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Disability and the Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecost and the Renewal of the Church*

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Abstract

The interface between the disability rights movement and renewal Christianity has been one of missed opportunities in part because of the centrality of healing in renewal Christian circles. This essay delineates the challenges that occur at this intersection and charts the way toward a renewal theology of disability in dialogue with J. Rodman Williams, one of the leading theologians of the charismatic and neo-Pentecostal movements. Central to such an endeavor is the articulation of an inclusive ecclesiology derived from the Pauline metaphor of the body of Christ animated by the Spirit's diverse giftings amidst and through the church's many members.

Keywords

charisms, spiritual gifts/gifts of the Spirit, theology and disability, renewal theology

Introduction

Renewal Christianity is well known for its emphasis on divine healing.¹ This strength is arguably its weakness when dealing with disability in general and people with disabilities in particular. In this essay, we explore the challenges

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¹ I use the term 'renewal Christianity' and its cognates to refer to the broad spectrum of churches and traditions derived from classical Pentecostal (and neo-Pentecostal), charismatic

and opportunities lying at the intersection of renewal Christianity and disability, and do so in five steps: i) an overview of the (missed?!) encounter between the contemporary church and disability; ii) an explication of the further challenges such an encounter poses for renewal Christianity; iii) an exposition of the renewal ecclesiology of J. Rodman Williams as an instance of the challenges confronting the encounter but also to provide resources for constructing a more disability-friendly renewal theology; iv) a re-reading of St. Paul's charismatic ecclesiology that brings Williams' renewal theology into dialogue with disability perspectives; and v) a sketch of what a disability-inclusive and renewal theology of the church might look like. The thesis I will be suggesting throughout is that people with disabilities are neither incidental to nor merely to be tolerated by renewal Christianity but instead belong at the heart and center—essentially, constitutively, intrinsically, and inherently—of the Spirit-filled Church and the renewal movement.

The Church & Disability: Challenges & Opportunities

In many ways, renewal churches do no better or worse in response to disability than other churches in general. Yet Christians across the spectrum should be concerned because there is a perception among people with disabilities that the church is not particularly welcoming to them. What might be the causes behind such perceptions?² First and foremost are un-interrogated theological assumptions linking sin, the lack of faith, and disability, and about healing and curing of disability—all of which combine to undergird the biases, fears, and stigmatizations inhibiting the formation of a more disability-welcoming church. While we will return to unpack these issues momentarily (in the next section), it is also important to mention here the extensive history of the church's charitable services to people with disabilities that have more often than not perpetuated paternalistic attitudes and practices toward such groups of people. As a result, the 'disabled' are seen first and foremost not as people created in the image of God but as 'problems' to be resolved or 'burdens' to be

(and neo-charismatic), and related movements. Elsewhere, I have called this 'pentecostalism' (uncapitalized)—e.g., Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 18–22—and 'renewal' functions synonymously with that usage in this article.

² Here I scratch the surface of a response; for a more complete discussion, see Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), ch. 2 and *passim*.

borne. Unsurprisingly, many people with disabilities shaped by the disability-rights movement have resisted such stereotypes of themselves.³

In addition to these historic tendencies are specifically contemporary challenges. Insofar as the employment provisions of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was enacted in 1990, do not require religious organizations to exempt potential hires or employees from subscribing or conforming to their tenets of faith, to that same degree the criteria for discrimination functions first at the religious rather than at the disability level. This exemption reflects a long-standing history of the separation of church and state in the U.S.A.: on the one hand, there is no state-church that can dictate the course of government, but on the other hand, there are also safeguards against governmental interference with the practice of religion. Hence the exemption-clause in the ADA preserves the rights of religious organizations to hire people with similar religious beliefs. Simultaneously, however, this fundamental religious right also functions in the church to inhibit the imperative thrust of the ADA, which is to accommodate and include all people with disabilities in the public sphere.

Compared to the wider population, of which in 2007, ‘an estimated 12.8 percent ... of non-institutionalized, men and women, aged 21 to 64 years, all races, regardless of ethnicity, with all education levels in the United States reported a disability’,⁴ the percentage of people with disability in American churches at least seems to be considerably lower. There may be various reasons for this, including that some disabilities are hidden and people tend not to publicize such to their pastors or church friends, or that some people with disabilities may be active members of their congregations in ways other than showing up regularly for worship, or that people with disabilities just tend to be less religious in general than the wider population. Regardless, clergy and other ecclesial leaders have often been quick to conclude that there are simply not that many physically disabled people in the community they serve. But perhaps the low numbers of such people in Sunday morning services and other ecclesial events is less a sign that there are few of them in the community and more an indication that such people feel unwelcomed in their local churches.

