—statistically speaking—should be attending church, but don’t.” <https://www.joniandfriends.org/the-largest-unreached-people-group-youve-never-heard-of>, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.

⁴ Jim Swanson, “Un-disabling the Church” (Sermon, chapel, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, 2007). Swanson was a strong advocate for services to people with disabilities.

⁵ Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 142.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 38.

of the weak is the death of fellowship.”⁷ God embraces weakness and integrates it into his plan for creation, encouraging believers to do the same. God’s provision of strength demonstrated through human weakness is vividly portrayed through stories in scripture, such as a young David fighting the giant Goliath, Mephibosheth receiving honor though he was physically vulnerable, and Moses confronting Pharaoh in spite of his speech impediment. Through these stories, believers learn that vulnerability is not something to fear, loathe, or reject. It is not from God that believers learn a distaste for those who are weak or vulnerable. Cultural values and a perceived need to be in control have led Christians to accept this false standard as truth.

Unfortunately, instead of heeding these warnings from scripture and scholars, the church often submits to the appetites of Western culture—a culture that values strength over weakness and excess over moderation. As a result, we become distracted from building God’s kingdom by a culture that promotes the achievement of personal goals through individual strengths and abilities. Systematic theologian Jürgen Moltmann clarifies the loss we incur when we allow this to be our truth:

The one-sided orientation toward accomplishment and success makes us unjust and inhuman in our dealings with others. We exclude the sick, the handicapped, the unaccomplished, and the unsuccessful from public life...it does give privileges to the healthy and capable over the retarded and the weak. Instead of an open and vulnerable society, we have a closed and unassailable society with apathetic structures. The living, open, vulnerable life is poured into steel and concrete. That is the modern death called apathy: life without suffering [*Leiden*], life without passionate feeling [*Leidenschaft*].⁸

Living an “open and vulnerable life” is one of the essential qualities people with intellectual disabilities (ID) bring to the community. Our exclusion of people with ID is one of the “valuable gifts lost to fellowship.” The idea that people who appear weaker can actually thrive in a culture that devalues them is compelling. Being in life-giving relationships with people with ID demonstrates, in real-time, the truth of 2 Cor 12:9–10:

⁷ Bonhoeffer, 94.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle* (Kindle Locations, 131-135). Kindle Edition.

“When I am weak, then I am strong.”⁹ We need to embrace vulnerability to understand and integrate the beauty of this scripture. We need to be in relationships with people with ID to receive the blessing God has prepared for us. Instead of embracing these truths, we turn away.

The problem rests not with people who have ID but with the church that lacks awareness of each church member’s value as an image-bearer of God. Beth Felker Jones submits, “To know what it means to be human; we must know what it means to be created in the ‘image of God.’”¹⁰ Author and theologian Jim Bruckner explains that first, the image of God must be understood as descriptive of every human being. All people are made in the image of God and “imbued with dignity, deserving of respect and of love as an image bearer of God.” Second, everyone has a choice to “bear God’s image as it was intended, that is, to be a blessing to others and give honor to its Source.”¹¹ Bruckner adds a critical but often neglected detail concerning this image: just as it is given to each person, it is given in relationship with God. According to the Christian scriptures, all of humanity shares this special connection with God. John Kilner adds that this is the standard God intended for Christians to use for how we live and mature in our faith.¹² Tom Reynolds corroborates Bruckner’s and Kilner’s assertions, adding that human wholeness is only possible in relationship.¹³ Being made in God’s image “is the innate dignity of being human in relation to the creator.”¹⁴ Therefore, Christians understand that the image of God is held as inalienable by all humans, that it upholds God’s high value of relationship, and that to be completely whole, every human must be seen through this lens. Hans Reinders writes that this holds specific importance for people with disabilities because

⁹ 2 Cor 12:9–10, NRSV, “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

¹⁰ Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 98.

¹¹ James Bruckner, *Healthy Human Life: A Biblical Witness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 9.

¹² John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2015), 140–141, 143, Kindle.

¹³ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 118. “Only in relationship is human wholeness possible, a wholeness that comes not despite but through disability and vulnerability.”

¹⁴ Bruckner, *Healthy Human Life*, 8.

this is how humans were created to live.¹⁵ God has created every human being in the Divine image, offering us relationship with him through membership in his church.

