

**THE DISABLED GOD?**  
**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DISABILITY THEOLOGIES**

By

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## **Declaration**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my God and the creator of the universe, who created human beings in his own likeness and image. In addition, to my late disabled younger sister who developed a disability a few years after her birth, grew up as a young woman with her disability and later at the age of 34 years. I dedicate this thesis to all persons with disabilities, declaring that no matter how profound your condition of disability is, it cannot change your image from something else but the image of God in which you were created like everyone else.

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## Abstract

The subject of discourse and in question in this thesis is “the disabled God”: What does the image of the disabled God consist of and portray? Issues surrounding disability within the Christian church have been intensely debated of late. Hence, a critical study of the image of the disabled God is needed. Understanding the image of the disabled God may allow people to experience liberation, since the issue of disability seems to subject many disabled persons to a critical levels of marginalisation, segregation, and oppression.

Chapter 1 contains the general introduction to the thesis and provides a brief introduction to the subject of discourse. It introduces certain concepts concerning the creation of human beings in the image and likeness of God, and a challenge to the church to ask herself what the image of God is like. It asks whether the church is influenced and follows the dictates of cultural myths and the societal norms within which human beings live. In addition, it asks why those with disabilities are considered not fit for society. Charismatic preachers and motivational teachers often preach messages that are demeaning to vulnerable persons with disabilities, claiming that persons with disability are hindered from experiencing healing because they could either not activate their faith or probably have sin in their lives. These messages are not too far from cultural myths and the societal norms which have crept into the church with messages that portray God as omnipotent, omniscience and omnipresent only, thereby contaminating a sound biblical hermeneutic which also portrays God as vulnerable, weak and disabled, a God who became vulnerable and disabled through Jesus Christ. To portray God as only powerful and perfect, is a subjection and undermining of who God is. God is the creator of all human beings in His own image and likeness, and therefore this is a call to preachers to return to a responsible biblical hermeneutic of Scripture and accurately teach and preach what the image of God consists of and portrays.

Chapter 2 is a critical analysis of the image of the disabled God. Nancy Eiesland points to Jesus Christ bearing the wounds of the crucifixion even after His resurrection in His glorified body. She claims that Christ appearing with the pierced hands, feet and side, is the creation of a new humanity, which provides access for those who have been side-lined through marginalization and segregation. According to her Christ identified with the vulnerable and disabled when He revealed Himself to His disciples and asked them to touch His hands with wounds. This signifies solidarity with those who have disabilities and the abolition of the physical avoidance of persons with disabilities. This is a call and a challenge to the church and to society to create

access for persons with disabilities so that they can be integrated into the church and society at large.

Chapter 3 contains a critical analysis of the vulnerable God by Thomas Reynolds, who portrays the disabled God as vulnerable. He emphasises that for Jesus Christ to come into our world, He needed to be vulnerable, portraying Jesus as the icon of God's vulnerable love. Reynolds does not stop at physical disability; he also considers mental disability. He asserts that all human beings are disabled, claiming that as people get older, and everyone's disability is revealed. Therefore, he challenges medical and societal models that want to fix persons with disabilities before they can be considered "fit for use". In this regard, he refers to the "cult of normalcy". Reynolds claims that every human is a gift in their capacity to the other. Therefore, there is the need to open up and welcome the other. Reynolds emphasises that the image of God characterises creativity, availability, and relationality, and this image surpasses what our culture, society and even church focus on.

Chapter 4 provides a critical analysis of the narrative of Shane Clifton's life experience of profound disability due to an accident, which resulted in spinal cord injury (SCI) and left him with (mostly) no sensation from his neck downward. He was frustrated with his new life of disability even though he did not wish for death as a better option, so he embarked on a search for happiness with his condition of SCI. He had to devise a means by which he could experience happiness with SCI. Clifton declares that whether a person flourishes does not depend on a state of perfect health and on having an able body. Therefore, he turned to virtue ethics, knowing that he is created in the image of God, and knowing that God can help him to live his life with a profound disability and yet flourish.

Chapter 5 draws some conclusions, provides summaries of the preceding chapters and proposes two models regarding disability and human flourishing, namely (i) reconciliation of disability with human flourishing and (ii) reconstruction of disability and human flourishing. The image of the disabled God remains a challenge to the church, charismatic preachers and motivational speakers. Overcoming this challenge requires a deliberate return to a responsible biblical hermeneutic teaching of the Word of God, through which the elusive category of the image of the disabled God is made known and through which will be discovered that the image of God is inclusive of all human beings whether abled or disabled. God came not in power to vanquish, but in weakness to help human beings in their profound state of weakness and need.

## Opsomming

Die diskoersonderwerp en -oorweging van hierdie tesis is "die gestremde God": Waaruit bestaan die beeld van die gestremde God en wat word daardeur uitgebeeld? Daar word die afgelope tyd intens in die Christelike kerk gedebatteer oor kwessies rakende gestremdheid. Daarom is daar 'n behoefte aan 'n kritiese studie oor die beeld van die gestremde God. Begrip van die beeld van die gestremde God mag vir mense bevrydend wees, want gestremdheid onderwerp gestremde mense klaarblyklik aan kritieke vlakke van marginalisering, segregasie en onderdrukking.

Hoofstuk 1 bevat die algemene inleiding tot die tesis en gee 'n kort inleiding tot die onderwerp van diskoers. Dit stel sekere konsepte oor die skepping van mense na die beeld en gelykenis van God, bekend, en bevat 'n uitdaging aan die kerk om haarself af te vra hoe die beeld van God lyk. Dit vra of die kerk beïnvloed word deur en die diktee volg van kulturele mites en die samelewingsnorme waarbinne mense leef. Daarbenewens vra dit waarom diegene met gestremdhede as ongeskik vir die samelewing beskou word. Charismatiese predikers en motiveringsprekers preek dikwels boodskappe wat kwesbare persone met gestremdhede verkleineer; die predikers en sprekers beweer dat die rede waarom gestremde mense nie genesing ervaar nie, is omdat hulle óf nie hul geloof kon aktiveer nie óf waarskynlik sonde in hul lewens het. Hierdie boodskappe is nie te ver van die kulturele mites en die samelewingsnorme wat die kerk ingesluit het met boodskappe wat God slegs as almagtig, alwetend en alomteenwoordigend uitbeeld nie. Dit kontamineer 'n gesonde Bybelse hermeneutiek wat God as swak en gestremd uitbeeld – 'n God wat kwesbaar en gestremd geword het deur Jesus Christus. Om God as slegs magtig en perfek uit te beeld, is 'n onderwerping en ondermyning van wie God is. God is die Skepper van alle mense en Hy het alle mense geskape na sy eie beeld en gelykenis. Dit is daarom 'n oproep vir die prediker om terug te keer na 'n verantwoordelike Bybelse hermeneutiek van die Skrif en om akkuraat te wees wanneer daar gepreek en onderrig word oor die beeld van God, waaruit dit bestaan en wat dit uitbeeld.

Hoofstuk 2 is 'n kritiese analise van die beeld van die gestremde God. Nancy Eiesland beklemtoon dat Jesus Christus die wonde van die kruisiging selfs ná sy opstanding in sy verheerlikte liggaam dra. Sy beweer dat Christus se verskyning met deurboorde hande, voete en sy, die skepping van die nuwe mensdom is, wat toegang verleen aan diegene wat opsy

geskuif is deur marginalisering en segregasie. Volgens haar het Christus homself met die swakkes in swakheid en met gestremdhede geïdentifiseer toe Hy Homself aan Sy dissipels openbaar het en vir hulle gevra het om aan Sy gewonde hande te raak. Dit simboliseer solidariteit met diegene wat gestremdhede het en die afskaffing van fisiese vermyding van persone met gestremdhede. Dit is 'n oproep tot en 'n uitdaging aan die kerk en aan die samelewing om toegang vir persone met gestremdhede te skep sodat hulle in die kerk en in die groter samelewing geïntegreer kan word.

Hoofstuk 3 bevat 'n kritiese analise van die kwesbare God deur Thomas Reynolds, wat die gestremde God as kwesbaar uitbeeld. Hy beklemtoon dat dit weens Jesus Christus se kwesbaarheid is, dat Hy ons wêreld kon betree, en beeld sodoende Jesus uit as die ikoon van God se kwesbare liefde. Reynolds verwys nie net na fisiese gestremdheid nie, maar sluit ook verstandelike gestremdheid in. Hy beweer dat alle mense gestremd is – dat wanneer mense ouer word, word hul gestremdheid. Daarom staan hy krities teenoor die mediese en samelewingsmodelle wat mense met gestremdhede wil regmaak voordat hulle as “geskik vir gebruik” beskou kan word. Hy verwys in hierdie verband na die "kultus van normaliteit". Reynolds beweer dat elke mens 'n geskenk in hul kapasiteit aan andere is. Daarom is dit nodig om oop vir die ander te wees, die ander te verwelkom. Reynolds beklemtoon dat die beeld van God kreatiwiteit, beskikbaarheid en relasionaliteit karakteriseer, en hierdie beeld verder strek as dit waarop ons kultuur, samelewing en selfs kerk fokus.

Hoofstuk 4 bevat 'n kritiese analise van die vertelling van Shane Clifton se lewenservaring van uitermatige gestremdheid as gevolg van 'n ongeluk wat tot spinale kolom-besering (SKB) gelei het en hom met (meestal) geen gevoel van sy nek af onder toe gelaat het. Hy was gefrustreerd met sy nuwe lewe van gestremdheid, alhoewel hy nie die dood as 'n beter opsie beskou het nie, en daarom het hy 'n soeke na geluk met sy toestand van SKB begin. Hy moes 'n manier bedink waarop hy blydskap kan ervaar selfs met SKB. Volgens Clifton is 'n mens nie afhanklik van perfekte gesondheid of 'n ongestremde liggaam om te floreer nie. Daarom het hy hom tot deugde-etiek gewend, wetende dat hy na die beeld van God geskape is en dat God hom kan help om sy lewe met uitermatige gestremdheid te lei en steeds te floreer.

Hoofstuk 5 maak gevolgtrekkings oor en gee opsommings van die voorafgaande hoofstukke en stel twee modelle rakende gestremdheid en menslike florerings voor, naamlik (i) versoening van gestremdheid met menslike florerings en (ii) rekonstruksie van gestremdheid en menslike florerings. Die beeld van die gestremde God bly 'n uitdaging vir die kerk, charismatiese

predikers en motiveringsprekers. Om hierdie uitdaging te oorkom, vereis 'n doelbewuste terugkeer na 'n verantwoordelike Bybelse hermeneutiese onderrig van die Woord van God, waardeur die ontwykende kategorie van die beeld van die gestremde God bekend gemaak word en waardeur ontdek sal word dat die beeld van God alle mense insluitend, gestremd of nie. Want Hy het nie met mag gekom om te onderdruk nie, Hy het in swakheid gekom om mense te help in hul diepgaande swakheid en nood.

## Table of Contents

<b>Declaration</b> .....	ii
<b>Dedication</b> .....	iii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iv
<b>Abstract</b> .....	v
<b>Opsomming</b> .....	vii
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b> .....	1
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
1.1 Background and Rationale .....	1
1.2 A Short True-Life Story of My Disabled Late Sister from Nigeria.....	5
1.3 Research Problem .....	8
1.4 Research Questions .....	8
1.5 Methodology.....	8
1.6 Significance of the Study.....	8
1.7 Definition of Basic Terms/Concepts.....	9
1.7.1 Disability.....	9
1.7.2 Christology .....	10
1.7.3 Incarnation .....	10
1.7.4 Critical analysis.....	11
1.7.5 Discourse.....	11
1.7. 6 Biblical Hermeneutics (Interpretation) .....	12
1.8 Christological Rhetorical Basis for the Image of the Disabled God.....	12
1.9 Preliminary Outline of Chapters .....	15
1.10 Summary .....	17
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b> .....	18
<b>A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NANCY EIESLAND’S UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMAGE OF THE DISABLED GOD</b> .....	18
2.1 Introduction .....	18
2.2 Background of Nancy L. Eiesland .....	19
2.3 Human Beings in the <i>Imago Dei</i> .....	20
2.4 Eiesland’s Understanding of the Image of the Disabled God .....	22
2.4.1 Impairment .....	24
2.5 Description and Function of the Christological Image of the Disabled God.....	26
2.5.1 Rhetorical View of the Image of God .....	27

2.5.2 Theological Implications of the Image of the Disabled God .....	30
2.6 Conclusion of Chapter .....	34
CHAPTER THREE .....	35
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THOMAS REYNOLDS’ PORTRAYAL OF THE IMAGE OF THE DISABLED GOD AS VULNERABLE .....	35
3.1 Introduction .....	35
3.2 Background of Thomas Reynolds.....	38
3.3 Reynolds’ Understanding of the Image of the Vulnerable God.....	38
3.3.1 Image of God as Creativity .....	41
3.3.2 Image of God as Relationality .....	42
3.3.3 Image of God as Availability .....	45
3.4 Envisaging the Function of the Christological Image of the Vulnerable and Disabled God .....	46
3.4.1 Reynolds’ Rhetorical Understanding of the Image of the Disabled and Vulnerable God....	48
3.4.2 Theological View of the Image of God .....	50
3.5 Conclusion of Chapter .....	53
CHAPTER FOUR .....	54
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SHANE CLIFTON’S RECONCILIATION OF DISABILITY WITH HUMAN FLOURISHING .....	54
4.1 Chapter Introduction .....	54
4.2 Background of Shane Clifton.....	58
4.3 Experiences of Disability and the Image of the Vulnerable Disabled God.....	58
4.4 Human Flourishing with Disability, Pain, and Suffering .....	62
4.5 Clifton’s Christological Understanding of Human Flourishing with Disability .....	64
4.5.1 Clifton’s Rhetoric of Human Flourishing with Disability .....	66
4.5.2 Clifton’s Theological Understanding .....	67
4.6 Conclusion of Chapter .....	70
CHAPTER 5 .....	72
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GOD’S IMAGE, DISABILITY, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION.....	72
5.1 Chapter Introduction .....	72
5.2 Nancy Eiesland’s Image of the Disabled God.....	76
5.2.1 God’s Image as Disabled .....	77
5.2.2 God’s Image as Impairment .....	77
5.3 God’s Image as Vulnerable .....	78
5.3.1 Image of God as Creativity .....	79
5.3.2 Image of God as Relationality .....	79

5.3.3 Image of God as Availability.....	80
5.4 Reconciling Disability with Human Flourishing.....	80
5.5 Reconstructing Disability and Human Flourishing.....	82
5.6 A Critique of Disability and Human Flourishing.....	85
5.6.1 Jürgen Moltmann and Disability.....	85
5.6.2 David H. Kelsey and Human Flourishing.....	87
5.7 The Church, Image of the Disabled God, Disability and Human Flourishing.....	90
5.8 Some Contributions and Recommendations.....	91
5.9 Conclusion.....	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	93

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and Rationale

Human flourishing is bodily flourishing, and therein an expression of health.<sup>1</sup> Yet the intersections between bodiliness, health, and flourishing become a site of theological contestation when the question of disability is considered. What does it mean to confess that humankind is created in God's' image, when human disability is considered? In recent times, the image of God has become a hotly debated subject, especially among scholars of disability theology, who challenge the sole understanding of a perfect image of God without attributing the vulnerability to it too. Reynolds (2008: 68) for instance argues that there appears to be a misrepresentation in the minds of many Christians about God as an all-powerful God who cannot be disabled.<sup>2</sup> Eiesland (2001: 2) considers this an unbiblical hermeneutic teaching of the church, a results of “the particularities of religious and cultural environments in which negative myths and beliefs about people with disabilities emerged.” As such, this has translated into undermining vulnerability and disability and has further resulted in the marginalisation and segregation of persons with disabilities (Chataika, 2013: 117-128). However, as Augustine argues, “there is no life that is not of God, for God is supreme life and the fount of life” (Reynolds, 2008: 151).

As the body of Christ, the church is meant to be a beacon of hope and grace for all people – including the disabled, the vulnerable in the society. Some scholars have argued that the ultimate responsibility of the church, as Christ's loving community, is to represent and show the ideal image of the disabled God (Thomas, 2012: 134; cf. Bosanquet, 1968: 123-124; Rausch, 2003: 197).<sup>3</sup> The premise is that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead and

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<sup>1</sup> Clifton asserts that Pentecostal Christians claim that it is God's will for all human beings to experience total health (Clifton, 2014c: 212). Moreover human flourishing is interpreted in a particular manner with well-being as understood as health (Kelsey, 2008: 14).

<sup>2</sup> A number of scholars agree that the all-powerful God disabled the Godself by coming into the human contingency (Creamer, 2006: 83; Samuel, 1998:16; Louw, 2014: 9).

<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Thomas (2012: 134) argues that the church should be a Christ-loving community but regrettably it is not, because people with disabilities experience great challenges which cause them to feel as unwelcome in church as they do in the society in which they live. This is the result of an overly narrow conception of the image of God in the church and society. Berquist (2014: 123-124) confirms that the church is not just a loving community of Christ, but that Christ is the community. The Christian community does not simply represent the body of Christ; it is that body, where Christ is present in His exaltation and humiliation. The above arguments prompt us to take a closer look at the attitudes towards those with disability within the community of Christ. Rausch (2003: 197) also affirms that “to be in Christ, means belonging to the realm within which Christ rules, and that realm is His

revealed Godself to the disciples in a divine body marked by the wounds of the resurrection (Swinton, 2011: 283). As such, this provides a subtle promise for disabled, vulnerable people who are perceived and treated negatively both in the church and in society (Eiesland, 2005: 584-585; cf. 1994: 20, 111, 113). Evidently, the negative attitudes towards people living with disabilities can be seen in church structures which disadvantage the disabled in several ways including restriction from being ordained (Eiesland, 1994: 20) and inaccessibility to church buildings due to restrictive architectural designs (Eiesland, 2009: 241).

In addition, Thomas (2012: 147) and Reynolds (2008: 69) observe that the church regards the disabled as in need of cure or healing, or as something to be fixed. Moreover, the Sacramental/Eucharistic fellowship of all believers tends to exclude those with disabilities as well as the vulnerable who are treated as lesser human beings (Eiesland, 1994: 112). Could this be due to ignorance of what the image of the disabled God consists of (Brummer, 2005: 86)<sup>4</sup> or a deliberate refusal by the church to acknowledge those with disabilities due to other factors such as cultural myths (Chataika, 2013: 117-128)? Although certain cultural myths despise vulnerability, ugliness, and disability, Brummer (2005: 90) holds that there seems to be a lack of understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ as the disabled God.<sup>5</sup> Given this, there is a wide acceptance of idealistic notions of human able-bodiedness, health and perfectionism, and some church practices overlook the image of the disabled God (Thomas, 2012: 144).<sup>6</sup>

In fact, as a disabled person, Eiesland points out that:

Church structures keep people with disabilities out; church officials affirm our spiritual callings but tell us there is no place for our bodies to minister, and denominations lobby to gain an exception from the governmental enforcement of basic standards of justice. There is no perfect church as there is no “perfect body” (Eiesland, 2009: 237).

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body, the community. Christ’s reign makes a real claim on us; it breaks down all divisions based on ethnicity, class, or social status. The Eucharist creates this communion by inserting us into the body of Christ.”

<sup>4</sup> Brummer (2005: 86) shows that for us to experience true reconciliation with God, we also have to have a knowledge of who God is and if we understand what God has done in Christ for our salvation, we will worship Him in fellowship with Him and with other humans without discrimination of any sort.

<sup>5</sup> Brummer (2005: 90) declares that Jesus was more than really human. He incarnated as a perfect human within the space of humanity. Hence, God revealed humanity and what it means to be in His fellowship. Through this revelation of His fellowship we are able to see how far we have been from His ideal nature, which should be the focus of our existence. We can only identify with God in love if we make His will our own will, and this requires our understanding that Jesus Christ was very human as well as very God. We can confidently say that Jesus was an ‘icon’ not only of humanity, but also an ‘icon’ of true God.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas (2012: 143) defines true health as not only the physical condition of the human person, which has to do with the organs or on the reliance of life that one possesses. Rather, it is how one deals with issues within her/his spirit, and this is usually revealed in an attitude exhibited in the spirit as well – hence, the need for strength in one’s soul to be able to deal with such conditions. He further argues that this view should liberate people from the illusion of health and the constant traditional as well as religious denial of weakness upon which the pursuit of health, beauty and accomplishment rests. Although health is regarded as something to be desired, it is not the ultimate goal for the existence of life.

The above observations elicit the question: Is the church not supposed to be accessed by all people whether disabled or abled? Eiesland shows that the church fails to realise that her actions segregate, marginalise and discriminate against those who are wounded and vulnerable due to physical and mental conditions of disabilities. According to Eiesland (1994: 70-72), the conditions of people with disability are culturally and religiously viewed as sin conflated, indicating being given birth to as a mistake or as being “blessed.”<sup>7</sup> In line with the previous question, one should also ask: Are all human beings created in the image of the crucified God? Eiesland (2001: 10) affirms that all humans are created in God’s image.<sup>8</sup> This raises a question as to whether all people are equal before God and can flourish despite having one or more forms of disability. Reynolds perceives that “by projecting our own fear of vulnerability onto another, we become cut off from the wellspring of our own flourishing: mutual dependence. We deny the other, and so, ourselves” (Reynolds, 2012: 41). Clifton rightly observes that “The flourishing of every person, whether disabled or not, is dependent on others, on support of our families, friends, communities, and social structures as well as cultural values given to us by religious and national traditions” (Clifton, 2018: 132). This goes to show that no single person can experience flourishing independently, whether able or not, since all humankind is created in the image of God.

This study is designed to address these questions. The study engages in a critical analysis of the works of the disabled God, as developed by Nancy Eiesland<sup>9</sup> in her book, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of disability*, which focuses on God’s disability. Secondly, the *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* by Thomas Reynolds, which considers the idea of God’s vulnerability and Jesus as the icon of vulnerability, is probed alongside Shane Clifton’s *Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics and the Good Life*, which discusses human flourishing in the face of profound disability. Nancy Eiesland conceives the

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<sup>7</sup> “The relationship between God and the person with disability is viewed as either blessed or damned by their impairment” (Barbre, 2000: 377; Fast, 2011: 417).

<sup>8</sup> Eiesland (2001: 10) in the article, “Liberation, Inclusion and Justice: A Faith Response to Persons with Disabilities,” discusses what it means to be “created in the image of God and His call on all people to express the divine image as well.”

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Eiesland was an associate professor of sociology of religion and disability studies at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, before her death in 2009 (Eiesland, 2009: 236). Thomas E. Reynold (PhD, Vanderbilt University) is an associate professor of theology at Emmanuel College in the Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto (Reynold, 2008). Shane Clifton is a professor of theology and the director of research at Alphacrucis College in Sidney as well as an honorary associate of the Centre for Policy, Faculty Health Sciences, University of Sydney. His current research is interdisciplinary, exploring the intersection between disability studies, virtue ethics and Christian theology. He also oversees a project on Australian aboriginal spirituality, “Dreaming and Charismatic Christianity: Intersections of the Spirituality” (<https://www.ac.edu.au/faculty-and-staff/shane-clifton>).

image of the disabled God and its connection to the theology of the cross from a Christological perspective. Similarly, Thomas Reynolds and Shane Clifton focus on vulnerability and grace from a Christological standpoint. Eiesland stands out as the authoritative voice, which established a link between the crucified God and the disabled God. She is cited by many disability theologians including Creamer, Reynolds, Reinders and Van Niekerk, who regard her as the mother of disability theology because of the important link she forged between the crucified God and the image of the disabled God.<sup>10</sup> The reason for choosing Thomas Reynolds is his understanding of Jesus Christ as “the disabled God”, who became vulnerable and made Godself vulnerable in solidarity with human beings in their vulnerability (Reynolds, 2008: 202). A reason for the choice of Shane Clifton is his understanding that disability cannot hinder any person from flourishing as long as the understanding of the image of the disabled God is available (Clifton, 2018: 44). This understanding of the image of the disabled, vulnerable God is liberating, since disability has nothing to do with human flourishing.

The study reviews and engages with the Christological considerations which are central to these theologians’ disability theology. Christological approaches consider other doctrines such as the doctrine of salvation,<sup>11</sup> of Trinity and of God.<sup>12</sup> Since Christology offers a more detailed

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<sup>10</sup> Creamer quotes Eiesland’s claim that Jesus reveals the disabled and shows that divinity as well as humanity is fully compatible with experiences of disability. The *imago Dei* includes pierced hands, sides and feet. This, according to Eiesland, means that the disabled God is part of a hidden history of Christianity, since the resurrected Christ is seldom recognised as a deity whose hands, side and feet bear the marks of profound physical impairment (Creamer, 2009: 85-86). Reynolds follows Eiesland’s notion of a disabled Christ, as one who understands by embodying disability even in His transformed, resurrected body (Reynolds, 2008: 177). Eiesland tells of her less than salutary experience as a child with a congenital disability in the congregation where her family worshipped (in Reinders, 2013: 32). Eiesland refers to God as disabled and notes that in the resurrected Jesus Christ, she saw not the suffering servant of whom the last and most important words were tragedy and sin, but a disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced sides and the *imago Dei* (in Van Niekerk, 2013: 154).

<sup>11</sup> Salvation is understood in a general sense as salvaging, restoring or renewing that which is spoiled, distorted or damaged, especially the life of human beings and the natural world. Against this background, salvation is also seen as the restoration to the original status of individuals and social groups and preservation of the natural environment from destruction by greedy and non-visionary human beings. A closer look at the term salvation from a Christian perspective reveals a deeper understanding than the general definition. The salvation of human beings has to do with the restoration of fallen human beings to their original state, that is, in the image of God. Events are past, present and will culminate in the futuristic eschatological new creation (Fiddes, 2010: 176).

Grindhei (2012: 35-36) further clarifies the role of Jesus in the role of God as the Christological understanding of the presence of God and the name of Jesus and His lordship (Grindhei, 2012: 35-36). In his book, *God Sent His Son*, Schonborn (2010: 321) argues that contemporary Christology offers more insight into the Trinitarian significance of Jesus’ resurrection.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham (2010: 19) notes in the *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* that in the Christian tradition God is publicly identified and named as the triune God insofar as the Trinitarian identity of the Christian God is not a matter of speculation. According to Abraham (2010: 19), Barth “made a virtue out of necessity by insisting that the one and only God is made known fully, finally, and exclusively in divine revelation in Jesus Christ conceptually, the true God of divine revelation is the triune God of the Christian tradition.” Abraham (2010: 19) concludes that “Divine revelation has been refigured to make visible a strong undercurrent of reason below the surface”.

understanding of the image of the disabled God, it could provide a clear evaluation of that image. It is important to note that the crucified and resurrected Christ<sup>13</sup> is at the centre of the theological rhetoric of the disabled God. However, can this reveal an ideal image of the disabled God which provides access, acceptance, equality and flourishing to every human being with or without ability?

As a result of their personal and individual experiences of disability, it is not difficult for the aforementioned contemporary disability theologians to portray their understanding of the image of the disabled God. They are able to invoke the theology of the cross and establish solidarity with the disabled God through whom grace is made available to all to experience human flourishing<sup>14</sup> including the disabled in their conditions of profound disability as they turn to the pursuit of virtue (Clifton, 2015a: 773, 782).

This study also tries to determine whether there is any connection between the theology of the disabled God and the “theology of the cross which has a strong pastoral theme” (Louw, 2014: 7), but the focus is on “Christology which is fundamentally about human experience” (Eiesland, 1994: 99). To achieve this, the study engages in a critical analysis of the theology of Nancy Eiesland, Thomas Reynolds, and Shane Clifton. The above introduction prompts me to share a short true-life story of my disabled younger sister.

## **1.2 A Short True-Life Story of My Disabled Late Sister from Nigeria**

From Eiesland’s understanding of the image of the disabled God and what it means to be human beings created in the image of God, I wish to share a true-life story of my late disabled younger sister, who was shown little care in her immediate environment situated in Nigeria. But before I proceed, I would like to give a very brief understanding of the context within which I am focusing my thesis, which is Nigeria. Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa, comprising an area of 923,768 square kilometres in the Western part of Africa, and a population of nearly 200 million people. A 2010 study showed that about 55% of the population are Christian, with multiple ethnic groups and diverse cultures<sup>15</sup>. The question needs to be asked

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<sup>13</sup> Brummer (2005: 92) claims that the resurrection of Christ is the supreme manifestation of the renewal of life in the loving fellowship of God, and that only through the condition of following Him in obedience, can one be in fellowship with Him and become just like Him.

