HACIA UNA TEOLOGÍA DE LA DISCAPACIDAD PARA EL CONTEXTO DE GHANA

TOWARD A DISABILITY THEOLOGY FOR THE GHANAIAN CONTEXT

Isaac Boaheng[1]
Christian Service University College, Kumasi.Ghana
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8624-3035

Resumen:
La teología de la discapacidad es un campo emergente dentro de la investigación teológica que explora la intersección de las percepciones humanas de Dios y la humanidad a través de la lente de las experiencias de la discapacidad. En Ghana, la literatura cristiana sobre el tema se centra predominantemente en el cuidado y las consideraciones éticas relacionadas con la discapacidad, con sólo un poco de atención a las dimensiones teológicas de la discapacidad. Por lo tanto, esta investigación se llevó a cabo para formular una teología de la discapacidad basada en la intersección de la teología para servir a las necesidades cristianas de Ghana. Una metodología de investigación basada en la literatura para recopilar, analizar y sintetizar información de estudios publicados previamente sobre el tema. El marco teológico adoptado en esta investigación aborda cuestiones de la *imago Dei*, la teología del pecado y la prosperidad en relación con la discapacidad. El documento termina con recomendaciones para promover la defensa, la justicia social y la plena inclusión y derechos de las personas con discapacidad dentro de contextos tanto religiosos como sociales.

Palabras clave: Cristo, teología de la discapacidad, Ghana, teología de la prosperidad.

Abstract:
Disability theology is an emerging field within theological inquiry that explores the intersection of human perceptions of God and humanity through the lens of disability experiences. In Ghana, Christian literature on the subject predominantly focuses on caregiving and ethical considerations related to disability with just a little attention to the theological dimensions on disability. This research was, therefore, conducted to formulate a theology of disability based on the intersection of theology to serve the Ghanaian Christian need. A literature-based research methodology to collect, analyze and synthesize information from previously published studies on the subject matter. The theological framework espoused in this research engages with questions of *imago Dei,* sin and prosperity theology in relation to disability. The paper ends with recommendations to promote advocacy, social justice and the full inclusion and rights of individuals with disabilities within both religious and societal contexts.

Keywords: *Christ, Disability Theology, Ghana, Prosperity Theology*

1. Introduction

The reality of people with disability is evident in any human society.[2] Disability may emerge at any point throughout one's life journey, whether during infancy, childhood,

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[1] Isaac Boaheng holds a PhD from University of the Free State, where he also serves as a research fellow. He is a faculty member at Christian Service University.

adolescence, adulthood, or in later years. No matter the time that it sets in, disability impacts individuals who encounter it. However, the degree of impact of disability on a person may differ depending on some factors. For instance, research indicates a strong correlation between social support and the effects of disability on individuals. Those who receive strong social support tend to experience less adverse effects of disability compared to those with limited social networks.[3] A person's "sense of maturity and locus to control" also determines the impact of disability.[4]

It appears the impact of disability is more devastating in developing countries than developed countries. Ghana is a developing country in West Africa where disability issues continue to attract public attention. Even though the country continues to make efforts toward reducing the plight of the disabled, disability continue to affect people's mobility and social interactions. Some traditional taboos prohibit disables from entering chiefs' palaces constitutes, thereby placing a social barrier on them.

The issue of disability has attracted public attention in Ghana and both secular and Christian scholars continue to explore ways of dealing with the issue. As a contribution to the ongoing discourse, this paper examines the issue of disability in the Ghanaian context from a theological perspective. It begins with the various models of disability and then proceeds to consider the reality of disability within the Ghanaian sociopolitical setting. It them explores the nature and scope of disability theology and continues with recommendations for the individuals living with disabilities, the church and society. Drawing from biblical narratives, the paper encourages inclusive practices within the Christian community. The paper emphasizes the need to ensure equal access to inclusive services, economic opportunities, and employment without discrimination or exclusion.

2. The concept and models of disability

The term "disability" is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental impairments that may hinder a person's full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Disability can result from congenital conditions, accidents, illnesses, or aging processes and may vary in severity and impact depending on the person involved. The World Health Organization uses the term "disability" to denote "impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions."[5] Joni Eareckson Tada defines "disability" as "any physical, emotional, or mental impairment that significantly impacts one or more major life activities, such as walking, seeing, hearing, thinking clearly or relating appropriately."[6] Disability, therefore, is not solely determined by an individual's physical or mental condition but is also influenced by environmental and social factors that may create barriers to inclusion and participation. A handicap and a disability are not the same. A handicap refers to any societal encumbrance that makes it difficult for one to succeed in life. Thus, while disability relates to our bodies, handicap relates to barriers in the society[7].

There are different models of disability that offer varying perspectives on its nature and implications. Scholars have identified four main models of disability: namely, moral model, medical model, social model, and limits model. These models reflect

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[2] E. DZIWORNU, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana: An Overview", *Journal of Advocacy, Research and Education* 10/3 (2023) 145-156. [DOI: 10.13187/jare.2023.3.145].

[3] E. DZIWORNU, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana...", 145.

[4] E. DZIWORNU, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana...", 145.

[5] The World Health Organization cited in C. KISNER – L. A. COLBY – J. BORSTAD, *Therapeutic Exercise Foundations and Techniques,* F.A. Davis Company, Philadelphia 2017, 52.

[6] J. E. TADA, "Disability", in: T. CLINTON – R. HAWKINS, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counselling*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene OR 2011, 394.

[7] J. E. TADA, "Disability...", 394.

different ways in which disability is understood, treated, and accommodated by the society.