³ See Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

⁴ M.J. Bjelland, W.A. Erickson, and C.G. Lee, *Disability Statistics from the American Community Survey (ACS)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics, 2008). [Last accessed 15 July 2009 from www.disabilitystatistics.org.]

How has the church communicated this, however inadvertently, to the wider public? For people with physical disabilities, the answer to this may be strikingly straightforward: church buildings that do not have externally visible accessible ramps are uninviting, or if, once inside the building and there are multiple floors or levels but neither ramps nor elevators for worshipers to access the multiple levels, this again broadcasts to people in wheelchairs, ‘You are not welcome here’. For people with sensory disabilities like blindness or deafness, few congregations have either Braille hymnals or sign-language interpreters available during the liturgy. Some ecclesiarchs might argue: If we had blind or deaf people in our church, we’d provide the necessary services, or if we had people in wheelchairs in our congregation, we’d build ramps or elevators. But on the other side it could just as well also be said: because of the inaccessibility of our buildings and our events, we have already sent a signal to people with disabilities that they are a burden who needs to be accommodated rather than a potentially integral part of the church community.

But even if we were able to get people with disabilities into our churches, we are not often good at engaging with them, retaining their involvement, and revising our self-understanding and practices so they become constitutive members of our parishes and churches.⁵ All too often, people with disabilities are not seen as viable contributors to church life, without much to add. There is the massive historical weight of considering people with disabilities as no more than objects of charity—little more than passive recipients of assistance or aid from able-bodied folk—which requires drastic revision before they can be seen as having their own form of agency.

For these and many other reasons, people with disabilities think that they are not welcomed in the church. To be fair, the church has made major adjustments in order to be more inclusive of people with disabilities.⁶ However much needs to be done, and this is particularly the case among renewal churches.

Charismatic Healing & the Church: Disability Perspectives

As already noted, on many registers, renewal churches fare no better or worse in their response to disability when compared to other churches. Yet there are

⁵ Here I extend the point of Marta Russell’s book—*Beyond Ramps: Disability at the End of the Social Contract, A Warning from an Uppity Crip* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998)—to ecclesial life.

⁶ E.g., Arne Fritzson and Samuel Kabue, *Interpreting Disability: A Church of All and For All* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004).

charismatic practices that exacerbate the problem in the renewal context: those focused on divine healing. People with disabilities feel even more marginalized in renewal circles because the healing emphasis highlights the deviancy of their condition from what is considered theologically normative.

It is very difficult to get around this issue because of the centrality of healing in the renewal imagination.⁷ Seeking a restoration of apostolic Christianity, renewal Christians are insistent that the healings seen in the ministry of Jesus and in the lives of his earliest followers should be evident in the church today. There is therefore the expectancy that people will be healed as a matter of course. This means the sick are regularly prayed for—in fact, there are church services devoted specifically to prayer for the sick—and the testimonies of those who claim to have received healing in response to prayer are widely publicized, even more so today via electronic media. And people have been perennially drawn to the renewal movement—both historically in North America but now across the global south – because they or someone they know have been prayed for and received healing in a renewal service or related or similar event.

The problem for people with disabilities is not necessarily the emphasis on healing as much as it may be on what happens when people are prayed for and not healed.⁸ Renewal Christians have adapted a hodge-podge of other Christian beliefs to ‘explain’ why people are not healed, many of which subtly (or not!) communicates negative messages to people with disabilities. Some, following the early faith healing teachings of E.W. Kenyon, think that people are not healed because of a lack of faith. Others, following a line of thinking prevalent among practitioners and advocates of the divine healing movement during the 1950s and 1960s (especially), believe that the presence of sin hinders the healing power of God. Still others might go further and link the persistence of sickness, illness, or disability to occultic forces, whether witchcraft (for renewal movements in the global south) or through influence traceable to the afflicted person’s present relationships or ancestral line.⁹

⁷ For some historical perspective, see Nancy Hardesty, *Faith Cure: Divine Healing in the Holiness and Pentecostal Movements* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

⁸ I gather accounts of the negative experiences people with disabilities have had with charismatic healing in my *Theology and Down Syndrome*, pp. 242–43.

⁹ See D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), ch. 9; C. Peter Wagner, *How to Have a Healing Ministry in Any Church: A Comprehensive Guide* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1998), p. 110; and Opoku Onyinah, ‘Contemporary “Witchdemonology” in Africa’, *International Review of Mission* 93.370–71 (2004), pp. 330–45.