<sup>14</sup> Kelsey (2008: 1) argues that “human flourishing is inseparable from God’s active relating to human creatures in such a way that their flourishing is always dependent upon God”. For Charry (1992: 45), “Christians are not alone in this world, and they do not have to invent the means for attaining their happiness. God has given a roadmap with designated landmarks and rests stops”.

<sup>15</sup> World Population Review 2019. Available at: <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/nigeria-population/> (accessed 1 February 2019)

whether the diversity of cultures and cultural myths on the image of God is influencing the church to an extent that vulnerable and disabled people are being marginalised and segregated unknowingly. Is this due to ignorance of what the image of God consists of? Hence, Haruna argues that

In most Nigerian societies traditional beliefs on the cause of disability determine, to a large extent, people's attitudes and reactions towards the disabled, in particular children. Disability conditions such as deafness, blindness, mental retardation and orthopaedic impairment in traditional settings are mostly attributed to punishment by vengeful gods for present or past incarnations for sins including murder, infidelity etc. There is also a strong belief in witchcraft and evil spirits, who supposedly cause havoc in the form of disabilities imposed on those who ignore their warnings. In this regard disabled persons are conceived as sinners and deviants and experience social exclusion. Disabled children also suffer from social exclusion and separation from other children and they are teased and jeered at in neighbourhoods (Haruna, 2017: 105).

Haruna further reiterates that

It is very common in Nigeria to see disabled persons on the streets begging for money to purchase medicine. Persons with disabilities are often denied treatment simply because of their inability to pay for medical treatment, which is no fault of theirs, but the result of poverty, because the majority of them do not have work or any special grant from the government. Generally, there is a negative attitude towards persons with disabilities (Haruna, 2017:108)

Haruna (2017: 108-109) goes on to say that access to buildings or transportation for persons with disabilities is a major concern, because there is no consideration for this. This attitude cuts across all sectors of society and includes public buildings and transport and even rental apartments, which are not built with the considerations of the disabled in mind.

Ulo Jemimah Stanley had a disability for 32 years before her death at 34 years of age. Her disability was the result of a wrongly administered immunisation at the age of two, which turned into an abscess, crippling her left leg. She grew up limping as a result of her disabling condition. She was a strong-willed, beautiful and talented young woman who loved to associate with people, but always suffered an inferiority complex and insecurity because of her disability. Probably because of her experiences of "segregation and marginalisation within the home as well as the church" (Eiesland, 1994: 33), she craved acceptance, care, and love, which she was denied. Her family members were ignorant of her need for attention, acceptance and support to help her overcome the feelings of inferiority, simply believing that she was a stubborn child. Ulo was judged through the opaque lens of cultural myth and religion which viewed and accepted God as only perfect and powerful. The family's perception of disability was that her condition was either a "blessing or curse," according to cultural myths.<sup>16</sup> Ulo's family used to

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<sup>16</sup> Although we have always been a Christian family, my family had limited knowledge of biblical hermeneutics, which could have given us a better understanding of the image of the disabled God.

jokingly refer to the Hausa adage, “*Ubangiji ya rage was ayanta zaki* (God reduced her beauty with disability), averring that God knew why He reduced her beauty by crippling a part of her body, her leg – if not, she would have gone further in life, using If we had known better, she may still have been alive and living a fulfilled life. If the family had cultivated and shown her a right attitude, things may not have turned out the way they eventually did.

Ulo could not finish school and left home to live somewhere else, but she returned home later, broken and sober, though renewed in spirit and committed to Christ. Much harm had already been done to her physical body, which resulted in so many health complications, including HIV. She was always welcomed back into the family whenever she returned, but was not taken too seriously, because she was not very stable and had left a rehabilitation center, which could have catered for her health needs and give her some vocational training. The family had no money for good medical care to enable her to survive and there was no regular supply of retroviral medication from the hospital. Her condition deteriorated to the point that, when she was eventually admitted to hospital, she died.

I feel the pain of Ulo’s case afresh whenever I encounter anyone with a disability who is being neglected. I remember being at the hospital and feeling helpless when Ulo was dying. It has been difficult for me to make peace with her death. I wish I knew about the image of the crucified Jesus Christ, the disabled God. My blindness was due to cultural myopia which did not allow me to see beyond disability and to see *all* people as created in the image of God, the disabled Christ. My family and I, our church and cultural mythical belief systems, judged Ulo and she did not experience the love that she should have enjoyed. I see many people in her condition today out there in my home church and community who are treated in either similar or worse ways. My encounter with the disabled God was a profound experience, as it opened my eyes to see that all human beings are created with love in the image of the disabled God.

Yong (2011: 347) calls on the church to be “driven by a vision of the full and ineradicable/indelible humanity of each person created in the image of God, regardless of that individual’s capacities or abilities.” Such an understanding of the image of God, if made visible, will correct the opaque vision of the church, as each person is treated with dignity and as one created in the image of God irrespective of his or her condition. In this spirit, we shall consider the research problem.

### **1.3 Research Problem**

The distortion of the image of the disabled God is witnessed not only in the church but also in society, and it results in the marginalisation, oppression, and segregation of those who are vulnerable and with disabilities in the community of Christ. A direct effect of this is that people living with disability are not often viewed as God's image bearers like the so-called able-bodied people. However, this study aims to undertake a systematic investigation to establish reasons for promoting human flourishing beyond physical ability. The fact that all human beings are created in the image of God qualifies everyone to merit acceptance and be treated as a human being without limitation. It will be argued that the value placed on human beings should supersede their physical ability and that people with disability should naturally be seen as created in the image of God.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

This study addresses the following research questions:

How do contemporary theologies of disability portray the image of the disabled God? To achieve this, the study looks at:

- How does Nancy Eiesland understand the image of the disabled God?
- What is the significance of Thomas Reynolds' portrayal of the disabled God as vulnerable?
- How does Shane Clifton reconcile disability with human flourishing?

### **1.5 Methodology**

An analytical literature study approach is employed to review the works of three contemporary disability theologians. Hence, available relevant monographs are consulted "to say something about the reality or theory and meta-theory, the mode of depiction, the claims to authority" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2005: 240). The study seeks to probe how Nancy L. Eiesland, Thomas Reynolds and Shane Clifton each relates to and interprets the image of God from a Christological and theological perspective in order to gain an understanding of the connection between the image of God and disability.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The research aims to portray a clearer understanding of a liberating image of the disabled and vulnerable God in order to promote the understanding that all human beings are created in the image of God. The research findings could help create awareness that could lead to behaviour

changes, and to dismantling the barriers against human flourishing which are present in the church and society.

## **1.7 Definition of Basic Terms/Concepts**

This section outlines some basic definitions, concepts and terminologies employed in this study such as Disability, Christology, Incarnation, Critical Analysis and Discourse. A general explanation of the Christological and theological premises for the views discussed, will pave the way for a clearer understanding of the image of the disabled God.

### ***1.7.1 Disability***

There appears to be no generally agreed/accepted definition of disability. Jones (2016: 14), for instance, subscribes to the World Health Organisation's definition of disability as a long-lasting physical, sensory, intellectual or developmental difficulty that restricts a person's ability to perform activities considered to be within the normal range for human beings. This definition focuses on the functional outcomes rather than the causes of disability. Berquist (2014: 41), on the other hand, defines disability as missing or damaged parts of the body of a person, including impairment of sight, hearing, walking or sexual reproduction.<sup>17</sup> For Abrams (2007: 127-128), disability is an impairment or blemish such as blindness, deafness or lameness.

Reynolds (2008: 27) offers a more holistic definition of disability as the small area where restrictions due to involuntary bodily impairment, social role expectations, and external physical/social obstructions overlap in a way that pre-empts intended participation in communal life.<sup>18</sup> Eiesland (1994: 27) considers disability as the consequences of impairment which result in an inability to perform some task or activity considered necessary. This view indicates that disability is a form of inability or limitation in performing roles or tasks expected of an individual within a social environment. This closely aligns with the term handicap, which

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<sup>17</sup> Berquist (2014: 41) explains that the ideal body was supposed to be whole, that is, to have its parts intact and operative. Missing or damaged parts were considered different or disabled. Disabled persons included persons with impairments of sight, hearing, and walking, understanding or sexual reproduction as well as persons whose appearance did not match the expected. Some of these limitations were lifelong (whether genetic or prenatal conditions), others resulted from accidents, warfare, torture, malnutrition, abuse or disease.

<sup>18</sup> "Christian community does not represent the body of Christ, the body where Christ is present in His exaltation and humiliation. This leads us to a second legitimate question: Where is Christ present? He is present as the centre of my existence, as the centre of history and as the centre of nature. But He is present 'incognito', unrecognised by the world – not because of His incarnation but because of His humiliation, His poverty, failure, and disgrace. But Christ incarnate is at the same time both humiliated and exalted, crucified and risen. He is present like this now, He is present *pro me*, for my sake. And His presence is in the Church; in a real sense it *is* the Church" (Bosanquet, 1968: 124). Similarly, "the concept of the body, applied to the Church, is not merely a functional concept, relevant only to the members of this body; but in its comprehensiveness and centrality it is a concept of Him who is present, exalted and humbled" (Bosanquet, 1968: 124).

denotes a social disadvantage that results from an impairment or disability. I consider this definition as more appropriate for this study, which understands disability as a form of vulnerability.

### ***1.7.2 Christology***

Sesboue (2005: 285) defines Christology as the doctrine of the works and the person of Christ, that is, the study of Christ and His works in relation to God and to humankind (cf. Cole, 2009: 834). Similarly, Bowden (2005: 220-226) understands Christology as a discussion about Jesus Christ who is God, took on human form, was crucified, died and was exalted after His resurrection from the dead. Christology also shows how Jesus brought salvation to humanity. For Hurtado (2006: 612), the reflection on Jesus' religious significance in the Christian faith as assigned by God, is what is traditionally referred to as Christology. Coggins (1989: 177) also describes Christology in conceptual patterns as a confession of faith in the works of Jesus as the Christ by the New Testament church and the study of the themes which may be traced according to Jesus' self-understanding.

### ***1.7.3 Incarnation***

For Behr (2015: 79-81), the incarnation is central to Christian theology. He notes that the second person of the Trinity came into human contingency. Jesus became a human being for the sole purpose of restoring fallen human beings by extending grace, which offers free salvation to all without compulsion. He adds that the fact that "the Christian faith is an incarnational faith, is self-evident". Crisp (2010: 161) notes that this doctrine of the incarnation is found in several places in the New Testament, especially in the fourth Gospel, which states that: "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth".<sup>19</sup> In Bauckhan's (2015: 33) words, "God becomes incarnate as one human in order to be known to all humans." He agrees with Crisp that "God's presence in incarnation is salvific because in this way God is with all people. As God incarnate, Jesus is God with us (Immanuel)". Behr (2015: 79) also affirms that the "eternal Son of God took flesh from His human mother and that the historical Christ is at once both fully God and fully human". Therefore, because Jesus took on human flesh, faith could be found in the Saviour.

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<sup>19</sup> John 1:14 (NIV) (Bible verse in original text cited).

### 1.7.4 Critical Analysis

This study is a critical analysis because it seeks to evaluate the discourse of Nancy Eiesland's *Disabled God*, Thomas Reynolds' *Vulnerable Communion*, and Shane Clifton's *Crippled Grace* in order to gain a clearer understanding of the image of God. According to *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Longman, 2009: 43, 400), a critical analysis involves making a careful judgment/examination of something and its value in order to understand it better for a more efficient explanation and understanding.<sup>20</sup> Several dictionaries also note that a critical analysis occurs when fault-finding or views and judgments are given for detailed checks to be attained on what is most important, particularly about a particular subject. Merriam-Webster defines the term critical as "given to making or expressing unfavourable judgments about things" and analysis as the separation or identification of parts of a whole (Webster, 2010: 249, 41). In Chambers Dictionary, the word critical is defined as "fault-finding, disapproving" whereas analysis is "a detailed examination of the structure and content of something" (Harrap, 2009: 285, 39). The Oxford Dictionary defines the term critical as "given to judgment" and analysis as "the resolution or breaking up of something complex into its various simple elements, the exact determination of the elements or components of something complex" (Oxford Dictionary, 2007: 562, 76).

According to Wallace and Wray (2013: 4), to be critical means to look for a hidden agenda or the tangible purpose of a write-up, statement or any given situation so that one is not being tricked in the end. Boeije (2010: 76) cites Jorgensen's definition that:

The analysis is the breaking up, or separating, or disassembling of the research materials into pieces, parts, elements, or units. With facts broken down into manageable pieces, the researcher sorts and sifts them, searching for types, classes, sequences, processes, patterns or wholes. The aim of this process is to assemble or reconstruct the data in a meaningful or comprehensible fashion.

From the above definitions and for the sake of this study, I prefer *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Longman, 2009: 43, 400) which focuses on careful judgment for a better understanding and efficiency.

### 1.7.5 Discourse

*The Oxford Dictionary* (1977: 211) defines discourse as conversation, a lengthy treatment of a theme or a lecture, whereas *The Cambridge Dictionary* (2008: 400) defines it as

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<sup>20</sup> The *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English* for advanced learners defines "analysis" as "A careful examination of something to understand it better" (Longman, 2009: 400); and "critical" as "something that is very important because what happens in the future depends on it".

communication in speech or writing. Marais (2015: 26) affirms that discourse is an open public conversation or lecture which is carried out within a specific atmosphere to explain an idea or convey information on a subject matter by way of an open interpretation, description or investigation of a component part of a whole. Discourse also includes the presentation of ideas and their relativity in making up the whole in order to gain clarity and understanding of the subject matter.

Additionally, terms such as cross (Gorman, 2006: 803-804), (Hawthorne & Cameron, 2009: 246), church (Lambert, 2009: 879-880), liberty (Mare, 2009: 1034-1035), liberation (Ringe, 2008: 652) and liberation theology (Taylor, 2008: 653), are relevant to the proposed study even though they may not form the basis of the major arguments.

### ***1.7.6 Biblical Hermeneutics (Interpretation)***

According to Drumwright and Osborn (2009: 331) biblical hermeneutics is “the correct reproduction of the thought of another from a different language. Especially when applied to Bible, interpretation has been called hermeneutics”. They further claim that the goal of interpretation (hermeneutics) is geared towards a discovery of the writer or the writer’s thought process or meanings of Bible books with the aim of passing on the meaning to contemporary persons (Drumwright and Osborn 2009: 332).

Meanwhile, Humphreys avows that the word “hermeneutics” is derived from the Greek term which basically refers to “interpretation, explanation, translation”. He adds that when applied to the Bible, it both means a principle by which a text is understood in terms of its original context or historical setting, and the principles and procedures by which a text from one context is made meaningful in another. While hermeneutics encompasses both exegesis and interpretation, the emphasis generally falls on the latter, on making texts meaningful in the present (Humphreys, 1990: 375).

## **1.8 Christological Rhetorical Basis for the Image of the Disabled God**

To interpret the Christological rhetoric which forms the basis for the image of the disabled God, Deland (1999: 48) also uses Christology as a point of departure:

Genesis 1:26-27 declares that “God created humankind in the image of God, according to [God’s] likeness. Image, likeness, refer not to physical appearance but to relationship and activity”. Yet, in God’s supreme act of love and revelation, the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, God incarnate.

Deland's view regarding human creation in God's image agrees with Samuel (1998: 15), who asked whether being created in the image of God means being created limited and whether the image of God in humans is in a sense limited right from creation or just as a consequence of sinfulness?<sup>21</sup> In an introduction to the topic "Understanding Humanity and Disability: Probing an Ecological Perspective," Reinders (2013a: 37-38) argues in respect of the creation of humans in God's image that "God did not only create some human beings in His image for mainstream Christian theology, the invention of a category of sub-humanity must appear as counterintuitive". Furthermore, "from a theological perspective, there is no need to argue for inclusion because it is given in creation, that God did not create only some human beings in his image" (Reinders, 2013a: 43). This then is a call to a closer investigation of what God says in His Word regarding the creation of humans in His own image, which will help to give us a good understanding of human nature and also help to transform negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

Similarly, an understanding of God's image which proposes a Christological relational-revelational view of God's image, should consider the person of Jesus Christ (Thomas, 2012: 143).<sup>22</sup> I concur with Deland, that people are created in the image of God and His likeness, and this can be seen in the image of the vulnerable and disabled God. Furthermore, the image of God can only be clearly revealed in Jesus Christ's cruciform in humility as well as exultation as the perfect place of God's identification (Thomas, 2012: 138). Similarly, Braaten (1976: 114) points out that "the crucified Christ is the inner criterion of all theology". Why would he be confident of such a claim? It is because, if one takes the existential reality away, there would be nothing specifically Christian about the church or about its faith and theology, which have tarnished the image of the disabled God.<sup>23</sup> However, one question that comes to mind is: What about the representation of the image of Jesus Christ who is the disabled God, who created all

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<sup>21</sup> For Samuel, Christ Himself was radically limited because He chose to be disabled and thus limited; that He can help us by relating to us as human persons who will always be limited. He further explains that limitations are in no way inconsistent with the perfection of human personhood. That even in the limitations which resulted from creation's fallenness and our consequent struggle with these limitations, our human personhood is eventually discovered more and more to the point of discovering the image of perfect personhood by discovering the Christ image formed in us more and more (Samuel, 1998: 15-16).

<sup>22</sup> For more on the images of Jesus Christ, see *Who is Jesus Christ? An introduction to Christology*. Liturgical Press Collegeville Minnesota (Rausch, 2003: 1-3).

<sup>23</sup> Braaten (1976: 114) notes that this cross of Christ is not just about the death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, but demonstrates the identification of God with the sufferings of the entire world. Furthermore, in this interpretation of the message of the cross, the alienation of Christ means that Christ has taken on Himself the alienation of anyone who is alienated, because God did so in Christ. It also means that Christ is in solidarity with those who are poor, oppressed or marginalised. In the case of those who are forsaken and abandoned, the crucified Christ, who experienced total abandonment by His father on the cross, knows and understands what it means to be so abandoned, hence, He identifies with their misery.

human beings in His own image and after His likeness? Hence, recognising equality, justice, and dignity of all His creation is not as evident as it should be.

The idea of the disabled God developed because of Christ's wounds from the crucifixion on the cross, the scars of which He still had after His resurrection. In this regard Swinton (2011: 283) draws on Eiesland's experience as a disabled person who was led to re-read Scriptures, particularly to reflect afresh on Luke 24:36-39:

While they were still talking about this, Jesus Himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.

Notwithstanding this image of the disabled God, which portrays the resurrected Jesus Christ as a disabled God, happens to be the foundation of Christian theology (Eiesland, 1999: 60-61). Toombs (1996: 918) concurs with Eiesland (1999: 60) that the resurrected Jesus Christ of the Christian tradition is a disabled God because His hands, feet, and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment. Fast (2011: 414-415) also calls the symbol of the disabled God a reasonable transition, as many would like to see the existential reality of the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ. It is the same Redeemer, Jesus Christ the disabled God, who still bears the wounds of the crucifixion and retains the brokenness in His own glorified body, even after His resurrection from the dead on the cross of Calvary. On that note, Tan (1998: 12) agrees with Eiesland (2009: 236) thus:

It was on the cross that Jesus experienced the ultimate disability.<sup>24</sup> Pinned to the cross, He knew how it felt to be physically incapacitated. The pains which He faced were like the ones endured by those with disabilities. Since disability and sickness were considered preliminary forms of death, Jesus went through an analogous death experience on the cross, He was regarded as a sinner, one who was forsaken by God, an image regularly applied to the disabled.

Rausch (2003: 237) also asks:

Is Jesus the source of salvation for human beings as Christians have traditionally asserted? Here I will answer with a qualified affirmative. Jesus is the source of human salvation, not by some work accomplished or transaction enacted, but as a constituent embodiment of the saving work of God, who speaks the divine Word into space and time and sends the Spirit into history, enabling us to participate in the divine life. We share in this life because of the Trinitarian nature of our salvation, which is always communion in the mystery we identify symbolically as Father, Son, and Spirit.

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<sup>24</sup> According to Tan, Jesus Christ Himself is God incarnated who became a human being by descending into the human contingency, which of course is a disability condition that is, just being human. She further argues that this disability of Christ stems from a wide gap between who He is, what He has and what He can do as opposed to who He became, what He forfeited, and the limitations as well as the confirmations and confinements to which He subjected Himself (Tan, 1998: 11-12).

The above statement ultimately means that the church cannot be different or contrary to what her Lord or His nature is. The church should critically examine her practices as well as her operations based on the Christological framework. If the Nigerian church is truthful, she will admit that she does not completely represent her Lord by exhibiting these qualities of giving access to the disabled and viewing the disabled as created in the very image of the disabled God. However, these practices, when in operation, should be able to include in the church persons with disabilities, and the vulnerable, because all humans are created in the image of God. Consequently, not only are those with disabilities accepted, but they are part of the community of Christ and they are given the opportunity to use their gifts, and not be seen as sin conflated but rather as a symbolic representation of human brokenness and disability, as we all in reality are. This will enable those with disabilities and the vulnerable to be viewed with dignity, as they fulfil their destiny.

### **1.9 Preliminary Outline of Chapters**

This chapter represents a brief introduction to Chapters Two, Three and Four which will undertake critical analyses of the theme. Chapter Five will offer recommendations, a summary of the chapters and the conclusion.

- Chapter One – Introduction to the Study

A conceptual framework of the theology of the cross and the crucified God could uncover the Christological and the theological rhetoric from which the image of the disabled God is formed. Disability theologians do not appear to employ a convincing rhetoric to describe this image of the disabled God. However, this could be realised as they invoke the image of the crucified God in their disability theology.

Eiesland adopts the theology of the cross in her disability theology, which serves as a firm foundation for the works of other disability theologians. This first chapter is a general introduction to the study and focuses primarily on the doctrine of Christ. After the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, He revealed Himself to His disciples with the wounds on His body. The wounds of impairment which Christ bore on His hands, feet, and side, dispel the taboo that encourages physical avoidance of disabilities (Eiesland, 1994: 101) and could liberate both the able and the disabled from cultural norms that discriminate against the latter. Reynolds (2008: 60) calls such norms the “cult of normalcy”, which has been a part of the teachings of church and society for so long. Hence, liberation and freedom may come to the church and society through understanding of the Christological and theological rhetoric which

underlies the image of the disabled and vulnerable God (Reynolds, 2008: 104). It may also result in human flourishing even in profoundly disabling conditions of persons with disabilities as they exercise virtue (Clifton, 2018: 121).

- Chapter Two – A Critical Analysis of Eiesland’s Image of the Disabled God

Chapter Two is a critical analysis of the disabled God in Eiesland’s work, which has a Christological focus. The chapter will probe concepts that relate to the image of the disabled God in the light of the theology of the cross. In her rhetorical submission of her image of the disabled God, Eiesland (2001: 3) argues that “it wasn’t God in a sip/puff, but here was the resurrected Christ making good on the promise that God would be with us, embodied as we are”. This statement helps to establish that all people are created in the divine image of God which is reflected uniquely in each person regardless of the person’s physical status as able or disabled (Eiesland, 2001: 10). For Eiesland (2009: 237), therefore, “Christ’s resurrection offers hope that disabled, non-conventional and sometimes difficult bodies participate in the *imago Dei*”.

- Chapter Three – A Critical Analysis of Reynolds’ Image of the Disabled God as Vulnerable

The third chapter of this research considers the image of the disabled God as vulnerable and examines the ideas of the language of hospitality from a Christological viewpoint which could promote inclusivity (Reynolds, 2008: 165). This Christological view which is biblical and theological may benefit the church if it occupies its ideal position of vulnerability as its Lord does. Reynolds also sees the image of God as including more elusive categories such as creativity, relationality, and availability, which serve as the characteristics of the vulnerable and disabled God. Reynolds may not completely agree with the assertion that all people are disabled, but he stresses that all are qualified to come to the table of the Eucharistic fellowship of the remembrance of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, including those with disabilities. The point of the challenge is the place of weakness within the framework of the vulnerable God. Reynolds further notes the human need for welcome despite conditions of disability and vulnerability (Reynolds, 2008: 19).

- Chapter Four – A Critical Analysis of Clifton’s Reconciliation of Disability with Human Flourishing

Clifton, a disability theologian, reveals the practical reality of the experiences of disability from a critical perspective, and how one can live with disability, experience happiness and flourish despite the challenges of vulnerability, fragility and limitation associated with disability

(Clifton, 2018: 95-96). Clifton's idea of crippled grace is a combination of the experiences of others, personal encounters of disabilities, and studies from different disciplines. It explores what happiness entails and how it may be attained through the symbolic nature of humanness (Clifton, 2018: 122). Furthermore, Clifton shows that knowledge of the experience of disability, may help one to understand disability as a symbol of the human condition, of human fragility, vulnerability and embodied limits. Such understanding could challenge the church to wake up to its existential reality and to capture a true picture of the reality of grace experienced by persons with disability (Clifton, 2018: 122, 180, 184). Bonhoeffer predicted the discovery that the disabled are a symbol representing humanity's fragility in a general sense.<sup>25</sup> The fourth chapter will wrestle with the ideas surrounding Clifton's emphasis on the grace that is available to all, abled or disabled, and that it is possible to experience human flourishing in the midst of profound disability.

- Chapter Five – A Critical Analysis and Summary of Chapters Two, Three and Four

Chapter Five is a descriptive summary of the major chapters of this study, namely Chapters Two, Three and Four. Hence, a critical analysis of disability theology from a Christological standpoint will be done. The chapter will analyse the Christological theological rhetoric which underlies the image of a disabled God, how disability theologians invoke the theology of the cross, and how persons with profound disabilities could experience happiness and flourish in their situations of disability.

### **1.10 Summary**

Having observed the above regarding disability, vulnerability and human flourishing, it is important to note that the crucified Christ remains the main focus in the theological rhetoric of the disabled God, hence the need to focus on how these three contemporary disability theologians portray this image from a Christological perspective. This understanding of Christ's disability can create a new humanity where both the abled and the disabled are in the image of God. Could this mean that all people can experience flourishing despite conditions of disability? In Chapter Two, a critical analysis of Nancy Eiesland understanding of the image of the disabled God will help us uncover her understandings.

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<sup>25</sup> According to Melcher, "The insights that Bonhoeffer gleaned from Bethel, a village that existed to help the weak and the fragile, were exceptionally helpful, he could grasp the fragility of all human life, a common state shared by all humanity. Bonhoeffer's insight was that seeing things from below, gives a perspective that is closer to reality. Thus, living in solidarity with individuals who are underprivileged, allows a perception that enhances one's understanding that all humankind is united in a dependent, precarious existence. This helps to eliminate the notion that 'healthy and strong' is the 'normal' state of affairs" (Melcher, 2013: 268).

## CHAPTER TWO

### A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NANCY EIESLAND'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMAGE OF THE DISABLED GOD

#### 2.1 Introduction

Discussions of the image of God are both fascinating and challenging at the same time, probably because of the perception of what the image of God entails. The idea of perception could explain why the marginalisation, segregation, and oppression of the vulnerable, persists in the church and society. In her book, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Eiesland presents her metaphorical view of “Christ’s disability” through the theology of the cross. She poses some challenging questions that are central to Christology in order to establish a specific discourse on the disabled God and reject the negative conception of disability. Jesus Christ, the disabled God, represents all peoples from every nation, both the abled and the disabled, and gives people hope, integrity, and dignity in the face of the physical mutilation of injustice and ritual bodily degradation, exclusion, and marginalisation (Eiesland, 2009: 243).

Eiesland asks: why did Jesus Christ reveal His impaired hands, feet and side just after His resurrection? Could they indicate the disfiguring vestiges of sin or are they to be subsumed under the image of Christ as the conqueror of death? Should the disability of Christ be understood as the truth of incarnation and the promise of resurrection (Eiesland, 1994: 101)?<sup>26</sup> It is important to understand the motive behind Eiesland’s questions if we argue that all human persons should “participate in the *imago Dei*” (Eiesland, 1994: 101). The disabled God comes not in glory, but in humility and foolishness, a merciful and compassionate presence that suffers intimately from the finite creature. Will the cross be the supreme example of a God who draws His creation near or will the cross engage with humanity and open it up to the promise of love built into creation (Reynolds, 2008: 203-204)?<sup>27</sup> Absoluteness of being or power is not the work

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<sup>26</sup> Here, Eiesland offers a redemptive response to the wall which has excluded the disabled and left them oppressed as a result of the taboo of physical avoidance. The theological implication of the disabled God reveals that Christ’s disfigured side also bears witness to the existence of “hidden” disabilities. Eiesland’s conception of the disabled God arose naturally in response to historical interpretations of the “pierced” side of Jesus, which emphasised the tragedy of innocent suffering (Eiesland, 1994: 101).