2.1. The moral model

The moral model historically viewed disability because of moral or ethical transgressions[8]. This model suggested that individuals with disabilities were perceived as morally flawed or punished by a higher power. Such beliefs led to societal stigmatization and discrimination, often relegating individuals with disabilities to the margins of society. The moral model draws from the moral weight that the Bible places on disability. Examples range from Leviticus 21:16–24, which prohibits individuals with blemishes from approaching the altar, to narratives where Jesus links faith to physical healing (Matt. 8:5-13; Mark 5:25-34; 10:46-52; Luke 5:17-26). The moral model has largely been discredited for perpetuating negative stereotypes and hindering social inclusion.

2.2. The medical model

The medical model, which is the modern companion of the moral model, conceptualizes bodies as functioning like machines with varying degrees of efficiency.[9] This model considers disability as stemming from the individual's inability to function due to a flaw in the body[10]. In other words, this models views disability as a sickness that needs medical attention[11]. Here, the individual is perceived as changeable, while the social environment is considered fixed and unchangeable. Consequently, if a person does not fit into the environment, the onus is placed on the individual (rather than the environment) to adapt and change[12].

Although this perspective may be less overt, it remains imbued with inherent value judgments, especially as bodies with significant "defects" are often deemed less desirable and, consequently, less good than those without such perceived flaws[13]. The prevailing inclination is toward modification—either fixing the defect if possible, normalizing it to the greatest extent if fixing is unattainable, or concealing it if neither fixing nor normalizing proves effective[14]. While medical advancements have greatly improved the lives of many, this model has been criticized for pathologizing disability and focusing on the individual's shortcomings rather than addressing societal barriers.

2.3. The social model

The social model, aligned with the principles of disability rights advocacy, shares similarities with liberation theology and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s[15]. Thus, this approach to disability shifts the focus from individual impairments to societal barriers and discriminatory practices. It initially recognizes disability as a minority group experience, involving prejudice, exclusion, and discrimination in various life aspects. However, it surpasses this observation by challenging the conventional understanding of disability.

Rather than associating disability with physical, cognitive, or emotional impairments, the social model posits that the essence of the "problem" lies within society itself—its architecture, attitudes, and assumptions[16]. For example, using a wheelchair becomes a limitation only when the built environment hinders societal

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[8] D. B. CREAME, "Disability Theology", *Religion Compass* 6/7 (2012) 340.

[9] D. B. CREAME, "Disability Theology...", 340.

[10] E. DZIWORNU, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana...", 147.

[11] S. AMENYEDZI, "Disability and Water Taboos in Ghana: Socio-cultural and Theological Reflections on the Environment", *African Thought: A Journal of Afro-centric Knowledge* 2/1(2022) 107.

[12] E. DZIWORNU, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana...", 147.

[13] D. B. CREAME, "Disability Theology...", 340.

[14] D. B. CREAME, "Disability Theology...", 340.

[15] D. B. CREAME, "Disability Theology...", 340.

[16] D. B. CREAME, "Disability Theology...", 340-341; E. DZIWORNU, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana...", 147; S. AMENYEDZI, "Disability and Water Taboos in Ghana...", 107.

participation. Deafness becomes a disability only when the community fails to learn sign language. Similarly, blindness becomes a limitation solely when the surroundings assume universal sight and do not accommodate alternative means of interaction. That is to say such impairments as blindness, deafness, lack of mobility which makes one disabled in one society may not render another disabled in another society which provides means for the impaired to overcome their limitations[17].

2.4. The limits model

The limits model begins by challenging assumptions about "normal" and "disabled"[18]. It views disability as a common facet of the human condition and recognizes life's inherent progression towards limitations. Human finitude—such as our inability to fly, inability carry the moon on one's shoulder, and inability to live forever—underline that human life is an experience of limitations[19]. This model contends that our concept of "normal" is illusory and perilous. Rather than solidifying disability as a distinct category, this model prompts consideration of limits as normal, expected, flexible, and even beneficial.

This approach to disability rejects oversimplified notions like "we are all disabled" and rather encourages a nuanced exploration of the unique aspects in each disability experience[20]. For instance, it questions grouping individuals with diverse disabilities and emphasizes the need to recognize positive attributes like creativity, interdependence, and perseverance associated with disability. Thus, instead of focusing solely on impairments, this model emphasizes the unique strengths, talents, and contributions of individuals with disabilities.

2.5. Disability in the Ghanaian context

No human society if free from the reality of disability. However, disability rates are higher in low-income countries, with a higher prevalence among females compared to males. Developing nations can have disability prevalence rates of up to 20% of their population. Ghana's 2021 Population and Housing Census recorded approximately 8% of the 30.8 million population as people living with disability[21]. This figure is a little below the global estimate of 10% of the world's population living with disability[22]. Disabilities in Ghana may be physical (paralysis, amputations, albinism), visual (blind), mental (mental retardation) or intellectual (learning disabilities, autism, dementia, speech). These disabilities encompass a wide range of conditions affecting learning, sensory perception, physical mobility, mental health, and genetic makeup.

Disability affects people's life in diverse ways. In the next section some of the effects of disabilities on the individual are outlined.

3. Effects of living with disability

3.1. Political dimension

In Ghana, disability may negatively affect a person's political career[23]. Conversations about the political marginalization of the disabled and efforts aimed at enhancing their political participation have predominantly focused on facilitating their voter

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[17] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities", *IJPT* 14 (2011) 280; E. DZIWORNU, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana…, 147.

[18] D. B. CREAME, "Disability Theology…, 341.

[19] D. B. CREAME, "Disability Theology…, 341.

[20] D. B. CREAME, "Disability Theology…, 341.

[21] Cited in R. WAYO, "People with Disability and Ghana's Economy Today", Ghana News Agency (2022), https://gna.org.gh/2022/11/persons-with-disability-and-ghanas-economy-today; E. DZIWORNU, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana…, 148.

[22] E. DZIWORNU, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana…, 148.

