

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract composition of overlapping geometric shapes in various colors including blue, green, yellow, orange, red, and purple. The shapes are layered and semi-transparent, creating a rich, textured effect. The overall style is reminiscent of modern abstract art or a collage.

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Disabling Leadership

**A Practical
Theology for
the Broken
Body of Christ**



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Chapter One

A Theology of Leadership and Disability

IN THIS CHAPTER, we will present a theology of leadership and disability. First, Andrew will investigate leadership literature to develop a theology of leading that paves the way for an inclusive ecclesiology¹ responsive to and integrative of the insights of disability studies. Second, Andrea will explore the body language of Saint Paul's invocation of the church, offering an inclusive vision of leading for the body of Christ. Finally, Jody will examine disability studies literature to present the church with an anti-ableist view of leadership that offers a compelling vision of the body of Christ leading in the pursuit of justice. We offer this overview to identify the conversation partners we have had along the way and the resources we are building on in hopes that readers will be encouraged to more fully enter the conversation. When we distinguish our own vision from the thinkers and practitioners we are drawing from, it is not to criticize their work but rather to demonstrate the nuances that we have learned in our shared journey.

¹The doctrine of the church.

LEADERSHIP STUDIES

Leading in the name of Jesus. In his reflections on Christian leadership, *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen tells the story of his transition from teaching pastoral theology at Harvard to serving as a priest at Daybreak, the L'Arche community in Toronto. L'Arche is an international association of communities comprising people with and without intellectual disabilities who live and work together.² Nouwen presents this transition to living with “the poor in spirit” as saving him from burnout and spiritual death.³ He explains that the path of academic success and popularity had slowly led his soul to a place of deep danger. At L'Arche, he found a “hidden life” with people who “had few or no words and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society.” He found that this community offered him “new words to use in speaking about Christian leadership.”⁴

It was during the early years of experiencing this new life that Nouwen was asked to speak about Christian leadership in the twenty-first century for the fiftieth anniversary of the Center for Human Development in Washington, DC.⁵ He overcame his hesitancy to do so by focusing on the ways in which the Spirit of God was leading him in his present moment and the lessons about leading that he was learning in his new life. He came to see that he could not adequately convey a message about Christian leadership

²The first L'Arche house was founded in 1964 in Trosly, France, by Jean Vanier, Phillippe Seux, and Raphael Simi to meet the need for humane living conditions and relational support for people with intellectual disabilities (www.larche.org/about-larche/history/). L'Arche has become a thriving international association of around 175 communities and projects in thirty-eight countries. In recent years, revelations have been made known about Jean Vanier's sexual abuse of several adult (nondisabled) women who trusted him for spiritual direction. L'Arche International commissioned an independent inquiry detailing the credibility of these allegations, condemning and confessing Vanier's actions, and outlining safeguarding policies and procedures (<https://commissiondetude-jeanvanier.org/commissiondetudeindependante2023-empriseetabus/index.php/en/home-english/>).

³Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 11.

⁴Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 12.

⁵Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 1.

alone and that it would be necessary for someone from his community to travel with him to share in ministry. As Nouwen reflected on Jesus sending out his disciples two by two, the L'Arche community commissioned Bill Van Buren, a resident with cognitive disabilities, to accompany him and minister alongside him.⁶ Nouwen confesses that he did not really know what to expect, but saw in the opportunity a moment to continue to unlearn what he had known about Christian leadership in favor of learning what is entailed in leading in the name of Jesus.

Before examining Nouwen's thoughts about leadership, it may be helpful to make a distinction in terminology. In this book, we will use the terms *leadership* and *leading*. While Nouwen uses these terms as functionally interchangeable, we read his theological trajectory as subtly dismantling many of the assumptions inherent in classic leadership studies literature. For this reason, we will tend to use the term *leadership* when it comes to the formal study of the attributes and capacities of leadership, but we will prefer the term *leading* when it comes to thinking about what it means to lead in the way of Christ. We believe that disability interrupts thinking about leadership in terms of capacities or attributes and serves to instead focus us on the practices of shared ministry, especially among diverse followers of Jesus. In this sense, we will read Nouwen's insights about shared ministry with Bill as disabling leadership. We will also interpret our own shared experiences as calling into question common assumptions about leadership in the body of Christ. We will claim that the inclusive ecclesiology prefigured in the body language of the New Testament and experienced in inclusive local worshiping bodies holds important lessons for leadership studies in general.

⁶Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 5.

Nouwen's reflections on Christian leadership are guided by the stories of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and Jesus' commissioning of Peter as a shepherd after the disciple's denial of his Lord. Nouwen's text is organized into three sections of three movements each. In each section, Nouwen first presents a temptation faced by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry and subsequently faced by Christian leaders at various points throughout our ministries. Second, Nouwen offers one of Jesus' commissioning statements to Peter as indicative of the Lord's call to each of us as we seek to shepherd those in our care. Third, Nouwen suggests a spiritual discipline for leaders to practice as we seek to be formed in the way of Jesus.

In this manner, Nouwen presents the temptations faced by Jesus as temptations faced by all Christian leaders as we resist specific common ways of thinking about leadership. He reads the tempter's offers to Jesus as the temptations to be relevant ("Turn these stones into bread"), spectacular ("Throw yourself from the parapet of the temple"), and powerful ("I will give you all the kingdoms of the world").⁷ In turn, Nouwen pictures Jesus as offering to Peter, and thereby to the Christian leader, an identity found in the first love of God ("Do you love me?"), a shared and mutual ministry ("Feed my sheep"), and a path of being led where we might rather not go ("Someone else will take you"). Finally, Nouwen offers three spiritual disciplines as practices to resist these temptations through responding to the call of Christ: contemplative prayer, confession and forgiveness, and theological reflection. By meditating on the love of God, sharing in vulnerability with others in the body, and carefully considering how we are being led, Christian leaders are pointed in the direction of leading in the way of Jesus.

⁷The three sections in *In the Name of Jesus* begin on pages 15, 35, and 55, respectively.

This book was very formative for me, Andrew, as in 2004 my wife and I made the transition from ministry in a large mainline church to moving into an underresourced neighborhood in a postindustrial town. At that time, we sought to follow the call of God in joining several other young families engaging in community development work. When I resigned my ministry position, I did not yet know that God would call us to plant a worshiping community alongside our friends and neighbors. During the first year and a half of living and forming relationships in our neighborhood, I worked various part-time jobs as I was commuting to seminary to finish my Master of Divinity degree.

Here I was in a new town, fixing up a former slumlord property and drug house to become our home, delivering water softener salt and waiting tables, while not yet being known or supported by the formal and informal leaders in our city. I viscerally understood Nouwen's description of the emotional journey involved in leaving a place in which you are known and respected and finding yourself in a small, hidden life in which you have to begin again with little more than your identity as one who is beloved.

Interestingly, however, while Nouwen's work was very helpful to me in thinking through what it means to lead as a follower of Jesus, I did not at that time recognize the importance of disability in forming this vision of Christian leading. My vision of Christian leadership still largely remained one of individualistic and heroic self-sacrifice. In a later section, I will explain how the vision of leadership offered in *In the Name of Jesus* differs from many of the common assumptions baked into formal leadership studies. For now, however, my point is to demonstrate the role that the community of L'Arche, particularly Bill Van Buren, played in the formation of this vision of leading.

In the epilogue, Nouwen explains that, while he did not yet have a framework in which to consider how he and Bill might lead together, Bill seemed untroubled by such a proposition.⁸ When Henri rose to deliver his speech, Bill joined him at the podium. After Henri would read a page, Bill would take it and place it on a table nearby. At several points, Bill interjected, explaining to the audience that he had heard one of Henri's illustrations before or that what Henri was saying was in fact what their community experienced. While we could be tempted to read this as inspiring in a paternalistic way, Nouwen recognizes the profound implications for a theology of leading. He explains that Bill was making clear that "my thoughts were not as new as I wanted my audience to believe." At one point, when Bill named a person whom Henri had referred to in an anonymous way, Nouwen recognized that Bill "wanted people to know about his friend" and was "inviting them into the intimacy of our common life."

After Henri finished speaking, Bill rose to address the audience. Nouwen admits that his first reaction was fear of embarrassment. Bill took the microphone and, in words shaped by his speech impediment, acknowledged the common ministry that he and Henri shared and thanked the group for coming. That evening and the next morning, Bill spent hours engaging the guests, asking about their experiences and sharing stories about life at Daybreak. As he and Henri flew back to Toronto together, Bill emphasized the reality that they had ministered together. At that moment, Nouwen recognized that, while much of what he had said likely would not be remembered, their shared ministry would have a lasting impact on those who had gathered for the event.