<sup>27</sup> Reynolds (2008: 203-204) highlights the idea that human beings are sinners and that God loves us enough to die for our sake. This cannot be achieved by means of a cheap or sentimental love of the cross, but instead by the love which is revealed in Christ’s death on the cross. Eiesland argues that through the cross, Christ suffers with

of the God we have come to know through the cross of Christ (Swinton, 2011: 273). The premise here is that a good understanding of the image of the disabled God will help the body of Christ to readjust its practices, which currently promote marginality and segregation of those with a disability within and outside the church. Thus, a critical investigation of the image of the disabled God is required.

## 2.2 Background of Nancy L. Eiesland

Nancy L. Eiesland was born in 1965 and died at the age of 44. Before her demise, Eiesland was a theologian and sociologist (Martins, 2009: 1)<sup>28</sup>. “Eiesland’s theology, based on Luther’s theology of the cross, enables her to symbolise God as disabled” (Fast, 2011: 414). Eiesland was a brilliant scholar and activist who transformed the landscape of disabilities and theology (Belser, 2015: 177). She was “a first leading character of the liberation theology of disability, she rightly deserves to be credited with such an honour for at least three major reasons. First, her book, *The Disabled God*, which is an inspiration to many people in the field, contains new ideas about theology and disability. Secondly, Eiesland’s arguments indicate a fresh approach to theology and Christianity.<sup>29</sup> Third, she maintains that the segregation of persons with disabilities in the church must stop, otherwise people with disabilities will stop attending church and the church, of course, is incomplete without them” (Reinders, 2008: 165-166).

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others and becomes the disabled figure of God, the icon of a God with disabilities, a God who undergoes physical deformity and stigmatisation for the sake of love.

<sup>28</sup> Nancy Lynn Arnold was born in Cando, North Dakota, and grew up on a nearby farm. Operations to remedy her birth defect began when she was a toddler. At the age of seven years, she was fitted with a full-leg brace, and told by her father that she would one day have to get a job that would get her off her foot, she would, for example not be able to be a checkout clerk. Eiesland was an outstanding student who won a national contest with an essay on the inaccessibility of the rural courthouse in North Dakota after which she organised a letter-writing campaign for ramps in the courts. She enrolled at the University of North Dakota where she became an advocate for the disabled and campaigned for ramps into the library and for accessible parking space. Eiesland was unable to continue with her work after her older sister was killed in an automobile accident (Martins, 2009: 1). Her parents took her to several faith healers, but she was not healed. She and her family joined the Assemblies of God and later she enrolled in Central Bible College and graduated as valedictorian in 1986. After her studies, Eiesland became a minister in the Assemblies of God, but later gradually drifted away from the denomination (Martins, 2009: 1). At Candler University Eiesland studied under the supervision of Rebecca S Chopp. She remembers that Eiesland complained that all Christians focus and profess their concern for the poor and the oppressed, but those with disabilities are marginalised and ignored. Chopp therefore urged Eiesland to write her master’s thesis, which evolved into “the disabled God”. She earned her master’s degree in 1991 and a Ph.D. in 1995, both from Emory University (Martins, 2009: 1). Eiesland is survived by her husband, their daughter, Marie, her parents, Dean and Carol Arnold, two brothers, Neal and Victor Arnold, and two sisters, Katherine Arnold and Jocelyn Gracza (Martins, 2009: 1). Even though Eiesland’s theology did emerge from her disability, an encounter with another disabled person, which gave her a new image of God (Swinton, 2011: 282).

<sup>29</sup> Reinders (2008: 166) notes that, “Eiesland’s theology aims at people with physical disabilities because it targets self-representation, which will be very difficult, for theological and moral claims could speak or do anything for those with intellectual disabilities for whom purposive agency and self-representation must remain empty notions”. Eiesland identified a theoretical framework that could transform Christian symbols (Reinders, 2008: 166).

Eiesland's "work is the most powerful discussion of God to arise from disability studies" in recent times (Martins, 2009: 1). Rebecca S. Chopp<sup>30</sup> acknowledges that "Eiesland is a, if not the, leader of disability studies and Christianity and disability studies in religion" (in Martins, 2009: 1). Eiesland's profound scholarship is acknowledged and has had such a profound influence that her book, *The Disabled God*, is cited widely, especially among the churches in the Atlanta suburbs (Martins, 2009: 1). Eiesland acted as a consultant for the United Nations for ten years<sup>31</sup>. She is one of the theologians who challenged the medical model of disability with new theological insights (Goetz & Bloem, 2015: 243).<sup>32</sup> She is also one of the Christian leaders who express criticism of the church's failure to provide a clear, adequate teaching on what disability is all about (Treloar, 2002: 596). Eiesland's views made people aware of the issues of injustice and oppression in the church and society (Swinton, 2012: 177).

### **2.3 Human Beings in the *Imago Dei***

As mentioned above, it is important to understand the idea of the *imago Dei* (image of God). Within this framework, Eiesland (1994: 101) argues that "our bodies participate in the *imago Dei*." Marais (2015: 323) affirms that "Human beings bear the *imago Dei*". In seeking to understand the meaning of the biblical statement, "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (Gen. 1:27), the doctrine of the *imago Dei* was developed (Holt-Woehl, 2012: 124). For the sake of this study, I wish to discuss briefly the understanding of the image of God as explained by Holt-Woehl from the perspectives of classical and biblical scholars. Holt-Woehl (2012: 124) shows that classical scholars such as Reinders view human beings as created in the image of God, which means that human beings are closer to God than any other living creature because of their capacity for reason and will.

Holt-Woehl (2012: 124, 125) further notes that Luther's thought focused on humanity's possession of reason and will, and that, for scholars such as Brueggemann, the biblical image of God is a mandate of power and responsibility. The understanding of what it means to be a human being must include people with intellectual disabilities and those with mental illness (Holt-Woehl, 2012: 125). Holt-Woehl (2012: 126) therefore presents a broader view of the image of God in which the word "image" refers to the entirety of humanness and not just some

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<sup>30</sup> According to Martins (2009: 1), Rebecca S. Chopp is a feminist theologian and President of Colgate University.

<sup>31</sup> Eiesland helped the United Nations with the work of developing the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities in its convention which characterises persons with disabilities as main subjects with rights, rather than just objects of charity, hence, endorsing the recognition of the spiritual rights of persons with disabilities (Martins, 2009: 1).

<sup>32</sup> See also Creamer (2009); Reinders (2008); Reynolds (2008); Yong (2007) and Goetz and Bloem (2015: 243).

part such as the reason and will. He adds that “As the image of God, they are to mirror God to the world, to be as God would be to the nonhuman, to be an extension of God’s own creative activity in the continuing development of the world” (Holt-Woehl, 2012: 126). This does not require reason and will but the availability to participate in the works of God. Furthermore, “Humans are created for community, humans need community, and humans are called to care for the community. It is as a community that humans are able to reflect God to others” (Holt-Woehl, 2012: 126). The notion of community can be seen as relationship and availability, which is also viewed in the light of the image of God and will be discussed in the next chapter.

In Deland’s (1999: 48) words, “to affirm that humankind is created in God’s image, is to affirm that bodily experiences are revelatory of God.” Hence, the *imago Dei* implies that all human beings are created in the image of God, bear the image of God and participate in the work of God. In this regard, Deland (1999: 50-51) writes:

Images of God dictate who will feel worthy in society and who will feel inferior, who will be respected and who will be despised, who will get easy access to the literal material goods of culture and who will have to fight for those same goods.

He argues that “Genesis proclaims a revolutionary, democratic concept: every person is regal before God; each person has direct access to God and a direct spiritual connection to God and to God’s creation” (Deland, 1999: 51). Deland (1999: 60) further shows that to be created in the image of God is not a call to perfection, but a call to mutual love and support of each other in God. As Eiesland (1994: 101) also asserts, “our bodies participate in the *imago Dei*, not in spite of our impairments and contingencies, but through them”, affirming that “such is the foundation for a revolutionary image of wholeness which Eiesland challenges us to embrace with her” (Deland, 1999: 61).

For Melcher (2013: 267), the image of God in human beings can be categorised thus: firstly, “a natural aptitude for knowledge and love of God”; secondly, “when the Triune God draws the image of God into the dynamic life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”; and thirdly, “perfect actualisation of human potential” (Melcher, 2013: 267). He submits that the image of God is present in every human being (Melcher, 2013: 267). This view, therefore, calls the church to an understanding beyond the opaque and patriarchal cultural view of human beings which excludes and marginalises the disabled, as we shall observe. There is an urgent need for the church to include all human beings, whether abled or disabled, in the opportunity to serve in the church and to exercise their God-given gifts. However, the question of what constitutes the image of God, remains.

Regarding the cultural and church constructions of the ideas of disability, Eiesland (2001: 2) submits that “many people, including the disabled, still believe the traditional myths about the disabled. Some of these negative attitudes have their origins in ancient religious beliefs that regarded the disabled as devil possessed, or as corporeal manifestations of family guilt”. Such beliefs are probably due to ignorance. Eiesland cites a well-known historical theologian, Carolyn Walker, who notes that Christianity’s view of impairment in the Middle Ages was the same as in ordinary life and that disability was seen as another variety of God’s creation (Eiesland, 2001: 2). Walker reasons that it was not necessarily ancient religious beliefs towards disability, but Christianity’s acceptance of the Enlightenment’s medical views, which were so widespread (Eiesland, 2001: 2). Thus, Eiesland (2001: 2) admits that, should the above claim be true, then there should be evidential historical records to such rights in other documents. It is assumed here that, should the disabled be recognised as created in the image of God and offered their dignity, such feelings of inferiority, which have negative effects on their lives, would cease. Hence, the tendencies to marginalise and segregate the disabled will be at their barest minimum. With the above view that human beings are created in the image of God, I would like us to have an understanding of what Eiesland’s understanding of God’s image consists of or portrays.

#### **2.4 Eiesland’s Understanding of the Image of the Disabled God**

Eiesland employs a metaphor to express her image of the disabled God thus:

For me, epiphanies come too infrequently to be shrugged off as unbelievable. Like a faithful Jew who had consciously opened the door for Elijah, each Seder and spun images of the majestic beauty of a Messiah who would shout an order and the universe would tremble, I had waited for a mighty revelation of God. But my epiphany bore little resemblance to the God I was expecting or the God of my dreams. I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is, the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to maneuver by blowing and sucking on a straw-like device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. At this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright. I recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged not feasible, unemployable, with questionable quality of life. Here was God for me (Eiesland, 1994: 89).<sup>33</sup>

Eiesland’s description reveals the ideal vision of the disabled God and its liberating theological intent of disability that incorporates both political action and preconception of symbols (Fast, 2011: 421). Eiesland offers the vision of a God who loves not only the disabled, who have

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<sup>33</sup> Eiesland speaks of what she termed the glimpsed hidden image of God, which enabled her to begin to think and share her contemplations and revelations with her friends in the disability rights movement. Making sense of their fascination with and appreciation of that image was the driving force behind her excellent work of liberation, which is a product of their common labour for justice and the corporate reflection of symbols (Eiesland, 1994: 90).

accepted Him into their hearts, but all people, including the abled. She also depicts the image of the disabled God as a God who is embodied in the image of Jesus Christ, the disabled God (Eiesland, 1994: 90). However, Fast (2011: 421) holds a different view and argues that “With the symbolisation of God as disabled, Eiesland moved beyond incarnational solidarity with disabled human beings and allows the incarnational promise to expand and include a focus on solidarity with this disabled God”.<sup>34</sup>

Swinton (2011: 283-284) affirms that God is a disabled God, which means that disability should not be a barrier to full participation in the ecclesiological and theological constructions of the church. Hence, a political action for justice and change, particularly in the church, becomes a necessity when the true nature of God is revealed. Swinton (2011: 283) further claims that the image of God is limited, deaf and crippled and he draws on Eiesland’s experience as a disabled person, which led to her re-reading of Scripture, particularly engaging in a fresh reflection on Jesus’ appearance after His resurrection in Luke 24:36-39 (Swinton, 2011: 283).

The idea of the image of the disabled God, as well as its relevance, reveals God’s ability to be in solidarity with those who are oppressed, segregated and marginalised, since all humans “participate in the *imago Dei*” (Eiesland, 1994: 101). This further suggests that Eiesland’s image of the disabled God leads to a deliberate recognition of the lived experiences of persons with disability and this can be viewed as a critical analysis of a social theory of disability and of certain aspects of the church’s institutional practices and Christian theology, as well as the proclamation of emancipatory transformation (Creamer, 2009: 86). If this concept of the image of the disabled God is realised, then, the liberation (Eiesland, 2001: 35) and inclusivity (Swinton, 2011: 287) of all humans to participate in the body of Christ becomes easier.

Swinton (2011: 276-295) identifies five God images, namely: “God as disabled”; “God as accessible”; “God as limited”; “God as vulnerable”; and “God as giver and receiver”. He further states that the image of Jesus Christ as the disabled God is not just a surprising discovery, but a theological reminder that we should not think of God’s power or abilities as

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<sup>34</sup> Commenting on Eiesland’s depiction of the disabled God, Fast (2011: 421) states: “She falls short, however, of a truly emancipatory theology by not moving beyond this relationship. Considering the complexity of issues and needs surrounding disability, solidarity can be viewed as a mere ‘Band-Aid’ on the oozing wound of disability. Eiesland seems to miss the true power of the cross as she moves from the incarnation directly to the resurrection in her theological approach to disability. She moves right up to the threshold of this emancipatory power but fails to go through the door. She tugs at the end of the red thread but fails to weave it into the fabric of her own liberation theology of disability”.

simply an unlimited extension of our power or abilities. Similarly, Cooper (1992: 179) explains that “God is disabled in the sense that the reality of the disabled enters into God”.<sup>35</sup> With this in mind, we shall consider impairment as a variable image of God in the next paragraph.

### **2.4.1 Impairment**

As mentioned above, Eiesland regards impairment as part of the image of God; that “in presenting His impaired hands and feet to His startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God” (Eiesland, 1994: 100). She points out that Jesus’ revelation of Himself to His disciples was a tangible existential reality (Eiesland, 1994: 99) and the paradox here is that Jesus appears with an impairment, a broken body, which is represented by injustice as well as sin, but is reshaped into the fullness of the Godhead (Eiesland, 1994: 100). In a journal article, Eiesland affirms that:

The foundation of Christian theology is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, seldom is the resurrected Christ recognised as a deity whose hands, feet, and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment. The resurrected Christ of Christian tradition is a disabled God (Eiesland, 1999: 60; cf. 2001: 3).

In relating to the appearance of the resurrected Jesus, the tangibility of a physical reality is embodied and it is worth quoting again here:

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them. . . They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:36-39 in Eiesland, 1994: 100).

Tan (1998: 12) also remarks that “Jesus’ disability was not a restriction that was as a result of sickness or disease or even something that is a mental or physical impairment, rather, it was because of His becoming a human being through which He experienced weakness, felt pain as well as limitation”. Yong (2015: 86), for his part, argues that “these conventions define both ability and disability in individualistic terms so that God’s redemption of such also gets reduced to their ‘fixing’ in our present life and their complete eradication in the *eschaton*”.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “God feels the world in the way the disabled person feels the world. To call God disabled reminds us of the concreteness of God’s loving presence in the world” (Cooper, 1992: 179). Cooper further asserts that, “the biblical text that serves as a paradigm of God’s concrete, suffering presence in the world is the Parable of the Great Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. There is nothing in this parable that hints of a divine cause either behind the poverty, sickness, or loneliness or in the way that people respond to the poor, sick, and lonely. What is suggested, is that God is present to us in the most concrete way: in the stranger, the poor, the hungry, and, of course, we can add the disabled. Certainly, the Parable of the Great Judgment tells us that our daily decisions have ultimate significance. But it also encourages us to think of God as poor, hungry, disabled, needing help from us to attain the most elementary necessities of food, drink, clothing, and companionship” (Cooper, 1992: 179-180).

<sup>36</sup> “Yet the scriptures suggest (for example Jer. 31:8-9; Mic 4:6-7; Zeph. 3:19-20; Luke 14:15-24) that the eschatological reign of God will include people with disabilities with the marks of their impairments apparent

Bloem (2015: 243) also affirms that the resurrected Jesus Christ bears impairment in His body. However, Reynolds (2012: 34) argues that the word impairment does not necessarily mean disability. Disability is, for example, a submission of visual impairment, although the contemporary world does not see it as such, but needing a wheelchair or medication for a bipolar disorder is a disability. For Belser (2015: 182), “The idea of disability as impairment is central to the way dominant culture conceptualises and imagines disability”.

Creamer (2009: 15), quoting Eiesland, asserts that disability is the consequence of impairment. Hence, impairment signifies an abnormality or a loss of physiological form or function.<sup>37</sup> This essentially has to do with processes of the functioning of the individual person. Creamer (2009: 15) also observes that disability can lead to poverty, for example, if a person is physically unable to work because of artificial barriers of access or the attitudes of people aimed at denying the disabled the right to work.<sup>38</sup> Swinton (2011: 283) also agrees that God is the disabled God who truly stands with the disabled in their physical impairment and social exclusion. The God we worship is disabled; hence, disability is no barrier to being in God’s image and should not be a barrier to full participation in the ecclesiological and theological constructions of the church. Rather, political action for justice and change becomes a theological necessity when the true nature of God is revealed (Swinton, 2011: 283).

To this end, opportunities should be made available for persons with disabilities to name themselves and to display their abilities, as these would give them a sense of dignity and worth. They will also not be viewed as incapable of doing something due to their disabling condition or left with a feeling that something is wrong with them. Eiesland’s submission is that, should disabled people be given power and dignity and as they name themselves and share their

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rather than erased or eliminated. Beates discusses some of these texts, but he assumes that the inclusion of such people in the eschatological presence of God involves their curing. I am not saying that people with disabilities will remain exactly as they are in the eschaton, or that suffering will continue the other side – it will not! But I am suggesting that the redemption of impaired bodies may include traces of the impairments that have marked our earthly journeys (just as these were visible on Jesus’ resurrected body) and, perhaps more importantly, that the healing of disability will involve as much, if not more, the transformation of fallen human prejudices regarding the goodness of God’s creation” (Yong, 2015: 86).

<sup>37</sup> Creamer shows, for example, that a person is considered handicapped when he or she has a damaged optical nerve or an inability to see, which makes one unable to distinguish floor numbers on elevator buttons, thus, hindering navigation without additional assistance; the person with a significant impairment is both disabled and handicapped (Creamer, 2009: 14).

<sup>38</sup> For Creamer, it is important to remember that disability crosses lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age and so on, that these and other life experiences affect each person’s experience of disability, and that sometimes the relationship between disability and other identities is direct, as when poverty or malnutrition leads to a disabling condition or prevents a person from receiving medical treatment or adaptive technologies. Conversely, disability leads to poverty if a person is physically unable to work because of an access barrier or because of a negative attitude towards the person (Creamer, 2009: 15).

narratives with the world, their dignity would not be taken away from them. The full understanding should be that all human beings are not just equal but are created in God's image. We shall now undertake a Christological analysis of the image of the disabled God and its function in the next section.

## 2.5 Description and Function of the Christological Image of the Disabled God

As highlighted above, it is imperative to have a Christological understanding of the image of the disabled God and its functions. According to Eiesland (1994: 99-100), "Christology is the natural domain of contextualisation since the incarnation is the ultimate contextual revelation". She quotes Orlando E. Costas' important observation about biblical contextualisation: "Biblical contextualisation is rooted in the fact that the God of revelation can only be known in history... Such a revelation comes to specific people in concrete situations by concrete means of particular cultural symbols and categories" (Eiesland, 1994: 99). By drawing on this idea, Eiesland essentially makes the claim that "God became flesh in a time and place, even though Christology is fundamentally about human experience and human bodies as partially constitutive of God. Perhaps the above can best be summarised as 'Emmanuel' which means 'God is with us'" (Matt. 1:22-23; in Eiesland, 1994: 99).<sup>39</sup>

Eiesland (1994: 99-100) further asserts that:

The coming of Emmanuel was understood by the early church in terms of the death and resurrection. At the resurrection, the disciples understood the person Jesus for who He really was. Only through the lens of the resurrection, could they understand the meaning and significance of the life of Jesus on earth. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important words were tragedy and sin, but the disabled God, who embodied both impaired hands and feet, as well as a pierced side and the *Imago Dei*. Paradoxically, in the very act commonly understood as transcendence of physical life, God is revealed as tangible, bearing the representation of the body reshaped by injustice and sin into the fullness of the Godhead.

Eiesland (1994: 100) further argues that the resurrected Christ fulfils God's promise of the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, without material form or substance, the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. This, therefore, suggests that Jesus Christ presented His hands and feet that bore the wounds of the crucifixion to His disciples, who were equally His friends, at a specific place and time and to a chosen people and culture. Thus, Eiesland maintains that the resurrected Jesus Christ is revealed as the disabled God. By making this point, Eiesland implies that, as Jesus calls His disciples, who are His companions, to recognise in the marks of impairment their own

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew 1:22-23.

connection with God, their own salvation is in turn recognised (Eiesland, 1994: 100). In other words, this disabled God reveals a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the God from heaven, but also the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is compatible with the experience of disability. The question remains: Why does Jesus Christ bear disability in His body? Does it mean that He too sinned? Even though Eiesland suggests that this was a revelation of a new humanity, why are persons with disabilities regarded as sin conflated or as something gone wrong? To address this question, we shall consider the rhetorical usage of the image of the disabled God and why the church and society need not jump to conclusions about persons with disabilities, since all human beings are created in the image of the disabled God.

### ***2.5.1 Rhetorical View of the Image of God***

In recent times, the concept of disability and sin conflated has constituted another serious negative rhetoric within the church, which cannot be ignored. Eiesland (1994: 70) shows that “The Christian interpretation of disability has run the complete range from symbolising to representing sin an occasion more than is required”.<sup>40</sup> Eiesland contends that the Hebrew Scripture is conflated with a common theme of moral impurities and physical disability. She cites examples which prohibit persons with disability from priestly activities,<sup>41</sup> pointing out that:

The specific physical standards of the passages may not be retained as criteria for today’s religious leadership, but the implicit theology that represents disability as being linked with sin, marring the divine image of the disabled God in humans, and preventing religious service, persists in the church actions as well as attitudes (Eiesland, 1994: 71).

Eiesland (1994: 71) notes that “the New Testament also supports this theme of a link between sin and disability”.<sup>42</sup> However, biblical reports also show that “the causal relationship between

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<sup>40</sup> Eiesland (1994: 70-71) asserts that within the Christian tradition there is a persistent thread which portrays disability as having an unusual relationship with God, hence the person with disability is either blessed or damned: the defiled evil-doer or the spiritual superhero. As is often the case with such starkly contrasting characterisations, neither adequately represents the ordinary lives as well as lived realities of most people with disabilities.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Leviticus 21:17-23 reads: “Say to Aaron: for the generations to come none of your descendants who has any defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is a hunchback or a dwarf, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the food offerings to the LORD. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God. He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food; yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the LORD, who makes them holy” (NIV). She claims that “these and similar passages have historically been used to necessitate the barring of persons with disabilities from positions of ecclesiastical visibility and authority” (Eiesland, 1994: 71).

<sup>42</sup> She gives “the account of the man with paralysis who was lowered by his companions into the house where Jesus was speaking in Luke 5:18-26.” She argues that this story has often been interpreted as a story of heroic

sin and impairment is both supported and contradicted by Jesus” (Eiesland, 1994: 72).<sup>43</sup> Hence, the sin-disability conflation, which desecrates all that is holy, is a travesty of the divine image (Eiesland, 1994: 72). It is necessary to ask this critical question again: Why did Jesus Christ, who is the disabled God, reveal His impaired hands, feet, and side just after His resurrection? Could they mean the disfiguring vestiges of sin? Should they be subsumed under the image of Christ as death conqueror, or should the disability of Christ be understood as the truth about incarnation and the promise of resurrection? If the church were to ask itself such critical questions, would people with disabilities be regarded as disabled because of sins they have committed? We should understand that persons with disability do suffer prejudice, exclusion, and marginalisation.

In this regard, Rachel Magdalene (in Claassens, 2013: 56) admits that the theological idea that human disability, disease and disaster stem from human sin, is ancient and continues to hold sway in some theological circles. This concept has contributed to the terrible abuse and neglect of persons with disabilities and chronic illnesses in religious circles. She further notes that the predominance of such theology remains highly problematic for those who experience disability, illness or any other kind of trauma if they define themselves as religious persons (Claassens, 2013: 56). Taking these insights into account, Claassens aptly demonstrates that what is needed, is a radical change in how we think, talk and act when it comes to disability and, specifically, when it concerns the religious framework for disability.<sup>44</sup>

Eiesland notes another critical notion which she calls “virtuous suffering”, which she claims the Bible upheld regarding people with disabilities (Eiesland, 1994: 72).<sup>45</sup> She identifies passages which support righteous submission to divine testing, which is upheld as a

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helpers and a crippled sinner, but forgiveness of sin as well as physical healing are represented as equivalent: “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘stand up and walk?’” (Luke 5:14; in Eiesland, 1994: 71). Eiesland also relates the account of the man by the pool of Bethesda in John 5:14, who, after he was healed by Jesus, was admonished: “Do not sin any more so that nothing worse happens to you” (Eiesland, 1994: 71). Similarly, the passage of John 9:1-3 is another presentation of a sin-disability link, but this time, it elicits a different reply from Jesus: “As He went along, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (Eiesland, 1994: 71-72).

<sup>43</sup> Pointing out that Jesus this time turns the table by providing an alternative to the commonly held concept of a sin-disability notion, she reiterates Jesus’ statement that the situation was to manifest God’s work in ordinary life (Eiesland, 1994: 72).

<sup>44</sup> Claassens calls for a re-focusing on human dignity that will help in the re-interpretation of biblical traditions for a new kind of speech regarding people with disabilities (Claassens, 2013: 56).

<sup>45</sup> “The account of apostle Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’, as ‘a messenger of Satan’ that was used by Christ as a sign of divine grace (2 Cor. 12:7-10), has been influential in supporting a Christian theology of virtuous suffering” (Eiesland, 1994: 72).

praiseworthy disposition for Christian disciples<sup>46</sup>, such as the early interpretations of the characters of Job and Lazarus, which hold that physical impairments are a sign of divine election whereby the godly are purified and perfected through pains and trials. She rejects the claim that disability is represented here as a temporary affliction that must be endured in order to gain heavenly rewards (Eiesland, 1994: 72).<sup>47</sup> Rather, “the biblical support for virtuous suffering has been a subtle, as well as particularly dangerous theology for persons with disabilities” (Eiesland, 1994: 72). It encourages passivity as well as resignation to institutionalised depression as an appropriate response to divine testing. Eiesland (1994: 72-73) stresses that suffering should not be viewed as a means of purification and gaining spiritual merit, as it not only promotes the link between sin and disability but implies that those who never experience a cure, continue to harbour sin in their lives.<sup>48</sup>

Yong (2011: 340) also identifies some of the notions that the church holds regarding those with a disability which is seen as sin conflated:

There are many reasons why people with disabilities perceive the church as not being particularly welcoming to them. First and foremost are un-interrogated theological assumptions linking sin, lack of faith, and disability, and about healing and curing disability, all of which combine to undergird the biases, fears, and stigmatisations inhibiting the formation of a more disability welcoming church. Then, even given the extensive history of the church’s charitable services to people with disabilities, these have more often than not perpetuated paternalistic postures and practices toward such groups of people. As a result, the “disabled” are not seen first and foremost as people created in the image of God but as “burdens” to be carried.

This quote reveals the careless attitude towards persons with disabilities in the Christian community, which often goes as far as reducing them to mere half humans who have yet to reach full humanity because of their disabilities. This is inhumane and should be stopped and corrected. Hermeneutically biblical sermons that do not segregate, marginalise or oppress, but include, es should, therefore, be preached to all people. Proclamations by preachers and faith healers should be according to biblical principles, in order to correct attitudes towards those with disabilities that render them as inferior or as incomplete human beings, since all human beings are created in the image of God.

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<sup>46</sup> According to Vercruyse (1976: 533), “The theologian of the cross looks, on the contrary, for what the theologian of glory rejects. He teaches, in fact, that penalties, crosses, death are the most precious treasure and the most holy relics, consecrated and blessed by the Lord of this theology Himself, not only by touching them with His most holy flesh, but by embracing them.”

<sup>47</sup> Vercruyse (1976: 533) also states that, “The theologian of the cross understands that the treasure of Christ consists in the infliction as well as the imposition of penalties which are, indeed, very good and agreeable things”.

<sup>48</sup> Eiesland further claims that this practice, emphasising self-sacrifice by women, the theology of virtuous suffering, has encouraged persons with disabilities to agree to social barriers as a sign of obedience to God and hence internalise a second-class status inside and outside the church (Eiesland, 1994: 73).