[23] J. OCRAN, "Disability, political citizenship and the challenge of inclusion in national politics: Analysis of five cases from Ghana", in: *Ghana Social Science Journal* 20/1 (2023) 4.

registration and casting ballots during elections, as well as providing assistive devices to support these processes[24]. However, there is a general lack of initiatives directed at fostering the involvement of individuals with disabilities as candidates in elections or appointees to political positions, where they can actively hold office and wield political influence. Consequently, one rarely finds individuals with disabilities running for public office in Ghana. Those who try face considerable challenges which ultimately putting them at a disadvantage in their electoral endeavors.

Ghana's Fourth Republic which began in 1993 only saw the appointment of a disabled as a minister of state on in 2013. Dr. Henry Seidu Daanaa, a visually impaired lawyer, was appointed as the Minister of Chieftaincy and Traditional Affairs. Even though Dr. Daanaa was qualified for the position, some people considered his nomination as inappropriate on the grounds of his disability. Some chief raised objections about his suitability for the ministerial position because he was not "whole" according to traditional standards[25]. Later, the Second Deputy Speaker of Ghana's Parliament attributed Mahama's defeat in the 2016 election to the appointed of Dr. Omane Boama (a "stammer" as Minister for Communications and Spokesperson of the President of Ghana from 2013 to 2017) and Dr. Daanaa as minister of state[26]. His argument was that traditions and customs do not consider such people as suitable to hold public offices.

Nonetheless, Daanaa's appointment served as a big motivation for other people living with disability to participate in national politics. His political career probably motivated the election of Ivor Greenstreet, a disabled, as presidential candidate of the Convention People's Party (CPP) in the 2016 general elections in Ghana. Greenstreet made history by becoming the first person with disability to contest the presidential election in Ghana[27]. His election as flagbearer did not, however, go well with some of his party members. A prominent member of the CPP, who previously served as a Minister of State and Member of Parliament in Ghana's early post-independence government, openly criticized the party's choice of flagbearer. During a TV interview in February 2016, he expressed doubt about the CPP's chances in the election due to the selected candidate's paraplegia[28]. He questioned how the candidate, Greenstreet in his state of physical disability, would govern if elected as president. He further indicated a preference for another candidate without any physical disability[29]. This remark attests to the pervasiveness of misconceptions about disability in Ghana, more so in the political sphere.

The political marginalization of the disabled is rooted in Ghanaian traditions and beliefs. Traditional leaders in Ghana are chosen based on lineage. Aside being a royal, one has to be physically appealing: tall, handsome/beautiful and without defect. In the olden days, these leaders led their people to wars and so they needed to have military skills as well[30]. In the modern society where war is uncommon, the demand for military skills is not critical. However, the fact that the leader should not be physically deformed is still very important. Consequently, individuals with disabilities are excluded from participation in chieftaincy and traditional authority. In some societies, these people are considered as possessing compromised spiritual identities and are therefore restricted from interacting with traditional authorities[31]. This traditional practice extends to Ghana's political arena and hinders disabled participation in public

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[24] J. OCRAN, "Disability, political citizenship**...**, 4.
[25] J. OCRAN, "Disability, political citizenship**...**, 6 y 8.
[26] J. OCRAN, "Disability, political citizenship**...**, 8.
[27] J. OCRAN, "Disability, political citizenship**...**, 7.
[28] J. OCRAN, "Disability, political citizenship**...**, 7.
[29] J. OCRAN, "Disability, political citizenship**...**, 7.
[30]I. BOAHENG, "Abanpredease Christology: A Christological Interpretation of Dormaahene's Chieftaincy Appellations", *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* 4/1 (2022) 1-15, https://doi.org/10.38159/motbit.2022411, on 5th February 2024.
[31] J. OCRAN, "Disability, political citizenship**...**, 4.

decision-making. Consequently, the disabled lacks adequate representation in governance and so there is limited advocacy for their rights.

3.2. Socio-religious dimension

The effect of disability on a person's social life in Ghana is profound and multifaceted. One significant aspect is the prevalence of stigma and discrimination towards individuals with disabilities, which often leads to social exclusion and marginalization. Negative attitudes and misconceptions about disability can result in people with disabilities being treated differently, ostracized, or even hidden from public view. This societal stigma can severely limit their social interactions and opportunities for meaningful engagement with others. Given the Ghanaian love for communal life, social exclusion resulting from one's disability poses a huge threat to a person's survival.

The socio-religious dimension of disability in Ghana is rooted in the traditional worldview. Some Ghanaians attribute disability to evil, magical powers (juju), sorcery, and witchcraft[32]. It is believed that whatever happens physically has spiritual antecedents. Therefore, one cannot suffer disability without the influence of supernatural forces. One may be disabled due to their own sins against the gods; someone may also use evil forces to cause another person's disability. Disability is also viewed as a consequence of violating societal taboos[33]. Examples of such taboos include having contact with individuals with disabilities during pregnancy or consuming culturally forbidden foods, engaging in illicit sexual activities, or neglecting specific rituals[34]. Breaking taboos related to water bodies may also cause disability. Such taboos include defecating in rivers or visiting water bodies during menstruation. In some cases, children born with disabilities may be abandoned at river banks because of the belief that such children are river deities. To avoid losing such babies, one has to hide them from public notice. Also, disabilities may be attributed to supernatural causes or seen as a punishment for wrongdoing in past lives. Thus, Ghanaians traditional hold the moral view of disability. The above explains why disability is always associated with stigmatization, social exclusion, ridicule, discrimination, and marginalization[35]. In the long run, the social effects of disability may yield psychological distress.