The church lacks awareness of its responsibility to provide an environment that honors and values each member of the body of Christ. Devaluing any member of the body of Christ has serious consequences. Theology of disability author and practitioner Amos Yong writes, “The holiness of God is itself at stake in this regard: the ongoing subjugation of innocent people with disabilities by the non-disabled world perpetuates the profanity of that world and desecrates the land, the people, and, finally, even God.”¹⁶

Moral theologian Brian Brock explains the experience of people with ID and the church as one where people with ID are “buffeted daily by disparaging comments, the stares of strangers, and the shrinking of their social worlds as those around them refuse to enter into meaningful friendships.”¹⁷ Brock continues by stating that God, through the crucified Christ, promised to fight against this unholy experience. Through God’s mercy, the inhospitable community will be broken open. Yong agrees, stating, “They [intellectually disabled] are certainly seen more as encumbrances than as viable members of ecclesial communities.”¹⁸ Often families who have members with ID will stop worshiping in the Christian community or find care for their disabled loved one while they go to church without them.

The Christian church has been lagging behind government, medical, and academic institutions in integrating people with disabilities, specifically, for our conversation, people with ID. While, as Christians, we believe that all human beings are made in God’s image, Western culture holds to a more ableist point of view. The fact is that believers emulate Western culture more thoroughly than we may think, which stands in direct conflict with how God created the church to operate. One major problem is that believers live in a society that values human beings contrary to God’s intentions or design. Historian of Anabaptism Donald Kraybill explains the problem this creates for us. “The values and norms of our society become so deeply ingrained in our mind that

¹⁵ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 143.

¹⁶ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 45.

¹⁷ Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 225.

¹⁸ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 13.

it is difficult to imagine alternatives.”¹⁹ However, this is just where the church is fortunate. Kraybill explains that a primary reason for the incarnation of Jesus Christ was to set us straight in the kingdom’s way. Jesus preached that the old ways, values, and assumptions need to be upended. He taught us a new way, a new kingdom order. As a result, we received a whole new structure with Jesus. “The upside-down lens sharpens the distinction between God’s kingdom and the kingdoms of the world.”²⁰

In order to see humanity beyond the restrictive values of our culture, twenty-first century believers can use Kraybill’s upside-down lens analogy to align our definition and valuation of humanity with God’s original intention. This will take effort from everyone. Our cultural milieu keeps us steeped in an ableist society; hard work is needed to become aware of our unconscious bias and its effects on our communities. Theologian of disability Hans Reinders suggests that our problem is less about “inclusion” than about the effects of ableism. “The real problem is not that we need a concept of human nature that includes persons with intellectual disabilities; the real problem is that our ableist culture is informed by views that are oppressive to people with disabilities.”²¹

So where do we start to correct this situation in the church? We start by seeking God’s direction. We often forget that the church must be divinely created, built on spiritual values and goals, not human desires and needs.²² When motivated by human love we operate out of a desire that seeks self-fulfillment. When we are motivated by spiritual love via the Holy Spirit, we operate out of Christ’s desires. The church’s ability to thrive depends on how seriously the community understands this. Humankind cannot, through its own power, create unity in a community. Jesus makes clear in his farewell discourse in John that unity originates from God and is modeled in and through Jesus Christ (Jn 17:20–23). Jesus Christ must be the mediator in our relationships. Referencing this same scripture, Felker Jones explains the importance of unity to the body of Christ. She reminds us that the church’s role is to share the gospel with the world

¹⁹ Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press 2018), 261, Kindle.

²⁰ Kraybill, 261.

²¹ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 12.

²² “Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.

and that unity in the body of Christ is part of the Christian witness.²³

Nurturing and developing our Christian community in this way creates the spiritual depth needed for the community to stand firm. If we maintain this focus, Bonhoeffer assures us that everything else between us will recede. Our discomfort at another's disability or fear of not communicating well with those not "like" us will be healed and transformed. Jesus Christ and God's will become the essential bond of the community. This is how God expected the body of Christ to live.²⁴ Throughout scripture, God expresses the importance of unity for believers, vertically with the Trinity and horizontally within the Christian community.²⁵ As a living organic entity, the church is not made up of a number of individuals but rather a body that grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its life-giving work.²⁶ First Corinthians 12:26 states, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (NRSV). Richard Rohr reminds Christians that they exist as part of a whole and not independently, adding, "An autonomous Christian is as impossible as an independent arm or leg."²⁷ Inherent in the many members of the church is a glorious diversity that purposefully exists in God's creation.²⁸ God created humanity with many different gifts, strengths, weaknesses, and challenges to be united and part of the body of Christ.