Eiesland raises another sensitive point of concern regarding what is called segregationist charity. She notes that “the biblical theme of charitable giving has also shaped patterns of interaction between able-bodied individuals and those with disabilities” (1994: 73). Charitable giving becomes an excuse to disengage from issues of human dignity and the deep-seated spiritual needs that pertain to justice and the human quest for meaning.

In this regard, Louw (2014: 4-5) argues that:

...to overcome stigmatisation more than charity is needed. The question is about the character of our involvement. How are we engaged with the being functions of disabled people to be with them in such a way that they discover meaning in life and are empowered to live a dignified life? What is the quality of our compassion? What is the intention behind the charitable act?

I will be bold here, and call on the church to return to the crucified Christ, the disabled God who bears the impairments in His hands, His side and His feet and who sees every human being as created in the image of the disabled God. As Eiesland (1994: 101) rhetorically asserts:

The disabled God repudiates the conception of disability as a consequence of individual sin. Injustice against persons with disabilities is surely sin; our bodies, however, are not artifacts of sin, originally or order wise... The resurrected Christ, in presenting impaired hands and feet and side to be touch by frightened friends, alters the taboo of physical avoidance of disability and calls for followers to recognise their connection and equality. The point of Christ’s disfigured side bears witness to the existence of “hidden” disabilities, as well.

It is important to understand that disability has no connection with sin or something gone wrong. Rather, it is another aspect of the image of the disabled God, far beyond the conception of culture and society, which is caged by norms that view disability as the outcome of something gone wrong or a sin. It is also a point of connectivity, oneness, and inclusivity.

Thus, Barbre affirms that the resurrected Jesus Christ who bears the wounds of impairment, is the disabled God and, symbolically, offers an emancipatory transformation. The image also supports the symbolic reconstruction of the Eucharistic rituals (Barbre, 2000: 377). Therefore, the church, preachers and faith healers should make room for the image of the disabled God. This being said, we shall consider the theological implications of the image of the disabled God in the following sub-section.

### ***2.5.2 Theological Implications of the Image of the Disabled God***

With the realisation of the need for access by persons with disabilities, most church denominations and local congregations have resolved to adjust their facilities in order to create space for everyone (Eiesland, 1994: 20). It is particularly important to create spaces for persons with disabilities so that they can gain access to the social-symbolic life of the church, and the church can gain access to the social-symbolic lives of people with disabilities (Eiesland, 1994:

20, 104). Since the church finds its identity as the body of Christ only by being a community of faith and witness, a coalition of struggle and justice, and a fellowship of hope, her mission necessitates that people with disabilities be incorporated into all levels of participation and decision-making (Eiesland, 1994: 104).

Furthermore, Eiesland (1994: 22) argues that “a liberation theology of disability includes a deliberate recognition of the lived experience of persons with disability”. It is difficult to ascertain who people with disabilities are if the identification is based on shared physical, psychological or even emotional traits. She points out that people who seem able now, may in the near future experience disability as they age, but now, they are the ones who single out those with a disability for differential treatment. She thus argues that necessitates marginalisation and stigmatisation despite the setting, be it medical, rehabilitation, education, social welfare or even church and society (Eiesland, 1994: 24). Within this framework, Eiesland (1994: 29) also clarifies her claim that a liberation theology of disability is a theology of individuals with similar goals and aspirations who identify their unique experiences while also struggling for recognition, inclusion, and acceptance by one another and by the able-bodied society and the church.<sup>49</sup>

In the light of the above, Swinton (2011: 283) affirms that “the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the disabled God, is a gospel of access, insofar as creating access for those on the margins is the Christian mandate”. It, therefore, means that God is an accessible God.<sup>50</sup> Swinton (2011: 283) develops this points by affirming that God is not outside of disability trying to heal it, but deeply implicated within it, and that in God’s very being, God shares in the experience of the disabled such as bearing the wound, coming into human contingency, and becoming human just as we are. Swinton maintains that this identification is not simply the social location of God, but God is alongside and sympathetic towards the disabled. It is an ontological statement about what God is in and of God’s self (Swinton, 2011: 283).

Eiesland (1994: 112) reiterates that, as the disabled God, Jesus Christ becomes a symbolic prototype and opens the door to the theological task of rethinking Christian symbols, metaphors, rituals, and doctrines so as to make them accessible to people with disabilities and remove their able-bodied bias (Eiesland, 1994: 104). Of significance is the Eucharist, which

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<sup>49</sup> Eiesland argues that people with disabilities are rejecting the stigmatised social identity which people imposed upon them, and are identifying themselves by naming themselves (Eiesland, 1994: 27).

<sup>50</sup> Swinton quotes Weiss Block, who calls the church to accept responsibility for its own oppressive practices and to change its structures and theological emphases so that people with disability can find acceptance and inclusion (Swinton, 2011: 288).

Eiesland (1994: 113) regards as the central and constitutive practice of the church's ritual of membership, for the person who can take or serve the communion, must be a real Christian subject. Hence, the inclusion of people with disabilities in the ordinary practice of receiving and administering the Eucharist, is a matter of bodily mediation of justice and incorporation of hope (Eiesland, 1994: 112). Eiesland (1994: 113, 115) contends that, in making the Eucharist a physical practice of exclusion, the church demonstrates a tangible bias against nonconventional bodies and dishonours the disabled God. Through the Eucharist, people with disabilities reject the church's stigmatisation of their nonconventional bodies and call for its reconciliation with the disabled God (Eiesland, 1994: 49, 115). For persons with disabilities, the body is the centre of political struggle, and in recent years they have become increasingly visible and active in public life. refusing to allow themselves to be restricted from public buildings and institutions or discriminated against in employment (Eiesland, 1994: 49).

In this regard, decisive steps are being taken to address the discrimination, marginalisation and stigmatisation faced by people with disabilities in the church, and inclusive strategies are being developed (Fast, 2011: 415) in the light of the church's understanding and acceptance of the significance of Jesus bearing His disability as a disabled God. Yong (2007: 12) is of the opinion that Christ's image of disability reveals a Christological understanding along three lines: Incarnation, Impairment and the Eucharist.<sup>51</sup> In the same vein, Cooper (1992: 180) pictures the disabled God in relation to God's power. He submits that as human beings we only understand God's divine power from our own perspective, but God's power is unlimited, while human power is limited, because He can do ultimately everything, and we cannot. Seeing God's power from the context of disability, beats human imagination, because as human beings, we can only see vulnerability. Cooper (1992: 180) reiterates that if we view God's power from a Christological dimension, we would see that it comes with a fresh reminder that God is with us in all circumstances. God's power works in our brokenness, suffering, and abilities, but our abilities and disabilities are sustained by the same unlimited power of the disabled God, which helps increase our compassion, creativity and richness of life (Cooper, 1992: 180).

Subsequently, Moltmann (2013: 1), commenting on the charisma of disability, maintains that a congregation that does not accept a disabled person, is a disabled church. He relates his view

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<sup>51</sup> The incarnation of the son of God means that Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect without any attraction but despised, and rejected, even to the point of death, which is sinful on the cross. maintaining that in a Christological understanding *imago Dei* would thus mean inclusive rather than exclusive of the human experience (Yong, 2007: 12). Further, "Jesus' resurrected body also bore the marks of impairment" while "the Eucharist also calls attention to the broken body" (Yong, 2007: 12).

to Swinton's (2005: 584) assertion that looking unto Jesus offers us a thick description of who God is and what it means to be a human being. Such a way of looking at one another through Jesus, the disabled God, offers us a thick description of what it means to sit with the marginalised, to befriend the stranger, to offer hospitality to those who are radically different from one's self. Swinton refers to the dignity that Jesus offers, which is unique and different, embodying friendship and community. His kind of friendship is shaped by grace rather than likeness (Swinton, 2012: 185). This is because the vulnerable, defenceless, excluded and marginalised are the brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ (Zerner, 1975: 247), who is the disabled God.

In this regard, Eiesland (2005: 584) observes that:

When denominations and congregations make progress in accepting and implementing accessibility, it usually happens through a subtle but powerful paternalism of the able-bodied church, liberally "welcoming" those of us with disabilities. Even some of the best denominational statements articulating a theology of access still speak in the voice of the able-bodied community, advocating for us, but not allowing our voices, stories, and embodied experiences to be central.

Remarkably, Eiesland (1994: 24) is of the view that the problem of disability is neither the psyche nor the bodies of individuals with disabilities, but rather, it is the system of social relations and institutions, which has accomplished the marginalisation of people with disabilities as a group.<sup>52</sup> People with disabilities are distinguished not because of their shared physical, psychological or emotional traits, but because the temporarily able-bodied persons single them out for differential treatment (Eiesland, 1994: 25).

Another important point raised by Eiesland (1994: 26) is in respect of the role of linguists and anthropologists. The act of naming someone or something grants power to the person who gives the name over the named. She further maintains that rather than the disabled naming themselves, historically, the disabled have been named by medical and science professionals or people who denied their full personhood. These professionals considered disabled persons to be less intelligent, less capable of making the right decisions, less realistic, less logical and less self-directed than non-disabled persons. Thus, capable persons and experts defined the experiences of disabled individuals, resulting in the scarcity of substantial direct experiential information about the feelings, goals, and self-definitions of disabled persons (Eiesland, 1994: 25). This attitude does not, however, offer dignity to persons with disability (Eiesland, 1994:

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<sup>52</sup> She claims that "the physical and psychological restrictions that people with disabilities face are primarily due to prejudice and social discrimination" (Eiesland, 1994: 62).

25). Eiesland (1994: 25) reveals her identity as a person with a disability and reminds us that persons with disabilities have now become the subjects of their own lives, identifying their own needs and ambitions, and naming themselves. They now use language that highlights their own self-understanding as people with full and normal lives, rather than the social stereotypes which emphasise passivity as opposed to dependence. She concludes that naming the experience of disability is no mere exercise in semantics or a matter of personal preference, it is part of the political work of empowerment (Eiesland, 1994: 26).

## **2.6 Conclusion of Chapter**

A critical survey of Nancy Eiesland's understanding of the image of the disabled God is a welcome idea that is like a breath of fresh air of hope and liberation to human beings, especially persons with physical disabilities. Eiesland presents her claim that all humans (including both the abled and those with disabilities) are created in the very image of Jesus Christ, who happens to be the disabled God. The image of the disabled God is not what our cultural myths or some ancient religious speculative beliefs hold Him to be. For theirs is an image of power and perfection, whereas the image of God presented by Eiesland is of wounds that can be seen in the impairment of hands, feet, and side, which signifies disability, even after His resurrection from the dead. This image of the disabled God is what this broken world needs, because through Jesus' experience of our human brokenness after He came into our contingency, our brokenness can equally be acknowledged. The image of the disabled God reveals brokenness, vulnerability, and disability, which resembles our current disabilities as well as abilities.

Actualising this image of the disabled God is a huge challenge within the existential reality of the church. The church, as well as society, must know that this image of the disabled God comes with the responsibility of mutual love that extends solidarity, care, and support to persons with disabilities. The church should also cease one-sided biblical teachings which view disability as sin conflated or something gone wrong. Instead, it should create access for persons with disabilities through the reconstruction of church structures as well as the creation of easy access and employment. They should also naturally participate in the church as well as society, where they can equally be their own voice. These and other forms of support will give them, not just equality, but also dignity and worth. Following the above submission on the image of the disabled God and humanity in the image of God, a critical analysis of the portrayal of the image of the vulnerable and disabled God will be done in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

# A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THOMAS REYNOLDS’ PORTRAYAL OF THE IMAGE OF THE DISABLED GOD AS VULNERABLE

### 3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we established that all human beings are created in the image of the disabled God despite the discriminatory attitudes towards and treatment of persons with disability. In his book, *Vulnerable Communion*, Reynolds posted some timely and critical questions to the body of Christ and society. For example, he asks: “What can happen in our churches and in our daily lives when we encounter not only people with disabilities but also other people who are different in some way or another?” Secondly: “How can we build bridges of understanding and mutuality, fostering mechanisms of support and empowerment instead of barriers?” (Reynolds, 2008: 12). These questions, of course, did not just emanate from nowhere, but from a personal experience as the parent of a child with a disability. Reynolds (2008: 13) “centres his focus on disability and human vulnerability” which he tries to “view through the lens of basic vulnerability” (Reynolds, 2012: 39). He argues that “God reveals the divine nature as compassion not only by ‘undergoing’ or ‘suffering’ with human vulnerability, but by raising it up into God’s own being” (Reynolds, 2012: 42). Hence, he makes it clear to the church that “there is no life that is not of God” (Reynolds, 2008: 151), which means that God is the source of human existence without which life cannot complete.

Reynolds emphasises the need for the church<sup>53</sup> to re-adjust its lenses away from “the cultures and societies which depend and rely upon frameworks of orientation that govern action or reciprocity, and provide for group accord by way of common conventions, norms, and ideas”, marginalising the disabled. He calls attention to a Christological understanding and solidarity towards the “vulnerable, oppressed” (Reynolds, 2008: 136, 208). It is in this regard that Antus

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<sup>53</sup> Hull calls on the church to recognise that people with disabilities are created in the image of God and they are a part of the church of God which is broken here on earth and which corresponds with the broken body of Christ in heaven, because Christ is the head of His church. Hull indicates that therefore suppression of the disabled body today is mostly done particularly in the church, Christ’s body here on earth. Viewing the broken body from a theological perspective becomes an opportunity for the church to open access for all these broken bodies (including abled ones) in her midst, instead of a focus on normalcy or perfectionism which oppresses, marginalises and segregates. The church should be open to other forms of human brokenness (Hull, 2003: 21) because the crucified and resurrected body of Christ points to the suffering which has always been with us, and cannot be separated from us.

(2013: 259) reveals that as human beings, we each embody various levels of ability, disability, vulnerability, strength, power, and limitation in complex and variegated ways that change over time. Even within the general condition of embodied vulnerability, we are not all limited and dependent in the same ways, therefore, we need not speak in homogenizing terms only. Reynolds further suggests that “Christians can think differently towards people with disabilities” and “become mindful to reconsider, so as to alter exclusionary practices and attitudes and thereby promote the full inclusion of persons with disabilities” (Reynolds, 2008: 14, 15). In this way, non-disabled persons can gain access to the social symbolic world of persons with disabilities, helping them the non-disabled reach a point of retaliating their complicity in their sanctioning of social and spiritual barriers to persons with disabilities (Reynolds, 2008: 15).

Reynolds (2008: 18) adds that “wholeness is not the product of self-sufficiency or independence, but rather of the genuinely inclusive communion that results from sharing our humanity with one another in light of the grace of God” and not as in the cult of normalcy<sup>54</sup> which excludes others. The theological implication is that God embraces vulnerability in Christ by entering fully into the frailty of the human contingency by dying on the cross. Thus God is in solidarity with human beings in vulnerability, weakness and brokenness, as further revealed by Christ’ wounds from the crucifixion after His resurrection (Reynolds, 2008: 19; 2012: 42). Reynolds (2012: 39) reiterates that “We do not discover who we are, we do not reach true humanness, in a solitary state; we discover it through mutual dependency, in weakness, in learning through belonging”. This reveals a new humanity as Christ centres His focus on disability by bearing it Himself. The Christological implication is found in “Paul’s thorn in the flesh. This is not to act in a romantic manner with passivity and self-sacrifice, but also drawing attention to the theological bearing notions such as relation, embodiment, wholeness, sin, redemption, hospitality, and nature’s ecclesial existence” (Reynolds, 2008: 19). Moreover, “Jesus Christ is the exemplar of such a stranger, an icon of a vulnerable God” (Reynolds, 2008: 20; 2012: 43). Reynolds (2002: 338) also states that:

Perhaps the love manifested in Christ can be seen as liberated desires releasing itself in a dynamically attuned and indiscriminate love for others and the world. In this way, Jesus becomes an iconic or transparent image of God's own radical openness to what is other than God, an openness that affirms the goodness of being itself in each creature.

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<sup>54</sup> The cult of normalcy follows a sequential natural order which showcases power and its ritualistic claim that being human is being normal, which is a social construct that excludes the disabled because they are viewed as the other (Reynolds, 2012: 217).

This means that love for the other, whether abled or disabled, is key to experiencing liberation.

Similarly, Wannewetsch (2012: 361) also observes that:

When people find the courage to resist distancing themselves from their disabled brothers and sisters and thus resist distancing themselves from the truth about all human life, they awaken to the fact that their own lives are as frail and mortal.

Antus (2013: 258) agrees that “all people must live in common vulnerability and shared dependence among each other”. This view also tallies with Reynolds’ argument that all human beings are disabled,<sup>55</sup> which implies that as people grow, they will come to a point in life in which they will individually experience disabilities in their bodies as they age (Reynolds, 2008: 21). Based on his experiences in life, Reynolds offers his view of the image of God as availability, as creativity and as relationality (Reynolds, 2002: 338; 2008: 179; 2010: 183).

Nonetheless, Reynolds (2008: 50) assures us that, as humans, “we are born to flourish” and “not just to flourish, but to find ourselves affirmed within a larger framework of value and purpose” (Reynolds, 2008: 50). He adds that “when tragedy strikes, we stubbornly resist it as if it somehow thwarts our anticipation of a more fundamental trustworthiness operative in the world”. With regards to human disability and the image of God, Reynolds (2008: 32) argues that “there is a faulty notion of human wholeness which supports the assumption that ends up construing lack of ability as an anomaly, an embodiment of insufficiency and deviance”. This action is capable of marginalising and segregating those with a disability to the point of oppression in society (Reynolds, 2008: 32). It is clear that human “disability is a factor of the cult of normalcy”, suggesting that people with some lack of what the society terms as normal, are also viewed according to a different image that portrays them as abnormal, which is tragic, because it is socially imposed (Reynolds, 2008: 32, 33). Thus, persons with disabilities are seen as liabilities or as victims who are in need of a cure, but disability is redemptive, because God in Christ Jesus embodied it and, as such, He embraced vulnerability, weakness and challenge (Reynolds, 2008: 33, 210). However, there is an urgent call for the church and society to understand the image of the disabled and vulnerable God.

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<sup>55</sup> Remarkably, as noted by Van den Bosch, “Reynolds does not interpret vulnerability within a Trinitarian frame, as Placher and Jensen do. Instead, Reynolds develops his ideas about vulnerability from a sociological perspective: vulnerability is part of disability discourse and of the abject cult of normalcy. From the reflection on and the experience with disability, Reynolds moves to a theology of disability that hinges on the idea that disability is not something less than normal. In theological terms, Reynolds’ approach to vulnerability is quite plain. He defines vulnerability within the frame of creation theology: God creates difference, and God self is vulnerable in His relationship with creation. In this light, the cult of normalcy can be called sinful, and the redemption of Christ implies the turning over of the tyrannical cult of normalcy. Human being, created in the image of God, is called to imitate God (*imago Dei* as *imitatio Dei*) by resisting the cult of normalcy and by releasing transformative power into creation” (Van den Bosch, 2014: 844).

### 3.2 Background of Thomas Reynolds

Reynolds is a professor of theology at the Toronto School of Theology who also “knows disability” and “brings together sociological, philosophical, and theological resources in order to challenge non-disabled individuals” (Fritzson, 2009: 241). Reynolds’ child, Chris, was diagnosed with Tourette’s syndrome and Asperger’s, a disability which his father, Reynolds, claims does not detract from the fact that his child is a precious gift not only to his own family, but also to the community that comes with its own cross. Chris’ disability includes abnormal behavioural, obsessive angry outbursts, and tightly squeezing his fingers (Fritzson, 2009: 241).

### 3.3 Reynolds’ Understanding of the Image of the Vulnerable God

In the previous chapter, we reviewed Eiesland’s understanding of the image of the disabled God, but Reynolds (2008: 176) contends that “the image of God is an elusive category loosely signifying that we are fashioned bodily to be creative, relational and available agents in the world”. In other words, Reynolds moved from the idea of physical bodily impairment to distinct categories through which the image of God can best be described, namely creativity, relationality<sup>56</sup>, and availability (Reynolds, 2008: 176). Hence, we will view these images from his perspective. Reynolds (2008: 182) suggests that “being signifies the fullness of possibility for creativity and relationship”, and that “it is what God is absolute and what human beings reflect infinitely as embodied creatures created in the image of God” (Reynolds, 2008: 182). In his view, welcoming another and relating with the other is the heart of creativity and the relational fabric of the *imago Dei*. Hence, “human beings reflect God’s free love as availability displayed by solicitude towards what is the other” (Reynolds, 2008: 185).<sup>57</sup> Reynolds (2008: 186) also regards availability as God’s invitation to humanity to dispose themselves towards one another in order to see clearly the image of God.

Swinton (2011: 293) concurs with Reynolds regarding the characteristics of God’s image:

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<sup>56</sup> In talking about relationality, Reynolds asserts that “the most pervasive image Jesus uses to mark this work of hospitality is the kingdom or reign of God. ‘Kingdom’ (*basileia*) is a relational praxis, a communal and social metaphor for a realm informed by God’s empowering ‘rule’ of welcome. It is an eschatological ideal, a future hope, but one that is productive in the present, challenging the world’s economies of domination and exclusion not through coercion but by the power of compassionate, gratuitous and unconditional regard – in a word, hospitality. This reign is demonstrated by a love that crosses boundaries, where distinctions between inside and outside become blurred, where one’s neighbour includes even one’s enemy (see Matt. 5:43–45, and the ‘Good Samaritan’ story of Luke 10:29–37). Announcing that such a reign is at hand, Jesus calls people to participate actively in God’s present work of reconfiguring the world. Hospitality becomes a hallmark of the reign of God” (Reynolds, 2010: 183).

<sup>57</sup> Reynolds (2008: 185) asserts that being “created in God’s image, we are beings with the capacity to respect, be faithful to, and show compassionate regards for others. Our responsibility to relationships renders us capable of giving and receiving love. So, availability is not simply a freedom from being causally determined and constrained by relationships; it is freedom for these relationships.”

Creativity, relationality and availability are therefore three primary characteristics of God that reveal something of what it means to be in the image of such a God. Fundamentally, love involves welcoming another into a space of mutual vulnerability. We exercise our freedom by becoming available to others. Freedom is a relationship of availability for the other wherein we bind ourselves to her by offering the gift of ourselves. This is what God does for humanity. Such radical availability requires the recognition of vulnerability. The vulnerability is the core of love; hospitality is a manifestation of the divine. Jesus Christ reveals the vulnerability of God. Hospitality is the Christ-shaped character of God's reconciling love, displayed not in power, but in vulnerability. We worship a vulnerable God.

Consequently, for one to be in the image of God, being creative in relating to as well as being available for others, should be a priority because, by being there for someone, we recognise that all human beings are one and that all are created in the image of God, which comes with dignity. Furthermore,

The image of God means not rationality but relationality; redemption is a result of God's own vulnerability, and the proper Christian response to otherness is hospitality. Reasoning from experience and from the Bible, Reynolds develops a theology of creation, sin, redemption and the church, designed to produce a metaphorical reversal that challenges our culture's cult of normalcy by privileging disability.<sup>58</sup>

However, it is important to understand that the image of the disabled God is a vulnerable image that can be accessed because of the love that comes with it, but because of the rationality of the nature of cultures and society, such an image is difficult to come by.

Deland remarks that "Image, likeness, refers not to physical appearance but to relationship and activity. Yet, in God's supreme act of love and revelation, the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, God incarnate" (Deland, 1999: 48). This goes to show that focusing on the physical image should matter less, since God created humans as relational beings, able to imagine things, with free will, with the ability of creativity, to be compassionate towards other creatures, to be self-aware and responsible for their actions, and with the sense of the future. Thus, the image of God has less to do with the physical "bodily perfection" (Deland, 1999: 55, 48) on which some church pastors, preachers and faith healers tend to focus. According to Deland (1999: 60):

The image of God is multifaceted, with no one image able to represent the whole concept of deity. So, too, the image of God as it is reflected in humanity, cannot be represented completely by any one individual, but only in the corporate diversity of humanity.

Like McKee, whom Deland quoted, he sees the image of God as "the source of power" (Deland, 1999: 73). Another biblical image of God is that of God as "the creator who brings order out of chaos and human life out of the dust of the earth" and of "the king-God-Almighty-Father-

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<sup>58</sup> (Publishers Weekly 19/6/2018)

Protector” (Deland, 1999: 51, 52, 71). Deland cites Bertel’s argument that mutual love is to be created in the image of God and not a call to perfection, as well as Wilke, who identifies the image of God as “wholeness”<sup>59</sup> (Deland, 1999: 61, 62). Similarly, Kelsey Marshall<sup>60</sup> admits that “disability changes my image of God from a God of wrath to a God of love” (in Deland, 1999: 68). Kelsey was able to use his situation to transform his understanding of the image of God to that of love. On the other hand, Hull (2003: 6) states that:

From a disabled point of view, there are difficulties in using the concept of the image of God as a starting point for a Christian understanding of the person. These difficulties have to do with the perfection which is suggested by the analogy. The image of God as portrayed in the Bible is that of a being whose perfect knowledge is attained through the perfection of the divine senses. When Hezekiah prays, ‘Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see’ (Is. 37:17), the assumption is not that God is hard of hearing or has a sight defect. God never has a mobility problem. ‘If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there’ (Ps. 139:8). It is generally recognised today that locating the image of God mainly in the intellect is unsatisfactory because it limits the degree to which slow learners and people with mental disorders can be thought of as being in God’s image. However, even when the image of God is conceived of as residing in such human attributes as the capacity to love or to possess imagination and freedom, there is a tendency to create a kind of sliding scale such that those whose freedom is impaired by disability and those whose capacity to love is impaired by pain are more or less excluded.

Hull claims that the human image of God is usually portrayed as a perfect, normal image. As such, he claims that this portrayal of God’s image comes with some difficulties, particularly when used as a starting point for the ideological understanding of “perfectionism” or “normalcy” deduced from the Bible’s portrayal of God. Hull, by implication, is on a mission to break this hegemonic syndrome of perfection/normalcy because of its exclusion of imperfection or bodies that are different. Thus, he concludes that the image of a perfect God has been used to exclude the disabled, particularly those with cognitive disabilities, from participating in church activities (Hull, 2003: 6). Lastly, Van den Bosch (2014: 836) argues that “vulnerability is an essential aspect of theological reflection on the *imago Dei*.”

Although the views of the image of God vary, as shown above, the focus here is on Reynolds’ understanding of the image of God based on the three distinct characteristics of creativity,

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<sup>59</sup> “Wilke stresses this same point thus: “God’s assurance of our wholeness is based on the divine word of our being children of God, made whole in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ... God makes us whole! And if we are whole in God’s eyes, no earthly person can say otherwise!” For Wilke, “the image of wholeness focuses not on what is missing, but on what is present; each person’s gifts and strengths are the marks of wholeness and of the *imago Dei*” (Deland, 1999: 63).

<sup>60</sup> A person with “hidden disabilities”, Kelsey Marshall became hard of hearing at age ten and developed multiple sclerosis and optic neuritis ten years ago at the age of 33. It was her experience of disability which enabled her to change her image of God and impressed upon her the critical importance of a parent’s love to a child for understanding of God. “I got the image of a God of wrath from my own father,” declares Kelsey Marshall (in Deland, 1999: 68).

relationality, and availability, all of which portray God as vulnerable. If viewed closely, one can establish some connectivity amongst the images. Hence, the God images portrayed by the contemporary disability theologians above, help us to gain a better understanding of the elusive nature of the image, as Reynolds' categories also show. Thus, we shall consider these categories as outlined by Reynolds.

### ***3.3.1 Image of God as Creativity***

In Reynolds' (2008: 180) view, "creativity is a broad term that is filled out by relationality and availability. It means a creaturely participation in God's creativity, which entails connection with openness to, and responsibility for creation". In creativity, the act of divine power played a key role in the creation of all things (Reynolds, 2008: 180. In the words of Fretheim:

If the God of the creation accounts is imaged more as one who, in creating, chooses to share power in the relationship, then the way in which the human as an image of God exercises dominion, is to be shaped by that model (in Reynolds, 2008: 180).<sup>61</sup>

Reynolds speaks much about vulnerability as he regards this commission of empowerment of human beings to share in the divine power of creativity as a blessing in so many respects, including procreation, naming, caring for, guiding, nurturing, harnessing and managing the economy of living things (Reynolds, 2008: 180).<sup>62</sup>

Equally important is the reference to Moltmann's view that human beings are the representatives of God on the earth who are therefore given the position of co-creators, which entails a world-shaping role that makes creation an inhabitable and stable place for creatures to reside (Reynolds, 2008: 180). He further notes that human beings intercede before God for the community of creation (Reynolds, 2008: 180).<sup>63</sup> Reynolds maintains that:

The image of God in humankind is not a stable substance or identifiable trait embedded in everyone so much as a dynamic correspondence with God that plays out variously in relationship to other creatures... we are called to create<sup>64</sup> from chaos to natural order and provide blessing (Reynolds, 2008: 180).