3.3. Effects on economic life

The economic effects of disability in Ghana are significant. One major consequence is the reduced employment opportunities faced by individuals with disabilities which leads to economic insecurity for themselves and their families[36]. Also, many people with disabilities face obstacles in accessing quality education and vocational training, which hinders their ability to acquire the skills necessary to compete in the job market and achieve economic independence[37]. Consequently most Ghanaians living with disabilities are unemployed. Frequently, individuals who held employment before encountering disability often face job loss due to the presumption that disability equates to incapacity[38]. This explains why the sight of individuals with disabilities begging for money on various streets in Ghana is not uncommon.

The next section considers the nature and scope of disability theology.

4. The nature and scope of disability theology

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[32] S. Amenyedzi, "Disability and Water Taboos in Ghana..., 108.
[33] S. Amenyedzi, "Disability and Water Taboos in Ghana..., 109.
[34] Shiriko cited in Shiriko..., 109.
[35] E. Dziwornu, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana..., 149-150.
[36] E. Dziwornu, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana..., 148.
[37] E. Dziwornu, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana..., 148.
[38] E. Dziwornu, "Plight of Persons with Disability in Ghana..., 148.

The expression "disability theology" is an attempt by disabled or non-disabled Christians to reflect and interpret the Christian faith against the backdrop of human experience of disabilities[39]. In other words, disability theology is an endeavor undertaken by both disabled and non-disabled Christians to contemplate and understand the Christian faith in light of the lived experiences of disability. From the above definition, the following deductions can be made. First, disability theology (like any other form of theology) is biblically based. The theologian seeking to apply the Christian faith to the situation of the disabled uses the Bible as the first and final authority. Second, disability theology is contextual because it emerges from theological reflection on human experiences in specific contexts. As a result of differences in worldview, the perception about disability and the needs of the disabled may vary from society to society. The theologian, therefore, has to examine the context and interpret God's will and purpose based on context-related needs[40]. Yet, it is important to state that the contextuality of theology should not be the driving force in the theological construct; the gospel must be central. Third, disability theology is global in nature in that it also addresses global needs despite its contextual consideration. The theologian, while seeking to address the needs of a specific context, also relates their study to global Christianity so that what is contextual will, to some extent, also have some global application. Fourth, disability theology may be constructed by disabled scholars, or non-disabled scholars with adequate knowledge and appreciation of the situation of the disabled. Fifth, disability theology seeks to explain the situation of the disabled from a God's perspective, to reduce the plight of the disabled and to build the faith of the disabled and non-disabled alike.

The starting point for disability theology is the recognition that individuals with disabilities have been marginalized in the evolution of Christian theology[41]. At best the disabled have been a minority in the development of Christian theology. This fact leads us to two key factors that have significantly influenced the formulation and popular depictions of God in Christian theology. Firstly, the dominance of able-bodied theologians in the formulation of Christian theology (whether historically or contemporarily) has led to the assumption of able-bodied hermeneutics as the norm for interpreting human experiences with God and images of God[42]. This able-bodied hermeneutical framework has resulted in oppressive practices and exclusionary measures. Societal constructs of beauty, normality, and intellect influence the perception of disability, often viewing it as an abnormality incompatible with reflecting the true image of God. Such perspectives have justified exclusion, marginalization, and attempts to "normalize" individuals with disabilities[43]. As a corrective measure, disability theologians advocate for the inclusion of diverse voices in theological constructions. By actively listening to these voices and contemplating the life experiences of people with disabilities, disability theologians aim to reconsider and adjust theological assumptions and practices that may contribute to the exclusion or misrepresentation of the disability experience[44].

Secondly, the church's theology, often influenced by values from dominant cultures, especially in the West, reflects assumptions rooted in modernity[45]. Liberal democratic culture shapes the church with values that make cultural sense but pose theological challenges when examined closely. In this case, "reflection on disability" (especially conditions associated with intellect and reason–highly valued in liberal society) "is seen as a way of cracking open false assumptions and revealing the true nature of God and

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[39] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 274.
[40] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 276.
[41] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 274-275.
[42] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 276-277.
[43] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 277.
[44] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 275.
[45] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 277.

human beings"[46]. This focus on disability prompts the church to reconsider its identity, encouraging counter-cultural engagement and a return to its true character. By challenging unreflective assumptions, the discussion around disability uncovers a God distinct from prevailing cultural norms within theological perspectives[47]. These two issues—namely, the influence of depictions of God on theological understanding of humanity and church practices, alongside theology's alignment with modernity—constitute core themes running through the domain of disability theology.

Furthermore, the field of disability theology is wide, complex and of varied methodologies. Disability theology transcends both denominational boundaries. Its historical roots can be traced to such traditions as Liberationist, Reformed, Feminist, Lutheran, Methodist, Process theology, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Pentecostalism. At the same time, it spans various theological disciplines, drawing from such theological fields as biblical studies, systematic theology, Christian ethics, church history, and practical theology[48]. Notably, key disability theologians often extend beyond formal theological backgrounds, encompassing sociologists, ethicists, educators, parents, psychologists, and philosophers who approach theology from diverse perspectives and disciplines. The methodologies employed in disability theology are equally varied, ranging from narrative approaches to social scientific analysis and systematic theological reflection on Christian doctrine[49]. The foregoing underscores the complexity and importance of engaging with disability theology as a vital aspect of theological inquiry and reflection.

Using the discussion so far as a contextual framework, the next section explores selected theological themes associated with disability.

5. Selected Theological Themes on Disability

5.1. Disability and the doctrine of *imago Dei*
The presence of disabilities in people's lives presents distinct challenges to our understanding of human nature. Christian anthropology—the study of humanity from the Christian perspective—is, therefore, highly significant for our reflection on the issue of disability. At the core of Christian anthropology is the idea that every human being is created in the image of God (*imago Dei* cf. Gen. 1:26-27). Beyond the mere fact that God created humankind in his own image, the text does not give adequate explanation about the divine image in humankind.