As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it. But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a *part* of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own (1 Cor 12:24b–26, MSG).

Assuring the full inclusion of everyone who comes to our church can be challenging for several reasons. Many factors contribute to the difficulty people with ID face in ecclesial communities. Stigmatizing

²³ Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine*, 198–200.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 26.

²⁵ Ps 133:1; Jn 17:23; 1 Cor 1:10; Eph 4:11–13; Col 3:13–14.

²⁶ Eph 4:16.

²⁷ Richard Rohr, "The Body of Christ," *The Center for Action and Contemplation*, May 19, 2017, <https://cac.org/the-body-of-christ-2017-05-19/>.

²⁸ Rom 12:4–5.

and discriminating against people with ID leads to social isolation and exclusion, and potentially to a lack of social skills and acumen. People with ID can have difficulty understanding social cues and norms not only because of their disability but also because they are not exposed to social interactions necessary for building these abilities. Their relationships are often limited to family and institutional workers. Studies have shown that creating inclusive environments helps mitigate isolation's impacts.

When SWDs²⁹ are taught in the general education context with their peers, they are provided positive social and behavioral role models so they can learn social and behavioral skills that occur in a natural setting. This promotes both explicit and incidental learning, which has been shown to increase social skills and positive behavior.³⁰

Isn't non-inclusion one of the cultural norms Jesus came to upend? Early in his ministry Jesus challenged the social boundaries that people had constructed. Consider the group of individuals he chose as his most intimate group of followers. He selected both men and women, fisherman and tax collector, skeptic and zealot, sinner and righteous Jew. He socialized with members of the Sanhedrin and people who did not follow a system of faith. He reached out and touched people labeled as unclean and embraced those caught up in sexual sin. Jesus confronted not only the social norms of the time but also Jewish law. One obvious lesson we learn from this pattern in Jesus's ministry is to value and love our neighbor.

One example of the difficulty of integrating people with disabilities into mainstream cultures was experienced through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In 1990, the ADA became law in the United States.³¹ Practical theologian Jennie Weiss Block, a strong supporter of this legislation, explains that while this law strove to legislate inclusion for people with disabilities, it rapidly became clear that the government could not mandate changes in people's attitudes. Her experience informs

²⁹ Students with Disabilities (SWD).

³⁰ Deborah Taub and Megan Foster, "Inclusion and Intellectual Disabilities: A Cross Cultural Review of Descriptions," *The International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education* (IEJEE) 12, no. 3 (Jan 2020): 275–281.

³¹ "An Overview of the Americans with Disabilities Act," ADA National Network, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://adata.org/factsheet/ADA-overview>. "The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990. The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The ADA is divided into five titles (or sections) that relate to different areas of public life."

her that laws and programs are not enough. Personal relationships are imperative to the success of healthy and sustainable integration and full inclusion of all members of the body of Christ. “Liberation and real access to the community will only be realized through personal relationships that develop into genuine friendships. Without true friendships, disabled persons will enjoy the new opportunities created by their equal rights, most likely as ‘strangers in a strange land.’”³² Block believes that one of Christian’s highest callings is to friendship.

In agreement with Block, Reinders adds that legal rights are incapable of building the intimacy needed to produce the essential sense of belonging. “Put simply, disability rights are not going to make me your friend.”³³ The ADA has successfully opened doors and provided opportunities for physical accessibility through the removal of material barriers. However, some supporters of disability rights feel that the changes imposed by the ADA law have had a negative effect. By making some buildings physically accessible, society has deluded the general public into thinking nothing more is needed for the inclusion of people with disabilities. Since people with disabilities can enter church buildings and other public spaces, no further change is necessary.