In this book, when we use the term *disability*, we mean any exceptionality or limitation that demonstrates substantial

⁸Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 75-81.

difference from what society considers “normal.” Defining disability often rests more on society’s perceptions of people with specific limitations than it does on the particularities of people with disabilities. At the same time, there are particular challenges associated with specific physical, cognitive, mental, and emotional limitations. Disability can refer to various categories:

- Physical (mobility, visual, auditory, verbal, chronic conditions, etc.)
- Cognitive (autism, Down syndrome, etc.)
- Mental (mental illness, obsessive-compulsive disorder, etc.)
- Emotional (severe depression, anxiety, compulsion, etc.)

We recognize that this is a somewhat arbitrary and broad grouping that does not necessarily present a clear convergence of shared characteristics. For instance, Bill Van Buren’s cognitive disability is different from Shilo Mann’s Down syndrome. Certain cognitive disabilities may not offer the same challenges as my daily navigation of obsessions and compulsions or my son’s daily navigation of the social stigmas placed on people on the autism spectrum. Developmental disabilities such as those associated with Jody’s cerebral palsy do not necessarily indicate cognitive or mental limitations. As imperfect as language of disability may be, we will deploy it in both conventional and subversive ways.

Much as we must resist lumping everyone with a disability into clearly delineated descriptive categories, so we must not offer a totalizing vision of what leading looks like for all people with disabilities. Just as we should be wary of conflating the varied leadership styles of nondisabled folks, we cannot and should not do so for people with disabilities. While it may be the case that the universal reality of human limitation is readily recognized through the category of disability, this observation calls into question

notions of leadership as neatly defined by either capacities or attributes. Disability itself disables many common conceptions of leadership. In this book, we will build on Nouwen's contention that leading in the way of Christ is not the domain of those who are relevant, spectacular, or powerful but those who experience being loved in weakness, being sent in community, and being led in surprising ways. After all, it is only in human weakness that God's power is made known (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Christian leadership. The seminal overview text for understanding common Christian evaluations of leadership studies is Robert Banks and Bernice M. Ledbetter's *Reviewing Leadership*.⁹ *Reviewing Leadership* is a survey text, summarizing key concepts in secular leadership studies and evaluating them from a Christian case-study approach. As such, it doesn't seek to make a distinct contribution to the field of leadership studies as much as to "evaluate current approaches" through theological and ethical lenses.¹⁰ Banks and Ledbetter summarize key streams of contemporary leadership studies, including the "great men theory," "traits characteristic of leaders," "leadership activity," "context in which leadership [takes] place," "emphatic situational method," "the transforming leadership approach," "partnering between leader and followers," and "situational, relational, and cultural factors."¹¹ In each case, they define the theory and then evaluate its relative strengths and weaknesses according to "biblical perspectives on leadership."¹²

The strength of this text is its inclusion of historic Christian streams of thought in regard to leading, including Pauline,

⁹Robert Banks and Bernice M. Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership: A Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

¹⁰Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, 10.

¹¹Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, 50-52.

¹²Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, 52.

Benedictine, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal.¹³ However, rather than using these trajectories to build a broad Christian understanding of leading, Banks and Ledbetter offer them more as historical moments preceding and leading up to modern leadership theory. None of these five trajectories of Christian spirituality is carried forward in a thick way to advance a distinctly theological vision for Christian leading. Rather, Banks and Ledbetter's treatment of leadership tends to summarize contemporary leadership studies and then attempts to add a "moral" component to it.

In sum, then, leadership involves a person, group, or organization who shows the way in an area of life—whether in the short- or the long-term—and in doing so both influences and empowers enough people to bring about change in that area. Such leadership may be good or bad depending on the leader's style and the content of what the leader is advocating. From a Christian point of view, it is only when the direction and the method are in line with God's purposes, character, and ways of operating that godly leadership takes place.¹⁴

While *Reviewing Leadership* serves as a helpful primer to leadership studies, it is precisely at the point of Christian evaluation that it falls short. The text does not sufficiently unpack an understanding of what God's purposes or character are or the ways godly leadership may be distinct from other sorts of leadership. The premise appears to operate on a form/content dichotomy that inadequately explores how the authors' otherwise helpful summation of Christian thought could do the heavy lifting of providing a theological vision for leading. Instead, the authors seem to move forward with an implicit American Reformed evangelical understanding of moral theory, seeking to evaluate the

¹³Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, 35-48.

¹⁴Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, 16-17.

“good” and “bad” of various approaches toward achieving a sort of ethical balance.¹⁵

While Banks and Ledbetter offer evaluative components, such as intentionality, reflection, self-evaluation, intellectual and ethical integrity, and perpetual learning and development, they do not explain what constitutes the ethical content they are seeking. This leaves these questions unanswered: What are distinctly Christian ways of leading? Is Christian leadership simply moral content infused into contemporary leadership forms? How does following Jesus offer a theological vision of leading different from simply being a good person engaged in organizational leadership? Is there nothing germane to leading in the way of Christ that opposes the spirits of our age?

Banks and Ledbetter gesture toward this problem as they summarize the biblical accounts in which the apostle Paul talks about leading in the church.¹⁶ They recognize the “danger of reading the priority we accord these matters [leadership, chains of command, and lines of authority] into Paul’s ideas about the church.” They acknowledge that the specifics of what we today understand as organizational leadership were not of primary importance to Paul. As Banks and Ledbetter read Paul, their theology of leadership sets out in a promising direction.

In studying the Pauline body language of 1 Corinthians 12, they explain that there is a scarcity of language devoted to power, organization, order, regulation, or authority, except when it comes to the authority afforded Christ as head of the church. They demonstrate Paul’s preference for family language, even acknowledging the way that his use of the household codes of his age subtly undermines common contemporary assumptions about gender roles.

¹⁵Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, 53-56.

¹⁶Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, 35-42.

They also note Paul's invocation of the diffuse move of the Spirit in corporate gatherings, his subversion of status distinctions, his preference for function over position, and his preference for motivation by persuasion rather than command.

However, Banks and Ledbetter still read back onto Paul and the faith communities he helped plant a constellation of modern assumptions about organizational structures that feels profoundly anachronistic¹⁷ and out of place. They describe Paul leading a "parachurch mission team and organization," Paul's vision of leadership as "democratizing" the role of leaders, and Paul's evocation of the household as evidence of the necessity for leaders to have "business experience." Finally, they describe the Antioch church as "essentially a nonprofit organization engaged in mission activities."

They do not address the difficulties caused by such an uncritical appropriation of language. Did the church at Antioch really think of itself as operating outside the structures of a worshiping community ("parachurch") or as an organization with a distinct mission from the church ("nonprofit")? Did Paul's vision of bodily mutuality in shared leading really operate according to "democratic" structures, with all the individualist anthropology that such a political structure entails? Are Banks and Ledbetter really claiming that because Paul understood connections between household and economy, contemporary church leaders must therefore be businesspeople who successfully navigate late modern capitalism? One has a hard time discerning how the vision of Christian leadership offered in this text is more compelling than being a successful CEO for Jesus.

Banks and Ledbetter end by invoking Pauline leadership "qualities," adding to the sense that they envision exemplary Christian

¹⁷Belonging to the wrong time period.

leadership as a particular moral posture overlaid onto whatever cultural leadership practices are currently in vogue. Again, they do not allow the helpful insights they find in Paul's understanding of the communal working of the body of Christ to shape a distinctly Christian vision for leading. Instead, they summarize the biblical account as chronologically prior to later visions of leadership, attempting to draw a bit from each stream as they present a summative view of secular leadership studies infused with virtue. We appreciate the early theological focus of *Reviewing Leadership* while finding that we must push beyond as we build a theology of leadership and disability. Again, our goal is not to single out this text for criticism but to demonstrate that the best of Christian leadership literature often lacks a distinctly theological vision of leading.