At least four views have been expressed in the history of the church. Early interpretations of the imago Dei suggested a physical resemblance between humans and God[50]. The anthropomorphic interpretation raises questions about spirituality and challenging conventional understandings of God's non-physical nature. The second view is the dominant Western interpretation which emphasizes human reason as the primary reflection of the divine nature[51]. Rooted in Western philosophical traditions, including Greek and Enlightenment philosophies, this interpretation elevates the value of intellectual faculties and may inadvertently excludes those whose cognitive abilities do not align with conventional notions of rationality (comprising thought, language and conceptualization)[52]. This view also prompts reflection on how diverse forms of

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[46] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., **2**77.
[47] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 277.
[48] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 275.
[49] J. SWINTON, "Who is the God We Worship..., 275.
[50] G. COWANS, "Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability", in: W. LONGCHAR – G. COWANS (eds.), *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*, The Association for Theoligical Education In South East Asia (ATESEA), Manila 2011, 184.
[51] G. COWANS, "Towards a Liberatory..., 184.
[52] K. C. ABRAHAM, "Theological Reflections on the Experience of the Disabled" in: W. LONGCHAR – G. COWANS (eds.), *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*, The Association for Theological Education In South East Asia (ATESEA), Manila 2011, 172.

cognition contribute to the broader understanding of human diversity and the divine image within each individual.

The third view interpretations focuses on the exercise of power[53]. It highlights the potential for hierarchical structures to emerge within theological frameworks. While human dominion over the earth is often equated with God's sovereignty, this conception has been historically exploited to justify oppressive power dynamics[54]. Recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of their abilities, challenges hierarchical paradigms and promotes a theology of equality and justice. Lastly, interpretations emphasizing human creativity and freedom offer a lens through which to explore the unique contributions of individuals with disabilities[55]. By recognizing human freedom and creativity as reflections of God's own creative capacity, this perspective celebrates the diverse ways in which individuals with disabilities embody the image of God[56]. It invites us to embrace a theology that values the inherent worth and agency of all individuals, fostering communities that uphold the principles of inclusion, dignity, and empowerment.

Indeed, the existing interpretations of the *imago Dei* fall short in adequately addressing the realities of disability, particularly for those born with impairments. If the criteria for bearing the image of God are based on abilities such as interaction with the environment, reasoning capabilities, or authority, then many individuals with disabilities would not meet these standards. The disability theology proposed in this paper challenges such narrow interpretations and instead affirm that the presence of the image of God is inherent in human life itself. This means that one bears the divine image simply by virtue of being human. From this perspective, the *imago Dei* is best understood within the context of relationships—both in relation to God and to others within the created world[57]. This perspective is rooted in God's existence in harmonious community of three persons characterized by mutuality and love. Daniel Migliore asserts that:

To be human is to live freely and gladly in relationships of mutual respect and love. The existence of human creatures in relationship—a paradigmatic form of which is the coexistence of male and female—reflects the life of God who eternally lives not in solitary existence but in communion. Thus, the image of God is not to be construed primarily as a set of human faculties, possessions, or endowments. It expresses self-transcending life in relationship with others—with the "wholly other" we call God, and with all those different "other" who need our help and whose help we also need in order to be the human creatures God intends us to be.

Thus, instead of perpetuating a codependent relationship where one party's identity is subsumed by the other's caregiving role, disability theology advocates for relationships characterized by mutual respect, empowerment, and recognition of the unique contributions of each person, including those with disabilities. In such relationships, individuals with disabilities are seen as valuable members of the community, capable of exercising agency and autonomy in their lives while also participating in meaningful and reciprocal relationships with others. Therefore, within the framework of disability theology, the emphasis is on fostering relationships that honor the full humanity and agency of individuals with disabilities, rather than perpetuating patterns of codependency.

The relationship perspective on the *imago Dei* may be further explored through a Christological lens. According to Migliore "Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of what God intends humanity to be.... Hence the form of human life that we meet in Jesus the

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[53] G. Cowans, "Towards a Liberatory...", 184.
[54] G. Cowans, "Towards a Liberatory...", 184.
[55] G. Cowans, "Towards a Liberatory...", 184.
[56] G. Cowans, "Towards a Liberatory...", 184.
[57] G. Cowans, "Towards a Liberatory...", 185; D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids MI ³2014, 145.

Christ will surely be the decisive factor in any Christian statement of what it means to be genuinely human"[58]. In Jesus, humanity is shown the essence of communal life in its purest form. While some communities may be formed around exclusive boundaries, Jesus exemplifies a different kind of community—one based on solidarity with all people, particularly those marginalized by societal norms[59]. Our purpose is rooted in relationships, with all other aspects of being understood within the context of community. This inclusive perspective underscores that it is through our relationships—in our very being—that the image of God is most fully realized in the sphere of disability theology.

5.2 Disability and sin

The Christian doctrine of sin and the creation of humanity has had a profound impact on societal attitudes regarding disabilities. As noted earlier both the moral model and the traditional Ghanaian worldview attribute disability to sin. Admittedly, the view that disability is the consequence of sin—a divine punishment upon and individual or a family—is supported by some biblical passages. For example, the men of Sodom who are struck with blindness as a divine judgment for their wickedness and attempt to assault Lot and his guests (Gen. 19:11); Deuteronomy 28:28 mentions blindness as potential consequences of disobedience and King Uzziah became leprous as punishment for his pride and presumption in entering the temple to burn incense, a task reserved for priests (2 Chron. 26:16-21).

In the New Testament, Jesus seemingly connected their condition to sin during his healing ministry. For instance, he healed the invalid man at the Bethesda pool and cautioned him to "sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you" (John 5:1-15). Similarly, in the account of the paralytic lowered through the roof in Capernaum, Jesus forgave the man's sins before healing him (Mark 2:1-12). Another example is the story of a boy possessed by a spirit where Jesus rebuked the spirit and cured the boy (Luke 9:37-43), implying a spiritual dimension to his affliction.