Of course, many renewal Christians, especially its scholars, have been calling for a reconsideration of theology of healing because they see other responses are needed in cases where healing does not occur and people are disappointed.¹⁰ Proposals have ranged from rethinking the role that sickness plays in the divine scheme of things amidst a fallen world to recommending a theology of suffering and understandings of healing in eschatological terms. These are helpful but much of this work does not acknowledge the distinction between sickness/illness and disability. In cases where such a distinction pertains, its neglect perpetuates the notion that people with disabilities remain characterized by their condition, their need, and their lack (of some ability, some capacity, or just of health) rather than by their personhood, agency, or potential. Further, the theologies of suffering inevitably present suffering as either a personal or individual experience and do not interrogate the social conventions that lead to the internalization of such feelings and that result in the marginalizing of the ‘disabled’. Disability or sickness remains understood primarily in biological, medical, and individualized terms to the almost complete neglect of the socially formed and constructed attitudes that exclude people with disabilities.

For example, take the case of people with Down syndrome. Yes, oftentimes, people with Down syndrome are also sick—they come down with the flu just like every one else, or they have complications with their internal organs that are life threatening. However, the trisomic condition in and of itself and the phenotype are not problems per se; they only become problems when society fails to see beyond the condition and thereby fails to recognize the human person in the image of God. In renewal circles, they are a problem when people with Down syndrome are prayed for to be healed of their chromosomal aberration. But how can we make sense of a person being healed of his or her trisomic mutation? In cases like these, the ‘syndrome’ is constitutive of such people, and to remove the syndrome is to fundamentally change, and even eliminate the person.¹¹ Similarly, a double amputee in a wheelchair is disabled, but neither sick nor in need of a cure. What such a person needs to get

¹⁰ E.g., Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and Theology of Mission* (ed. Amos Yong; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), ch. 12; Martin W. Mittelstadt, *The Spirit and Suffering in Luke-Acts: Implications for Pentecostal Pneumatology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004); and William W. Menzies, ‘Reflections on Suffering: A Pentecostal Perspective,’ in Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies (eds.), *The Spirit and Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Russell P. Spittler* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), pp. 141–49.

¹¹ As Stanley Hauerwas puts it with regard to people with congenital intellectual disabilities, ‘To eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject’—see Hauerwas, ‘Marginalizing the

around is not shoes (like the rest of us) but a set of prosthetics or a motorized chair, not regular cars (like the rest of us) but a modified vehicle, etc. More importantly, such a person is neither pitiable nor merely a potential recipient of our charity, but oftentimes in renewal circles, the only thing we think we can do is to pray for his or her healing.

This fails to acknowledge, however, that the Bible itself, while replete with healing narratives, also preserves accounts of people who are accepted not because they were healed of their sickness or disabling condition, but in spite of such. Zaccheus, for example, was accepted and considered saved and whole not because he was healed of his dwarfism but because Jesus treated him as a human being in need of repentance and went to his house. Paul himself prayed, many scholars believe, for a healing of some sort for his body, but he was told, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor. 12.9, NRSV). In light of such passages, I suggest that renewal Christians need to reassess their theology of disability.¹² For initial steps toward that task, I suggest consulting the *Renewal Theology* of J. Rodman Williams.

Towards an Inclusive Charismatic Ecclesiology: J. R. Williams’ Renewal Theology

J. Rodman Williams (1918–2008) was a Reformed theologian who received his PhD in philosophy of religion and ethics at Columbia University in New York City. While teaching at Austin Presbyterian Seminary (from 1959–1972), he was caught up in the charismatic renewal movement beginning in

“Retarded”, in Flavian Dougherty (ed.), *The Deprived, the Disabled, and the Fullness of Life* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), pp. 67–105 (69). For this and other reasons, I distinguish between ‘healing’ and ‘curing’ in such cases—we can pray in some instances for the latter (e.g., for a person with Down syndrome to be cured of the flu) but otherwise, a healthy individual with trisomy 21 is no more in need of healing than a non-disabled person; see Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, esp. pp. 245–47.

¹² I am happy to note that other renewal scholars are also beginning to address this important topic—e.g., Martin W. Mittelstadt and Jeff Hittenberger, ‘Power and Powerlessness in Pentecostal Theology’, *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 30:1 (2008), pp. 137–45; Steven M. Fettke, ‘The Spirit of God Hovered Over the Waters: Creation, the Local Church, and the Mentally and Physically Challenged—A Call to Spirit-led Ministry’, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 17:2 (2008), pp. 170–82; and Christopher D. Rouse, ‘Scripture and the Disabled: Redeeming Mephibosheth’s Identity’, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 17:2 (2008), pp. 183–99.