Leadership theory. Peter G. Northouse's edited volume *Leadership: Theory and Practice* is the representative text for secular leadership studies. In its eighth edition, *Leadership* surveys the various schools of thought in leadership studies and offers a comprehensive definition of leadership that incorporates components of various theories. With many scholar-contributors and a reliance on primary studies, *Leadership* is a more robust evaluation of leadership theory than Bank's and Ledbetter's *Reviewing Leadership* and shows more nuance in navigating various components of leading. Interestingly, whereas *Reviewing Leadership* tends to assume an implicit understanding of what (biblical) morality entails, *Leadership* devotes a chapter to explicitly examining ethical theories to suggest thick methodologies for understanding leadership ethics.¹⁸

Each chapter in Northouse is devoted to a particular theory, trajectory, or issue in leadership studies. In chapters 2-12, Northouse

¹⁸Peter G. Northouse, ed., *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 8th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2019), 335-70.

describes and evaluates diverse schools of thought, including a focus on the traits or skills of leaders (chaps. 2-3), a focus on behaviors of leaders in particular situations (chaps. 4-5), theories of how leadership functions in group dynamics (chaps. 6-7), various postures or approaches leaders tend to take toward leading (transformative, authentic, serving, and adaptive, chaps. 8-11), and a study of how followers interact with leaders (chap. 12). Whereas Banks and Ledbetter focus primarily on a “person, group, or organization who shows the way,”¹⁹ Northouse examines the complex dynamics associated with particular group configurations and processes. This leads Northouse to conclude that leadership is “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”²⁰

While Northouse focuses on the processes of leadership, the interplay between leaders and followers, and the particular group dynamics of communities and organizations, the qualitative and quantitative research nature of the text limits the parameters of its discussion of leadership. *Leadership* surveys the available literature more than it offers a particular vision of leading. For our purposes, it is helpful as we seek to understand the contours of the discussion, allowing us to position Nouwen’s vision of leading in relation to the discipline of leadership studies as we prepare to offer a distinct theological view of disability and leading.

Northouse recognizes that the traits and skills approaches to leadership are overly focused on the abilities and capacities of a leader. He ventures beyond this limited vision to describe particular practices (behaviors) and contexts (situations) in which leadership is enacted. He then moves to a wider angle in describing two theories that explain how leaders interact with followers: path-goal theory (a

¹⁹Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, 16.

²⁰Northouse, *Leadership*, 5.

continuum that enumerates various pragmatic approaches leaders use in relation to people and tasks) and leader-member exchange theory (an exploration of the dyadic²¹ relationship between leaders and various groups of followers). In describing various postures of leadership, Northouse is more interested in observing the diversity of leadership styles than he is in commending a particular manner of leading. Finally, in devoting a chapter to a study of the dynamics of following and the behaviors of followers, Northouse recognizes the necessity of mutuality in any social grouping. He suggests that groups can enact either a helpful dynamic of “co-creation” between leaders and followers or a destructive dynamic in which dysfunctional leaders focus on coercive power and control.²²

As Northouse includes leadership ethics in the discussion, he does not assume his readers will approach the text with a unified ethical theory, nor does he leave his use of ethical terminology vague. He offers a brief history of Western ethical theories dating from Plato and Aristotle. He uses Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development as an explanatory framework for moral formation in individuals, understanding it as a progression from a morality grounded in systems of punishment and rewards to a morality based on society’s norms and expectations to a morality developed on notions of justice and principle.²³ Northouse then discusses various ways to theorize how ethics works, including deontological and teleological orientations to ethics.²⁴ He offers virtue ethics as a distinct reclamation of an Aristotelian logic focusing on character development.²⁵ He also explores research

²¹Relational and mutual interaction between two parties.

²²Northouse, *Leadership*, 304-13.

²³Northouse, *Leadership*, 336-38.

²⁴Deontological approaches to ethics stress moral principles and duties, while teleological approaches to ethics stress moral outcomes and consequences.

²⁵Northouse, *Leadership*, 339-41.

related to the “dark side of leadership” and ends by suggesting five guiding principles for ethical leadership: respect, service, justice, honesty, and community.²⁶

Northouse’s *Leadership* is helpful as a survey of leadership theory and as an introduction to Western traditions of ethics. At the same time, it does not offer a distinctly theological contribution to understanding leadership. It also does not adequately explore how various non-Western cultural and ethical traditions may understand leadership. Finally, it does not acknowledge the ways that both Aristotle’s virtue ethics and progressive understandings of moral and cultural development (e.g., Kohlberg) may contribute to picturing non-Western peoples or people with disabilities as primitive or unproductive. Yet perhaps surprisingly, where Banks and Ledbetter fall short in adequately clarifying what they mean by godliness and Christian ethics, Northouse is clear about the universal moral principle and character-trait approaches he recommends. In this sense, it could be maintained that Northouse offers thicker frameworks for conceptualizing theological approaches to leading than Banks and Ledbetter do. This is because Northouse makes his theoretical apparatuses explicit (even with their limitations), whereas Banks and Ledbetter leave theirs implicit.

Leadership paves the way to better understanding what Nouwen agrees with and disagrees with in contemporary secular leadership studies. Like Northouse, Nouwen is less interested in the traits or skills of the leader than he is in the mutuality encountered in group dynamics involving leaders and followers. By making his biblical and theological assumptions clear, Nouwen succeeds where Banks and Ledbetter fall short: he puts flesh on the bones of a Christian

²⁶Northouse, *Leadership*, 346-52.

approach to leading. As such, he incorporates important aspects found in Northouse's account: servant leadership, the dyadic relationship between leader and follower, and the need for leaders to be followers. Nouwen draws from important aspects of Western virtue theory by explicitly offering practices for the formation of the leader in the way of Jesus without offering virtue ethics as the only way to think about character formation. Because he is offering a theologically particular account of leading, Nouwen also implicitly brings components of divine command theory and *theosis*²⁷ into the discussion, thereby moving beyond Northouse and beyond virtue ethics.

We maintain that Nouwen's theologically thick account of leading owes largely to his experience with disability in general (and his relationship with Bill Van Buren in particular) as shaping a distinctly Christian understanding of leading. If leadership theory is overly focused on the particular players involved (leader, follower, group)—rather than the mutual enfolding of members of the community into one another (Paul's vision in 1 Corinthians 12)—then leadership theory and Christian leading have little in common. If, however, the best of leadership studies is utilized as a skeleton (much like the doctrine of creation) onto which flesh is formed (much like the doctrine of the incarnation) and into which life is breathed (much like the doctrine of sanctification), then leadership theory can effectively serve theological studies.²⁸ In turn, theological leadership studies will inform and be informed by the life of the church, especially as it is constituted by the joining of people with differing abilities. It is this communal life that Paul imagines as a perichoretic²⁹ dance in which the weak and the

²⁷Eastern Orthodox conceptions of union with the divine.

²⁸Note the way this account of leading is Trinitarian, thereby preparing the way for the interconnected social vision of leading this text will advance.

²⁹Inter-permeation (perichoresis) is a historic Eastern way of expressing the relationship among the persons of the Trinity.

strong, the presentable and the modest, the nondisabled and the disabled, need one another and draw life from one another.

Leadership and identity. In the discipline of leadership studies, disability (if mentioned at all) is often treated as an ancillary issue to be considered alongside other identity issues. We appreciate that leadership studies as a discipline now includes robust treatments of identity. At the same time, we claim that disability cannot be reduced to an “issue,” a specialist interest, or simply a particular locus of identity. Instead, we claim that the reality of disability opens up ways of thinking about leading that offer implications for how we conceive of and practice leadership in general. We read Nouwen as explicating the theological categories needed to envision leading in the way of Jesus and as making these categories available through living his life in a disability community. In other words, disability can be a door into recognizing that human limitation, rather than human strength, is the space in which the leading of Jesus is made known. In the same way, God uses the limitations we all experience as humans to show us what it means to follow the way of Jesus, the One apart from whom we can do nothing.

But we have this treasure in clay pots so that the awesome power belongs to God and doesn't come from us. . . . We always carry Jesus' death around in our bodies so that Jesus' life can also be seen in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4:7, 10)

He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, because power is made perfect in weakness.” So I'll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ's power can rest on me. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Human limitation is the theological space that makes room for leading in the way of Jesus. In part three of this chapter, Jody will investigate disability literature so that the church may hear what

we need to hear about limitation and leading. Disability literature speaks to the body of Christ as a whole, not just to a particular disability community. Disability both converses with and disables common assumptions about leadership.

As we move toward considering the mutual articulation present in the interchange between disability studies and leadership studies, we will briefly consider what leadership literature has to say about issues of identity (gender, ethnicity, ability, etc.). *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership* offers a thorough exploration of sociological, philosophical, psychological, and emerging perspectives on leadership.³⁰ Alongside “traditional” approaches to considering leadership (general theories of leadership, organizational theory, followership, etc.), *SAGE* explores issues related to cultural context, gender, power, aesthetics, and identity.

In an essay on gender and leadership, Carli and Eagly explore theories about innate difference versus cultural construction in gender identity, demonstrating that limitations on women in leadership are historically related to discrimination more so than particular leadership styles or traits.³¹ In an essay on crosscultural leadership, Guthey and Jackson push the discussion beyond deterministic relationships between leadership styles and national, cultural, and ethnic identities toward recognizing how various understandings of leadership and followership influence and shape cultural identities.³² In essays on critical leadership studies and leadership and power, Collinson and Gordon explore the ways in which power functions as both individual and systemic, explicit and implicit, recognized and unknown.³³ In essays on discursive

³⁰Alan Bryman, David Collinson, Keith Grint, Brad Jackson, and Mary Uhl-Bien, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership* (London: SAGE, 2011).

