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The Body of Christ Has Always Been a Virtual Body

Deanna A. Thompson¹

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

— attributed to St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582)²

I come from a long line of pastors; I grew up seeing my Dad and our church community being present with those who suffer. I witnessed again and again that to be the body—the feet, the hands of Christ—is to be present with people during the worst times of their lives. This is why St. Theresa’s prayer resonates deeply with me: the church at its best embodies the compassion of Christ with and for those who are suffering.

Illness/Conversion

I was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer at age 42, and if I hadn’t been on so much oxycodone, I wouldn’t have agreed to my brother setting up a CaringBridge website. I was shocked to realize that the place where I found I most resembled myself was in virtual space.

In those early months after the diagnosis (the cancer broke my back), my body was so debilitated that when people saw me in person it looked like I was dying. And seeing that reality reflected back to me regularly reduced me to tears, unable to say almost anything about what it was like to have my life undone by cancer. But online I found that I could speak in complete sentences without the tears interrupting my words. Then people read those words and responded to me and my family with abundant support, care, and compassion.

Before cancer I was a “digital skeptic,” convinced that our digital tools were distancing us from one another. But with the experience of care, compassion, and support from what I’ve come to call “the virtual body of Christ,” I had a conversion experience about the potential power of digital tools to help the church live out its calling to be the body of Christ in this time and place.

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² <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/christ-has-no-body-now-but-yours>

One of the chapters in *Hoping for More*, my memoir on living with cancer, is titled “Embraced by the Virtual Body of Christ.”³ Then I came across a short piece by Jason Byassee about virtual theological education where he makes the claim that “the body of Christ has always been a virtual body.”⁴ This statement set me on a path to think more about the virtual body of Christ in its ancient form and how that might connect to the virtual body of Christ today. I went on to write a book about the virtual body of Christ, and I continue to speak on the subject of church in the digital world.⁵ All of this is not a vocation I would have chosen on my own, but here I am.

Body of Christ Always Been a Virtual Body

Paul was almost never physically present with those he considered members of the body of Christ. Before exploring the claim that the body of Christ has always been a virtual body, let’s look at Paul’s use of the metaphor of the body—a common metaphor at the time to talk about human relationships, but he uses the image in uncommon ways. In his explanation of the variety of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, Paul insists that the diversity of gifts of the Spirit are given by to God “for the common good.”⁶ As biblical scholar Michelle Lee explains, philosophers of the day used body imagery to facilitate “cessation of strife through acceptance of one’s place in the body.”⁷ Paul’s use of body imagery in 1 Cor. 12, by contract, imagines a reversal of status. Because the Corinthians are called upon to have the mind of Christ⁸ they are called to perceive status differently than the ruling philosophies of the day. Acting as Christ acts, Paul proclaims, means that the weakest and least honorable among them deserve the greatest attention and place of honor.⁹

Even though social and political uses of body imagery at the time encouraged members of the body to sympathize with the suffering of other members, Paul’s insistence that the weakest members of the body were to be viewed as the top priority stood in stark contrast to the prevailing view of the hierarchy that existed within the body, highlighting the countercultural nature of Paul’s vision for what it means to be the church. Since Corinth was a restored city of Rome, Paul was also enacting this reversal of status within an imperial context. To call the Corinthian community “the body of Christ” that proclaimed Jesus as Lord countered the proclamation of Caesar as lord, where Caesar is seen as ruler and head of the body. Paul’s application of the body metaphor “deeply disrupts the smooth flow of the social hegemonic networks” of the time.¹⁰

It can also be argued that Paul’s reversal of conventional ways of imagining hierarchy within the body is about more than just reversing the status quo. The reversal applies not just to the Corinthians but also to Christ and the road to the cross. Paul’s understanding of

³ Deanna A. Thompson, *Hoping for More: Having Cancer, Talking Faith, Accepting Grace* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012).

⁴ Jason Byassee, “For Virtual Theological Education,” *Faith and Leadership*, March 2, 2011, <https://faithandleadership.com/jason-byassee-virtual-theological-education>.

⁵ Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016).

⁶ 1 Cor. 12:7.

⁷ Michelle Lee, *Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ*, Society for New Testament Studies Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 144.

⁸ 1 Cor. 2:16.

⁹ 1 Cor. 12:22–23.

¹⁰ Guillermo Hansen, “The Networking of Differences that Makes a Difference: Theology and Unity of the Church,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 35.

the church as the body of Christ is aligned with the view of God's solidarity through the cross with those who suffer most. The privileging of the weakest is what New Testament scholar Michael Gorman refers to as Paul's vision of "cruciform hierarchy."¹¹ Paul insists that it is God's arrangement of the body¹² that promises care by the entire church of members who need it most.

After he paints a picture of how the parts of the body work together, Paul then moves on to identify the Corinthians explicitly as the body of Christ,¹³ narrowing the focus to the shape of the body locally in Corinth. Here Paul's vision for care of the weakest takes root at the local level. "The local congregation is small enough to recognize the special needs of its members," writes biblical scholar James Thompson.¹⁴ What emerges through Paul's letters to the churches is the portrait of the apostle as pastor, focused on the particular needs of particular communities.

It is also important not to ignore the wider vision of the body of Christ at work in Paul's way of relating to local churches like the one in Corinth, one that does not always depend on face-to-face interactions, one that I'm calling the virtual body of Christ.