1965.¹³ He went on to be the founding president of Melodyland School of Theology, and moved from there in 1982 to teach theology at Regent University School of Divinity in Virginia Beach. It was during his first years at Regent that he conceived and then completed his magnum opus, the three-volume *Renewal Theology*.¹⁴

The subtitle to Williams' major work, *Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective*, summarizes the scope and method of the *Renewal Theology*. Following the genre of systematic theologies in the evangelical Protestant tradition, the three volumes move from the loci of God, the world, and redemption (vol. 1) to salvation, the Holy Spirit, and Christian life (vol. 2), and the church and the last things (vol. 3). The 'charismatic perspective' is most palpably felt in volume 2, although it will also be noted in the other two volumes by the attentive reader. The strength of the work, however, lies in its careful attention to biblical themes which Williams focused on, almost at the expense of engaging more contemporary theological perspectives and sources.¹⁵

As Williams did not set out to address issues in disability theology, he should not be faulted for neglecting the topic. Before the turn of the century, disability insights, like other liberation theology perspectives, remained beyond the horizon for evangelical theology.¹⁶ Hence any comment about what Williams might have thought theologically about disability should be proffered tentatively. We can, however, observe what Williams wrote about the doctrines of providence and of suffering, and extrapolate from there how he might have considered disability.

¹³ For biographical overviews, see Stanley M. Burgess, 'J. Rodman Williams', in Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 307-20 (307-08), and C.M. Robeck, Jr., 'Williams, J. Rodman', in Stanley M. Burgess (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 1198.

¹⁴ The three volumes were initially published by Zondervan in 1988, 1990, and 1992 respectively. I rely mainly on J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 3 volumes-in-one ed., 1996). All references to this work will be made parenthetically in text as *RT* followed by volume and page number(s).

¹⁵ See Terry L. Cross, 'Toward a Theology of the Word and the Spirit: A Review of J. Rodman Williams's *Renewal Theology*', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 3 (1993), pp. 113-35 (118-21), and Frank D. Macchia, 'Revitalizing Theological Categories: A Classical Pentecostal Response to J. Rodman Williams's *Renewal Theology*', *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 16.2 (1994), pp. 293-304.

¹⁶ Theologians from evangelical backgrounds (besides myself) who have only recently begun to take up disability perspectives in their constructive work include Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).

As a Reformed theologian, of course, Williams upheld the doctrine of God's sovereignty over all creation. God preserves the world and accompanies its creatures in all that happens (*RT I*, pp. 117–25). Whence then derives evil, tragedy, pain, and suffering that humans experience? Williams suggests thinking about suffering within the following framework: that suffering is due to the kind of unfinished world that God has created which requires human effort and work; that suffering is also the result of sin and the Fall; and that suffering is part and parcel of the life of faith (*RT I*, pp. 127–33). Given these overarching considerations, suffering can also be considered to be the divinely appointed means of spiritual formation and growth designed to foster and deepen faith (*RT I*, pp. 134–37). More to the point, suffering allows for 'a deepening experience of knowing Christ, of being a blessing to others, and of preparation for the glory to come' (*RT I*, p. 138).

From a disability perspective, this fairly traditional evangelical theodicy is helpful in some respects, but not as much in others. The emphasis on God's sovereignty and accompaniment is important especially for comforting the afflicted. Further, there is at least an openness to thinking about the unfinished character of the world that we live in such that all human lives can also be considered to be in the process of formation. But while suffering can surely be a means of spiritual development in anticipation of the coming eschatological glory, disability perspectives would question the individualistic framing of such 'lessons' that need to be learned. There would also be caution against instrumentalizing disability as if people with them needed disabilities for reasons peculiar to their lives and those of their circle of family and friends. In short, there is a danger that people may be reduced to their disabilities and the spiritual functions such disabilities purportedly serve in the scheme of their lives instead of their being appreciated, valued, and esteemed as creatures made in God's image.

I suggest, however, that it is particularly Williams' charismatic theology that provides resources for rethinking a theology of disability, even if perhaps never explicitly considered by him in these ways. Three aspects of Williams' discussion of the work and gifts of the Spirit are especially noteworthy for our purposes. First, the gifts of the Spirit are manifest through human beings and therefore involve human agency. Williams is careful to emphasize the gifts are gracious endowments of the Spirit, not enhancements of natural abilities resident within human beings (*RT II*: 332). But this neither diminishes the human activity involved nor the fact that the distribution of the gifts may be better received by those 'who are positively prepared through study, practice, and experiences of many kinds' (*RT II*: 333).

Second, the community is highlighted in Williams' renewal charismology (theology of the charisms or charismatic or spiritual gifts). Here the emphasis follows the Pauline insistence that the gifts of the Spirit are directed toward the common good of the people of God (*RT* II: 335-36). The goal is the up-building and edification of the believing community rather than any elevation of gifted individuals.¹⁷ This means both that individuals are not to desire the gifts for self-centered reasons and that the manifestations of the gifts are altruistically directed. Thus Williams, following his biblical guide, St. Paul, connects theology of the charisms to theology of love, parallel to the discussion of the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 succeeded by a discussion of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Love, after all, is the matrix within which the gifts accomplish the uplifting and wholeness of the body.