³¹Bryman et al., *SAGE*, 103-17.

³²Bryman et al., *SAGE*, 165-78.

³³Bryman et al., *SAGE*, 181-202.

approaches to leadership and identity work in leadership, Fairhurst and Sinclair think through dynamics related to social construction and identity.³⁴

While *SAGE* does not devote an entire chapter to disability as a locus of identity, many of the studies cited in this collection of essays shine a light on how identity and power have functioned to shape common understandings of leadership as a discipline. This is helpful in that it gives the church a framework through which to explore ways in which leadership as a category has often differed from leading in the way of Jesus. In other words, the essays in this text help us see how Western culture has often read our assumptions about leadership as power, autonomy, or capacity back onto the biblical text rather than allowing Jesus' pictures of leading to shape our imaginations. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus makes a distinction between two different visions of leading: "But Jesus called them over and said, 'You know that those who rule the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that's not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant'" (Matthew 20:25-26).

Toward this end, we find critical theories very helpful. When leadership has functioned as an exercise in "lording over," there is much that needs to be deconstructed. As leaders who have been discipled in evangelical church communities, we recognize the need for deconstruction of certain patriarchal, ableist, and white supremacist assumptions that have often been baked into American evangelical Christianity. At the same time, we recognize that deconstruction alone does not teach us to follow Jesus. While we appreciate critical studies for the way it helps us name certain

³⁴Bryman et al., *SAGE*, 495-517.

power structures as idolatry, critical studies alone does not sow the seeds of new life. It is the gospel itself that both deconstructs and constructs. God's work of salvation on the cross of Christ is the "stone of stumbling" (1 Peter 2:8), a work that can be experienced as scandal, foolishness, or divine wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:22-25).

Jesus pointed to both the deconstruction of religious and political powers of his day and the construction of communities that would embody the new life he came to give. We do not fear or demonize critical studies (as is increasingly a trend in conservative church circles), nor do we end in deconstruction alone (as is a tendency in some "exvangelical" circles), but rather we utilize critical studies to help us describe the kingdoms of this world that will fall before the kingdom of God.

The reasons we are drawn to Nouwen's treatment of leadership are that, rather than emphasizing certain character traits, situational behaviors, group dynamics, or transformative postures, he explains what Christian leading is not and in turn offers certain practices to train us to lead as we follow Jesus. He is both deconstructing leadership studies and reconstructing a Christian vision of leading informed by disability. By contrasting temptations and spiritual disciplines, Nouwen does not so much define leadership as offer us a path as we explore leading in the way of Jesus. He reminds us that the very temptations to which our Lord was subjected are the temptations certain conceptions of leadership may continue to offer us, conceptions that are often uncritically accepted by church leaders. The temptations to be relevant, to be spectacular, and to be powerful: these are modes of leadership toward which we are tempted by conceptions of leadership that think in terms of traits, approaches, dynamics, or postures. The practices of being prayerful, confessing and forgiving, and being led by the Spirit: these are paths that offer us the opportunity to

be transformed by the Spirit of God as we are conduits of the life of Christ.

This is leading in the way of Jesus, with “nothing to offer but [our] own vulnerable self”³⁵ to the approbation or reprobation of those around us as we are rooted in our identity as the beloved of God. As we allow our full selves (limitations, scars, disabilities, and all) to be touched by those around us, we point back to the “Jesus who is Lord, not I.”³⁶ As we join our particular bodies and particular identities with the bodies and identities of those around us, we find ourselves located in the body of Christ, the one who is the head. As we exist as who we are, the Lord who is Leader leads his flock through us. As we enter into mutuality with those different from us (including and especially those with disabilities), it is most clearly seen that “we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us.”³⁷ Nouwen makes it clear that this vulnerability does not amount to being “psychologically weak” or “passive victim[s]” but those with the intention to lay down our lives so that the life of Jesus can be experienced.³⁸

Toward the end of joining our bodies into the mutuality of Christ’s body, we turn to Paul’s great invocation of the body in his first letter to the Corinthian church.

INCLUSIVE BODY LANGUAGE OF 1 CORINTHIANS 12

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Paul compares the body of Christ with a physical body, claiming that the various parts must be joined and operating together for the body to be a living and functioning being. This passage is sandwiched between a conversation about economic divisions in the church evidenced in the practice of

³⁵Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 17.

³⁶Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 41.

³⁷Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 41.

³⁸Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 63.

some members getting drunk at Communion while others were going without (1 Cor 11) and a contention that particular gifts and attributes are worthless without love binding them together (1 Cor 13). In drawing from the analogy of a physical body, Paul begins with the head, moves through the parts that are seen, and focuses on the members that are less presentable or are treated as less honorable. This rhetorical move is structured to humble those who are living in the proclamation of their own self-importance by reminding them that nothing they do matters without love and mutual interdependence.

A common line of interpretation is to read Paul as referring to the need for unity amid a diversity of spiritual gifts (understood as skills or attributes). As we shall see, this line of interpretation assumes that Paul is talking about individual people manifesting particular actions at which they excel for the sake of everyone. While we do not disagree that this passage includes references to the performance of certain actions as gifts from God (e.g., words of wisdom, performance of miracles, speaking in tongues, teaching), we also recognize that this passage describes many gifts not as active performances, but as special embodiments of openness to receiving the Spirit's peculiar graces and receiving particular persons (e.g., faith, discernment, interpretation, hospitality, healing touch).

Whether the gifts are understood as activities or postures, the ones gifted are pictured not as acting out of their own resources but as receiving certain graces and callings from the Spirit. Specific disabilities, therefore, may not always be best understood as connected to the fall but as connected to salvation—exemplifying the particular grace of God in the life of an individual for the sake of the community. Additionally, if members of the body are themselves understood as gifts, then each member is a gift of God's

grace to be experienced by the body. The idea that spiritual gifts are primarily capacities or skills implicitly leaves out parts of the body who may not have gifts that are known to others, may be seemingly unskilled, or may not exhibit the sort of recognizable manifestations the church expects. If we believe that the many parts of the body refer only to those who exhibit the sorts of spiritual gifts discernible on a skills inventory, we easily leave out people with disabilities that may render it difficult to understand what, if any, spiritual gifts they may have.

I, Andrea, will contend that, rather than understanding Paul's invocation of the body as referring to skills or capacities, we should understand it as representative of a diversity of ethnicities, genders, socioeconomic distinctions, and abilities (including bodies that are nondisabled and disabled). In this passage, Paul conceives of the members of the body as Jew and Greek, slave and free, public and modest (1 Corinthians 12:13, 23). It is in this sense that we are to understand spiritual gifts: spiritual gifts are God's gifts of a diversity of particular people, including their bodies and their vocations, to the corporate body and its vocation. The significance of bodies is not understood simply by delineating the known functions of individual body parts. For this to be obvious, one only needs to consider the appendix. We may not be able to easily define its function but we notice it when it is sick or ignored.

There are other parts of the body that are like this. For most people, our palate and lips are not things we think about regularly. But for those born with a cleft palate or lip, it is quickly obvious that these parts, while perhaps not seeming to do much, are still quite essential for our bodies to function well. As an analogy of the church being one body with many parts, our bodies must be understood as inclusive of the parts that carry out essential functions,

the vital parts that we talk less about, and the parts we seem to pay attention to only when they are hurting.

Evangelicalism and spiritual gifts. In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, W. Harold Mare pictures 1 Corinthians 12 as primarily about unity amid a diversity of gifts (as skills) in the church.³⁹ While he grounds this unity in the various members receiving the same Holy Spirit, he claims that these verses are not about local church bodies, but rather about the universal church body as a whole. We cannot help but wonder if this type of formulation reinforces separate (but equal?) local worshipping bodies in which Christians of different ethnicities, socioeconomic locations, and abilities are segregated according to their group identity while joined in an ethereal sense. If unity is purely a spiritual or invisible reality, where does the church experience material and visible joining as an embodiment of Christ's body?

Mare mentions diversity as he quotes Paul's invocation of Jew and Greek as well as slave and free. However, he does not appear to carry this recognition into his interpretation of the different members of the body, choosing to focus instead on spiritual gifts as activities. While he explores how the behind-the-scenes gifts are as important as the up-front ones, he does not consider the ways in which Paul's "humbler members" may themselves be gifts for the building up of the community. Mare focuses on the *functions* of body parts and is therefore left picturing some members as primarily recipients.