On the other hand, there are passages that imply that disability may not be the effect of sin. In Jewish society, individuals labeled as "sinners" were typically classified into two main categories: those publicly recognized as criminals and those deemed lowly, such as the poor, blind, paralyzed, deaf, lame, lepers, and the physically crippled[60]. The latter were often associated with impurity and sinfulness and hence socially and religiously marginalized. Their existence was marked by a lack of hope. Though Jesus sometimes associated disability with sin, he vehemently challenged such discriminatory practices and attitudes. From Jesus' perspective the disabled had equal standing before God and could worship God in Spirit and in truth. His attitude toward the physically disabled underscore that the prohibition of the persons with physical defects (disabilities) from the Levitical priesthood (Lev. 21:16-23) does not mean those people were inherently religiously unclean. The prohibition against priests with physical defects from the Levitical priesthood must be interpreted within this broader context of purity and sanctity. The passage underscores the importance of physical wholeness and perfection as symbolic representations of spiritual purity. Priests were seen as intermediaries between God and the people, and as such, they were expected to embody holiness in both body and spirit. This prerequisite typified Christ's moral perfection (Heb. 9:13-14)[61]. God consistent care and concern for individuals with disabilities throughout the Bible affirm their worth and dignity as members of the community.

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[58] D. L. MIGLIORE, *Faith Seeking Understanding...*, 146.
[59] D. L. MIGLIORE, *Faith Seeking Understanding...*, 146.
[60] W. LONGCHAR, "Culture, Sin, Suffering and Disability in Society", in: W. LONGCHAR – G. COWANS (eds.), *Doing Theology from Disability Perspective*, The Association for Theligical Education In South East Asia (ATESEA), Manila 2011, 218.
[61] D. C. STAMPS (ed.), *Life in the Spirit Study Bible*, s/e, Grand Rapids 2003, 188-189.

Jesus's act of restoring sight to the blind (e.g., John 9:1-12), enabling the lame to walk (e.g., Mark 2:1-12), and curing those with various physical ailments (e.g., Matt. 8:14-15) not only demonstrate his power and authority but also his compassion towards those who were suffering due to their disabilities. He consistently reached out to marginalized and excluded individuals, including those with disabilities (cf. Mark 7:31-37). He challenged social attitudes and stigma surrounding disability by affirming the inherent worth and dignity of each person. He advocated for a radical shift in societal norms by urging people to extend hospitality and compassion to the marginalized, including the lame, maimed, blind and poor (Luke 14:12-14; see also Luke 13:10-17; Matt. 25:31-46)[62]. By breaking down societal barriers, Jesus fostered a new understanding of community grounded in the grace of God, directly confronting those who excluded disabled individuals from social and religious life.

While the biblical record acknowledges a relationship between sin and impairment, Jesus consistently contextualizes this connection within the framework of faith and healing. In John 9, Jesus refrains from attributing disability (blindness) solely to sin. He states that the man's condition of blindness serves as an opportunity for God's works to be displayed (v. 3). Even though he occasionally connects disability to sin, Jesus' actions and words challenge simplistic assumptions. He healed and restored individuals to demonstrate that disability is not solely a punishment but can serve as an opportunity for divine intervention and the manifestation of God's compassion and grace[63].

A disability theology must acknowledge that there is nothing inherently sinful with a persons with disability. Even though the biblical and cultural perspectives highlighted that some disabilities may be caused by sin, it was also clear that not all sufferings are sin-related. Since it is God who truly knows the cause of one's problem, we should leave him to be the judge. In the Ghanaian context, there is the need to shift away from blame and condemnation to a perspective of inclusion, acceptance, and the recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, regardless of their abilities or limitations.

Advancing sound theological view on disability requires the application of sound hermeneutical principles. I propose the following two guidelines for such a task. Firstly, contextual analysis plays a crucial role in understanding the historical and cultural contexts in which biblical texts were written. Leviticus 21:16-23 may be used to illustrate this principle. The text, which excludes individuals with disabilities from the Levitical priesthood, initially appears to devalue them in God's eyes. However, a consideration of the ancient near east religious practices and other biblical passages—especially those related to teachings and practices of Jesus—reveals that this prohibition is not meant to promote discrimination against people living with disabilities. The prohibition stems from a desire to maintain ritual purity, rather than implying inherent worthlessness of disabled individuals. Thus, a consideration of the broader socio-political and religious contexts allows interpreters to identify the ways in which societal structures may have influenced the portrayal of individuals with disabilities in the Bible. This contextual understanding serves as a foundation for interpreting biblical texts in a manner that avoids imposing modern biases onto ancient texts and promotes a more accurate understanding of disability in biblical times.

Secondly, our hermeneutical framework need to challenge societal norms and advocate for the rights and dignity of all people. By centering the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals, interpreters can discern the ways in which the biblical narrative affirms the intrinsic value and worth of individuals with disabilities. As noted earlier, theological formulations are done predominantly by abled-persons who have not experienced the plight of the disabled. Therefore, the tendency of

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[62] W. LONGCHAR, "Culture, Sin, Suffering...", 219.
[63] W. LONGCHAR, "Culture, Sin, Suffering...", 219-220.

interpreting the bible from the abled-perspective, even if there is enough reason to do otherwise, is very high. Going forward, should endeavor to interpret Scripture in a way that promotes liberation, justice, and inclusivity.