Third, however, as the gifts are intended for the common good, they are distributed across the body such that '*each person has a distinctive role to fulfill*' (*RT* II: 336; emphasis Williams'). So even though the pastor, preacher, and prophet have important functions, these do not displace the contributions of each and every member of the congregation. This is exactly the point behind Paul's identification of the weaker or less honorable members (at least as deemed according to outward appearances) as being as even more honorable (than previously thought) and necessary for the health of the whole body (1 Cor. 12.22-25). Thus Williams is careful to caution that there are situations 'where some of the *charismata* of the Spirit may be disregarded or even unwelcomed' (*RT* II: 338). How much more important, then, that 'no gift of the Holy Spirit be denigrated, despised, suppressed, or set aside. All gifts have their proper and essential place in the full functioning of the body of Christ. Even if one gift, one member, is missing or not functioning, the body is sorely handicapped' (*RT* II: 339).

To my knowledge, this is one of the few places, if not the only place, in *Renewal Theology* that reference is made to 'handicap'. Even if the word is being used metaphorically rather than literally with reference to people with disabilities, I would like to suggest that the application for theology of disability is not only plausible theologically but also is exegetically implicit in St. Paul's discussion. In other words, I believe Williams' Pauline-inspired

¹⁷ Thus the manifestations of the charisms presuppose the ecclesial context, even its institutional dimension—this is one of the central theses of Paul Kariuki Njiru, *Charisms and the Holy Spirit's Activity in the Body of Christ: An Exegetical-Theological Study of 1 Corinthians 12,4-11 and Romans 12,6-8* (Tesi Gregoriana Serie Teologia 86; Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2002).

charismatic theology is directly applicable in helping us reconsider how renewal Christianity can be more inclusive of people with disabilities.

Rereading St. Paul on the Body and the Charisms: Williams & Disability Perspectives

In what follows I argue that Williams' charismology, supplemented by a disability hermeneutic, can help us re-read St. Paul toward a more disability-friendly and inclusive theology of the church (ecclesiology).¹⁸ There are three facets of this argument, particularly as retrieved from the *locus classicus* of Pauline charismology, the discussion of the gifts of the Spirit in the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12.

First, Williams' insight that even the most disregarded, despised, and denigrated members—the 'weaker' members, in Pauline idiom—are essential to the body of Christ invites a disability application. A disability hermeneutic would suggest that the Pauline references to bodily members that seem 'to be weaker' (ἀσθενέστερα, 1 Cor. 12.22) or 'less honorable' (ἀτιμότερα) or 'less respectable' (ἀσχήμονα, 1 Cor. 12.23) fit people with disabilities according to conventional stereotypes.¹⁹ And it is stereotypes that Paul is addressing, which is why he uses language like 'that seem to be weaker' or 'that we think less honorable' (δοκοῦντα and δοκοῦμεν respectively in 1 Cor. 12.22-23, emphasis added). In fact the root word for 'less respectable' (ἀσχήμων) could very well mean 'misshapen' or 'ugly'. While some scholars dismiss the idea that Paul might have been 'referring to members of the congregation who were perhaps crippled or deformed or who otherwise lacked the physical beauty associated with nobility',²⁰ my claim is that inclusion of people with disabilities in this context not only does not do violence to Paul's rhetoric but

¹⁸ For developments of a disability hermeneutic as applied to biblical studies, see Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (eds.), *This Aabled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Semeia Studies 55; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

¹⁹ Martin Abl says that 'Perhaps the closest ancient Greek parallel to the modern term "disability" is the word ἀσθενής ("weak") and its correlates'; see Abl, "'For Whenever I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong": Disability in Paul's Epistles', in Avalos, Melcher, and Schipper (eds.), *This Aabled Body*, 145-58.

²⁰ Timothy Carter's response to this suggestion is that 'there is nothing in the context of 1 Corinthians to suggest this meaning for the metaphor'; see Timothy L. Carter, 'Looking at the Metaphor of Christ's Body in 1 Corinthians 12', in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman* (Pauline Studies, 5; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), pp. 93-115 (quotation in text and here in footnote from p. 112).

instead fits well with the overall intent of what Paul is attempting to do in this passage—which is to break down the elitist, triumphalistic, and exclusionary attitudes certain Corinthians had developed vis-à-vis others in the congregation.