So also the inconspicuous members of the church are essential—those who pray, those who work with their hands and bring their meager tithes into the church, etc. As the humbler parts of the body are given special attention by covering them with

³⁹Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 10:264-65.

appropriate clothing and, as in the case of the digestive organs, providing them with food, so the inconspicuous members of the church—the poor, the despised, the less prominent—are to be cherished and nurtured.⁴⁰

Mare goes on to list particular spiritual gifts, noting that the list is not exhaustive and that none of the gifts amounts to anything without love. However, he still presents them primarily as actions and arranges them in a hierarchical fashion. Some of this limitation may be because Mare's commentary is offered in a biblical studies vein and is not an expressly theological interpretation.

Body language. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Richard Hays explains that the type of body language that Paul appropriates (including its accompanying notions of headship) would not have been new to his hearers.

This figure was ordinarily used to urge members of the subordinate classes to stay in their places in the social order and not to upset the natural equilibrium of the body by rebelling against their superiors. . . . Paul uses the body image in a somewhat more complicated way to argue for the need of *diversity* in the body (vv. 14-20) and, at the same time, *interdependence* among the members (vv. 21-26). Thus, he employs the analogy not to keep subordinates in their places but to urge more privileged members of the community to respect and value the contributions of those members who appear to be their inferiors, both in social status and in spiritual potency.⁴¹

Hays points out that Paul mentions Jew and Greek, as well as slave and free, thereby contending that Paul is thinking in terms of diversity. He infers that male and female were intentionally left out

⁴⁰Gaebelein, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 265.

⁴¹Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 213.

of the analogy due to divisions that were happening in Corinth based on related issues. Hays reads Paul as attaching significance to the fact that, while the body parts are unique, they have been joined together in one body in a way that subverts the hierarchies assumed in common cultural usages of the metaphor.

Hays reads the interdependence of the members of the body as pushing back against independence and autonomy.

The apparently “higher” members (eyes and head) cannot scorn the hands and feet, without whom they would have no power to act (vv. 21-22); likewise the different members of the church need one another. This observation allows Paul to draw a subtly pointed conclusion: “the members of the body that seem to be *weaker* are indispensable” (v. 22). Since this comment does not follow strictly from verse 21 (the hands and feet are hardly “weaker” than the eyes and head), we must assume that Paul’s word choice here is determined by the pastoral situation in Corinth: those who fancy themselves above who they regard as “the weak.” . . . Paul has already played ironic inversions of this theme earlier in the letter (1:27; 4:10; 9:22), associating weakness with the cross and with his own apostleship. Here he straightforwardly asserts that the (apparently) weak have an “indispensable” role in the life of the community and that the strong ignore them at their own peril.⁴²

While Paul may not have been thinking strictly about disability in the way we are framing it in this book, his interest is very much in line with our basic contention: the assignation of weakness is often based on a misguided perception that is at odds with the valuations of the divine economy. Hays tells us that Paul is pointing out the class tensions between people who are joining together for worship, inverting the idea that those of a lower class are in fact weaker, instead proclaiming them worthy of being

⁴²Hays, *First Corinthians*, 215.

clothed with dignity and honor. For our purposes, we cannot overlook the common connection between disability and financial poverty in a societal economy that often esteems worth based on production value.

As Hays talks about the importance of unity and interdependence, he explains that differences between members should not lead to division. Members should share in one another's joys. Hays astutely recognizes connections between language of spiritual gifts, division and unity, and ethnicity and social status. Hays presents "manifestations" of spiritual gifts as the main theme of these Pauline chapters while acknowledging that this language is in some way connected to language of ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.

Lucy Peppiatt, in her treatment of gender in Pauline texts, also points out that the imagery of head and body was familiar during this period.⁴³ She explains that Paul used what was already at hand and repurposed it. As she considers various possible interpretations of the word *head*, she concludes that Paul is not laying out a hierarchy in church or marriage but is instead pointing to the complexities of the reality of divine-human communion. Peppiatt notes that the head and the body are of the same substance. Because God is the head of Christ, but Christ is also God, we can draw a conclusion that the reference to headship is not intended to inaugurate a system of ranking status in church or family. There is no subordination in the Trinity. Peppiatt reminds us that if hierarchy was what was intended, Paul would more likely have used the already accepted imagery of master and slave rather than the analogy of members in a body.

Peppiatt concludes that Paul is calling out the Corinthian corruption of his teaching and further qualifying his message by

⁴³Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 58.

adding to it language of the body: “Through the metaphor of the physical body, Paul exhorts the congregation to elevate respect, love, interdependence, and care for one another over charismatic gifts or ‘roles.’”⁴⁴ Peppiatt reads those who are vulnerable not as passive recipients of the activity of the gifted but as those whom God honors, thereby affecting an inversion of the social order. She explains that “Paul claims that those who are more ‘important’ must devote themselves to honoring the dishonorable parts in the knowledge that those members are given the highest honor by God himself.”⁴⁵ Peppiatt presents three conclusions: we must be aware of what Paul is not saying, we must take into account the rest of the letter (including Paul’s emphasis on the all-encompassing nature of God), and we must recognize the references to head and body as flipping a hierarchy used to oppress.

While Hays expands the focus of spiritual giftedness to include social status and Peppiatt expands its breadth to encompass gender, neither explicitly includes disability in Paul’s metaphorical framework. However, they lay the groundwork for this move, a move we will make explicit. Hayes, Peppiatt, and Mare each carefully exegete 1 Corinthians 12. Taken together, a picture of a church that includes different ages, genders, socioeconomic groups, and a multitude of spiritual gifts can be visualized and hoped for.

Hays and Mare both focus on the division in the church in Corinth as relating to a supposed hierarchy in the world of spiritual gifts. They suggest that the dissension in the group is coming from the exercise of spiritual gifts as capacities or spectacular actions. Both maintain manifestations of spiritual gifts are the overarching topic of the chapter. If we were to conclude having read only these commentaries, we could easily interpret Paul’s reference

⁴⁴Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women*, 137.

⁴⁵Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women*, 138.

to those who are weaker and unrepresentable as those on the bottom of hierarchies based on gender, class, or spiritual giftings.

There is likely truth to these interpretations of Paul's concerns. Yet I, Andrea, also believe that they have missed the mark on pointing out who, in a church context, might be implied in the words *weaker*, *less honorable*, and *unrepresentable*, especially in the time of Paul writing this letter to Corinth. There is no mention, in any of the commentators' writings, of people with disabilities.

Disability as diversity. We can draw conclusions about how people with disabilities were treated in the first century through the numerous verses where interactions with, and discussions of, people with disabilities occur in the New Testament. The story of the man born blind in John 9 contains much more than just the lesson that he was not blind because of sin. It shows that he was an outcast relegated to begging for money. It shows that, despite identifying himself as the blind man that used to beg but could now see, people in leadership looked to someone else to confirm his words. His parents were called on to confirm his story. This is an example of infantilizing an adult capable of speaking for himself.

In Luke 14, Jesus tells a man inviting others to a banquet not to invite those he knows will repay him. Instead, the man should make it a habit to "invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. And you will be blessed because they can't repay you" (Luke 14:13-14). As we contrast the list of guests people desire to invite and the list of guests Jesus tells them to invite, it is obvious that the group that includes those with disabilities was considered weaker, less honorable, and unrepresentable. They weren't being invited to the table then and in most instances aren't being invited to the table now.

In Mark 2, we find Jesus in Capernaum, where friends of a man with a disability were so desperate to get him to Jesus to be healed that they made a hole in a roof and lowered him on a mat to Jesus.

Jesus doesn't begin by focusing on the man's perceived need but on the man's true need, the need he shared with all humanity. Jesus doesn't approach a disabled person at an altar to immediately begin prayers for physical healing. Instead, he sees him for who he is, recognizes what his deepest needs are, and tells him that his sins are forgiven. A rabbi known for his ability to heal initially leaves out words of physical healing. The disabled man is not healed in order to become a part of the body of believers. Instead, he is made a part of the body through forgiveness, only to have it followed with physical healing.

In Matthew 8:28 Jesus arrives by boat to the region of the Gadarenes to an immediate confrontation with two men who are demon-possessed. These men live in burial caves—a cemetery, in graves already occupied, if you will. People were afraid because of the men's violence. This scene invites us to imagine a modern-day scenario in which people who are homeless and mentally ill show up at the doors of churches but are not treated as Jesus would treat them: stopping to listen to them. I can imagine many scenarios in which the men would be rejected and sent away, much as Jesus was asked to leave the region after healing the men whom the people had rejected. We are not suggesting that all mental illness is related to demonic possession but are simply noting how Jesus related to people on the fringes of society. When Jesus welcomed people into his work and community whom others avoided, the resultant diversity was not often received with celebration.