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<sup>61</sup> Reynolds also cites Fretheim who notes that the very first word of God in the Genesis 1:28 account illustrates this notion, when God spoke to the newly created human beings instructing them to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, have dominion and subdue the earth (Reynolds, 2008: 180).

<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, this is a call to be like the Creator, imitating divine creativity to generate new life with continuity in words and action (Reynolds, 2008: 180).

<sup>63</sup> He compares human beings to tenants who are given the responsibility of managing and caring for the earth in trust, so that they can ensure its flourishing (Reynolds, 2008: 180).

<sup>64</sup> God is not so much the cause of things as the lure for things. God lures a world of relatively free creatures towards increasing love and creativity. The creatures' relative freedom or self-determination is affirmed, so that the causal factors in any particular event are understood as multiple. God is a necessary dimension of reality – by sustaining the world's order and by driving creation towards increasing complexity, meaning and value – but not a controlling dimension (Cooper, 1992: 178).

He also asserts that:

The lives of people with disabilities are as varied and different as the lives of those without disabilities. Indeed, it is such difference that God creates as blessed and good, that through encountering it, we meet traces of the divine (Reynolds, 2012: 43).

Creamer (2006b: 64-65) states that “humans are created in the image of God, we must then ask what it tells us about God, that humans are limited. The limited<sup>65</sup> model brings in a new perspective that might show a divine preference for diversity”. His statement reveals that all human beings have some form of limitation or another and that could be the reason why Jesus took it upon Himself to show human beings that everyone needs someone. Van den Bosch (2014: 842) further claims that, “Created in God’s image, human beings are gifted with the capacity to respect, be faithful to, and show compassion to others”. This means that, as human beings, reflecting the image of God is not an option; it is what should be done. To buttress this point, Rosenblatt, as quoted by Deland (1999: 51-52), claims that human beings are:

Instinct-driven creatures: free will, imagination, creativity, compassion, conscience, self-awareness, and a sense of the future. By choosing to make our lives an expression of our best selves, our innately God-like nature, we reaffirm our connection to the Creator, who is our source.

Additionally, Kolb (2010: 71) cites Luther’s statement that recognises God as the “Almighty creator” in whose image all human beings are created. Luther “defined God as speaking God, as a speaking creator, and the human creature as one created in God’s image for community and conversation with the creator” (Kolb, 2010: 78). However, for Lid (2017: 38) “the image of God is vocation”.

The above discussion shows that though people are different, all are created in the very image of God. With this, we move on to the image of God as relationality.

### ***3.3.2 Image of God as Relationality***

Regarding the image of God as relationality, it is important to note that human beings are wired as relational beings created by God (Reynolds, 2008: 180). Accordingly, “Full personhood is neither diminished by disability nor confirmed by ability. Instead, it is a factor of the interdependent relationships we share with one another as creatures loved into being by God and in the image of God” (Reynolds, 2012: 42). As created beings in the image of God, humans

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<sup>65</sup> Limitness is a value ground for theological reflection, as it teaches about the nature of humanity and contributes new divine insight to our understandings of God (Creamer, 2006b: 65).

should relate in mutual interdependence to each other if they are to reveal their ideal nature.<sup>66</sup> Hence, “Creative power is relational power” (Reynolds, 2008: 180). However, Hull (2003: 6) is of the opinion that if people find it difficult to relate with others, it is most probably because of the fear of vulnerability or that they assume that they lack the creative power to be in a relationship. This surely means that they are in trouble, because it is conceived that the image of God resides in relationality, which, by implication, can put such people at a disadvantage. Thus:

Viewed through the lens of basic vulnerability, “neediness” or “lack of ability” is not a flaw detracting from an otherwise pure and complete human nature. Rather, it is a testimony to the fact that we all human beings receive our existence from each other. And recognising this is a source of relational openness to others, who are in turn similarly constituted. Genuine wholeness is found not through bodily completeness or ability but through an acknowledgement of vulnerability that is made concrete in relations of mutual giving to and receiving from others (Reynolds, 2012: 39).

The knowledge that vulnerability is not a flaw would go a long way to dismiss any form of fear that has hindered persons with disability from opening up and has kept them bound from experiencing the freedom in relationship.

Reynolds (2012: 42) also argues that most often what challenges our attitudes regarding our relationship with fellow human beings, is how to rethink what accessibility means. Human existence is in the company of other finite creatures who are vulnerable (Reynolds, 2012: 42). Hence, in view of the preceding arguments, he suggests that for Christ to enter the human contingency, He willingly embraced vulnerability<sup>67</sup> because of love. Christ Jesus took vulnerability, weakness and sorrow to a tragic death on the cross. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us (Reynolds, 2012: 42)<sup>68</sup>, and His action is a challenge to the church and its adherents to do likewise.

Furthermore, “Full personhood is neither diminished by disability nor confirmed by ability. Instead, it is a factor of the interdependent relationships we share with one another as creatures loved into being by God and in the image of God” and “to exist as a finite creature is to be vulnerable” (Reynolds, 2008: 42). Consequently,

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<sup>66</sup> Reynolds maintains that as “the creative power of God extends in relationship with others, so does the *imago Dei*” (Reynolds, 2008: 180).

<sup>67</sup> Reynolds challenges us to acknowledge that vulnerability and creativity hold together equality and difference, common sharing, and the gift of distinctiveness opens out into a relationality of dependence (Reynolds, 2012: 45).

<sup>68</sup> “God’s sharing of the divine self in this way sends a distinct message: God is in solidarity with humanity at its most fundamental level, in weakness and brokenness. Here, God reveals the divine nature as compassion not only by “undergoing” or “suffering with” human vulnerability, but also by raising it up into God’s own being” (Reynolds, 2012: 42).

It is precisely such vulnerability that God embraces in Christ, entering fully into the frailty of the human condition, even unto a tragic death. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. God's sharing of the divine self in this way sends a distinct message: God is in solidarity with humanity at its most fundamental level, in weakness and brokenness. Here, God reveals the divine nature as compassion, not only by "undergoing" or "suffering with" human vulnerability, but also by raising it up into God's own being (Reynolds, 2012: 42).

Reynolds draws our attention to the fact that a created soul is wired in a material body, which implies that embodied human beings are limited within the material body frame (Reynolds, 2008: 181). Since God created the human being to be in a relationship with other creatures (Reynolds, 2008: 181), for the able-bodied to be in a relationship with persons with disabilities, is a given, not an option.

Likewise, Swinton (1997: 24) notes that "such a relational view of the image of God realises that the human is said to be in the image of God when such a human stands in a particular relationship to the triune God."<sup>69</sup> In other words, "relationship is the image of God" (Swinton, 1997: 24). This implies that relationship should not be taken lightly, since in relating to other humans, irrespective of their status as disabled, we are exhibiting the image of God. Within this frame, Swinton (1997: 26) affirms that "God is present within our temporal relationship" and Blair (2003: 74) explains that "we are fashioned spiritually, mentally, physically and relationally after the image of God". Furthermore, "the image of God is something toward which humans may grow, but most significantly, human relationship" (Cornwell, 2015: 113) and "God's creation as good and very good, God as relational, and humankind in the image of God" (Holt-Woehl, 2012: 123). Considering the emphasis on the understanding of the image of God as vulnerable and disabled, the relationship is key. If this component called 'relationship' is lacking in the body of Christ, it is presenting a different image.

For Broesterhuizen (2008: 164), "God is a community"<sup>70</sup> and this signifies a relationship in togetherness without segregation or disparity of any kind, since all humans belong to one body, a community of people. Broesterhuizen insists that for people to reflect the image of God, human beings must exist and act according to their original design in togetherness, not in self-isolation, but in the closely deep relationships with one another for which they were created

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<sup>69</sup> In all of us, the image of God is broken and distorted and the purpose of the Gospel is to bring about reconciliation with God and consequent restoration of His image within humanity, which stands in need of reconciliation (Swinton, 1997: 24).

<sup>70</sup> In this approach, human beings are not defined by individual characteristics, but human nature is seen as essentially social and communal and human personhood is being in communion. Humans are truly persons to the degree that they reflect in their being and actions the personal and communal relationship of the love in Trinity (Broesterhuizen, 2008: 164-165).

(Broesterhuizen, 2008: 165). Van den Bosch (2014: 842) also states that “in Christ, human beings are brought into relational wholeness with one another”. The church is the community of Christ where oneness should be upheld, but this relationship seems scarce, especially between the able and the disabled. This issue of relationship must be taken into consideration and without delay.

### 3.3.3 *Image of God as Availability*

According to Reynolds (2008: 186):

Wholeness is not the product of self-sufficiency or independence, but rather of the genuinely inclusive companionship that results from sharing our humanity with one another in love. This is what it means to be God’s representative on earth, a counterpart to the divine.

He also suggests that inclusive companionship is possible only if all human beings are seen as “precious and marked of dignity in relationships with other” (Reynolds, 2008: 186). Reynolds argues that this attitude of availability must be a self-transcending love that is open towards the other (Reynolds, 2002: 330). Since human beings are created in the image of God, they have to be available to one another in freedom.

Swinton (2011: 293) explains that:

We exercise our freedom by becoming available to others. Freedom is a relationship of availability for the other wherein we bind ourselves to her by offering the gift of ourselves. This is what God does for humanity. Such radical availability requires the recognition of vulnerability. The vulnerability is the core of love; hospitality is a manifestation of the divine. Jesus Christ reveals the vulnerability of God.

Since vulnerability is the core of love and hospitality towards the other, it should be something worth exercising or vying for without fear of contradiction, as it ultimately reveals the image of God. Doing the contrary also suggests that human beings who are created in the image of God, do not seem to actualise this point of being available in love towards the other unless there are personal benefits to the persons who avail themselves to the benefit of the other out of love.

On this point, Louw (2014: 9) cites Reynolds’ statement that “the moral fabric of love” is availability. Iozzio (2008: 400) also remarks that “love’s availability to others is a dynamism of respect, fidelity, and compassion that affirms by creating and preserving space for others to be in their own right, on par with everyone else”. In *Vulnerable Communion*, Reynolds (2008: 184) argues that human beings are created as supreme beings with the sole purpose to love God, and that “availability is not a freedom from being causally determined and constrained by our relationships; it is a freedom for these relationships” (Reynolds, 2008: 185). He points

out that “freedom is a relationship of availability for the other whereby we bind ourselves to her by offering the gift of ourselves” (Reynolds, 2008: 185).

For Sugden (1998: 30), the availability of physical and spiritual access must first begin with the community’s recognition of the need for spiritual access. Hence, physical access will not happen because the right step has not been taken, for if it is taken, then it should also make the physical a priority. This ultimately means that the spiritual can be considered the foundation of a solid building. We shall now consider the category of God’s image as creativity.

### **3.4 Envisaging the Function of the Christological Image of the Vulnerable and Disabled God**

As already noted, the Christological image of the disabled God has nothing to do with the most unfortunate or glorious aspect of an existential reality within this frame, but with the cross of the crucified Christ. Reynolds (2008: 203) affirms that:

God comes not in glory, but in humility and foolishness, a merciful and compassionate presence that suffers with the finite creature in closeness, not in distance. The cross is the supreme example of a God who draws near, not to conquer or vanquish suffering and tragedy, but to engage it and open it up anew to the promise of love built into creation.

As shown above, the Christological image of the disabled God has to do with relationship, and to relate, is to be vulnerable, that is, to be willing to be harmed or injured for the sake of others because of love. Reynolds (2008: 204) agrees with Eiesland that “through the cross, Christ becomes the disabled figure of God, the icon of a God with disabilities, a God who undergoes physical deformity and stigmatisation for the sake of love.” Thus, “through the cross, God shows solidarity with the plight of those suffering from social, economic, and social-political oppression” (Reynolds, 2008: 205-206).<sup>71</sup> His view of Jesus’ solidarity with humanity’s broken world challenges humans to respond to the plight of those with a disability. When Jesus was disabled on the cross, He did so willingly by subjecting Himself; He was not forced to do what He did (Reynolds 2008: 207-208). That is why, even in His resurrected body, He still bears the wounds of impairment to show His solidarity with humanity. If Christ was not available in His love for humanity, He would not have been able to relate in solidarity with human beings in

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<sup>71</sup> This solidarity effectively reverses any and all human economies of exchange based upon production and ability (Reynolds, 2008: 206).

their suffering.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, He was able to create a new humanity through powerlessness (Reynolds, 2008: 205). Reynolds (2013: 291) explains that:

The consequence is a remembering of ourselves differently as a church, a vulnerable communion, an inter-corporeal belonging comprised of many different kinds of bodies. Not only can the past be represented in inhabitable ways for persons with disabilities, reclaiming vulnerable embodied experience beyond concealment or shame, but the past can be foregrounded through the lens of disability to make possible new ways of being together, members of one another as the body of Christ.

Reynolds' claims further confirm that all humans have one thing in common and that is vulnerability. Vulnerability binds people together. It is inescapable that all human beings are born, live their lives and eventually die as vulnerable creatures that are exposed to vulnerability; hence, in need of each other in love as they grow to experience flourishing by caring for others (Reynolds, 2012: 38). This invariably means that vulnerability is worth desiring because it creates access for others into our space or to give and receive help. On the other hand, "By projecting our own fear of vulnerability onto another, we become cut off from the wellspring of our own flourishing: mutual dependence. We deny the other, and so, ourselves" (Reynolds, 2012: 41).

Considering the Christological image of the vulnerable and disabled God in *The Crucified God*, Moltmann affirms that Christ revealed His identity and became the identity of those who have lost theirs and are deprived of their humanity. Moltmann argues that Christ identified with the rejected as well as despised of society to the extent that He was easily recognised amongst the disabled such as lepers, the rejected, the sick, the oppressed, the segregated and the marginalised (Moltmann, 1993: 27). Moltmann stresses that in the community of the people of Christ, all kinds of individuals should be represented, including the strong and the vulnerable and weak, the high and low, as well as the educated and uneducated. This is because before God all humanity is understood to be equal and significant, while everyone has a special and momentous role to play. No one is unimportant, everyone is useful, whether disabled or abled (Moltmann, 2013).

The crucified Christ did not just assume humanity, but also the misery of humankind, to heal it, since all are made in the likeness of the crucified Christ. His coming into human existence is His solidarity with humanity in vulnerable love and the restoration of dignity. Christ restored

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<sup>72</sup> "In the moment when it appears that Jesus can do nothing, His ministry collapsed, and His disciples scattered, Jesus' availability to humanity, such that tragedy is incorporated into the divine life. In Christ, the truly human person, God takes up suffering of the world" (Reynolds, 2008: 205).

dignity to human beings through solidarity and His identification with humanity in brokenness and vulnerability (Moltmann, 2013: 1). Similarly, Paul the Apostle discovered the power of God not just in areas of personal strength, but also in vulnerability, weakness, ill-treatment, suffering, and persecution. However, Paul's experience of Christ's sufferings was meant to influence others. As stated in 2 Corinthians 13:4, even if we are weak and vulnerable in Him, we shall live with Him by the power of God (Moltmann, 2013: 1; cf. Deland, 1999: 55; Kolb, 2010: 83; Reynolds, 2012: 41; Melcher, 2013: 269).

Louw also asserts that "the theology of the cross once again emphasises the solidarity of God in the midst of the history of suffering".<sup>73</sup> Thus, "it is in pathos that God reveals Himself in such a way that He becomes involved in loving solidarity with human suffering" (Louw, 2014: 8). The Christological image of the disabled God is found in relationality, creativity, and availability, because it is accomplished in "companionship and complete identification of the forsaken" (Louw, 2014: 7). This means that being in a relationship with God, means being in solidarity with those whom society chooses to oppress (Swinton, 2011: 304; cf. Deland, 1999: 62). In this regard, we shall consider Reynolds' rhetorical understanding of the image of the vulnerable and disabled God.

### ***3.4.1 Reynolds' Rhetorical Understanding of the Image of the Disabled and Vulnerable God***

The rhetorical understanding which underlies God's image as vulnerable is revealed by Reynolds (2008: 19) thus:

Such vulnerability that God embraces in Christ, entering fully into the frailty of the human condition, even unto a tragic death. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Sharing the divine self in this way sends a distinct message: God is in solidarity with humanity at its most fundamental level, in weakness and brokenness. This is not to romanticise weakness. Rather, here God reveals the divine nature as compassionate, not only by undergoing or suffering from human vulnerability, but also by raising it up into God's own being.

It is important to clarify what is meant by "vulnerability." According to Reynolds (2008: 108), "vulnerability is derived from the Latin word *vulnere*, meaning to injure or harm. Human beings are open to wounds" which means "to love is to be vulnerable" (Reynolds, 2008: 121), and our existence as finite creatures is accompanied by vulnerability (Reynolds 2012: 42). Jesus Christ came into the human realm through His embrace of vulnerability because of His

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<sup>73</sup> "Moltmann's theology of the cross is based on the premise that if the suffering on the cross is in fact a Messianic suffering, then God Himself is involved in the suffering. By this premise, Moltmann breaks away from Aristotle's metaphysical theistic view of God as being immovable, apathetic and unchanging" (Louw, 2014: 7).

love.<sup>74</sup> Reynolds (2008: 204) reiterates that a vulnerable God suffered by sharing with His creatures, which necessitates the affirmation of human creatureliness from above. God became vulnerable to help us, which requires that as humans we too should be willing to become vulnerable, just as He was.

Invariably “God’s creativity and providential presence are vulnerable” (Reynolds, 2008: 165). Here we see creativity, relationality and availability according to the image of God. This kind of vulnerability is the capacity to suffer and take up the burden of the other, that is, giving oneself by being relational and available to the other (the broken world or disabled) without quitting or resigning, and in warm, loving embrace (Reynolds, 2008: 165). In this rhetoric, “God cares for creation; God is pained and angered; God empathises and mourns; God has compassion and gives up the divine self; God suffers with, and for or on behalf of the people” so that, in human terms, we will have understanding (Reynolds, 2008: 165). Thus, “vulnerability is embodied and human in God’s self-revelation through Jesus Christ, poignantly culminating in the weakness and suffering of the cross” (Reynolds, 2008: 165) and, looking intently at the cross of Jesus Christ, all that can be vividly seen, is God’s vulnerability, which basically means love (Reynolds, 2008: 165).

On vulnerability as love, Reynolds (2008: 136) sees love as being available for another, which ultimately means respect, fidelity, and compassion that streams from an unconditional regard for another. The natural human relational tendency is an impossible accomplishment, but the love which always exists within human relationships is possible as a free gift to the other, and it is potentially inborn in humans (Reynolds, 2008: 137). It is worthwhile for human beings to explore this inborn gift in themselves and express it by being relational, available and creative. Reynolds (2008: 138) maintains that “vulnerability is a gift radiating with an unconditional power that can perhaps best be called divine” and that “loving another is a kind of conversion to God” which comes as “human beings seek welcome, a place called home” (Reynolds, 2008: 139). Human life seeks more than survival alone. Rather, “it seeks to flourish and find itself acknowledged within the larger framework of value and purpose insofar as life seeks delight in living, and delight blossoms most fully in the dance of relational mutuality and love” (Reynolds, 2008: 139-140). Reynolds, quoting Stanley Hauerwas, agrees that:

Our neediness is also the source of our greatest strength, for it requires the cooperation and love of others from which we derive our ability not only to live, but to flourish. Living out this reality

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<sup>74</sup> Christ Jesus took upon Himself vulnerability, weakness and sorrow, as He met a tragic death on the cross. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us (Reynolds, 2012: 42).

is a source of genuine good, for it entails caring for others in their disabilities as essential, not only for our own flourishing, but for the common good of the communities in which we flourish (Reynolds, 2008: 107).

Next, we shall consider the image of the vulnerable and disabled God from a theological perspective.

### ***3.4.2 Theological View of the Image of God***

The issue of theodicy is raised by Robert Massie who asked the questions: “If a healthy child is a miracle of God, who created the imperfect child? Why would God create imperfection? Especially in a child? Especially in our child?” (in Reynolds, 2008: 31).<sup>75</sup> In addressing these questions, Reynolds (2008: 32) argues that:

If we affirm a God who wishes to eradicate suffering and whose power is able to undo suffering, it stands to reason that there must be divinely ordained grounds for why some experience tragedy to a degree that others do not, perishing or remaining broken in ways that others are not. Could it be related to a person’s lack of faith? Could it be that God has a broader, higher purpose to serve by exposing some to unremitting loss and pain or fashioning some with bodily defects and inabilities? Indeed, perhaps some must endure personal suffering and anguish in order to cultivate sympathy and love in others. Or perhaps suffering reflects God’s way of nurturing moral advancement, an instrument of eventual blessing for the sufferer, for others, or both. Perhaps affliction is a crucible in which virtue and character are formed, becoming an example or inspiration for others.

This means that human beings are limited and should not try to explain every situation of suffering and vulnerability which people experience in life with the assumption that it is a result of something which has gone wrong.

Suffice it to say that offering responses to the questions above is theologically wrong. Erroneous teachings abound with different pictures that trivialise suffering and explain it away as a problem to be solved rather than faced from a positive standpoint and dealt with in a practical manner (Reynolds, 2008: 32). Reynolds (2008: 32) offers two practical responses to these situations, namely “presence” and “relationship.”<sup>76</sup> The common responses above present a false redemptive representation of the ever nearness of the presence of God in the midst of brokenness and those amongst us who experience vulnerability in solidarity. Of course,

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<sup>75</sup> These and many more questions are often asked by parents of children with disabilities or people with disabilities, especially in situations or conditions of suffering. They cry out, “Where are you God? why me?”, of “Why did God make me so?” (Reynolds, 2008: 31). Reynolds’ response is that there is the need for availability, especially when there is social exclusion, emotional outbursts, educational failures, or uncontrollable situations as in his son’s life (Reynolds, 2008: 31).

<sup>76</sup> Reynolds asserts that “another person is not a problem, but a presence whose call for affirmation elicits the moral obligation to listen and pay attention, to show compassion in a way that reflects back to them their distinct creaturely beauty and value” (Reynolds, 2008: 32). The reality of suffering can only be recognised in close association with the other, especially when it has nothing to do with the person who has willingly come to the disabled person. Reynolds, in the words of Stanley Hauerwas, asserts that the real moral task requires a relationship of interdependence, not in reasoning propositions (Reynolds, 2008: 32).

presence does not remove such vulnerability or eradicate the brokenness, neither does it embrace it (Reynolds, 2008: 32; cf. Iozzio, 2008: 399). Such responses portray disability as a freakish spectacle to be shunted away from the ordinary space of public life, resulting in the marginalisation of persons with disabilities, even to the point of oppression (Reynolds, 2008: 32). However, people need to accept vulnerability as part of life and know how to deal with it, rather than to completely reject it because they believe it is a result of something that has gone wrong.

Because “disability is a factor of the cult of normalcy” (Reynolds, 2008: 33),<sup>77</sup> it is often represented negatively through verbal diminishment with terms such as freak, cripple, retard, idiot, imbecile, spaz, and so on – in the same way that disability is represented negatively in many parts of the Bible, as per Reynolds quoting McCloughry and Morris (Reynolds, 2008: 34). Reynolds, therefore, calls our attention to this critical question: “Is there a perspective in Scripture that celebrates diversity and the life of all people made in the image of God?” (Reynolds, 2008: 34). He concludes that this requires “a theological hermeneutic of disability” which compares biblical texts which are harmonically related to and at some point also opposed to one another so as to find a path for them that is theologically suitable for a fruitful and better understanding (Reynolds, 2008: 35).<sup>78</sup>

Reynolds (2008: 36) further uncovers some denigrating notions of disability from widely held beliefs with their roots in ancient Babylonian and Egyptian cultural beliefs which view disability as an evil omen or the product of an evil spirit. Disability is regarded as a product of sin, as God’s curse or punishment. Whereas the Hebrew Bible portrays disability as sin conflated<sup>79</sup> and the New Testament shows disability as sin conflation, though there are cases

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<sup>77</sup> Reynolds argues that the disabling aspect is the way in which communities have set standards as well as norms that manifest in what the abled-bodied claim to be the ideal standard, without critically looking at the very image of God in which the human being is created. The result is what he calls the cult of normalcy, which projects a specific image on those who do not meet or who disrupt the *status quo*. Disability is therefore viewed as an anomaly that should be corrected or cured. Although other communities/societies or families view disability as a gift or a strength, disability is really not about disabled people, but about us who set these specific standards without truly considering the image in which human beings are created, even the image of God (Reynolds, 2008: 33).

<sup>78</sup> Reynolds explains that the various biblical writers are from various socio-cultural and political frameworks and these texts are not written at the same time or in the same place. Therefore, it is important to compare Scriptures and to offer interpretations of disabilities to our contemporary times which will counter the unproductive attitude towards those with disabilities within the community of humanity, who are created in the image of God (Reynolds, 2008: 35).

<sup>79</sup> “A long tradition relates disability to sin and desecration. In the Jewish Bible disability has a connotation of impurity. Leviticus 21:17-23 forbids persons with a physical defect to approach the sacred places, because they would profane the holy things. Even the sacrificial animal should be male, perfect and unblemished. In a careful analysis of the Jewish texts, not only the Jewish Bible, but also rabbinical writings and the Talmud, Judith Abrahams shows that physical and psychological perfection was seen as prerequisite for a relationship with God.

of ambiguity in most of Jesus' healing ministry, which also function to confirm His Christological identity (Reynolds, 2008: 36-37). Hull (2003: 6) has this to say concerning the image of God and sin conflation:

It is agreed that the image of God has been defaced by sin, but the problem is that, due to a persistent tendency to infer inner sinful states from outer imperfections, disabled people tend to be regarded as particular evidence of the fall of Adam and Eve. This is why the eschatological vision describes the removal of disabilities. 'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy' (Is. 35:5-6). Because God is perfect, the image of God must be found in that which is perfect, or in that which is moving towards perfection. The problem lies in the fact that divine perfection is imaged upon or is a projection of the ideals of a perfect human being or a perfect human life. It is this convergent or unequivocal model of perfection, this implicit refusal to acknowledge the multiplicity of the genuinely human which leads many disabled people to search for a different starting point for a Christian theology of the person.

Thus, understanding Reynolds' portrayal of the elusive category of the image of God is imperative, because it challenges the thought pattern which resides within the limitation of the perfection of God and which excludes and segregates others.

Another notion that relates to disability is the issue of lack of healing<sup>80</sup> which suggests a lack of faith on the part of persons with disabilities. In the gospels, when Jesus healed he usually proclaimed: "Your faith has made you whole". Reynolds argues that such remarks can be very dangerous (Reynolds, 2008: 37). Clifton agrees that "identifying disability with sin, is inherently demeaning" (Clifton, 2015b: 769). Therefore, it is important to oppose this notion of demeaning people with disabilities simply because of ignorance of the true image of the vulnerable and disabled God.

People with disabilities are not sick, but illness can result in disabilities (Reynolds, 2008: 37). Disability is socially constructed, and it gives license to some of the marginalising and segregatory actions against persons with disabilities in society. Hence, disability is viewed as a result of personal tragedy or body-gone-wrong and promotes beliefs in the presence of evil forces responsible for such disabling conditions (Reynolds, 2008: 37).<sup>81</sup>

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This perfection was embodied in the male, free and learned priest without any defect, who stood in sharp contrast to the disabled – the mentally retarded, physically disabled, deaf, and blind (Broesterhuizen, 2008: 154).

<sup>80</sup> According to Treloar (2002: 600), "Bill stated that his lack of a biblical foundation for understanding of disability allowed Satan to tempt him years earlier with thoughts that God was punishing him through failure of miraculous healing for his daughter, Cathy. He believes that pastoral teaching on disability would provide a biblical foundation for understanding why God does not always heal, and help to alleviate spiritual distress and turning away from God".

<sup>81</sup> Luther famously typifies this approach as he suggested that a mentally retarded boy be choked to death because the boy was a body mass that did not have a soul but rather was an instrument of demonic activity (Reynolds, 2008: 38).

### 3.5 Conclusion of Chapter

For the church to embrace the image of the disabled and vulnerable God, she needs to understand that her call and her task is to create order from chaos, to impart blessings and to fulfil her mandate as builder of the bridges of mutuality and understanding which foster the mechanism of inclusivity, support, and empowerment for vulnerable persons with physical as well as mental disabilities. Therefore, encountering people with disabilities is, in other words, encountering traces of the divine. Full personhood is neither diminished nor confirmed by ability, but interdependent relationality. The church should bear in mind the image of Jesus Christ as vulnerability. This image of God is grounded on creativity, availability, and relationality as stated above and if the church is to reflect these traits, she must make herself available to all people, especially to those who are disabled, and must discard the cult of normalcy. The church should, in her advocacy, preach as well as teach a biblical hermeneutics which promotes friendship and equality amongst people and the understanding that human beings created in the image of God are meant to flourish and reflect the image of God in their lives despite disabilities.