But beyond such contextual hints, Paul also refers to the weaker or less respectable parts of the body as necessary and indispensable (ἀναγκασιά, 1 Cor. 12.22). While scholars have debated what the ‘weaker’ versus ‘necessary’ body parts are, an important clue lies in the wider Greco-Roman context. Thus for Plutarch, the ‘necessary parts of the body ... are double like the hands and feet, eyes and ears’.²¹ That each of these body parts appear in Paul’s discussion (1 Cor. 12.15–17, 21) suggests that these would have been associated with strength by the original readers of the epistle. A disability perspective would highlight, however, that in the ancient Mediterranean context these bodily parts are the nexuses through which human bodies interface and interact with the world. They are considered to be necessary just because eyes see, ears hear, hands feel, and feet cross the external world. They are strong (not weak) because they are the means through which people discern the world, do things, get around, even protect themselves. The weaker bodily parts, on the other hand, were those members that were ‘passive’ by contrast—perhaps internal organs of the body in need of protection—not only incapable of acting out the bodily desires and needs but also unable to fend for themselves and hence reliant on those members of the body who were ‘stronger’. But even if the necessary parts of the body—the hands, feet, etc.—were impaired, then they are no longer strong but weak.

By extension, then, people with disabilities are implicit in this metaphorical discourse. Their physical or sensory impairments thus define their ‘weakness’, both in the sense that they are less able than others without disabilities and in the sense that they are reliant in some respects on the assistance of others. At the same time, Williams’ insistence that the spiritual gifts of even the weakest members of the body of Christ should not be despised challenges the stereotypical thinking of non-disabled people. In this case, a renewal ecclesiology would resist conventional ableist marginalization of people with disabilities as ‘weaker’, less respectable, or un-necessary members of the church with little to contribute. Instead, the Spirit distributes gifts liberally and graciously so that people with disabilities are just as capable of contributing to the edification of the community of faith and hence are necessary in that sense.

²¹ See Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina, 7 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier, 1999), p. 460.

This leads to the second facet of a disability reading of the Pauline metaphor of one body with many (both strong and weak) members: that the unity of the body is constituted precisely by its diversity.²² ‘Indeed’, as Paul writes, ‘the body does not consist of one member but of many’ (1 Cor. 12.14). But even more pointedly, the one body of Christ has many members, including people across the spectrum of disabilities. The one Spirit distributes many gifts to many different members, and it is through such a diversity of members and gifts that the body is built up and edified. The health of the body requires the working of its many parts: the ‘stronger’ and ‘weaker’, those with more or less honor or respect, with each member recognized and honored.

Thus, Paul says not only that the apparently weaker bodily members are equally necessary for the health of the whole group but also that it is such marginalized members who are (to be) given greater honor and granted greater respect (1 Cor. 12.23). Williams’ point, derived from this principle, is that no gift—and no individual believer—is to be suppressed, dismissed, or minimized, and that there is no hierarchy of the gifts. Rather, all gifts are similarly indispensable and each person is equally important for the health of the whole. Indeed, each with his or her own distinctive gift has been made part of the same body of Christ by the Spirit.²³

From a disability perspective, then, people with disabilities are by definition embraced as central, necessary, and essential to a fully healthy and functioning body of Christ. Beyond such a descriptive statement, however, is the implicit prescription of St. Paul: that ‘those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe [or should and ought to clothe] with greater honor’ (1 Cor. 12.22). Thus it is the responsibility of the whole body to put a stop to the stigmatization and marginalization of people with disabilities.

The third facet of our discussion, however, concerns the broader context of both Corinthian letters taken together. A disability reading of the body of Christ metaphor builds off the central point that Paul is combating, namely, the factionalism that threatens the Corinthian congregation.²⁴ Paul’s overarching worry was about those attitudes regarding elitism and superiority

²² This theme of the diversity of the body’s many members is emphasized by Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 159.

²³ See D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 47-48.

²⁴ Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), esp. pp. 157-64.

among the Corinthians that excluded others who were considered less spiritual and thus threatened to fragment the unity of the body (see 1 Cor. 8 on food offered to idols and 1 Cor. 14 on prophecy and tongues). In the background were further concerns about the sectarian divisiveness of those who thought themselves more knowledgeable, more eloquent, and with greater wisdom than others who were treated as less articulate and more foolish (see 1 Cor. 1.10-3.23), as well as other conflicts within the Corinthian congregation generated by apostolic lineage (1 Cor. 1.12 & 3.4) or social status (see 1 Cor. 6 on congregational lawsuits, 1 Cor. 11 on the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ vis-à-vis the Supper, or the various references to slaves throughout the epistle).²⁵ Read from this perspective, Paul’s insistence of the unity of the body involving diversity takes on greater significance. Yet the important point is that such diversity includes ‘the weak’. This is especially important for people with disabilities given that in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul highlights his apostolic credentials as consisting specifically of his being a vessel of clay (2 Cor. 4.7-12), his having a weak bodily presence (2 Cor. 10.10), and his foolishness and sufferings (2 Cor. 11.16-33). In fact, God would not answer his prayer for deliverance so that Paul could say, ‘whenever I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor. 12.10; cf. 1 Cor. 1.25). So if Paul’s theology of strength resides wholly in his theology of weakness, then his views regarding the strength of the ecclesial body depends wholly on the ‘weakness’ of the bodily members.