Over and over, Jesus invites, touches, sits with, heals, and welcomes the weaker, less honorable, and unpresentable members as he welcomes people with disabilities. Yet commentaries on Paul's description of the one body with many parts, even when they suggest who this diversity of members might include, fail to venture into the exploration that people with disabilities are a

necessary part of the body. Rather, people with disabilities are still most often pictured as broken or passive recipients of healing and charity. Our contention is that people with disabilities are as important and vital to experiencing a complete picture of Christ as are male and female, slave and free, Greek and Jew. To this great invocation of the body we would add: abled and disabled.

In his work on liberation and reconciliation, *A Theology of Race and Place*, Andrew also visits the passage from 1 Corinthians 12. He tells us, “According to Pauline somatic ecclesiology, the church is present inasmuch as there is a diversity of ethnic and socio-economic groups functioning together in a whole and healthy bodily unity as they are joined to their head, the Jewish Lord.”⁴⁶ He claims that the passage does not foremost point out the idea of a group of people with different spiritual gifts joining together, but rather that those with static identities are together striving to intermingle those identities within the body.

Andrew goes on to tell us that it is necessary for this diversity of members to be together physically in a local space, an idea that none of the previous theologians explicitly focuses on in their work, and an idea that Mare’s analysis contradicts. A group of similar body parts, or a community in which one part of the body is trying to manipulate another, means the body is not present there.

Utilizing Pauline language, it should be clear that a group of “feet,” a collection of “hands,” an assembly of “ears,” or a gathering of “eyes” does not constitute a body. These grotesqueries instead constitute a dismembered corpse. A living and healthy body must share space and must include variegated body parts; it is of necessity a scandal to all the pseudo-theological evaluations of whiteness, including the oppositional logic of the identity politics that whiteness

⁴⁶Andrew T. Draper, *A Theology of Race and Place: Liberation and Reconciliation in the Works of Jennings and Carter* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 281.

instigated. Neither assimilation nor separatism, even if the separatism is posed within a framework of imaginary unity or equality, amounts to a proper ecclesiology.⁴⁷

Andrew recognizes that for the church to be one body with many parts, it must not be homogeneous in each separate local body, but instead, congregations must be diverse. His writing, however, stops short of recognizing that diversity also needs to include disability. Much like the opening story of Andrew missing some things in his interaction with Jody, his early writing missed the full implications of what Paul's body language means for disability in the church. This shows that embodying the diversity of life in the Spirit is a continual journey.

In so many theologians' exegesis of 1 Corinthians, disability goes unmentioned. The exclusion of a whole group of people, by this interpretation of 1 Corinthians, would seem to mean that the church still does not think in terms of a whole body, but rather maintains the vision of a dismembered corpse. In all of these commentaries, there is one missing group of people—a people who, by definition, should be given special honor.

Jesus tells us whom to invite to the table, but our church tables don't often reflect this diversity. Our tables are not often inclusive of people whose bodies are not healed as we think they should be, who engage in stimming habits that others may find loud and distracting,⁴⁸ or who experience the world and social interactions in a nonnormative fashion. When people with disabilities are unable to access community life, are excluded from worship, or are sent to separate Sunday school classes, the church is not living as one body with many parts. In these moments, we resemble a

⁴⁷Draper, *Theology of Race and Place*, 283.

⁴⁸Making certain repetitive movements or sounds that aid in dealing with external stimuli.

dismembered body, a body that has amputated the parts it is ashamed of or is uncertain what to do with.

If we are to be one body with many parts, recognizing the weaker parts as indispensable, bestowing greater honor on the parts that are less honorable, and treating the unpresentable parts with modesty—because this represents the body of Christ—we should look around our own church body and see bodies that are broken. And we should look around our boards, leadership teams, groups of those making decisions, and those in seats of honor, and find people with disabilities.

ANTI-ABLEIST LEADERSHIP

To view and embrace people with disabilities as leaders, the church needs to evaluate and challenge its perceptions of leadership. As people with disabilities lead the body of Christ, the church will grow into a healthier vision of leading in the way of Jesus. As we learn from people with disabilities, the church will learn a more holistic vision of justice and reconciliation, one that resists various objectifying ways of viewing others, including ableism. Toward this end, I, Jody, will explore insights from four respected and diverse authors, three of whom have disabilities (Joni Eareckson Tada, Nancy Eiesland, and Judy Heumann), and one who has a family member with a disability (Amos Yong). Due to time constraints and some of the realities of my cerebral palsy, Andrew and I have collaborated on this section, which means that the voice may vary a bit from other sections I have authored. However, my insights provide the key interpretive frameworks through which we are considering each of these authors.

Paving the way: Joni and Friends. Joni Eareckson Tada has been involved in disability ministry for over forty years, having been paralyzed from the shoulders down as a result of a diving

accident at the age of seventeen. Since 1979, the mission of her ministry, Joni and Friends, has been “to glorify God as we communicate the Gospel and mobilize the global church to evangelize, disciple, and serve people living with disability.”⁴⁹ An evangelical Christian, Tada has helped the church to build bridges with the disability community and to include people with disabilities in the body of Christ. While the mission of Joni and Friends tends to position people with disabilities as recipients more so than agents, the organization does aim to build the leadership skills of people with disabilities as they serve the church.

Through her writing and speaking ministries, Tada has given the church a bigger picture of how God works, including reminding us that God doesn’t always heal. Tada focuses on God using suffering for God’s purposes, interpreting disability primarily in this light. By interpreting disability through the lens of suffering, Tada’s theological framework tends to be narrowed to the doctrines of fall and redemption more so than creation. In other words, she tends to see disability as something to be endured or suffered through more so than a constitutive and graced part of a person’s identity. When the doctrine of new creation (eschatology) is employed in her work, it tends to function as offering a release from disability rather than a fulfillment of the created particularity of bodies.⁵⁰ Additionally, her view of providence leads her to believe that God has a reason for all suffering. This conception of sovereignty commits her to explaining suffering in a deterministic fashion and locating disability as a subset of this category.

The work of Joni Eareckson Tada has greatly increased the church’s awareness of the need to include people with disabilities

⁴⁹Joni and Friends, “What We Do,” www.joniandfriends.org/about/what-we-do/.

⁵⁰Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven: Your Real Home . . . from a Higher Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

within the body of Christ. While we suggest that there are problematic limitations associated with viewing disability primarily through the lens of suffering, we recognize that suffering has been a large part of Tada's experience and that God has worked in her and through her in relation to her experience. In addition to being paralyzed from the shoulders down, Tada, who is now in her seventies, has dealt with debilitating chronic pain that began in her mid-fifties. She explains that this pain has often left her crying in the middle of the night. She has also faced breast cancer and narrowly survived Covid-19.⁵¹ Tada takes comfort in God's presence in her pain, asserting that God allows suffering for "very specific, very important reasons."⁵² Tada testifies that God uses her suffering and her injury to make her more like Jesus.

Alongside Joni, we affirm that God does not always heal and that healing does not always conform to our expectations. Just as our Lord had a different plan for John than for Peter and just as Peter was not to concern himself with it, the Lord meets each of us in particular ways. For instance, although there are specific challenges associated with my cerebral palsy, my disability is not a source of chronic pain. Whereas my disability is congenital, Tada's disability was brought on at a later point in life. Alongside Tada, we affirm that disabilities can bring awareness of our dependence on God and can focus us to trust in God. Disabilities can produce an intimacy with God in specific ways that able-bodied people may not experience.

Tada teaches the importance of submission to God's sovereignty and the ways in which God uses all things for God's glory. In the

⁵¹See her update after recovering from Covid-19: "Finding Strength in COVID," January 28, 2021, www.joniandfriends.org/finding-strength-in-covid, and her reflection on the increased dangers of the pandemic for disabled people: "COVID Dangers for the Disabled," March 26, 2021, www.joniandfriends.org/covid-dangers-for-the-disabled.

⁵²Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 70.

next section, we will point to some of the difficulties associated with collapsing disability into categories of pain and suffering. However, we affirm that Tada's focus on God's providence has encouraged the church to more fully accept people with disabilities and appreciate what they bring to the body of Christ.