Strong and Weak Ties in the Ancient Body of Christ

It is interesting to note that biblical scholars who apply the work of sociologist Mark Granovetter on social network ties (especially the importance of weak ties) to Paul's social networks suggest that Paul had many more weak ties than strong ties.¹⁵ They pay attention to how Paul was not a solo act, but how he relied heavily on coworkers like Timothy and Phoebe, Priscila and Aquila.

Even as Paul developed many close relationships through face-to-face interactions with members of churches scattered across the Mediterranean, he was only able to be physically present with them on very occasional visits. Paul describes his siblings in Corinth as members with him in Christ's body, but his presence with them is primarily a virtual one, mediated through letters and messages passed on by Timothy and other coworkers. In order to maintain ongoing relationships with these communities, Paul developed and relied on a network of letter coworkers, co-senders—and sometimes even co-writers—with whom he worked to get letters delivered to the churches and responses back to him.¹⁶ Jason Byassee offers this intriguing view of Paul's relationship with the churches he leads, most often from a distance:

Paul so often longs to be with the congregations from whom he is absent in the body. But notice what he doesn't do: he doesn't wait to offer them his words until he can be with them. He sends them letters. Letters meant to be read corporately, perhaps even to lead worship or be part of it. Such letters allow him to engage personally without

¹¹ Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 272.

¹² 1 Cor. 12:24.

¹³ 1 Cor. 12:17.

¹⁴ James Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 197.

¹⁵ Dennis Duling, "Paul's Aegean Network: The Strength of Strong Ties," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43, no. 3 (2013), 138.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Drescher, *Tweet If You Heart Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2011), 80.

being present personally. They are a poor substitute in some ways. In others they are superior.¹⁷

Paul's connections with members of local incarnations of the body of Christ are nurtured and maintained mostly through a virtual form of communication. To talk about letters as virtual communication helps make more visible the ways in which communication was also mediated during predigital periods of history. And as Byassee suggests, Paul's virtual presence via letters is in some ways a poor substitute for his physical presence. We see from the first letter to the Corinthians, for instance, that Paul is distressed over some members' abuse of the practice of the Lord's Supper. They reportedly eat and drink while others go hungry.¹⁸ It is likely that Paul's physical presence with them could have helped address the abuses much more quickly. Instead, such practices were able to continue far longer because he was dependent upon letters to address such problems.

In other ways, though, the letter writing approach opens up new avenues for developing and maintaining important relational ties, both strong and weak. As Elizabeth Drescher observes, Paul's pastoral ministry via letters presents an innovative decentralized model of leadership that we can learn from today. Calling Paul a "networked communicator," Drescher points out that when communication between pastor and congregation happens primarily through letters, the community is invited not just into dialogue with Paul through the contents of the letter but also into engagement with one another over how the contents of the letter should be interpreted within its own particular context.¹⁹ When we read Paul's letters, we see in them a pastor who offers encouragement, consolation, critique, correction, solace, instruction, and admonishment—and each of his letters is full of theological responses shaped by the on-the-ground experiences of members of the body of Christ.

Being present virtually, through letters, opens up avenues for developing and maintaining important connections with members of the community. While it is clear that Paul's leadership and guidance through his letters shaped how these fledgling churches attempted to live into being the body of Christ, his primarily virtual approach to leadership empowered lay leaders as they put into practice this vision of community and ministry. It is also important to acknowledge that Paul imagined the church not only in local terms but also as extending beyond individual local communities (note that Paul addresses his letter to the Corinthians "to God's church that is in Corinth").²⁰

The Body of Christ as Always a Virtual Body

Paul's being present virtually through letters differs from our digitally mediated virtual experiences of today. When I use the term "virtual" to refer to our digitally mediated connections, I'm aware that *virtual reality* (VR) or *virtual life* (VL) is often contrasted with "actual" reality or *real life* (RL), and that this contrast encourages a bifurcated view that being online or connected digitally is utterly distinct from *real* or embodied reality.

¹⁷ Byassee, "For Virtual Theological Education."

¹⁸ 1 Cor. 11:7–22.

¹⁹ Drescher, *Tweet If You Heart Jesus*, 80–82.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 1:2.

But thinking of *virtual reality* as diametrically opposed to embodied reality belies the ways in which our engagement with virtual reality is always done by those of us with bodies, living in a material world. Digital scholar T. V. Reid writes,

It is important to take that illusion of virtuality [of the virtual world] seriously; it is to some degree a new kind of experience. But it is also not wholly new (whenever we read a novel we also enter a virtual world, just not a digitally delivered one). Part of studying virtual worlds should be to remind users that they are never just in a virtual world, but always in a real one too.²¹

This is where religion scholars and theologians need to become more nuanced in our discussions of virtual reality. Yale theologian and liturgist Teresa Berger, author of *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, encourages us to resist falsely dichotomizing between what is “virtual” and what is “real.” Berger notes that our daily living is “digitally infused,” and time spent online versus with others in person do not occur in entirely different worlds.²² Just as it is possible to be in close physical proximity with others while simultaneously being absent mentally or spiritually, it is also possible to be virtually present to one another in profound, meaningful, and real ways even when we’re physically distant. Real, embodied reality and virtual reality are always inextricably intertwined, both through the letters of Paul’s time and the digital connections of our own.

²¹ T. V. Reid, *Digitized Lives: Culture, Power, and Social Change in the Internet Era*, 1st ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 21.

²² Teresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2018), 16–21.