From a disability perspective, this translates into the following outline of an inclusive ecclesiology. First, the church consists of the weak, not the strong; people with disabilities are thus at the center rather than at the margins of what it means to be the people of God.²⁶ Second, each person with disability, no matter how serious, severe, or even profound, contributes something essential to and for the body, through the presence and activity of the Spirit. Finally, people with disabilities become the paradigm for what it means to live in the power of God and to manifest the divine glory.

Having said all this, it is important to register the following caveat before proceeding: that there are those in the disability rights movement who will

²⁵ The social divisions in the Corinthian context are highlighted by Gerd Theissen, ‘The Strong and the Weak in Corinth: A Sociological Analysis of a Theological Quarrel’, in Brian S. Rosner (ed.), *Understanding Paul’s Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches* (trans. John H. Schütz; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 107-28.

²⁶ This is understood by L’Arche, an international organization that exists to serve people with severe and profound disabilities; see Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

resist defining their personhood in terms of weakness since that perpetuates discriminatory perspectives that have been handed down for generations. While admitting that to be true with respect to popular conventions of strength and weakness, I submit that the marvel of St. Paul's discussion is precisely to subvert such usually unquestioned presuppositions. In other words, if we take Paul seriously, our understandings of strong and weak will themselves be transformed.

Toward a Disability-Inclusive Charismology & Renewal Ecclesiology

There is, however, one final but essential step to take to see how J.R. Williams' renewal ecclesiology can be reconfigured to be inclusive of people with disabilities. This involves not just an acceptance of their presence in the church, but a reception of their gifts and ministries. As Williams has noted, the Spirit distributes many gifts to the many members of the body so each person's contributions should be received rather than despised. The thrust of Paul's argument is that all of the gifts are needed for a fully functioning body;²⁷ analogously, every member is interdependent on every other member so that all suffer or rejoice with each one. Even the 'weakest' and least respectable have something to offer once we get beneath the surface. But if this is true, and if Williams is right that the spiritual gifts involve the agency of both the Holy Spirit and docile human beings, how does this apply to people with disabilities?

Here we need to get very concrete in order to drive home our point that a renewal ecclesiology emphasizes the Spirit's working and gifting in and through people, not just in and through bodily parts.²⁸ People with physical disabilities, for example those in wheelchairs, are nevertheless very capable if given the proper technological assistance. The ministry of people like Joni Eareckson Tada is exemplary in this regard.²⁹ Few can deny the Spirit's ministry in and through her life. People with sensory impairments because of

²⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul and Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 556-57.

²⁸ The following is a brief summary of proposals presented at much greater length in Yong, 'Disability from the Margins to the Center: Hospitality and Inclusion in the Church', in Bert Roebben and Anna Halsall (eds.), *Inclusive Religious Education: International Perspectives* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2010), forthcoming.

²⁹ See <http://www.joniandfriends.org/> for a description of Tada's ministry, which includes a 'store' of the many books she has authored.

blindness or deafness are just as capable with basic accommodations.³⁰ In these cases and many others, people with physical and sensory disabilities do not contribute more to the church not because they are incapable of doing so, but because pre-existing social prejudices hinder the reception of what they have to offer.

What about people with intellectual disabilities?³¹ How might they exercise agency in response to the Spirit's promptings, endowments, and giftings? Without denying the cognitive component involved in responding to the Spirit, I suggest that more often than not heightened intellectualism gets in the way of operation of the Spirit's charisms. In fact, Paul indicts the Corinthians on exactly this point: that it is in their following the conventions of the world's wisdom that they have failed to recognize the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1.20), that God has chosen the 'foolish in the world to shame the wise' (1 Cor. 1.27), and that it is worldly eloquence and wisdom that hinder the full manifestation of the Spirit and the power of God (1 Cor. 2.4-5). In contrast, people with intellectual disabilities are possibly more open to the moving of the Spirit because there is less they have to put aside in order to participate in what God seeks to do in the midst of the congregation. Maybe such people are more capable of exercising faith since their discursive intellect does not generate doubt or skepticism. Perhaps for similar reasons, their lives are more conducive for the manifestation of God's love since they have not developed the prejudices that divides us who have been socialized according to the values of the world. If this is anywhere near the truth, then people with intellectual disabilities do not contribute more to the church not because they are incapable of doing so, but because pre-existing social and ecclesial prejudices hinder the church's welcome of their presence, embrace of their way of life, and reception of what they have to offer.³²