Liberation: Nancy Eiesland. Nancy Eiesland was a liberation theologian who was born with a congenital bone defect in her hips. In her book *The Disabled God* she challenges the church to view people with disabilities as ordinary people who live life in unconventional ways. Rather than focusing on the limitations of people with disabilities as the primary cause of their pain, she focuses on the societal stigmas and marginalization associated with the social construction of disability.⁵³ She utilizes a minority group model of disability and insights gained from the civil rights struggle to work for political liberation and equal access.⁵⁴ Eiesland presents a contextualized Christology of Jesus as the disabled God and incorporates eucharistic language to bind disabled and non-disabled people together in a new body politic.⁵⁵ She describes the church as a “communion of struggle” that works against exclusivity, segregation, and isolation.⁵⁶ By viewing disability as diversity, Eiesland is able to name the struggle endured by people with disabilities as they “seek their place in the decision-making processes of the church and make their nonconventional bodies models for ritual practice.”⁵⁷

Eiesland recognizes that focusing on God's supposed unique purposes for disability can serve to separate people with

⁵³Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 23-25.

⁵⁴Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 53-68.

⁵⁵Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 98-108.

⁵⁶Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 108-9.

⁵⁷Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 109.

disabilities from others. Rather than assigning special providential meaning to disability, Eiesland sees more value in focusing on the cruciform humanity of all people, particularly exhibited in people with disabilities. In other words, she reads the limitations of humanity back on to the body of Jesus more so than reading a decontextualized ideal of divinity down onto the person of Jesus. Hers is a Christology from below.

Eiesland also points out that focusing mainly on disability through the lens of suffering places pressure on people with disabilities to accept injustice. Instead, it is more helpful to focus on the resurrected Jesus who displays his wounds and scars.⁵⁸ This provides empowerment to people with disabilities by encouraging us and others to view our bodies and our beings as grace and gift more so than as crosses to bear. While retaining the marks of his calling, the resurrected body of Jesus was not a liability but a force to be reckoned with. Jesus was exactly who God wanted him to be, including within the limitations of his humanity. This does not mean that Eiesland denies the reality of the particular suffering associated with particular callings. At the age of thirteen and after eleven operations, Eiesland accepted that pain would be a part of her life. Rather, it means that Eiesland joins a trajectory that locates suffering within the revelation of God's own being.⁵⁹

Eiesland's liberative theology of disability draws from the experiences of the disability community as a lens through which to read the biblical text. Whereas Tada does not explicitly explore insights from the disability rights movement (despite her involvement in it), Eiesland tends to foreground liberation and experience over against tradition and revelation. Tada strives to conform her experience of disability to a biblical theology of suffering; Eiesland

⁵⁸Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 98-100.

⁵⁹Cf. Jürgen Moltmann and the Lutheran tradition in which Eiesland ministered.

tends to underemphasize that which does not conform to a sociological model of liberation. If Eiesland's is a Christology from below, Tada's is a Christology from above. Taken alone, neither leads the church to a full-orbed experience of the diversity and mutuality of Christ's body. We are deeply indebted to the works of both Tada and Eiesland. Both have brought disability to the attention of the church. Their very different ways of framing disability have provided us with a spectrum within which to articulate our theology of disability.

Eiesland insightfully demonstrates the ways the biblical text has been used to conflate disability with sin, to extol suffering as virtue, and to encourage segregationist charity, but she does not thoroughly explore how liberative strands in the text and tradition can be read as undermining such ableist frameworks.⁶⁰ While we applaud her focus on experience and liberation, we look toward incorporating the perhaps surprising resources that the theological tradition and biblical text have to offer in disabling leadership.

We find Tada's work and Eiesland's work to be truncated in similar (and perhaps complementary) ways. If Tada interprets her experience of disability through the lenses of a biblical theology of suffering, Eiesland interprets the biblical text in light of experiences of sociopolitical liberation. That said, we recognize that none of us reads the text apart from our bodies and experiences. This is one of the reasons we need the complexity of the tradition and a contemporary diversity of interpretations, including theologies of suffering and theologies of liberation. We recognize that we live in a cultural moment in which the Western church must reckon with the exclusionary ways we have ordered our communal life. Toward that end, liberation theology is a welcome force.

⁶⁰Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 70-75.

Inclusion: Amos Yong. Amos Yong is a Pentecostal theologian who has written extensively about disability theology and who grew up with a brother with Down syndrome.⁶¹ His account of disability is more theologically robust than Tada's and is more conversant with the biblical text and the tradition than Eiesland's. Rather than describing disability solely in terms of suffering/providence or marginalization/liberation, he takes a systematic approach, investigating the broad corpus of Scripture and the wisdom of historic Christian doctrine to present a theology of disability that is both inclusive and liberating.

Yong investigates the Hebrew Bible to present the context of ritual purity codes, biblical stories about people with disabilities, and practices of lament at unjust suffering. He encourages us to think more broadly than a truncated reading of the Torah's explicit references to bodily impairments and instead to consider how the complexity of the biblical narrative is "suggestive for theological insights regarding disabilities."⁶² He pushes beyond the ableist interpretations that have animated some traditional exegetes of the text and some progressives who react against the text altogether.

Yong carries forward this interpretive framework as he engages with key New Testament texts. He demonstrates that the disciples' often faulty vision of people with disabilities was rooted in common interpretive pathways of the biblical text that were challenged by the life and ministry of Jesus. He spends special time with the subversive witness of the doctor Luke, both in the affirmation of people with disabilities in his gospel account and the inclusion of

⁶¹Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007); Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong, eds., *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

⁶²Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 46-47.

a diversity of dis/abilities in the Spirit-filled moment of Pentecost.⁶³ Next, he reads Saint Paul's inclusive ecclesiology according to a diversity framework similar to that which Andrea used in section two of this chapter.⁶⁴ Finally, he looks toward the new creation and what healing entails in light of the risen body of Jesus and the eschatological freedom to be who God has intended us to be.⁶⁵

Yong's theological methodology of paying careful attention to the text while interpreting it through a strong christological lens produces a nuanced vision of disability. By carefully considering what it means to be human in reference to Jesus (and what it means to be part of his body through reference to the church), Yong does not fall into the traps of presenting disability solely as either a liability to be endured or a social construction to be resisted. He considers the manifold wisdom of God in the variegated diversity of human bodily experiences and gestures toward their mutual enfolding in the life of God both now and in eternity. Rather than saying too much about the meaning of disability, he attempts to respond as a Christian to the diverse givenness of bodies.

On one point we would offer a caution: in order to contextualize the ritual purity codes of the Hebrew sacrificial system, Yong mentions a history of interpretation that differentiates between disease and disability in priestly duties.⁶⁶ He carefully avoids this differentiation by recognizing that it "may not be possible to maintain the distinction between disease and disability."⁶⁷ At the same time, he labors to explain how certain diseases may lead to certain disabilities and vice versa. I, Jody, would like to caution us not to spend too much time trying to distinguish between disease and

⁶³Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 79-80.

⁶⁴Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, chap. 4.

⁶⁵Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, chap. 5.

⁶⁶Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 18-29.

⁶⁷Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 22.

disability but rather to simply recognize that people with diseases are included in the disability community. *Disability* is not a static label, a clear marker, or a community with permanent bounds. People may move in or out of the disability community depending on a variety of factors related to aging, injury, genetics, and medical care.

In my view, Eiesland falls into a similar problem as she makes distinctions between people with cognitive disabilities and people with other disabilities. By working to differentiate the experiences had by different people in the disability community, she seems to harden categories of disability in unnecessary ways. While there is certainly room for recognizing particular challenges faced by particular people, we would like to offer a reminder that a theology of disability is easily applicable to many different people with many different experiences. Just as we are laboring to disable leadership as a category defined by abilities and capacities, so we hope to disable a conception of disability that differentiates disabled people by abilities and capacities (e.g., high functioning vs. low functioning, etc.). In our view, a robust theology of disability leads us to recognize the ways in which all of our limitations are brought into the life of God through the body of Jesus Christ and the community that makes up his presence in the world.

On this, we agree with Yong. He believes in having a loose definition of disability to make room for the mystery of God's actions in the world. Rather than building a cataphatic theology of disability, he offers an apophatic theology of disability.⁶⁸ In other words, rather than saying too much about what disability is and exactly how we should categorize it (a very modern

⁶⁸Cataphatic theology involves building similarities between humanity and divinity by making "positive" or constructive statements about the divine; apophatic theology involves recognizing the dissimilarity between humanity and divinity by making "negative" statements that describe the limitations of human knowledge and preserve divine mystery.

preoccupation), he offers guidelines about how we should *not* think about disability to make room for receiving the given particularity of particular human beings. Thereby, he encourages us to respond to the particular grace of the humans to whom we are relating rather than to a generalized conception of a specific category of human.