5.3 Disability and the prosperity theology

Prosperity theology—the theological view that God rewards faithfulness and obedience with good health and material wealth—can be linked with disability theology in some ways. "Prosperity" is comprises physical and spiritual wellbeing, having abundant resources (which can be money, houses, cars, children, a promotion, and jobs), ability to use divine power to address life challenges, longevity, fruitfulness, and similar others[64]. It is argued that prosperity is available for any believer who by faith has a covenant with God. Prosperity preachers argue that failure, poverty, suffering, pain, diseases, and all forms of difficulties are a form of curse that should not be associated with the children of God[65]. Prosperity preachers have virtually no tolerance for hardship, suffering, brokenness, or delay in life[66]. Some of them even refuse to celebrate the Good Friday because of its associated pain and suffering. They emphasize that one has to be delivered from the influence of evil forces in order to enjoy fullness of life.

The hermeneutical, theological and pastoral framework of prosperity preachers portray salvation not only in material terms but also in terms of physical health. Ill-health is considered as the work of the devil and so one must defeat the evil forces behind their health in order to get health[67]. This requires faith of the sick and help from a religious leader. Kate Bowler describes faith as "a force that reaches through the boundaries of materiality and into the spiritual realm, as if plucking objects from there and drawing them back into space and time" and by this she means, faith is the agent that makes what one wants become real in the real world, "transcending the separation between two universes for the sake of each believer"[68]. Some preachers, due to their belief in faith-healing, reject the notion that neglecting basic personal hygiene can lead to illnesses[69]. They often promises of healing to their follows based on their faith.

The view that disability and other human predicaments are mainly the work of evil forces make people troop to religious leaders for solution to their problems. Healing and deliverance services go on in different parts of Ghana where people with disabilities (such as blindness, lame, paralytic and others) troop for their healing. In Ghana, while all Christian churches endorse the ministry of healing and deliverance, Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal, and Newer-Prophetic churches exhibit a notably greater interest in these phenomena. One reason for this lies in the emphasis placed on miracles and supernatural experiences within these denominations. In Ghana pastors like Rev. Adom Kyei Duah, Rev. Obofour, Rev. Daniel Obinm, Rev. Dag Heward Mills, Rev. Sam Korankye Ankrah, Rev. Nicholas Duncan Williams are among the popular healing and deliverance ministers. Unlike the traditional churches, Pentecostal and related movements prioritize the belief in and demonstration of spiritual gifts, including healing and deliverance. Consequently, their services often revolve around the manifestation of these gifts. These minsters usually broadcast their services to reach people beyond their chapels. Testimonies about their healing prowess are usually

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[64] S. J. Komolafe, *The Transformation of African Christianity: Development and Change in the Nigerian Church.* Carlisle", Langham Publishers, s/l 2013, 32-33.

[65] M. A. Ojo, "The Prosperity Gospel among Neo-Pentecostals in Africa", in: P. W. Barnes – B. Bhasera – M. A. Ojo – J. Rantho – T. Yoakum – M. Zulu (eds.), *The Abandoned Gospel: Confronting Neo-Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa,* Zambia 2021, 32.

[66] J. O. Soboyejo, "Prosperity Gospel and Its Religious Impact on Sustainable Economic Development of African Nations", *Open Access Library Journal* 3 (2016) 8.

[67] C. Mbewe, "Illness, Curses, and Afflictions", in: P. W. Barnes – B. Bhasera – M. A. Ojo – J. Rantho – T. Yoakum – M. Zulu (eds.), *The Abandoned Gospel: Confronting Neo-Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa,* Zambia 2021, 76-77.

[68] K. Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, 141.

[69] F. Amevenku, "Faith Healing in Ghanaian Christianity: An Examination of Attitudes and Practices based on an Exegesis of James 5:13-18", *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* 18/4 (2015) 87.

broadcast on both television and radio. Moreover, the charismatic leadership characteristic of these churches plays a significant role in fostering interest in healing and deliverance ministries. These churches are typically led by pastors who claim to possess special spiritual gifts, such as the ability to heal the sick or deliver individuals from spiritual bondage. The charismatic style of leadership and personal testimonies of miraculous experiences shared by these pastors and their followers serve to captivate the congregation's attention and deepen their belief in the efficacy of healing and deliverance.

Though the healing and deliverance ministry is highly patronized it comes with some downsides. Hermeneutically, prosperity theology often employs selective interpretations of Scripture and focus on verses that promise prosperity and health while overlooking passages that address suffering and disability. For example, they interpret 2 John 2 as promising physical health to all. The passage reads: "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul" (NRSV). The prosperity-oriented interpretation of this text is flawed, at least, on two grounds—one contextual and one grammatical. Firstly, the context of the text reveals that John used 3 John 2 as a form of greeting rather than a doctrinal passage. Although doctrines can arise from non-doctrinal passages (because all Scripture is profitable for doctrine - 2 Tim. 3:16-17), the original intent of the author, as shown by the context, is not primarily doctrinal. Secondly, the term "pray" translated from the Greek verb *euchomai* means a desire or wish rather than a promise John is giving to his fellow believer[70]. The term *euodousthai* means "to journey successfully" or "to succeed", suggesting a wish for a good and safe journey throughout one's life rather than material prosperity (cf. Rom. 1:10)[71]. Both the NRSV and the NIV translate this expression as "all may go well with you," reflecting John's wish for Gaius. However, John's wish does not guarantee that Gaius will experience what he wishes for him. This fact makes it unsound to derive any universal principle of material prosperity from this text.

Theologically, prosperity theology promotes a shallow understanding of God's nature and purpose. It reduces the complexities of human existence to a narrow focus on material success and physical health, neglecting the deeper spiritual aspects of life. This theology may inadvertently suggest that those experiencing disabilities are somehow lacking in faith or unworthy of God's blessings. This obviously contradicts the fundamental Christian belief in the inherent value and dignity of all individuals.