Considering that God's image exceeds the mere physical perfection created by the cult of normalcy, the church needs to grant access to those who, for a long time, have been relegated to the background because of disabilities. The church should stress that disability is not as a result of sin or anything going wrong, but disability is another image of God, hence, the need for the church to embrace it and create opportunities for those with disabilities to also flourish in her midst. If the church is Christ's, then she should recognise that Christ restores dignity to humanity in solidarity with human brokenness and vulnerability; and the church should do likewise. God's power is found in places of vulnerability and not just in places of strength.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SHANE CLIFTON'S RECONCILIATION OF DISABILITY WITH HUMAN FLOURISHING

#### 4.1 Chapter Introduction

From the discussion of Nancy Eiesland's understanding of the disabled God above and Thomas Reynolds' notion of the image of the vulnerable and disabled God, it is clear that the image of God is an elusive category. Jesus bore disability in his hands, feet, and side. One wonders why and how a perfect and almighty God bears disability. What does it signify and how can persons with profound disabilities have hope and experience flourishing in their situations? Can persons with disabilities ever experience happiness and flourishing even in their conditions of profound disability?

Shane Clifton relates his experiential reality of disability with human flourishing in his book, *Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics, and the Good Life*. He shows that when people are said to have a disability at any point in life, the thought is usually, "they'd be better dead" than be alive with such a condition<sup>82</sup> (Clifton, 2018: 1; 2013a: 348). Clifton's claim regarding disability is not baseless because most persons with disabilities "are also told by the charismatic preachers and motivational speakers that to concede to the constraints of disability, is to fail in faith" (Clifton, 2018: 1; cf. Sugden, 1998: 28; Yong, 2011: 340). However, this contradicts the reality of human life. In her view of health as human flourishing or well-being, South African systematic theologian Nadia Marais quotes Moltmann who claims that "when human flourishing becomes equated with health or 'well-being,' such as in the World Health Organisation's definition of health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being', it becomes highly suspect because it proclaims a utopia or 'a life without suffering, happiness without pain, and a community without conflicts' which simply does not exist"

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<sup>82</sup> Spinal-cord injury entails the loss of sensation and movement, but it is also the distortion of neurological function. Normal sensation is replaced by permanent neuropathic pain (that feels like burning skin) and arthritic-type aches, and the ability to decide what and when to move is replaced by spasms and uncontrolled bladder and bowel activity. It is a catastrophic injury that impacts every aspect of life: the initial terror of finding oneself trapped in bed in ICU is followed by months of hospitalisation and years of rehabilitation, which eventually give way to a stable disability that requires ongoing medical intervention and care. This understandably creates difficulties for family relationships (and sexuality), vocation, and recreation. This process inevitably involves a loss of independence, and so impacts one's sense of self (Clifton, 2015a: 767). Clifton asserts that in his own experience of disability, however, he found that disabled people do not want to be helped to die. Instead, they seek the opportunity to live and to do so to the fullest extent possible. He further argues that he is not now and has never been suicidal, but he has certainly struggled to be happy (Clifton, 2013a: 348).

(Marais, 2015: 312). Marais' statement simply means that human life is not a perfect life without challenges, just as this world is not a perfect place without trouble or woes. Hence, the need for a critical observance of the preaching and teaching that sometimes misguides people, as it is not realistic and moreover weakens faith and prevents those with a disability from seeing themselves as created in the image of God.

Clifton comments further on the prevailing myopic view which only puts pressure on disability, happiness, and faith, resulting in self-contradiction simply because of a narrow perception of reality (Clifton, 2018: 1). He notes that "to reflect on disability is to explore the fragility and potency, dependence and independence, constraints and possibilities, hardship<sup>83</sup> and joys" which are part of everyday human life (Clifton, 2018: 1; cf. 2015a: 782). Clifton's central aim in writing this book is to give hope<sup>84</sup> to persons with disabilities and to make people aware that disability serves as a symbol of the human condition. Therefore, it is important for them to seek understanding of happiness in their conditions of disability and to also take advantage of their experiences in order to attain happiness in the phase of disability. By so doing, they are able to show that people can live well in the face of life's challenges and disability is central to human experience (Clifton, 2018: 2-3; cf. 2017: 60).<sup>85</sup> Even then this reality is difficult to accept but requires someone with courage like Belser to acknowledge his/her disability as own identity.

On the acceptance of one's identity as disabled, Belser (2015: 181) states that:

Disability is a vital part of how I know myself, how I have come to know my world. It is central to my embodied sensibility, my politics, and my passions. Strip away disability, and you strip away a depth of my identity, a source of who I am.

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<sup>83</sup> Clifton (2018: 2) asserts that the human body is inherently fragile, at risk of illnesses and diseases as well as disabilities and permanent disability, which may happen by accident, or as we age, even though it is not easily admitted as such. The problem of pain is not pain *per se*. Pain is a survival mechanism that functions to show us our limits; nowhere is this more obvious than with a spinal-cord injury, where the absence of the capacity to feel certain pains is itself a danger. The issue, then, is not pain, but suffering, which is prolonged hardship (physical, psychological, and social) that serves no meaningful purpose (Clifton, 2015a: 766)

<sup>84</sup> "While the theological virtue of hope in God can be unlimited – is anything impossible for God? in application to living with a disability, it exists in the mean between naive optimism and nihilistic despair. Thus, hope enables a person to be realistic about their situation – knowing that fragility and hardship are always companions to the joys of life – but not defined by it. Hope transcends the limits of dependency, paralysis, and a wheelchair; the virtue reaches for a future that defies the constraints of the present" (Clifton, 2015a: 782).

<sup>85</sup> In arguing about human experience in the face of disability, Belser, shows that "a future with no place for disability is an impoverished future, a future that shuts out important dimensions of human experience, a future that forecloses the integrity and vitality of disabled lives... a future that has room for disability and difference, where disability is preserved as a valuable dimension of the human experience" (Belser, 2015: 181).

The above statement is a challenge and a wake-up call to persons with disabilities to accept their identity as created in the image of God and allow themselves to flourish in life because no one will embrace their identity on their behalf.

Clifton's *Crippled Grace* brings into conversation three areas of study that have underlined his journey as a person with profound disability namely the virtue<sup>86</sup> tradition, disability studies, and Christian theology. Hence, he claims that "in discussing virtue and flourishing, grace is always the view" (Clifton, 2018: 5, 6; cf. Marais, 2015: ii). He also sees disability as an approach that has multiple and connected components of a whole, which can be disputed. He recognises two models of disability, the medical and the social models.<sup>87</sup> Whereas the medical model focuses on physical impairment of the individual, the social model insists that disability is a social construction that promotes societal exclusion as well as isolation of people with disability (Clifton, 2018: 6-7). Furthermore:

From the perspective of the social model, discrimination and exclusion result from lack of knowledge about the experiences of disability along with prejudiced attitudes that arise from deep-seated, pervasive cultural devaluation and systematic institutionalised discrimination. It is easily within our capacity to reshape our environment in ways that include people with disabilities, but this does not happen because ignorance and prejudice make us unaware of the importance of access and inclusion, and so we consider the social, economic, and political costs of changing an unreasonable burden. Since the social model of disability unmasks prejudice and its effects, it becomes the foundation for social change (Clifton, 2018: 7).

Unless some biblical exposition on disability is deliberately taught in the church, society will not be enlightened or acknowledge that human beings are created in the image of God, which means that prejudice against, as well as the segregation and marginalisation of persons with disability, will continue. Such attitudes of discrimination hinder the flourishing of many, particularly, people with disabilities. But no sacrifice is too big to ensure that persons with disabilities participate and are included in the functions of the church and of society.

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<sup>86</sup> Clifton argues that virtues are taught, modelled and highly contextual and are sustained by cultural tradition (Clifton, 2018: 55). Virtues are the habits that enable a person to achieve the happiness that comes with excellence. Hence, practicing virtue enables it to become a habit, a habit which is responsible for the achievement of happiness (Clifton, 2018: 53). In Nicomachean ethics, Aristotle identified eleven moral virtues namely courage, moderation (self-mastery, temperance), liberality, magnificence, greatness of soul, ambition, gentleness, friendliness, truthfulness, wittiness and tact and justice (Clifton, 2018: 53).

<sup>87</sup> The social model of disability is understood in the context of the term "society" which consists of social structure and the cultural values that frame personal meaning and virtues (Clifton, 2018: 6-7).

Clifton (2018: 8) further shows that people with disabilities are socially marginalised and that disability is expensive<sup>88</sup>, as are the technological support that could offer better functional support. He states that too many people with disabilities are taken out of family homes and housed in institutional settings (Clifton, 2018: 8). They are often silenced and without political power, whereas the *status quo* of social systems resides in the cultural values which direct their social living. These values are mediated to people through narratives, discussed and criticised in philosophies and theologies, and expressed in art and popular media (Clifton, 2018: 8). Clifton, therefore, contends that the “ancient and modern religious texts, including the Bible, reflect and reinforce prejudice, as do important philosophies (especially virtue tradition), novels, popular movies, television programmes and so on” (Clifton, 2018: 8). Furthermore, “cultures are sustained and propagated by personal values” (Clifton, 2018: 8). However, persons with disabilities should not be seen or used as metaphors<sup>89</sup> because they are much more than their impairments, hence, the need to refrain from such pejorative language (Clifton, 2018: 10, 61-62).

Black concurs with Clifton that metaphors of disability should not be used loosely by able-bodied people. She notes that preachers who use such metaphors in preaching, for example, could identify the congregants as being deaf because they do not adhere to God’s instructions or being blind to God’s saving grace of Jesus (Black, 1996: 54). However, the problem with the negative use of disabling terms such as paralysis, blindness, deafness, and muteness metaphorically in religious vocabulary, is identifying the terms with the refusal to act in line with God’s will, hence, being labelled as deliberate egotistic conduct (Black, 1996: 54). Since human beings, including people with disabilities, did not create themselves, it is important to be considerate and to refrain from responding negatively towards persons with disabilities. Having examined briefly Clifton’s understanding of disability and human flourishing, we shall consider the experiences of disability and the image of God which is vulnerable as well as disabled through the lens of Shane Clifton.

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<sup>88</sup> Lack of employment for people with disabilities especially puts them in an economically disadvantaged position because they cannot meet the high cost of living, since the social structure is generally inadequate for their welfare (Clifton, 2018: 8).

<sup>89</sup> “Disability imagery is used to describe the falsity of idols: ‘they have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk’ (Ps. 115:5-7). Seemingly less problematic are the eschatological texts that promise to heal people of their impairments (e.g., Ps. 146). But while these arise out of a compassionate impulse, they assume that disability is abnormal, and flourishing is impossible without the healing of the defect” (Clifton, 2018: 62).

## 4.2 Background of Shane Clifton

Shane Clifton is a professor of theology and director of research at Alphacrucis College in Sidney as well as an honorary associate at the Centre for Policy, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney. His current research is interdisciplinary in nature, exploring the intersection between disability studies, virtue ethics, and Christian theology. He also oversees a project on Australian aboriginal spirituality, “Dreaming and Charismatic Christianity: intersections of the Spirituality”.<sup>90</sup> Shane Clifton received his Ph.D. from the Australian Catholic University and is a co-author with Neil Ormerod of *Globalisation and the Mission of the Church* (2009) as well as the editor of *Australasian Pentecostal Studies*. In October 2010, Clifton had an accident while riding a bicycle that left him a quadriplegic. He has written about his experiences in his memoir, *Husbands Should not Break* (Clifton, 2015a: 784).

## 4.3 Experiences of Disability and the Image of the Vulnerable Disabled God

The negative use of disability as a metaphor has caused those with disabilities to view their disability as something evil, which should not be identified with. Clifton relates his personal struggles when he first had his spinal cord injury (SCI) and later the joy of living with a disability when he understood what disability is all about. His experiences were framed through his personal interaction with others such as Jay and Helena McNeill, his friends and the parents of a set of twins, one of which had a severe disability (Clifton, 2018: 17). Clifton recounts his own experiences and challenges as a disabled person with the hope that others<sup>91</sup> in the same condition or situation of disability, will benefit from it:

Above all of these challenges and more, was the immense challenge of sustaining a deep relationship with my wife, not only because of the impact of spinal cord injury (SCI) on sexual function, but because love is grounded in mutual self-giving, and I was no longer sure how to play my part (Clifton, 2013a: 348).

The experiences of disability, love, and sex have indeed prevented many persons with disabilities from flourishing, but leading to suffering and emotional and psychological pain, causing some to commit suicide. Barnes narrates the story of a wife who rejected her husband after he returned from war with mental illness. The rejection caused the man to commit suicide, while his wife fell in love with another disabled person who lost his manhood to paralysis due

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<sup>90</sup> See <https://www.ac.edu.au/faculty-and-staff/shane-clifton>.

<sup>91</sup> Clifton suspects that his struggles are not unique to him but relate to others in similar situations of disability or the disabled community facing vulnerabilities (Clifton, 2013a: 348-349).

to injury in Vietnam, but whose self-esteem was restored after sleeping with the woman (Barnes, 1992: 14).

In essence, disabled people want acceptance and shun rejection:

In my experience, however, disabled people don't want to be helped to die. Instead, they seek the opportunity to live and to do so to the fullest extent possible. I am not now, and have never been, suicidal, but I have certainly struggled to be happy. I suspect that this struggle is not unique to me, nor is it especially the problem of people in the disabled community. It is, rather, the universal challenge of our species, the pursuit of happiness in the face of the vulnerabilities that shadow us all (Clifton, 2013a: 248).

Clifton later (2018: 18) recalls the experiences of McNeil, whose state of mind and vulnerability were so low, that he began to feel like a fraud. McNeil expressed his doubt about the God he had subscribed to, for, despite his position as the worship pastor in a megachurch who every Sunday led people into intimate upward worship of God, McNeil reached a point where he doubted God, whom he regarded as a healer and an accessible God and friend. He struggled with his daughter's disability and wondered whether this God cares, considering what was happening in the life of his innocent daughter, particularly her vulnerable state of disability, which left both him and his daughter in a state of suffering and helplessness. McNeil wondered whether the Christian God was a bogus God, but he eventually reconciled his beliefs with his existential reality (Clifton, 2018: 18-19).

The lens through which McNeil viewed his relationship with God had to be polished with the granules of disability (Clifton, 2018: 20). The reality of his daughter's disability made him realise that his self-made theology had misdirected him to build his theology on sand, instead of on God, whom he earlier saw as a friend. His new understanding made him understand that he could lay down his life for his disabled daughter Sunshine (Clifton, 2018: 20-22).<sup>92</sup> McNeil was fortunate enough to come to terms with reality and understand that the image of the disabled God, did not fit with his former self-made theology, which had kept him in a place of unhappiness and doubt that prevented both him and his daughter from flourishing. He felt that his daughter Sunshine was an innocent child experiencing the pain associated with disability,

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<sup>92</sup> Sunshine loves and trusts her father and her love is the driving force in his life. Her face beams with light and satisfaction and she brings love with her smile. McNeil would say that "if disability can ground humanity and inform acts of compassion, then we should embrace rather than see disability as a problem to fix" (Clifton, 2018: 23). Even though McNeil would never choose disability for his daughter, despite the hard lessons he learnt from it because of his human vulnerability, the situation has made him a better person and he now has more respect for God than before (Clifton, 2018: 24-25).

but nonetheless a blessed gift from God whom he had the privilege of taking care of in love, even in her state of vulnerability.

Clifton's experience of pain made him ask: "How could a good, loving, and sovereign God have caused or allowed me to break my neck?" (Clifton, 2018: 29). He struggled with the issue of pain. Clearly, when people with disabilities find themselves in such situations of pain, they ultimately need encouragement to accept their situation and experience flourishing and happiness instead of the prejudice that comes from the church and society. Thus, Clifton (2018: 19) concludes that disability is often accompanied by pain, urging that "we might also recognise the courage it takes for the disabled person to deal with the ongoing reality of pain,<sup>93</sup> to face the difficulties of day-to-day living with determination, and to embrace community life in the face of prejudice" (Clifton, 2013a: 351). He acknowledges that there are times when God seems absent, or worse, malicious, so that one has to struggle with the reality of the love of God (Clifton, 2018: 29).

Clifton believes that "disability and suffering do not always go together; but often disability is accompanied by pain and loss" (Clifton, 2018: 29). He shows that "pain is a survival mechanism that functions to show us our limits; this is nowhere more obvious than with a spinal cord injury, where the absence of the capacity to feel certain pains is itself a danger" (Clifton, 2018: 30). The issue is no longer the "pain" but the "suffering" that persons with disabilities encounter, which has to do with a prolonged hardship – physical, psychological and social (Clifton, 2018: 30). The pain and suffering that persons with disabilities experience, stem from their vulnerable status. Ironically, "the perfection of God is a perfection of vulnerability and openness to pain. Part of the mission of the church is to bear witness to the God of life by accepting many forms of human life and sharing in human vulnerability and pain" (Hull, 2003: 22). This could mean that if the church is too careful of becoming vulnerable, then it will keep excluding the parts of the body of Christ which are differently able, vulnerable and broken.

Marais quotes Jansen and Küster who acknowledge that vulnerability is the finitude and pains that human beings suffer, including cold, heat, hunger, thirst, tiredness, loneliness (Marais, 2015: 317). In other words, the quest for human flourishing becomes a questionable endeavour if it cannot include both illness and vulnerability in its scope (Marais, 2015: 317). Marais also cites Jansen and Volker's view that the rhetoric of human flourishing needs to take

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<sup>93</sup> Without doubt, "every person with an SCI will experience physical loss and pain and this will have a negative impact upon the experience of bodily pleasure" (Clifton, 2013b: 361).

vulnerability seriously if it is serious about its concern for the present, material world. Vulnerability and illness point to a particular understanding of human misery that is concerned with the natural frailty and limitations of human existence. Human withering thereby becomes a natural part of human flourishing. In this sense, both withering and flourishing fall within the ambit of being human, which includes susceptibility to illness, vulnerability, frailty, pain, and ultimately death (Marais, 2015: 317). In other words, the human condition is a vulnerable one.

Clifton expresses concern about the notion of the creation of human beings in God's image, which has been associated traditionally with rationality, morality, and relationality (Clifton, 2018: 58, 79). People are made in the divine image with moral and relational capacities (Clifton, 2018: 99, 128). Therefore:

The Trinitarian God is by very nature relational, and humanity created in the image of God, is likewise relational: "Theologically speaking, we are truly human because we are drawn into communion with God the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Relationality thus constitutes the essence of human nature, an affirmation that embraces people with profound disabilities, because God loves them and draws them to Himself, regardless of whether they understand it. From this perspective, modern individualism is a mark of the separation from God and others, and the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are intended to restore the relationship with God and with one another. And the church, as the body of Christ, exists (or at least is meant to do so) as a foretaste of God's promise of fully restored relationships of our becoming who we were created to be (Clifton, 2018: 152).

It is important to note that relationships cannot be experienced in isolation or through segregational or marginal tendencies but through full knowledge and acceptance of relational reality since God is a relational being who created us to be in relationship. Therefore, we are called to actualise one of the purposes for our existence which is to be in relationship with one another. Our root is in God and human beings are created in the image of God to relate with God as well as with others.

Additionally, Clifton notes that Protestants prefer a relational understanding of humanity created in the divine image of God, which has theological significance. Christ is God's image and all humans can be transformed into the very image of Christ. This, therefore, means that human beings should desire to be filled with the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, which are virtues (Clifton, 2018: 153). Moreover, there are multiple ways of understanding the image of God. The relational anthropological view claims that every human being is a child of the Trinitarian God (Clifton, 2018: 152-153). Thus, if we find it difficult to relate with people who are disabled, simply

because of our normal status, then we undermine them and treat them as though they were not also created in the image of God through Jesus Christ:

If the image in which we all partake is exemplified in Christ, then that image is not one of perfect beauty, is symbolised through wondrous, earthly fragility. A disability aesthetic sees the value of strangeness, difference, deformity, fragility, ageing, and so forth. It is opposed to beautiful bodies but has much broader tastes, and in that way, is self-accepting and embraces the uniqueness of other... What is true of us as individuals should also be true of the body of Christ, which is also a disability community of love and radical diversity (Clifton, 2018:180).

According to Van den Bosch:

The agency of the Holy Spirit firmly unites quality and vulnerability, flourishing and suffering, in such a way that these two conditions cannot be separated from one another. In other words, through the work of the Spirit, every living being is invited to accept the experience of vulnerability and finality of life. And denial of vulnerability may be interpreted as a denial of the Spirit's creation, because creaturely life is supposed to be vulnerable, finite, and restricted. It is precisely in the finality, contingency, and vulnerability, that the quality of life emerges (Van den Bosch, 2014: 847-848).

These statements suggest that when church groups refuse to teach biblical hermeneutics in their congregations, it may result in feelings of guilt in persons with disabilities because they have been told that sicknesses, vulnerability, fragility or anything that society and culture reject or consider a taboo, is evil. On the other hand, if they were taught that the Christian God is a vulnerable and weak and disabled God, they would probably see themselves created in His image and be able to bear their pain and also flourish. Having considered the image of God in the light of the experience of disability, we shall examine how human beings can experience flourishing even in conditions of disability, pain, and suffering.

#### **4.4 Human Flourishing with Disability, Pain, and Suffering**

Since Jesus Christ as the vulnerable and disabled God also experienced vulnerability and pain, our understanding of disability is challenged. Clifton was a victim of SCI whose state of profound disability eventually placed him in an excellent position to speak of his experience of human flourishing in the face of disability, pain, and suffering. Clifton claims that he was at first unhappy with his condition of disability, "so I turned to the philosophical contemplation of happiness" (Clifton, 2014a: 1827). This pursuit of meaning regarding his condition caused him to ask questions about the problem of pain: Why do bad things happen to good people and where is God? (Clifton, 2014a: 1827).

In response to the above, Clifton (2018: 30; 2015a: 766) reasons that :

Suffering undermines a person's flourishing and can be understood objectively and subjectively. Objectively, it refers to the flourishing of physical, psychological, intellectual,

moral, and relational capacities central to our nature as human beings; suffering is what keeps a person from the well-being that, without the evil, he could and should not have had. Subjectively, a person can also suffer the loss of desire of the heart that is particular to the individual, such as the loss of a love, personal goals, and identity.

Turning to virtue ethics helps people in situations of disability not to succumb to the resignation which ultimately results in suffering and destabilises the person's ability to flourish.

Most people with injuries, even those with high levels of quadriplegia, desire to live and flourish (Clifton, 2018: 30). Furthermore,

If bodily pleasures are based upon walking, running, kicking, holding, throwing, tackling, swinging, swimming, standing, diving, surfing, climbing, jumping, sliding, and bouncing from one thing to another in an endless dance of movement, then losing the ability to do any or all of these things, impacts happiness (Clifton, 2013a: 361).

To the contrary,

Happiness (better translated as well-being) is found in the pursuit of truth and meaning, and achieved through the exercise of virtues; the habits of character (prudence, justice, fortitude, self-control, generosity and the like) that facilitate success in activities we believe to be meaningful (Clifton, 2014a: 1824).

Thus, happiness is not just a product of luck, but comes from the exercise of virtues, the habits of character that enable one to become successful in what one does, which together constitute the good life (Clifton, 2014b: 378).

Reinforcing this point, Clifton (2013a: 363) states that,

Within the limits that their injury necessarily imposes, what will be certain, is that they will need to relearn the basics of life, the many things that were once taken for granted. This fact can either be rejected or embraced. To learn to live again will require the exercise of the virtues we have been describing and embracing the lengthy and sometimes arduous task of relearning is one way in which SCI people can experience the gratification<sup>94</sup> of flow. By way of reminder, virtues are the habits that enable a person to achieve the happiness that comes with excellence. To achieve new levels of independence, the person with an SCI will need ambition, the determination to succeed. They will need courage in the face of ongoing pain and certain hardship, and the related virtue of perseverance.

The practice of virtue is worthy of note, and if persons with disabilities want to experience flourishing and happiness despite their conditions of disability and vulnerability, they will have to be strong and determined to achieve that goal.

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<sup>94</sup> Gratification occurs “when we engage in activities that we consider valuable... gratification involves determined effort, it is achieved by the exercise of virtues and strengths” (Clifton, 2013a: 358). In other words, “gratification or flow ... is the satisfaction that comes from determined effort and the exercise of the virtues and strengths that are necessary to succeed in the activities considered valuable” (Clifton, 2014b: 378).

Clifton also argues that persons with disabilities should be allowed to speak for themselves especially when it comes to the virtue that shapes their sexual flourishing. He contends that the church has little or nothing to say on behalf of persons with disabilities. In a healthy sex life, there is joy/happiness that comes with sexual touch leading to orgasm. It does promote the well-being of children as well. Since sex is meant for human flourishing, it is helpful to draw from the whole of the virtue tradition which allows sex to flourish at its best (Clifton, 2018: 182-183). Clifton states that “virtues, in particular, are best understood flexibly, and so able to meet the demand of particular challenges such as that of disability” (Clifton, 2014b: 379).

Consequently, Clifton argues that a theoretical understanding of the experiences of disability without the practical, is highly limiting and cannot provide an adequate picture of reality. It is important to allow those with the practical experience of disability to relate their stories, which could help promote human flourishing especially of people with disabilities who are also created in the image of God.

#### **4.5 Clifton’s Christological Understanding of Human Flourishing with Disability**

The Christological understanding of human flourishing in the context of disability is revealed in the prayer of Jesus to His Father before He was crucified on the cross when Jesus said, “Take this cup from me,”; and the soulful depth of His final cry on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. This, indeed, appears to be Jesus’ form of the question, “Why me, God?” (Clifton, 2018: 40; 2015a: 778).

Clifton (2018: 44-45) reveals his understanding of human flourishing in spite of disability:

Why me God? Is shorthand for “Why, God, don’t you intervene?”. The theological challenge of disability is its permanence and God’s failure to respond to countless desperate prayers for healing. In this previous work, I have criticized Pentecostal/charismatic theology and practices that focus on miraculous physical healings. Instead, I argued for the understanding of well-being that seeks flourishing of people with a disability, and that is able to hold together the fact of suffering and the possibility of a good life. Indeed, so-called supernatural physical healing is no answer to the problem of pain – not only is it extremely rare (an inherent unsubstantial), it is also inevitably arbitrary. Until there is no suffering in the world, theodicy remains. Yet, while prioritising prayer for physical healing is a distortion of faith, denying the presence and activity of God in the world (for example, by the practical atheism of Deism), eliminates faith altogether. Catholic and orthodox practices of sacramental healing provide a more balanced and nuanced conceptualisation, since they seek to mediate the presence and grace of God in the midst of suffering and in the face of death and stress; “efficacious wholeness” rather than focusing solely on a physical cure. That is to say, faith, expressed and built up through prayer, looks to God to infuse life with a meaning that embraces and transcends its hardships.

A critical observation of the above view shows that human flourishing is embedded in the will of God, just like in the prayer of Jesus Christ to His heavenly Father on the cross. Nonetheless,

it was the will of the Father that Jesus experience pain and disability on that cross although He did not commit any sin or wrongdoing.

Clifton concludes that “faith gives birth to hope” (Clifton, 2018: 45; cf. Yong, 2011: 346), buttressing his point that faith draws the future into the present as the present is touched by the reality of the future. The real power of hope also renews the present and helps a person to be realistic about the present situation (Clifton, 2018: 45).

Marais points out that human flourishing can never be without a hitch, irrespective of the angle it comes from – it could be in the form of anthropocentrism, entertains consumerism and is embedded in secularism, which results in distortion (Marais, 2015: 308).<sup>95</sup> Marais claims that before talking about what human flourishing is, it is helpful to know what human flourishing is not. She, therefore, cites Theo Boer’s metaphor of withering<sup>96</sup> as a duplicate for flourishing, especially where human beings experience suffering, for example patients who request to undergo euthanasia (Marais, 2015: 315). Boer indicates that “there is a dynamic relationship ‘between flourishing and withering’, on the one hand, so that a simple understanding of withering as the absence of flourishing, is not possible” (in Marais, 2015: 315). On the other hand, Marcel Sarot notes that “no one would call a withering plant flourishing”. Indeed, “objective standards” are often employed in evaluating a human life, which makes it possible to distinguish between “withering” and “flourishing” (Sarot in Marais, 2015: 316).