Therefore, the church’s initial question is whether physical accessibility is sufficient when welcoming people with disabilities into the community. More to the point, how can believers of able body befriend and support believers with disabilities, such that everybody gets part of what they need to flourish? Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong points out the flaw in assuming only physical and sensory issues must be addressed for full inclusion. Being hospitable and welcoming is as important as physical accessibility. As the church discerns appropriate Christian hospitality, it needs to determine what changes are fitting to welcome people with disabilities into the church. An attitude that expresses honor and respect is vital for including people with disabilities lest they be objectified as people needing charitable care rather than valued as equal members. Yong admits that while it is often the case that people with disabilities do need care, “the goal must be the full inclusion and edification of others.”³⁴ Able-bodied Christians must not be under the “illusion that interpersonal change is less important than infrastructural improvement.”³⁵

³² Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 158.

³³ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 43.

³⁴ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 79.

³⁵ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 1.

Able-bodied people must stop seeing difference as a deficit and become more comfortable with diversity. Nancy Eiesland, in her theology of the disabled God, insists that the church must find new ways to interpret disability. “The historical moment of remembrance is embodied in Jesus Christ, the disabled God, present in resurrection and in the church and broken anew at each eucharistic reenactment. The symbol of Jesus Christ, the disabled God, is both gift and enigma, enabling a two-way access through his broken body.”³⁶

Through the church, there is hope. Christian communities must lead the way in removing barriers that block full inclusion for people with disabilities by adjusting their narrow definition of what is currently considered normative for human beings in the church. According to Reynolds, the definition of normalcy Christians generally employ has a “narrowing effect that is dehumanizing and disabling, not only disconnecting persons from the nourishing fulcrum of dependent relationships with others but also reducing persons to their consumptive and productive capacity.”³⁷ To transform narrow attitudes on acceptable behavior and abilities, members of the church must examine how they value the divinely created spiritual body of Christ.

Reinders offers that the issue is simple. Friendship is a critical element of God’s desire with and for creation. God chooses us as friends, and the expectation is that we will do the same within our communities. As a reflection of the *imago Dei*, every human being is worthy of being called a friend. “We need friendship if we are to flourish as human beings. The theological justification for this claim is that friendship with our fellow creatures is our vocation. This is what we are created for.”³⁸

The way of being together in a community needs adjustment as well. In the human self-focused way of life, Christians’ approach to each other can be politely cold and, sometimes, off-putting. Succumbing to society’s norms of appropriate social behavior, members of Christian communities often keep each other at arm’s length. By contrast, God’s way is to show each other love and compassion, creating communities with hospitality. Covenant pastor and theologian Donald Frisk reminds us that we are together with God in the act of creating loving communities: “One of the implications of being in the image of God is that we are called to

³⁶ Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 23.

³⁷ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 98.

³⁸ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 162.

be co-workers with him.”³⁹ Able-bodied Christians can offer believers with disabilities, particularly those with profound disabilities, something missing in most of their relationships. The able-bodied believer can offer the honor of being chosen as a friend.⁴⁰ C.S. Lewis, twentieth-century Anglican writer and lay theologian, asserts:

A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,” can truly say to every group of Christian friends, “Ye have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another.” The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others.⁴¹

Being in mutually respectful relationships, regardless of abilities, could lead non-intellectually disabled believers to understand the truth of the scripture that the weak are essential to the body of Christ. Brock suggests that offering friendship could be the beginning of building a redeemed human community. Suppose Christians understood that all believers are in need and are in the recipient’s role? In that case, their eyes could open to the similarities; the differences could fade.⁴² In community, the Holy Spirit is given the space and the opportunity to work through each member to mature each other’s faith and build up the community.

An excellent, free resource to help churches evaluate their communities’ responsiveness to people with disabilities is the Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability, developed through collaboration with many advocacy groups.⁴³

One might wonder what would happen if the church turned to God and truly welcomed intellectually disabled people into the body of Christ despite all their differences. Yong wonders, “What would happen if the public discovered that church communities were creating inclusive educational and liturgical environments because they valued the presence of

³⁹ Donald C. Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations: This We Believe* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 55.

⁴⁰ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 5.

⁴¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960, reissue ed. HarperOne, 2017), 144, Kindle.

⁴² Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 203.

⁴³ “Five Stages: The Journey of Disability Attitudes,” ELIM Christian Services and Dan Vander Plaats, 2014. <https://www.wheaton.edu/wheaton-center-for-faith-and-disability/disability-foundations/the-5-stages/>.

children and people with intellectual disabilities?”⁴⁴ The church’s witness to the world is a critical point to notice. Christians’ responsibility is not only to the church but to the whole of creation.

⁴⁴ Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 112.