Pastorally, prosperity theology can have harmful consequences for individuals with disabilities. It may create unrealistic expectations for miraculous healing or financial prosperity, leading to feelings of guilt, shame, or inadequacy when such outcomes are not realized. There are cases where healing is imposed on the disabled person. People are declared healed at the prayer center and yet are found in their predicaments after they return home[72]. This phenomenon makes people feel disappointed after their experiences. Also, individuals with disabilities are sometimes blamed for their lack of healing due to purportedly insufficient faith[73]. As the minister continues to say that whatever a person asks in faith shall be granted, those with perpetual disabilities are psychologically troubled it becomes clear to them that their lack of faith is the cause of their troubles. Individuals with disabilities may feel pressure to believe that their lack of healing is due to their own lack of faith or spiritual shortcomings. This belief can lead to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, or even abandonment by God, as they may perceive themselves as failing to meet the expectations set forth by prosperity theology. Such a

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[70] J. M. LIEU, *II & III John: A Commentary*, Westminster John Knox Press, London 2008, 268.

[71] J. M. LIEU, *II & III John...*, 268.

[72] Mookgo S. Kgatle cites a case where a prophet declared a paralyzed person healed and yet, the person was given his clutches to use as before. M. S. KGATLE, "Pentecostal theology regarding disability in African neo-Pentecostalism", *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 58/1 (2024) 2. [Retrieved from a3004.https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3004]

[73] M. S. KGATLE, "Pentecostal theology regarding disability...", 2.

perspective further stigmatizes individuals with disabilities, attributing their condition to moral failings rather than recognizing it as part of the diverse human experience. This attribution of blame can exacerbate the challenges already faced by individuals with disabilities, adding layers of shame and guilt to their lived experiences. Another pastoral issue is that individuals with disabilities are sometimes used as props to showcase the healing powers of prosperity preachers (healing and deliverance workers)[74]. Rather than genuine concern for their healing, ministers seek to demonstrate their own power by supposedly healing disabilities. This often involves exploiting individuals, including able-bodied individuals pretending to have disabilities, further demeaning genuine disabilities within the community.

To address the shortfalls of the prosperity-oriented disability theology, the disability theology proposed in this paper emphasizes solidarity, compassion, and justice in response to disability. It advocates for a broader understanding of God's presence in the midst of suffering and disability and recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their abilities or limitations. The cross serves as a profound Christian symbol that provides basis for understanding disability. It embodies the concept of suffering and vulnerability. Jesus' own experience of suffering on the cross highlights the reality of pain and hardship in human existence. This understanding not only challenges the notion that disability is solely a result of sin or divine punishment but also portrays suffering as a universal aspect of the human condition.

6. Recommendations

The theological reflections offered above lead to the following recommendations. First, professionals engaging with individuals with disabilities need to appreciate the significance of religiosity and social support. Informed by the study, clinicians are encouraged to create culturally tailored strategies addressing religiosity and social support geared toward lessening the impact of violence and discrimination on persons with disabilities. This will ultimately contribute to the enhancement of their health and overall quality of life.

Secondly, there is a need to address Ghanaian misconceptions about physical and mental disabilities, utilizing both informal and formal social education and training for the public and traditional healers. The study suggests focusing efforts on empowering women and girls with disabilities. Additionally, religious institutions should play a role in challenging negative attitudes about disability and offering essential support to individuals with disabilities.

Third, measure must be put in place to promote enhancing accessibility. That is, construction projects and programs must prioritize accessibility for people with disabilities. This requires disability-inclusive development strategies. Disability-inclusive development refers to the approach of ensuring that development initiatives, programs, and policies consider and accommodate the needs and rights of people with disabilities. This approach involves removing barriers, providing accessible infrastructure and services, promoting inclusive education and employment opportunities, and actively involving people with disabilities in decision-making processes. For example, architectural designs and spaces should incorporate facilities that cater to their needs. There is the need to ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities, such as installing ramps, handrails, and designated seating areas. There should be adjustments to application processes to enable consideration of individuals with disabilities (e.g., providing application forms in alternative formats such as large print or Braille). Accessibility can also be enhance by putting in place the necessary

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[74] M. S. Kgatle, "Pentecostal theology regarding disability**..., 2-3.

modifications to facilitate qualified individuals with disabilities in performing essential job functions (e.g., offering sign language interpreters). Adaptations that allow individuals with disabilities to enjoy equal benefits and privileges (e.g., removing physical barriers in communal areas like cafeterias or lounges) is also encouraged. By creating accessible spaces, the society demonstrates its commitment to ensure greater inclusivity, equality, and empowerment for all its members, including those with disabilities.

The study has noted the stigmatization against people with disabilities which leads some families to conceal their disabled members due to fear of social ostracism. There are social injustices, oppression, margination and exploitation of the disabled. As a minority group their voice is hardly heard. This situation underscores the urgent need for the church in Ghana has a vital role to play in advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities. Guided by the example of Jesus Christ, who ministered defended and empowered the marginalized, the church can speak for the voiceless and the downtrodden. Practical advocacy activities may include organizing awareness campaigns to educate congregants and the wider community about the rights and needs of individuals with disabilities. These campaigns may take the form of seminars, workshops, and community outreach programs aimed at challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusivity. Additionally, churches can establish support services and resource centers tailored to the needs of individuals with disabilities, offering counseling, vocational training, and support groups to empower disabled individuals and their families.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, fostering a robust theological understanding of disability requires applying rigorous hermeneutical principles. By contextual analysis and challenging societal norms, interpreters can uncover a more nuanced portrayal of disability in biblical texts while advocating for the dignity of all individuals. However, the intersection of disability theology with prosperity theology presents complexities, as it may inadvertently perpetuate harmful stereotypes and unrealistic expectations. To address these challenges, a compassionate and inclusive approach that is rooted in solidarity, justice, and empathy is essential. Moving forward, it is crucial to combat misconceptions, promote accessibility, and advocate for the rights of individuals with disabilities within religious communities and society at large.

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