In relation to the present study, Boer’s metaphorical definition of human flourishing appears to be more inclusive, as it considers the peculiar needs of persons with disabilities and shows that life itself is a mixture of pain and happiness. Very few persons with disability have established the habits of virtue that could enable them to fully experience flourishing (Clifton, 2014b: 388). It is revelatory to understand that perfection is futuristic, hence the necessity for the abled body to give access to the disabled to experience flourishing together, even in the face of profound conditions of disability, since all humans are created in the image of the disabled God.

We shall now turn to Clifton’s rhetoric of human flourishing in the face of disability.

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<sup>95</sup> The result of such distorted relations is anthropocentrism (a focus on human beings above all else), consumerism (a focus on health and wealth above all else) and secularism (a denial of transcendence above all else) (Marais, 2015: 308).

<sup>96</sup> Withering is therefore a sensible description of a variety of human miseries including vulnerability, illness, suffering, oppression, sin and evil (Marais, 2015: 315).

#### 4.5.1 Clifton's Rhetoric of Human Flourishing with Disability

Clifton (2018: 57) responds to Aristotle's view that "it is impossible for the disabled person to be truly happy". He regards the statement as a form of prejudice which entrenches the *status quo*. Therefore, Clifton returns to the Scripture for answers and notes that it offers a ray of hope of inclusivity even though there are some uncertainties (Clifton, 2018: 57). Regarding human nature, he comments:

Humanity is made in God's image, which has traditionally been associated with our rationality. In both Hebrew and Christian theologies of creation, our flourishing involves the authentic fulfilment of our natural inclination to know what is true, to love what is good, and to be rightly related to God, and rightly related to one another and the whole creation. Throughout the remainder of the Hebrew Bible, and especially in psalms, proverbs, and other wisdom literature, there is an emphasis on both prudence (practical wisdom, which flows from divine wisdom) and moral formation; the purpose of the whole collection is moral training. While the Hebrew Bible does not emphasise reason to the same extent as the Greeks, there is still a firm commitment to knowledge of the truth, especially the truth of God, as well as the transformation of the heart that flows from that knowledge (Clifton, 2018: 58).

Thus, the knowledge of the truth of God regarding human nature is key, because it helps the church, preachers, and society to accept that all the humankind springs from one and the same source. For this reason, we should accept one another, including impairment.

Clifton (2018: 65) further draws attention to Jesus' vision and mission as captured by Luke 4:18-19 (from Isa. 61:1-3):

The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Jesus' message is fundamental, because it brings the good news of the kingdom of God, which is partly here. It is a vision of human flourishing (the Lord's favour) which is personal, social and cultural in scope. The goal is to fulfil the liberative promise that is contained in the Hebrew Bible (Clifton, 2018: 65). Therefore, any barrier to human flourishing, especially of the poor, the oppressed and the disabled, is seen as injustice, since there is a promise of friendship with God through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit (Clifton, 2018: 65). Indeed, "the eschatology Jesus offers looks to the future, and in so doing, brings joy in the present day, notwithstanding its ups and downs" (Clifton, 2018: 66). This means that the present condition of persons with disability cannot hinder them from experiencing human flourishing once they are children born of God through Jesus Christ, the disabled God, and they understand that they are created in the image of God.

Clifton's theological understanding of disability will be probed in the following.

#### ***4.5.2 Clifton's Theological Understanding***

We have noted above the view that the kingdom of God does not have to be a futuristic experience, but can partly be enjoyed here on earth to the level of human flourishing by all who are children of God, including persons with disabilities. In his theological understanding of human flourishing, Clifton argues that seeing disability as a tragedy, provides theological justification for attitudes of pity and exacerbates practices of healing that can alienate people with disabilities (Clifton, 2015a: 769-770). He also considers the Hebrew Bible's notion of disability as a consequence of disobedience (Clifton, 2018: 61).

Clifton relates the testimony of Lee-Anne, who passed away in February 2014 when she was 26 years old. Lee-Anne once visited a smallish church and the pastor of the church asked if he could pray for her to receive healing. She agreed and at least 15 people stood around her to pray and cast out from her only God knows what. However, what she considered oppressive and degrading, was that they asked her to repent of her sins so that the hindrances to her healing would be removed. They even tried to lift her up from her wheelchair and force her to stand up on her feet despite her critical disability. The prayer encounter caused scoliosis, but every time she yelled at them to let her go because of the pain she was experiencing, they yelled back at her demons to be quiet and leave her. Instead of experiencing healing, her condition worsened, causing a strained back and biceps for three weeks, which increased her suffering. Afterwards, they gave her Joni Eareksson Tada's book. After reading the book, she realised that they completely contradicted themselves. That was the last time she visited the church; she became nervous of such gatherings and prophetic meetings from fear of a similar situation occurring (Clifton, 2014c: 207).

Kamba tells of her encounter with a faith healer and how it almost cost her life:

I personally experienced the hurt of participating in a "healing prayer" with a well-known Western evangelist, and the failure to be healed has deeply disturbed me. I attempted to commit suicide because it made me think that God did not love me. I revolted and concluded that God was not real, and the Holy Scriptures were not true. By God's grace, God placed people on my path to help me reconstruct myself. They showed me that I am of value to God and in society (Kamba, 2003: 39).

Yong (2011: 340) also highlights the wrong impression that the church presents to those with disabilities, so that the church is not a welcoming space for disabled persons:

There are many reasons why people with disabilities perceive the church as not being particularly welcoming to them. First and foremost are un-interrogated theological assumptions

linking sin, lack of faith, and disability, and about healing and curing disability – all of which combine to undergird the biases, fears, and stigmatisations inhibiting the formation of a more disability-welcoming church. Even given the extensive history of the church’s charitable services to people with disabilities, these have more often than not perpetuated paternalistic postures and practices toward such groups of people. As a result, the “disabled” are not seen first and foremost as people created in the image of God, but as “burdens” to be carried.

Therefore, concrete steps should be taken to correct the wrong perceptions of persons with disabilities who are often treated as though they are not created in God’s image.

Similarly, Clifton recounts Joni Eareksson Tada’s experience at a conference where prayers of healing were offered, but she and many others like her in wheelchairs, did not experience healing. She noted that the light was never aimed at those critical quadriplegic conditions and in wheelchairs (numbering about 30); only a general prayer was offered on their behalf. Consequently, the “difficult: cases such as profound cases of quadriplegics, stroke survivors, children with muscular dystrophy, as well as men and women stiff and rigid from multiple sclerosis, could not experience healings at the crusade. Instead they rushed out to escape rude glances from the crowd. Those who could not receive healing were so disappointed that she had to ask herself whether trying to get rid of disability is the only way to deal with suffering. She sensed that a wrong picture of disability was being portrayed in such meetings (Clifton, 2014c: 208).

Clifton also shares his personal experience:

My story might not be recognised as testimony, because it highlights my struggles and doubts as well as the permanence of my injury notwithstanding consistent prayer. I have been blessed by the faithful prayer of many friends. In their prayers is the evidence of love and a mysterious solidarity in my hardship. But I have also experienced the dark side of the Pentecostal emphasis on healing, as is apparent in this extract from my memoir (Clifton, 2014c: 206).

For Clifton, healing ministries are a burden rather than agents of liberation for people with disabilities, because they tell those with disabilities that are not healed that they lack faith, and suggest that God only heals some people with lesser problems and ignores others in critical situations. He believes that the healing ministry is disabling, because it makes spectacles of disabilities and illness (Clifton, 2018: 72). Clifton points out that some of the teaching stories of Jesus have a symbolic purpose as they encourage believers to seek Jesus amid the storms of life.<sup>97</sup> Jesus’ teachings, healings, and exorcisms are all about the good news of the coming

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<sup>97</sup> The purpose of Jesus walking on water is not to teach His Christians that they can defy gravity. Such stories distract people from the actual meaning of the bigger whole to a lesser important perspective (Clifton, 2018:74).

kingdom and constitute an attack on evil.<sup>98</sup> The healing of the woman with the issue of blood, for instance, shows Jesus' rejection of the accusation that she was impure and His expression of His compassion for her for the social marginalisation and segregation she endured (Clifton, 2018: 73).

Clifton further demonstrates that,

Through the ages, faith in Jesus, and through Him the possibility of healing, has offered hope to people subject to pain, disability and grief. As is apparent throughout the New Testament, the promise of healing is normally fulfilled eschatologically (every biblical character experiences the gamut of human growth and decline, and fragility, suffering, and death are the one universal reality, even for Jesus). As we live in the hope of the eschatological vision, we are graced with the Spirit as the first fruits or deposit of the future (Rom 8:23). In this way, hope transforms the present, not by eliminating hardship, disability, or even death, but by giving us the fortitude to persevere and live constructive and meaningful lives (Clifton, 2018: 74-75).

Clifton argues that the problems with models of disabilities such as medical, healing and social models, is that they want people with disabilities to be what they term "normal" and get rid of the defect, not realising that what most persons with disabilities long for, is a social environment that is inclusive and that enables them to flourish<sup>99</sup> just like other people (Clifton, 2018: 75).

Another notable aspect of the life of Jesus Christ is His love in solidarity with those whom society has marginalised, oppressed or segregated such as the poor, women, sinners, children, the meek, the sick and the disabled (Clifton, 2018: 75). Jesus' idea of social inclusivity is highlighted in the parable that likens the kingdom of God to a banquet to which all are invited to come, just the way they are, to feast and to rejoice in the kingdom of God, rather than to be healed of their ailments, which are of secondary importance (Clifton, 2018: 75). This is a challenge to the body of Christ to welcome all without exception as well as create grounds for human flourishing and prevent unnecessary questioning of self-identity.

Treloar (2002: 595) poses some critical theological questions which further highlight the questions that people with disabilities usually ask themselves: "Who am I and what does disability mean for my life? Why me/my family member?; What did I do to deserve this?; How can a good God allow this to occur?; Why doesn't God heal me/my family member?" (Treloar, 2002: 298). Treloar also researched the questions that people often ask those with disabilities

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<sup>98</sup> The serious threat to evil is that Jesus' message of good news of the coming kingdom is nothing but the evil that surrounds the social, cultural and religious world of His day which led to His crucifixion. (Clifton, 2018:74)

<sup>99</sup> Clifton (2018: 78) states that individual flourishing is dependent on social, cultural and religious transformation, especially for those with disabilities.

or parents of persons with disabilities. A typical case study was of a mother (Megan), whose child had a profound disability and who was often asked:

“What have you done in your past that would make God give you a child with a disability?” Basically, “What terrible sin did you commit? ...Don’t you hate God if He would do this to you? That He chose you to have a child with a disability? What could God’s reason be?” (Treloar, 2002: 598).

Treloar reports that Megan would respond that she knows that God is moulding her character to be like her Lord Jesus Christ and she sees it as an opportunity to help others who may be in similar situations. Above all, she remained steadfast that God’s love for her and her family is tangible and settled and that she does not need to know why God allowed her daughter to be disabled since He alone is the ultimate and knows all things (Treloar, 2002: 598).

#### **4.6 Conclusion of Chapter**

Clifton’s reconciliation of disability with human flourishing is important not just to persons with disabilities, but also to the able-bodied. The understanding is significant because it is revolutionary, timely and liberating, especially for persons with disabilities. It also dispels the conflation of sin with disability, it is inclusive, and it helps people to accept who they are and experience human flourishing even with a profound disability. The model creates room for the vulnerable, oppressed, marginalised and segregated. It reveals the characteristics of the image of God as creativity, availability, and relationality. This understanding transcends the image that culture and society and even the church present (perfectionism and normalcy).

We have noted additionally that the messages of some charismatic preachers and motivational speakers have no room for persons with physical impairments, simply because they associate the ideal image with perfection, power, strength and the like. They believe that anything outside the ideal image is the result of lack of faith or sin, and they therefore exclude people with conditions of disability. What they seem to forget or are ignorant of, is the significance of Jesus Christ’s resurrected body that still bears the wounds of the cross in His hands, feet, and side. Jesus’ wounds signify that He bore human brokenness. It means that the church should turn to biblical hermeneutics to teach transformative messages that do not exclude people who are differently abled simply because they have physical disabilities. Rather, the church should focus on inclusive messages of hope because, in the real sense, disability has little or nothing to do with the physical aspect of the nature of human beings who are created in the image of God.

Therefore, to experience human flourishing with disabilities, it is important to understand that human beings are created in the image of God, and this image is beyond the space confined by culture, society and even the church, which for so long has remained ignorant of the knowledge of God's elusive nature. This elusive category of the nature of God as the disabled God should be preached, spoken about and announced to all people, who should also know that human beings are all created in the image of God, and insist on the virtue ethics Clifton draws on to experience flourishing with disability, pain, and suffering. It is important for charismatic preachers and motivational speakers to search for a biblical hermeneutic which does not segregate or marginalise. Their teachings and sermons should be inclusive messages which draw the future into the present, all-encompassing of the reality of the present and also holding the hope of the utopia that is yet to come.

## CHAPTER 5

# A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GOD’S IMAGE, DISABILITY, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Chapter Introduction

In the preceding chapters, we explored the significance of the image of the disabled and vulnerable God and from the works of contemporary disability theologians such as Nancy L. Eiesland, Thomas Reynolds and Shane Clifton we established that disability can be reconciled with human flourishing from a Christological perspective. The significance of this study lies in the emphasis on the liberating power of disability theology, particularly to persons with disabilities. The focus of this study is on the image of the disabled, vulnerable God and the possibility of human flourishing in the face of disability, since Christology deals with human experiences, despite the fact that within Pentecostal circles human flourishing is viewed as well-being or health (Clifton, 2014c: 212).

Nancy Eiesland focuses remarkably on the physical aspect of disability, Thomas Reynolds progresses to mental disability and insists that all human beings are vulnerable, while Shane Clifton sums it up that neither physical or mental disabilities, pain or sufferings, can withhold a person from flourishing according to their character in the image of God. Their human flourishing cannot be hindered as long as they turn to virtue ethics of joy, love, and hope in their pursuit of happiness. The three contemporary disability theologians are connected by their recognition of the foundation of their theologies of the disabled God, which is the theology of the cross. Moreover, all three recognise that human beings are created in the image of God.

Jane Deland, who has written extensively on the image of God from the perspective of disability, argues that “we must view disability and disease through different conceptual lenses than we have used heretofore in order to behold the image of God in each child of God” (Deland, 1999: 47). This is to say that the image of God should not just be viewed from a marginal position, but rather it should be broadly viewed to show that it liberates rather than segregates or marginalises people with impairments.

Thus,

People with disabilities and those who care for them emphasise several principles which they believe are essential in creating a liberatory theology of disability: the experience of disability must be viewed as a wellspring of theological reflection, rather than as a curse or blessing, test or punishment; the concept of perfection as a theological norm must be rejected; images of healing and wholeness must be conceived differently in order to incorporate the experience of disability; oppressive language must be eliminated; no one individual can claim to be the image of God alone; only an understanding of the vulnerability and interdependence of all human beings will help us discover what it really means to be human (Deland, 1999: 52).

A Christological understanding of the image of God is imperative, because it will give a better view of persons with disability as people created equally in God's image, rather than as lesser human beings who need to be fixed or to step up to the standard of society to assume full humanity. Moreover, according to Thomas (2012: 148), "people with disabilities call forth a community of equality in which our differences help each of us to flourish exactly as different people".

In her view of human beings as created in the image of God, Jones (2014: 282) poses some rhetorical questions: "What does it mean to be created in the image of God... What similarities do we see between ourselves and God that would lead us to believe or confirm that we are indeed made in God's image?" She identifies some traits in human beings which may be associated with the divine, such as angry, frustrated, jealous, vengeful, forgiving, reasonable, lonely, caring, forgetful and generous, etc. (Jones, 2014: 282). Jones claims that several character traits that are linked with God's disability, are somehow ignored by biblical studies and that, if we are created in the image God, then these disability traits depict vulnerability as part of God's image too (Jones, 2014: 282).

On his part, Hull (2003: 22) argues that:

The perfection of God is a perfection of vulnerability and of openness to pain. Part of the mission of the church is to bear witness to the God of life by accepting many forms of human life and sharing in human vulnerability and pain. In this respect, part of the mission of disabled people is to become apostles of inclusion, witnesses of vulnerability and partners in pain.

Thus, we need to take the views of Janes Deland, Cyndi Jones and John Hull regarding the image of God, seriously. Deland challenges us to behold the image of God, disability, and disease through other lenses, since human beings are created in the image of God. Jones, on the other hand, challenges biblical hermeneutics to reject cultural or societal influences, as these vulnerable character traits of God are biblical. Hull further shows that to gain a deeper understanding of God's image, we should turn to the notion of vulnerability. These three theologians call on the church and society to not be too quick to reach conclusions about the image of God or focus on perfection. If the church is God's, then the church should be equally

vulnerable, like God. Therefore, the concept of God's image should be understood in the context of human flourishing and disability which, most of the time, comes with pain and vulnerability.

David H. Kelsey broadly defines human flourishing and argues that:

The challenge to Christian theology has been to develop conceptual and argumentative strategies by which to show that, properly understood, human flourishing is inseparable from God's active relating to human creatures, so that their flourishing is always dependent upon God (Kelsey, 2008: 1).

From the above, it is clear that Kelsey considers human flourishing from a biblical hermeneutical perspective. He claims that "health, whether physical, emotional, intellectual, social, or cultural, is at best a problematic metaphor for what is meant theologically by human flourishing" (Kelsey, 2008: 3). Kelsey suggests that human flourishing is traced to God, without whom the experience of human flourishing cannot be ascertained.

In view of previous discourses, we should critically examine how these contemporary theologies of disability portray God's image as disabled and vulnerable, and how people can experience human flourishing in the face of disability. Thus, Eiesland's metaphorical recognition of the image of God as disabled, as opposed to the association of disability with sin, points to the divine image of the disabled God in human beings who are disabled (Eiesland, 1994: 71). We should recall Eiesland's argument that as human beings our bodies participate in the *imago Dei* (Eiesland, 1994: 101). Hence, this study attempted to investigate Eiesland's understanding of the image of the disabled God and how this understanding can help the church and society to reshape people's misconceptions of the image of God, since all human beings are created in this image. In the next section, we shall do a brief survey of the real-life experiences of some persons with disabilities.

Above, I told the story of my late younger sister's experience of disability and her feelings of inferiority during her high school days. Her community could not accept that she is not different from other human beings or help her. She tried to keep up with non-disabled people around her to overcome her inferiority by dating boys, partying and acting in a manner which prevented her from focusing on her studies. Eventually, she left home and returned only when her health had deteriorated, and later died of other ailments. I noted in Chapter Two that, if I had understood the image of the disabled God, my younger sister Ulo Jemimah Stanley would probably still be alive. We (her family) misunderstood her feelings of rejection and being excluded for obstinate and defiant behaviour, but she felt inferior because sometimes even we,

her siblings, ridiculed and jeered at her disability. For instance, my brother would mimic the way she walked. If we understood what the image of the disabled God was about, we would have seen that she was perfectly created in the image of God like any other human being, and tried to help her. She may have been able to fulfil her dreams, but that did not happen, because the family did not understand the liberating power in the image of the disabled God.

Similarly, Eiesland draws not only on her lifelong experience of disability (from a degenerative bone disease), but also from the experiences of others, for example, Diane DeVries, a congenital amputee, and Nancy Mairs, who was crippled by multiple sclerosis (in Yong, 2007: 11). Eiesland's retelling of the stories of these two women reveals two ordinary lives. DeVries never internalised able-bodiedness as the standard to which she should aspire, but instead saw her own body as different and not defective. DeVries knew that her body was different from childhood, but accepted that body. She experienced marginalisation, discrimination, and oppression from her grandmother, who saw her as an offspring of the devil, in society and on many occasions in the Christian church, which denied her theological access. DeVries and her husband decided to leave their church because of discrimination against their daughter. However, her experience reveals a transformed understanding of independence, premised not on physical detachment, but instead on relatedness and solidarity (Eiesland, 1994: 32-38). Eiesland further reports that:

DeVries was reared at home with her family, went to public schools, had an active social life, lived with friends, had lovers, graduated from university, lived on her own, joined a church and left it, became pregnant, married, and divorced. She has also lived in institutions for people with disabilities, attended special schools, used prostheses and abandoned them. She lived an ordinary life in an unconventional body (Eiesland, 1994: 39).

In contrast, Nancy Mairs' disability came to her unexpectedly. She was 29 years old when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She expressed fury over her body that had become disabled with the degenerative disease. She isolated herself and rented a small apartment, leaving her husband and two children behind. In that space, she attempted suicide and was clinically depressed for nearly a year, but soon discovered that her body would not go away, but was becoming another body (Eiesland, 1994: 42-43). After fighting an intense internal battle, Mairs came to terms with the difficulty that comes with disability. She understood that ordinary life is filled with blessings and curses and that it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the two (Eiesland, 1994: 40-46).

In the light of the above testimonies, we shall consider Eiesland's view of God's image in the next section.

## 5.2 Nancy Eiesland's Image of the Disabled God

Eiesland (1994: 89-90) Christologically reveals the metaphors of her powerful vision of the image of God which perfectly portrays the symbol of disability. She sees God as a disabled God, who does not reveal His omnipotence and self-sufficiency or deserve pity as a suffering servant. The image of God is a God who is embodied in the image of Jesus Christ, the disabled God.

Fast (2011: 421) concurs with Eiesland's metaphor as revelatory of the ideal image of the disabled God. Eiesland reasons that it is liberating, because the symbol portrays the disabled God as one who loves all human beings, including persons with disabilities, but the image of the disabled God is a God who is embodied in the image of Jesus Christ, the disabled God (Eiesland, 1994: 90). However, Fast has a contrary understanding of the re-symbolisation of God as disabled. She contends that Eiesland moved beyond incarnational solidarity with disabled human beings and allows the incarnational promise to expand and include a focus on solidarity with this disabled God (Fast, 2011: 421). Swinton adds that "God is in solidarity with humanity at its most fundamental level, in weakness and brokenness" (Swinton, 2011: 292).

Nonetheless, Fast claims that Eiesland seems to miss what truly gives liberation, arguing that mere solidarity does not liberate as it should, but the cross does, for the cross gives direction to resurrection. She criticises Eiesland's move from the incarnation directly to the resurrection in her theological approach to disability, arguing that Eiesland moves right up to the threshold of this emancipatory power, but fails to go through the door. In other words, Eiesland tugs at the end of the red thread but fails to weave it into the fabric of her own liberation theology of disability (Fast, 2011: 421).

Eiesland's symbolic image of the disabled God caused me to take a second look at the notion that human beings are created in the image of God and that we all bear our identity as made in the image of God, who is ultimately the source of our existence and the redeemed life through Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate (Cornwall, 2015: 110). This reality broadened my understanding of the image of God and that humanity was created in His image. I wish I had this understanding before the death of my disabled younger sister who passed away in 2015 without receiving support to help her find her identity as one created in the image of God, simply because I was ignorant of the image of the disabled God, whose symbolic image gives liberation and, as Swinton notes, "a recognition of shared vulnerability does away with the negative cultural assumption" (Swinton, 2011: 292). To this end, the subsequent topic

broadened our understanding of Eiesland symbolic image of God's image as disabled, which has to do with the works of Christ.

### ***5.2.1 God's Image as Disabled***

As previously established, and since Christology deals with human experience, the image of God as disabled, is a Christological image. Eiesland (1994: 100) remarks that, when Jesus presented Himself to His disciples, they were afraid, but then He called them to Him and asked them to touch His physical body, because a spirit does not have flesh and bones. Yong (2007: 12) explains that Eiesland's proposal derives from the truth "embodied in the image of Jesus Christ, the disabled God", and that the image is informed along three lines of Christological reflection. The first is incarnation, which means that Jesus had to be like His sisters and brothers in every respect (Yong, 2007: 12). The second is marks of impairment – in His hands, side and feet (Yong, 2007: 12), which we shall consider more closely. And the third is the Eucharist<sup>100</sup>, which is a Christian celebration that is meant for every believer, whether abled or disabled. For Cooper (1992: 179):

God is disabled in the sense that the reality of the disabled enters into God. God feels the world in the way the disabled person feels the world. To call God disabled reminds us of the concreteness of God's loving presence in the world.

Thus, God bearing the wounds of impairment, means He is in solidarity particularly with the marginalised such as the disabled (Fast, 2011: 429). We shall consider impairment as the image of God in the next part of the discussion.

### ***5.2.2 God's Image as Impairment***

Impairment signifies the occurrence of symptoms that reduce the quality or strength of something which can be seen or heard. From Eiesland perspective, Jesus' revelation of Himself to His disciples was a tangible existential reality, and the paradox is that Jesus appeared with an impairment, a broken body, which is reshaped and which represents injustice as well as sin in the fullness of the Godhead (Eiesland, 1994:99, 100). The resurrected Christ is seldom recognised as a deity whose hands, feet, and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment (Eiesland, 1999: 60). Jones (2014: 284) points to some forms of impairment from

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<sup>100</sup> "The Eucharist as body practice signifies solidarity and reconciliation: God among humankind, the temporarily able-bodied with people with disabilities, and we ourselves with our own bodies. In the Eucharist, we encounter the disabled God, who displayed the signs of disability, not as a demonstration of failure and defect, but in affirmation of connection and strength. In this resurrected Christ, the nonconventional body is recognised as sacrament. Christ's solidarity with the more than 600 million people with disabilities worldwide is revealed in the Eucharist" (Eiesland, 2009: 243).

the Old Testament, for example, Moses had what is called speech impairment, which was probably why he overstayed when he went to meet God on the mountain; or perhaps it was God with the speech impairment. She reasons that when we find it hard to communicate with people who have a speech impairment, we do not recognise the image of God.

### **5.3 God's Image as Vulnerable**

In Reynolds' portrayal of God's disability and vulnerability, "God reveals the divine nature as compassion not only by 'undergoing' or 'suffering' with human vulnerability, but by raising it up into God's own being" (Reynolds, 2012: 42). As Eiesland has noted, Jesus bore the wounds of the crucifixion, which signifies His solidarity with humanity. We, therefore, need to focus on Jesus Christ as the exemplar of the stranger, who became the icon of a vulnerable God (Reynolds, 2008: 20). By implication, Jesus' vulnerability made Him become in every respect like His sisters and brothers, including the disabled. For this reason, Antus (2013: 258) urges believers to share a dependency with one another by living in common vulnerability, just like Jesus did. Like Reynolds, Antus affirms that "we do not discover who we are, we do not reach humanness in a solitary state. We discover through mutual dependence, in weakness, in learning through belonging" (Reynolds, 2008: 19). Human beings are not created for isolation, hence the image of the Christian God is revealed distinctly in relationality, creativity, and availability.

As Eiesland recounts, the God of her dreams is totally different from the God of society and culture, whose character is omnipotent, perfect, solitary, almighty, and prosperous, and who ultimately does not identify with the vulnerable, disabled, poor, sick, etc.. Hull (2003: 35) agrees that the human image of God is usually that of the perfectly normal human God, who is raised to an even higher level of perfection. However, such images of God exclude imperfect or different bodies. Deconstructing this act of exclusion is a challenge to the church and society, which need to understand the image of God's vulnerability. Thus, the church should carefully consider her actions towards those with disabilities, particularly from the three perspectives of creativity, relationality, and availability, which Reynolds claims are the primary characteristics that are revealed in God's image. These images are repeated here because of their relevance in neutralising the attention given to physical body fitness, instead of the image of God. If all human beings are created in the image of God, these characteristics should be priorities.

### ***5.3.1 Image of God as Creativity***

Reynolds shows that the vulnerable God, who is the God of creation, chose to share His divine power of creativity with human beings in many ways such as procreation, naming, caring for, guiding, nurturing, harnessing and managing the economy of living things (Reynolds, 2008: 180)<sup>101</sup>. Cooper argues that God has given His creatures a level of creativity and love to sustain creation towards increasing complexity, meaning and value, but not in a controlling way, so that God and the world become co-creators of each event (Cooper, 1992: 179). For Samuel (1998: 16), the omnipotent Jesus Christ as the almighty, all-powerful God, who is the co-creator and through whom all things are made, disabled Himself on the cross. Samuel calls this the disablement of God. Regarding God's omnipotence, Dicken claims that the design was to limit God's responsibility towards His creation which includes and does not exclude each finite creature, as each is an occasion to be a co-creator with God (Dicken, 2011: 134). Reynolds agrees with Moltmann that human beings are the representatives of God on the earth and are therefore given the position of co-creators to create from chaos, to nurture and to bless (Reynolds, 2008: 180). Human beings have instincts and can talk with the Creator. Seeing humans as co-creators adds meaning to the word "difference" as used by Reynolds, for we are all created differently in terms of the colour of skin, shape, size, and gender, yet we relate with one another as we agree to make ourselves relational. We shall shortly discuss the image of God as relationality again below.