In this manner, Yong's account remains thoroughly theological. In an article on disability and suffering, Yong talks about the early church's debate about the humanity and divinity of Jesus.⁶⁹ He explains that, at Chalcedon, the church prescribed "four fences" for thinking about the nature of Christ. These fences were ways in which the two natures of Christ should *not* be thought about (as opposed to attempting to overexplain how the divinity and humanity of Christ relate in one person).⁷⁰

In this sense, orthodoxy should not be read so much as an exhaustive description of Christian doctrine but as a tradition of signposts directing us away from the overly systematized and individualistic ways of explaining God known as heresy. Orthodoxy protects the mystery of God from overspeculation and guides us away from an unhealthy obsession with controlling the conversation about the Giver of life. Orthodoxy is less a foundation on which to build than a community to join and a pathway to travel. Since we derive our anthropological considerations about disability from our christological and ecclesiological considerations about the body of Jesus, it is appropriate to put a limit on what we say about disability in order to entrust the complexities of our being (individual and corporate) into the hands of God.

⁶⁹Amos Yong, "Disability and Suffering? Pastoral and Practical Theological Considerations," *Testamentum Imperium* 5 (2016), www.preciousheart.net/ti/2016/Yong_Disability_Suffering_Pastoral_Care.pdf.

⁷⁰According to the Nicene Creed, these are "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."

Yong offers us wise pastoral advice in his “four fences”:⁷¹

1. “God’s sovereignty does *not* mean God is the direct cause”;
2. “Though a fallen world, sins are *not* directly linked to disability”;
3. “All sickness is *not* derived from Satan or demons”;
4. “Pastoral agents should *not* resort to sovereignty, sin, or Satan as the first or foremost cause of any disability.”

As Yong concludes, “proper Christian pastoral care should *never* presume to provide any definitive theological explanations for disability.” In *Disabling Leadership*, we are less interested in defining either disability or leadership than we are in offering disability as a gift of grace for considering what it means to lead in the way of Jesus. When we move beyond essentialist categories, we are free to relate to people as simply human and to work for justice as a signpost of the disabled body of the risen Lord.

Justice: Judy Heumann. Judy Heumann is regarded as one of the founding leaders of the disability rights movement in the United States and is known for her international disability work. Even though Heumann’s work has not been centered primarily on faith communities, the church can gain much from her leadership experiences. From her early days of activism to her later leadership in government, Heumann has stressed the importance of people with disabilities being in positions of leadership whenever possible. She has devoted her life to this end, believing that when minorities are given power to make decisions, real long-lasting change occurs.⁷² We believe that this is equally important, if not more so, in the body of Christ. In presenting the life and legacy of Judy

⁷¹Yong, “Disability and Suffering?” 12-13. Emphasis original.

⁷²Sadly, as we were preparing to publish this book, we learned that Judy Heumann passed away on March 3, 2023.

Heumann, we hope to give a concrete example of being free to work for justice through accepting the given and graced reality of our bodies.

I, Jody, recall a pastor in our church watching the movie *Hidden Figures* and talking about how, as a middle-aged African American woman, she was hurt that she had never been taught about Katherine Johnson.⁷³ I shared a similar feeling as I did not learn about Judy Heumann until after college (and didn't learn about the history of the disability rights movement until my early forties). Heumann was a trailblazer who paved the way for the inclusion of people with disabilities in many sectors of society and yet I had never been taught about her. However, as the chairperson of the Indiana Governor's Council for People with Disabilities, I had the opportunity to hear her speak.

In her book *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist*, Heumann, who recently passed away at the age of seventy-five, shares what it was like to have to fight just to receive an education, just to work, and just to "be human."⁷⁴ Heumann used a wheelchair most of her life after having polio when she was eighteen months old. Her local public school initially refused to allow her to attend, calling her a fire hazard. Heumann's mother had to fight time and again just for her to be included in the educational system. Heumann graduated from college with a degree in speech therapy but, in 1970, was denied her New York teacher's license because she couldn't walk. Again, she was described as a fire hazard. Heumann took the Board of Education to court and won. Yet at that time even the American Civil Liberties Union would not help with her case because they said it was not a civil rights issue.

⁷³A Black female mathematician who calculated flight trajectories for NASA in 1961.

⁷⁴Judith Heumann, *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* (Boston: Beacon, 2020).

Heumann found it necessary to draw parallels between the civil rights movement and the disability rights movement, the same parallels I found myself drawing with Pastor Andrew in 2015 when our church moved into our permanent building, explaining to him how we must join together to push against notions of separate but equal regarding accessibility. In the original 1964 Civil Rights Act, people with disabilities were not covered. In 1973, the US secretary of health refused to sign regulations enforcing section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the section that stated that “no otherwise qualified individual” could be denied participation in federally funded programs “solely by reason of his or her disability.”

Understanding that disability rights were not yet seen as civil rights, Heumann led the 504 Sit-in at the San Francisco Office of the US Department of Health, protesting for twenty-six days alongside more than 150 people with all kinds of disabilities, refusing to leave until section 504 was signed. They were successful and, to this date, it remains the longest sit-in at a federal building. Heumann’s actions are the reason children from all over the country with all kinds of disabilities can now receive a “504 plan” in their schools to ensure appropriate educational access and accommodations.

While this sit-in was led by people with disabilities, it was organized alongside other groups who had interests in civil rights. While people with disabilities led it, people of many different abilities were involved. Carrying forward this experience, Heumann stresses how important it is for people with disabilities to be the driving force for advocacy around disability issues in particular and to be in leadership positions in general. She explains that disability groups wrote the regulations that enforced section 504, which had become law without the ramifications being considered. When it came time to enact the legislation, the government tried to water it down to avoid having to make federal buildings and

programs accessible. But disability groups demonstrated the ways in which this would continue the segregationist practices of separate but equal.

The regulations written by disability groups for section 504 became the building blocks for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. In the 1980s, as language was being written for the ADA, it was not easy for people with disabilities to travel around or to meet with one another. Justin Dart, a wealthy friend of the Bush family who had gotten polio, used his own money to travel the United States to hear from people with disabilities as they crafted the ADA. While the final form of the ADA was a little watered-down due to an organized anti-ADA response, it remains the most significant piece of legislation aimed at equal access for people with disabilities.

During Clinton's presidency, Heumann became the assistant secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services at the US Department of Education. She made a point of hiring people with disabilities to be on her staff because they were working on special education law. While she oversaw a \$10 billion budget and four hundred people, she explains that the hardest part was simply getting around Washington, DC, and finding good personal assistants. I, Jody, while serving in various positions of leadership, have also found that accessibility in everyday life is often what is most stressful. Opening up spaces to equal access so that people with disabilities can share in what it means to simply "be human" is often the biggest challenge.

For instance, for me to get to church on a Sunday morning involves quite a few complex steps. I need a reliable personal assistant who can come early in the morning to help me bathe, get dressed, and get breakfast. Public transportation does not run on Sundays in our town, so I need to be ready early to wait for the volunteer-driven accessible church bus to arrive on its route. I then spend

quite a bit of time on the bus as we pick up others for worship. When arriving, we are each lowered on the bus lift and then must wait in line for the one-person elevator to be available. If any of these steps are interrupted for any reason (my attendant is sick or unavailable; budget cuts or staffing shortages are affecting home health care; the church bus is having mechanical problems; the church is low on volunteer drivers; there is rain, ice, or snow; etc.), the whole process falls apart.

Our backup plan is to use a local ambulance service, but it costs \$20 round trip, which is a weekly expense I cannot afford (although the church has budgeted for a limited number of passes to be available that I disperse when needed). When Andrew, Andrea, and I are invited to speak at or attend a conference, for me to be included means that my personal assistant must be available to travel with me, another person must be able to drive an accessible vehicle, the lodging must be accessible, and the cost cannot be prohibitive. Often these barriers to inclusion are too many to be overcome. In those instances, I am thankful when Zoom or livestream is available. However, I still miss many important aspects of Christian community because I am often prevented from joining physically.

Accessibility does not benefit just me. It enables the church and society to have a fuller perspective and a broader diversity of people at the table. In the church, people with disabilities lead us toward a fuller experience of Christ's body. If the church is truly the church only because we exist for the sake of the world, then it is imperative that people with disabilities be included in leadership.

CONCLUSION

We have claimed that disability disables leadership by pointing us toward leading in the way of Jesus. We have described the body

language of 1 Corinthians 12 as directing us toward the importance of including the most vulnerable members in the body of Christ and including people with a diversity of abilities in leadership. We have given signposts for a holistic theology of disability and have suggested ways in which disability justice is gospel work. We now turn to the importance of learning from people with disabilities as we make our way to the practical considerations of a theology of disability and leading.

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