It is also important to consider people with profound disabilities—perhaps the most challenging category—and how their gifts can be received by the

³⁰ Blind theologian John Hull, for example, has written a remarkably insightful (pun intended!) book: *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), even as Deaf theologian Hannah Lewis has written a resounding (again, pun intended!) volume: *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

³¹ This includes people with various types of impairments such as those with congenital Down syndrome, autism, learning or developmental disabilities of one form or another, or those who have sustained brain injuries at some point in life; for a broad introduction, see James C. Harris, *Intellectual Disability: Understanding Its Development, Causes, Classification, Evaluation, and Treatment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³² In my book, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, I provide various other examples of how people with intellectual disability contribute to the life of the people of God.

community of faith. Those with profound disabilities are, in Hans Reinders' words, people who have 'not gone beyond a toddlers stage of [mental] development'.³³ In most cases of profound disability, any talk of subjective agency can only be metaphorical: people with profound disability do not do things in the normal senses of that word. So Williams' insistence that the gifts of the Spirit involve divine *and* human activity would not generally apply here. But that does not mean that people with profound disabilities are either unnecessary to the body of Christ or undeserving of even greater honor. These are still applicable in at least the following three respects: that these are not only *seemingly* weaker members but are actually so, and in that sense are worthy of even greater honor and respect (1 Cor. 12.23); that they are members of the body who need the care of others even more and in that sense provide occasions to the body for expressions of such gifts of caring (1 Cor. 12.25; cf. Rom. 12.6, 8, and 1 Pet. 4.9-10); and that the honor accorded to their lives, made in the image of God, provide the occasion for the rejoicing of the entire body (1 Cor. 12.26). I have in mind here concrete cases like that of Arthur Young, whose profound disability serves as the focal point for the demonstration of congregational care and inclusion.³⁴ As Hans Reinders argues in his book, friendship with people with profound disabilities is still possible and will be rewarding if the people of God were open to how the Spirit's presence and activity may be manifest in and through such relationships.

An inclusive community of faith will thus expectantly await the manifestation of the Spirit's gifts in and through the church's most unlikely members. My claim is that not much is expected of people with disabilities precisely because of the false stereotypes that such 'weaker' or less respected members are only passive recipients in need of the aid of the non-disabled. Without denying that people with disabilities have needs, my argument is thus intended to overcome the discriminatory and exclusionary idea that 'they' are the needy and 'we' are not. Instead, I propose, as an extension of Williams' renewal theology, that a church renewed by the Spirit's presence and activity not only embraces people with disabilities but also expectantly receives their gifts and ministries.³⁵

³³ See Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 48.

³⁴ Arthur's life and its ecclesial context are recounted by his mother, and New Testament theologian, Frances M. Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), part A, esp. ch. 5.

³⁵ This thesis has also been argued by Jürgen Moltmann, who has written: 'every handicap is also a gift', and 'Communities without disabled persons are disabled communities'; see Moltmann, 'The Spirit Gives Life: Spirituality and Vitality', in Harold D. Hunter and Peter D. Hocken

Conclusion

Our task in this essay has been to explore the specific challenges disability poses for renewal Christianity. Part of the answer, I have suggested, is focusing away from disabilities and toward the people with them. This involves, concomitantly, a reorientation toward the body of Christ, shedding ableist assumptions about human life and embracing what might otherwise be thought of as a radical charismology and ecclesiology. The radicality of such a proposal is informed by disability-informed re-readings of the Pauline metaphor of Christ's body as constituted pneumatically and charismatically by many gifted members. Such a renewal ecclesiology opens up to and indeed requires a hospitable, welcoming, and inclusive theology of the church. At the heart of such a radical ecclesiological vision are people with disabilities—who are or should be the most honored and respected members of the community of faith.

Such honor and respect is most explicitly demonstrated not only in the presence of people with disabilities in the church but also in their activity. I am referring here to activity both in the regular sense of that term (for people with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities) but also in the metaphorical sense (for people with profound disabilities), but in all cases, such 'activity' involves the Spirit's manifestation through their lives for the overall edification of the people of God. Thus honor and respect is given through the valuation and reception of the contributions, ministries, and gifts of such people. When this happens, the Spirit-filled church becomes a church that not only ministers *to* people with disabilities—quite necessary—but also ministers *with* them!

(eds.), *All Together in One Place: Theological Papers from the Brighton Conference on World Evangelization* (JPTSup, 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 22-37 (34-35, italics orig.). Thanks to Harold Hunter for reminding me of this insight of Moltmann's.