### ***5.3.2 Image of God as Relationality***

It is significant to note that human beings are wired as relational beings created by God (Reynolds, 2008: 180). Similarly, because humans are in the image of a vulnerable God, it is important to understand that Jesus Christ entered the human contingency and willingly embraced vulnerability because of love. Jesus did all that He had to do with a relational intent (Reynolds, 2012: 42). In this regard, God invites His creatures to participate within His very being of relational praxis just as Jesus did, because God Himself is a relational God (Holt-Woehl, 2012: 124). This participation should be a socially relational action, just as God Himself declared that the condition of the totally isolated Adam, was not good. God has given human beings the gift of communicating relationship with one another and with God (Holt-Woehl, 2012: 26). However, if the image of God is conceived as residing in relationality, then those

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<sup>101</sup> Managing the economy of all living things is a call to be like the Creator, imitating divine creativity, to generate new life with continuity in words and action (Reynolds, 2008: 180).

whose relations are damaged, are disadvantaged (Hull, 2003: 6). Marais, however, states that love for self and neighbour should be the expression of any relationship. She further maintains that the essential and significant aspects of this relationality are connected to our source, who is the God in relation, even with Jesus Christ (Marais, 2015: 282). This view of God's image as relationality takes us to the next point – availability as another image of God.

### **5.3.3 Image of God as Availability**

As mentioned above, Reynolds notes that welcoming another is being in relation with God, and being in a relationship with God means being in relation with another (Reynolds, 2008: 185). Hence, Reynolds sees love as the heart of the creative and relational fabric of the *imago Dei*, since humankind mirrors God's free love as availability which is displayed by solicitude towards the other (Reynolds, 2008: 185). The church is therefore challenged to see this attitude of availability as a self-transcending love that is open towards the other (Reynolds, 2002: 330). Swinton agrees that if we (the church) become available to others, then we are exercising our freedom of relationship. In other words, the church should assume the core of love, which is a vulnerability. Iozzio (2008: 400) understands this availability to others as a dynamism of respect, fidelity, and compassion which creates space for others as for everyone else. This availability could also include what Sugden (1998: 30) calls "the availability of physical and spiritual access". In my view, availability is an act of imitating Jesus Christ, whose relational availability was possible because of love. It, therefore, suggests that love should be carefully considered as the key to availability.

### **5.4 Reconciling Disability with Human Flourishing**

From the discussion above, we understand that the image of God is an elusive category, hence, our perception of the image of God should not be restricted to cultural and societal norms which could hinder us from understanding the image of God. Such cultural influences were probably the reason I could not reconcile why an old schoolmate in high school between 1986 and 1987 was so bold to have said openly, "I will rather be dead than have a disability in my life". I marvelled at these words, which were uttered many years ago. But now, through my encounter with disability studies, I have come to realise that persons with disabilities have not sinned or done anything wrong to warrant their disabling conditions, instead they are created equally in the image of God and should not want to die. Notwithstanding, the lack of knowledge surrounding disability issues is pervasive; it requires a basic understanding of what the image of God entails, which will result in human flourishing in the face of disability.

To reconcile human flourishing with a disability requires a good understanding of the image of the disabled God and the knowledge that human beings, including the disabled, are created by God and in the image of God. Clifton displays astounding insight about disability issues. He aims to give hope to persons with disabilities and reassure them that it is possible to flourish and experience happiness despite their disability. It is expedient for persons with disability to experience flourishing (Clifton, 2018: 2-3). Again, “looking through the lens of disability, we come to recognise that hope and love mean more than physical perfection. Even in the brokenness of life, we can still live out lives of love, affection, concern and hope” (Deland, 1999: 64). Such comprehension of disability which transcends physical perfection and understands the brokenness of life is highly important in the attempt to relate to the image of God.

Broesterhuizen (2008: 151) claims that the traditional Christian challenge is finding a way to reconcile functional impairment with the notion that God is the creator of humans in His own image and likeness. He analyses John Hull’s view that traditional concepts are a major source of contention, dividing cosmic history into three periods: The first period is called the perfection era, when God created the cosmos and everything in it perfectly, including a human relationship with God. The second is the period of sin and redemption, when the image of perfection in the human person no longer existed; instead, impairment caused a broken relationship with the Creator. Nonetheless, the third and last period, the Messianic age, brings the light of hope in the future, when history will be consummated, all pains and sufferings will be banished and human persons will be restored to their original perfection (Broesterhuizen, 2008: 151).

Broesterhuizen’s analysis reveals that functional impairment can only be conceived in the second historical stage of brokenness in imperfection, disability, poverty as well as death, but with the consummation of history, imperfection will be eradicated. This view suggests that either the parents of the disabled person or the disabled person sinned, resulting in disability (Broesterhuizen, 2008: 151). But in the Messianic era, the final period, sin and brokenness will be done away with with the ushering in of perfection, and there will be no more blindness because those who were blind, will see and the lame will walk, jump and even dance (Broesterhuizen, 2008: 151). This message ought to give hope to persons with functional impairments, but it does not. Broesterhuizen cites Thomas Coughlin who recalls his encounter with children with hearing impairment:

When I speak with deaf children, I ask them, when you die and go to heaven, you will become hearing, is that right? Ninety-nine per cent of the children say: No, I don't think so, I will still be deaf when I get there, and we are happy with who we are. That is liberation; liberation from the feeling that I have to meet what is the norm, what people say that I should be (in Broesterhuizen, 2008: 151).

In the light of such situations as in the story above, Clifton calls on persons with disabilities, the church and society as a whole to recognise disability as a symbol of humanity's broken condition. It is important that we realise that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God. In reconciling human flourishing with disability, persons with a disability will not partake of some utopian promise, but will experience life in its paradox, with its pain and suffering. Broesterhuizen (2008: 166) is of the opinion that the eschatological promise is somewhere outside this space and time, yet it can be realised to some extent, here and now. Whereas Eiesland sees Jesus Christ, who bears impairment in His hands, side and feet as the disabled God in whose image the human person is created. For Broesterhuizen (2008: 166) the experience of human flourishing can be deduced from the claim that some eschatological utopia can be realised through the knowledge of the re-creation of the human person when Jesus died on the cross and became the disabled God; that its messianic future is one and the same moment in which God's image is revealed. Meanwhile, Reynolds beholds Jesus as vulnerable, since He willingly came into the human contingency and became as one with human beings for the sake of the liberation of human persons from eternal death and separation from God. Hence, Clifton concludes that disability or ability cannot determine human persons' flourishing.

How then do we reconstruct disability and human flourishing?

### **5.5 Reconstructing Disability and Human Flourishing**

With the understanding of the context within which this thesis is written, we have come to acknowledged in this study that persons with disabilities are created equally in the image of God like everyone else in the space of human existence. This brings together these three contemporary disability theologians who each in an astounding manner dealt with the issues of human beings, whether abled or disabled, as all in God's image of disability, vulnerability as well as flourishing. As noted by Behr (2015: 80) "Jesus became human being" which enabled His work of being crucified in relation to human salvation to come to pass (Cole, 2009: 834). This is flourishing, since Jesus' impairments did not hinder Him from flourishing and accomplishing His purpose. Hence, disability or health cannot be a determining factor for human flourishing, which comes through the pursuit of the virtue ethics of joy, hope and love, even with a condition of profound disability. Hence, persons with disabilities should not allow

themselves to be given or accept cheap or false hopes of a utopian eschatological future, or that they can experience perfect bodiliness here and now once they are able to activate faith or are free of sin. Such anticipation of experiencing perfection or healing (and resulting flourishing) may not be realisable. Persons with disability should be encouraged to accept their disabling conditions as a reality, but to also accept that they are created in the image of God.

Suffice it to say that Clifton's experience of profound disability and human flourishing contrasts with the unrealistic utopian promises made to persons with disabilities by some faith healers and preachers. Clifton's experience of unhappiness with his SCI was real but he came to a point of reality and did experience happiness through the pursuit of virtue ethics. He did not fold his hands and wait for the utopian eschatological future promised by faith healers and preachers to come before beginning to experience human flourishing in his disabling condition as a result of SCI. Instead, Clifton reconstructed his disability through accepting reality and working to experience flourishing in the midst of his condition of profound disability, pain, and suffering by defying cultural, societal and church norms, which Reynolds calls the cult of normalcy.

In reconstructing disability in order to experience human flourishing in the face of a disabling condition, Clifton turned to the philosophical ideology of the contemplation of happiness. This pursuit of meaning regarding his condition pushed him to ask questions about pain and suffering: "Why do bad things happen to good people and where is of God?" (Clifton, 2014a: 1827). Asking such questions suggests that he was probably at a point of facing a reality completely different to what he was used to. Clifton acknowledges that facing a life of suffering and pain takes courage since the condition of disability is another life altogether. Therefore, Clifton (2014a: 1824) claims that:

Happiness/well-being/flourishing is found in the pursuit of truth and meaning and achieved through the exercise of virtues;<sup>102</sup> the habits of character such as prudence, justice, fortitude, self-control, generosity and the like, which is the facilitator of success in activities believed to be meaningful.

Happiness is not just a product of luck but comes through the exercise of virtues, the habits of character that enable one to succeed in what one does and which together constitute the good life (Clifton, 2014b: 378). Clifton claims that the reconstruction of disability to attain the level of human flourishing involves relearning the basics of life, learning to live again, which

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<sup>102</sup> Almost every human virtue arises as a response to hardship, so that the virtues of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23) – are potently manifest in communities enriched by people with disabilities (Clifton, 2015a: 773).

basically requires the exercise of virtue as mentioned above, being ambitious and being determined to succeed. His emphasis on the virtues of faith, hope, and love shows that these virtues bring together primary and secondary causation – God’s activity and our own – and so helps us work towards our own flourishing as well as the flourishing of others (Clifton, 2015a: 784).

Mccabe (2017: 52) stresses that for someone with a disability to be willing to suffer, is a concrete rejection of what is called cheap happiness or popular esteem, which are built on short-term victories and successes. Mccabe maintains that persons with disability will not accept unrealistic utopian hopes because they regard them as vague, hence they are not optimistic about hopes that are built on the pretext that one day they will be healed and finally become productive members of society. They do not defer rest and consolation to a hoped for but distant time. Rather, they decide to accept God’s consolation in the present, in the midst of their suffering (Mccabe, 2017: 52).

In agreement with Clifton, Mccabe (2017: 53) stresses that the demand for happiness and healing accompanies the person with disability throughout his/her whole life. The petition is for eternal healing and is best compared not with human requests and optimism, but with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. The requirement is a deep hope for healing and transformation; it is secured through a firm act of faith and it ultimately aims for the eternal love of God. The request opposes all the optimistic promises that never amount to anything and the attractions of shallow happiness and pleasure that never last (Mccabe, 2017: 53). Moreover, human happiness is not dependent on a person’s capacities or incapacities (Melcher, 2013: 265), but on the pursuit of virtues, the habits of character and the image of God.

However, we need to identify some basic keys that can be used to attain human flourishing in the face of profound disability. Firstly, persons with disabilities should be willing to acknowledge and embrace their status and, very importantly, recognise that disability does not change one’s status as one created in the image of God. Hence, to reconstruct disability and human flourishing, is to turn to the virtue ethics, the pursuit of truth in the habits of character, and to know that this life is a mixture of suffering and pain, joy and happiness. It is also important to realise that experiencing human flourishing is not the absence of disability. Hence, persons with disabilities should be willing to reject unrealistic and vague utopian ideals that will not be actualised or amount to anything in the here and now, as charismatic preachers and

motivational speakers promise them. With the above understanding, I would like us to discuss the critique of disability and human flourishing.

## **5.6 A Critique of Disability and Human Flourishing**

At this point, it is helpful to critique the relationship between disability and human flourishing. Disability does not reflect the image of God according to Nigerian cultural and societal norms. Rather, it defies the image of God and His body, which is the community of Christ's people where those with disabilities should experience flourishing. The church urges those with disabilities to keep hope alive that one day in this life they may be healed and finally become productive members of society. The church focuses on God's omnipotent perfection in making these promises to persons with disabilities, claiming that only through faith in God, will the disabled be healed and experience human flourishing. The views of two notable theologians help to explain how these ideas of disability and human flourishing are perceived and understood.

### ***5.6.1 Jürgen Moltmann and disability***

Moltmann argues that Christ revealed His identity and became the identity of those who have lost their identity – the identity which is created by societal norm (or Reynolds' cult of normalcy) and deprives people of their humanity. Christ, therefore, identified with the rejected as well as the despised of society and He was found amongst the disabled such as the lepers, the rejected, the sick, the oppressed, the segregated and the marginalised (Moltmann, 1993: 27).

Moltmann is not ignorant of disability because of the experiences of his older brother Hartwig to whom Moltmann was personally attached. Moltmann's brother was severely disabled and was among the 10,000 disabled people who became victims in the Nazi euthanasia programme during the Second World War. Moltmann, therefore, became particularly sensitive to the plight of those in our world as well as our churches who are not appropriately valued, such as the physically and mentally disabled. Moltmann (2013: 1) maintains that the disabled who are in solitude under the guise of protection and care, are actually deprived of freedom, not only in the public but also in the private. No person with a disability is useless or of no value and no one can be dispensed with, whether they are vulnerable, uneducated or ugly, because we all have special charisma in the community of Christ's people.

Moltmann further asks: “Why are all people made in the form of the crucified Christ?” Then, he rhetorically declares that the crucified Christ assumed not just humanity, but also its misery, to heal it. The crucified Christ did not just assume humanity but also the misery of humankind, to heal it, since all are made in the likeness of the crucified Christ. In this respect, Christ restored dignity to humans through solidarity and identification with them in brokenness as well as in vulnerability (Moltmann, 2013: 1). Moltmann further reiterates that Paul the Apostle discovered the power of God not just in areas of personal strength, but also in vulnerability, weakness, ill-treatment, suffering and persecution. His experience of Christ’s sufferings, helped him to encourage others (2 Cor. 13:4).

Moltmann also argues that when God became a man in Jesus of Nazareth, He not only entered the finitude of man, but His death on the cross also entered the situation of man’s godforsakenness. Jesus did not die the natural death of a finite being, but the violent death of a criminal on the cross – the death of complete abandonment by God (Moltmann, 1993: 212). Moltmann, therefore, queries the extent to which both the knowledge of the crucified God as well as its meaning can help suffering humanity. He contends that those who suffer without cause, often at first assume that God has forsaken them. By making this claim, he affirms that God appears to be the mysterious, incomprehensible God who destroys the good fortune that He gave and that anyone who cries out to God in suffering echoes the death cry of the dying Christ, the Son of God. This is the God who cries, but, in a profound sense, is the human God who cries with humanity and intercedes for them with His cross (Moltmann, 1993: 252). The crucified Christ is the image of the invisible God, which speaks only of the cross. Essentially, this understanding entails a liberating theology as well as a crucified theology, of which the method as well as the theory can only be controversial, purposeful, dialectical, and characterised by careful evaluation and judgment (Moltmann, 1993: 63).

Subsequently, Reynolds (2008: 23) argues that persons with a disability give others precious insight into the woundedness and vulnerability of human life. He sees disability as a profound symbol of human brokenness, not as a flaw, but as a condition that is pervasive. There is no differentiation between the healthy and those with disabilities, because no human being is without limitations and vulnerabilities. Humans are born needy and die empty and helpless. Hence, disability does not determine a person’s nature. Quoting Moltmann, Reynolds reiterates that no one else has such valuable insights into the woundedness and vulnerabilities of human life as persons with disability (Reynolds, 2008: 24). Reynolds confirms that when individuals with disabilities experience suffering, it is usually as a result of the refusal of those without

disabilities to accept that both the disabled and the non-disabled are the same in the sight of God – *Coram Deo* – meaning there is no difference between human beings before God.

For Moltmann, Christ is the very image of the invisible God and all human beings are created in the image of the crucified Christ. The wounds He bore on the cross, show His solidarity with the marginalised, segregated, oppressed, disabled and the vulnerable, in other words, all those who have lost their identity to societal standards of what is normal. Moltmann claims that, if the knowledge of the crucified Christ is understood and perceived, then many who suffer would not despair but take consolation in Christ, since they understand that they are created in the image of the crucified Christ. Thus, human flourishing can be experienced even in a state of profound disability.

### **5.6.2 David H. Kelsey and Human Flourishing**

According to Aristotelian virtue ethics, human flourishing means true happiness. Therefore, to experience happiness or human flourishing, people need to focus on living and doing what is good, by which their character would be judged as good if they despise vices such as dishonesty, cruelty, and stinginess and acquire virtues like charity, benevolence, honesty and generosity (Purcell, 2014: 2). Consistently practising these virtues should be a lifestyle which always aims at what is good (Purcell, 2014: 3). Thus, “Aristotelian virtue ethics focuses on *eudaimonia* or human flourishing” (Purcell, 2014: 11) and to engage with the experience of human beings in a more lucid or less divisive way, requires that the rhetoric of human flourishing comes into its own contemporary theology as an alternative way of speaking about human happiness (Marais, 2015: 9).

Kelsey describes human flourishing based on the Oxford Dictionary definition of flourishing as “to blossom and to thrive” in a general sense (Kelsey, 2008: 2). Human flourishing is inseparable from God’s act of relating to human beings, so that their flourishing is always dependent upon God in as much as the glory of God is seen as being made fully alive in human beings (Kelsey, 2008: 1-2). Describing his theological understanding of human flourishing, Kelsey argues that if flourishing means to blossom, then God is in relationship with His people whose lives are characterised by the beauty of fruitfulness available to others and are nurtured and sustained in order to preserve seeds from which future generations can benefit (Kelsey, 2008: 2). However, in this context of human flourishing, Kelsey also foresees a theologically problematic metaphor with health, whether physical, emotional, intellectual, social, or cultural (Kelsey, 2008: 3). Therefore, he strategically focuses on the theological usage of human

flourishing as human well-being and on making sense of human flourishing in terms of being in healthy relationships with others or one's setting (Kelsey, 2008: 8).

Kelsey points out that in popular devotion, human well-being is habitually characterised in the form of people who are happy and healthy, self-fulfilled, self-realised or fully actualised (Kelsey, 2008: 9). Clearly, "these culturally accepted informal indices of biological, psychosomatic, psychosocial, societal, and cultural 'well-being' are widely adopted as conclusive of human flourishing" (Kelsey, 2008: 9). However, Kelsey is of the opinion that in this context, it is hard to see the attractiveness of the theological strategy of analysing human flourishing as existential self-relational well-being (Kelsey, 2008: 11). By implication, Kelsey is of the opinion that "it seems to promise to maximise both God's 'involvement' in human being and God's 'otherness' than human being in such a way that God's relation to human being does not threaten to minimise human power and agency" (Kelsey, 2008: 11).

Thus, it is somehow problematic theologically to define human flourishing as human well-being which is understood as health (Kelsey, 2008: 14). Whereas the criteria for well-being is understood as health, which rightly refers to the dynamics of various types of human relations – with themselves or fellow creatures and the lived worlds they share, the criteria for a theocentric account of human flourishing has to do with human relations with God and God's relations with them. In a theocentric account of human flourishing, God's relations with human beings and their relations with God are the larger context within which the meaning of their relations with one another and with other creatures as well as with their shared lived worlds is defined and their significance evaluated (Kelsey, 2008: 14).

Nevertheless, Kelsey argues that when ill health sets in, it cannot be the basis for a theological account of human flourishing, neither should suffering be sought in order to attain human flourishing (Kelsey, 2008: 14). A theocentric perspective also reveals that suffering cannot be the determining factor in human non-flourishing theologically even though several forms of ill health and non-wellbeing can result in suffering. Hence, when suffering is eliminated, it does not automatically translate into human flourishing (Kelsey, 2008: 14-15). The inadequate theological assumption that arises here, is that when human flourishing is understood as well-being in the sense of health, it fails to provide the conceptual space needed for consistent joint affirmation of human flourishing (Kelsey, 2008: 15).

Furthermore, Kelsey makes a distinction between two kinds of God-relations corresponding to two broad kinds of human flourishing, which are theocentrically understood. The first is Type

A flourishing, which stems from God's relations with human beings, and the second, Type B human flourishing, concerns human beings' appropriate response to God (Kelsey, 2008: 20). According to this conception, the basis of Type A human flourishing is God relating to human beings. Three distinct varieties of Type A human flourishing are identified: God relating to create, God relating to draw to eschatological consummation, and God relating to reconcile (Kelsey, 2008: 20). Human beings flourish in Type A simply because God relates to them creatively regardless of what they believe, say, feel or do. This is probably the most counterintuitive sense of human flourishing. Thus, an understanding of God's creativity as inherently expressive of the divine life that is God's glory in the strict sense of the term, is warranted (Kelsey, 2008: 22). This simply suggests that each creature flourishes in Type A in the sense of blossoming as long as it manifests the glory of the God who relates to it creatively (Kelsey, 2008: 23).

Kelsey further argues that:

For all of its variability, human creatures' flourishing as the "glory of God" is part of the theological warrant for the judgment that human beings are of unconditional value, a dignity deserving unqualified respect such that they must be treated as a good in itself, an end and never only a means to other ends. This is the most counterintuitive sense of human flourishing, theocentrically understood as the "glory of God," because it entails the claim that in this sense a human being "flourishes" as the (imitative) "glory of God" simply by virtue of God relating to it creatively even if it is extremely unwell, biologically, psychologically, socially, or culturally ill, wounded, broken and in excruciating, personality-destroying suffering. Firstly, the concrete way in which a human creature flourishes in this sense of the term, i.e., as the "glory of God" purely in virtue of God's creative relating to it, is relative to whatever capacities and powers it actually exercises here and now, no matter how diminished or even extinguished its capacities and powers may be, but it is not a function of the creatures exercising those capacities and powers. Secondly, a human creature's "flourishing" as (derivatively) the "glory of God", partly grounds the conviction that it has a dignity that deserves unconditional respect no matter how "diminished" it may be (Kelsey, 2008: 24-25).

This means that human flourishing does not depend on anything that surrounds a person's actions or what the human being has achieved or not achieved, attained or not attained, apart from the relational flourishing which comes and is freely given through creativity with dignity and respect in order to flourish as the glory of God.

Kelsey's second, broader kind of human flourishing, which he calls type B flourishing, is grounded in human response to God relating creatively with humans. They are impressive because they are conceived and experienced as the creaturely glory of God, therefore they respond to God and acknowledge Him as glorious (Kelsey, 2008: 25).

## 5.7 The Church, Image of the Disabled God, Disability and Human Flourishing

Thus far, we have shown that all human beings are bearers of God's image despite their physical, psychological and spiritual condition. Since the "church" is not our main focus, I shall offer only a very brief definition of it. The term implies that any time there is a gathering of people in the name of the Lord, that gathering belongs to the Lord, who is the head of His body (this includes the abled and the disabled alike), the members of which are the recipients of His heavenly grace through the Eucharist.<sup>103</sup>

I would like to challenge Nigerian churches to take the image of the disabled and vulnerable God into consideration and make a critical assessment of what this image consists of as well as what it portrays. This can be done through biblical hermeneutics (interpretation) in order to reproduce and also convey the thoughts and meanings of the Scriptures regarding disability, so that the ultimate purpose will be achieved (Drumwright and Osborn, 2009: 331-332).

Hull has shown that the church's mission is to bear witness to the God of life by sharing human vulnerability, suffering, and pain as the core of God's love. The church comprises of the abled as well as the disabled, hence the able-bodied should extend love to the disabled within the church in solidarity in order to be the part of the church, which is broken and wounded just like the hands and feet of Jesus Christ. However, what we see in real life is a reversal of this, as in Eiesland's account of her experience of marginalisation because her body did not meet the expectations of the "cult of normalcy" promoted by the church and society. As noted in the discussion above, Reynolds calls on the church to be available for the other, since all human beings are created in the image of the disabled God for creativity as well as to relate to one another. It also significant to understand that this image of God is an elusive category, meaning that the disabled are also a part of the body of Christ. Failure to critically view the image from a biblical hermeneutics' viewpoint (with the sole aim of conveying the thought processes and meanings of the writers of the texts) could lead to a view of disability as sin conflated and of those with a disability as unfit to bear God's image. The danger, therefore, is that such a view undermines the very image of the disabled God. Such was the case of my younger sister regarding the Nigerian context, where persons with disabilities are viewed as either blessed or damned.

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<sup>103</sup> In Eiesland's words, "The Eucharist as a central and constitutive practice of the church, is a ritual of membership. Someone who can take or serve communion is a real Christian subject. Hence inclusion of people with disabilities in the ordinary practice of receiving and administering the Eucharist is a matter of bodily mediation of justice and an incorporation of hope" (Eiesland, 2009: 240).

Within this context, Raymond furthermore, reinforces that:

Disabled people in Nigeria encounter a plethora of attitudinal, institutional and environmental barriers that impede and militate against their active social inclusion within contemporary society. Within rural areas, it is commonly held that disability is a result of a “curse”. Therefore, disabled people are commonly perceived as being “dependent”, “helpless” and “in need of charity”. Such strong and commonly held beliefs reinforce these structural factors that fuel the mutually negative symbiotic relationship between poverty and disability (Raymond, 2008: 20).

It is with this in mind that Moltmann claims that a church that is not disabled conscious or does not regard a disabled person as a normal person equally created in the image of God, is a disabled church. This could mean that, to be an abled body of Christ, a church should ensure that disabled persons have access to participate in church and society so that they are able to display the creative abilities in them for the benefit of all, that is, accept that all the human beings are created in the image of the disabled God. With this understanding, disabilities of any kind will not hinder a person from flourishing as human flourishing cannot be experienced without some suffering, pain, disability, and vulnerability.

### **5.8 Some Contributions and Recommendations**

As we have already seen from Haruna and Raymond within the context in which this thesis is situated, a way of contribution is deliberate steps in order to sensitise church leadership within this setting regarding what the image of God portrays and consists of. These church leaders should also create the same awareness in followers through periodic seminars and conferences based on biblical hermeneutics of Scriptures. This is to educate the people, to sensitise them to gain understanding of the image of God and what disability is all about from a Christological perspective. All human beings should be aware that all people walk on the same earth, breath the same air, drink the same water, the same sun falls on all, all people are mortals, they have soul, spirit, body and above all, our blood is red. Our physiology should matter less, rather than being a major issue. Human beings should focus on virtues, from where character comes, then the image of God can be realised, and segregation and marginalisation will be a minor issue, since humans still exist in an imperfect world.

Therefore, I recommend that churches within the context in which I write this thesis, emphasise and insist on a Bible hermeneutics of Scriptures from a Christological viewpoint when teaching seminars and preaching sermons in churches, especially on sensitive subjects like disability. Churches can be vanguards for the disabled in the midst of the world by being accessible to all, and by educating the church followership, who are made up of society in which all people are in the very elusive image of God. The church should influence cultures and bring reform that

will restore values and bring liberation, particularly for the disabled within churches. I recommend that people with disabilities should also be taught that they are also an image of God. There should be a deliberate move towards building of confidence in them, creating spaces for them within the church structures so that they too can contribute their own giftings, which is very important, because the church cannot be complete without them. They should be encouraged and integrated in all walks of life, so that they can be free of inferiority complexes usually associated with disabilities within these settings. Persons with disabilities should be given free education as well as free medical treatment and architectural designs should be reconstructed to accommodate all. Organisations should give employment to qualified people, whether abled or disabled, not just based on physiological fitness but based on merit. All this should be from a Christological perspective, since it is the work of the person of Jesus, who is the disabled God.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

Having come this far in this study regarding the Christological image of the disabled God and human flourishing with disability, adding to all the volumes that have already been written on the subject, it is important to note that the goal is to keep opening up other perspectives for further research. This study cannot be concluded here, because there are a number of insights that could be valuable for further research in this discourse.

The image of the disabled God is a provocative subject that is still open to debate within the Christian circle as well as in Christian theological discourse. Furthermore, a closer look through the lens of biblical hermeneutics, offers the revelation of a fresh understanding of the elusive category of God's image highlighted in many ways. One of these is the emergence of the new humanity in Jesus Christ in vulnerability with the wounds of impairments in his hands, feet, and side. This creates access for those oppressed by the influence of the prejudice of cultural and societal norms and imprisoned by the cult of normalcy. This new humanity is devoid of segregation and marginality. Hence the vulnerable, oppressed, wounded, and disabled are also welcomed to experience full personhood in the image of the disabled God. This image does not stop at the physiological aspect, but is viewed as creativity, relationality, and availability.

Conclusively, the image of the disabled God shows that a person with a profound disability can also experience human flourishing. But this does not mean that such experiences are devoid of pain and suffering, for this would amount to a utopian promise, which is not realistic and cannot be found in this life.

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