



# The radical embodiment of God for a Christology of a new era



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The research focussed on the embodiment of God and approached this theme through a discussion on the deep incarnation of God in Christ. This article provides an overview of the existing literature on incarnation. Jesus Christ made God human and understandable. Theology is placed in the sphere of humanity by the humanness of Jesus. This positioning of theology in the sphere of humanity attended to the humanness of Jesus as a biological and social being, on par with human nature, in direct contact with other human beings. Jesus' bodily existence makes his life and living inevitably fragile and vulnerable, but also one in solidarity with the ongoing misery of humans. Special attention was given to the Gospel of John and John 1:14 as an influential expression of the incarnation, and also to the concept of *logos*. The research attended to the implications of the embodiment of God and the way in which humans participate in the mystery of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This mutual participation implies that the relationship with God and the call to reflect God is done as embodied beings and not apart from human bodies. The discussion of deep incarnation and God's radical presence in flesh motivated the conclusion that God is part and parcel of nature's vulnerability, pain and suffering. Jesus' powerlessness accentuated the dignity of all bodies, and that there are actually no marginal cases of being 'human'. The radical embodiment of God, the body of the earthly Jesus, reminds followers of Jesus of the significance of leading creative lives, resulting in authentic Christian spirituality that is embodied and vulnerable.

**Keywords:** Deep incarnation; Humanness; Embodiment of God; John 1:14; H.N. Gregersen.

## Bridging the gap

In the course of time, in the writings of Paul, the focus would very much come to be on the church as the body of Christ, and not on the body of the earthly Jesus (Gregersen 2012:234). This article, however, focusses primarily on the body of the historical Jesus as reflected mainly by the gospels and most specifically the gospel according to John. Consequently, with this focus in mind, it would be appropriate to describe Christianity as a 'religion of the body' (Creamer 2012:341) or faith of the body. An authentic Christian spirituality is embodied.

God's identification with people – God's 'particular identification' with the world – goes beyond imagination, to a 'radical particularisation' (Bauckham 2015:32–33). God does not only identify with a 'worldly reality (Israel)', but identifies as a 'worldly reality (Jesus)'. God gives God's self the 'identity of the human Jesus' (Bauckham 2015:33). 'Speaking of Jesus as being simultaneously "human" and "divine," "true man" and "true God," is the appropriate dogmatic expression of our faith in "Jesus" as the "Christ"' (Nipkow 2001:38). Jesus of Nazareth made God human and understandable (Du Plessis 2003:133). In Jesus, God became a person, and simultaneously a person that became human (Küng 1987:1–2).

Rather than considering incarnation as a 'one way event located in the past' – of God in the past, becoming flesh to dwell among us – Athanasius sees it as a 'purposive statement' emphasising the 'second transformative clause' (Behr 2015:80, 97). The Word becoming flesh is a 'transformation of all that to which the Word comes, bringing all things in heaven and on earth to the Father' (Behr 2015:97).

God's intervention through the ages in the history of the world, and God's care and maintenance of the world, reaches a climax with this dramatic incarnation (Naudé 2004:188). This dramatic incarnation serves as an expression of God's love and the way in which God takes care of

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and protects his creation. Jesus does not present the only picture of God, but Jesus is definitely the clearest picture of all (Conradie 2006:236–237): ‘Jesus is God’s representative on earth’, says Gregersen (2012:235), ‘and through him God’s presence on earth is thus presented’. Incarnation establishes a ‘re-union between God and human beings, in which the differences between divinity and humanity are retained in the flow of exchange between Jesus Christ and his sisters and brothers’ (Gregersen 2013:260). The spiritual gap between humans and God is bridged by the incarnation of Jesus’ fate (Evers 2015:309; cf. Gregersen 2015c:378). The gap not only represents the suffering of humans being alienated from God but also other forms of suffering, such as in the narrative of Job and all evolutionary suffering (Gregersen 2015c:378).

This research focusses primarily on the deep incarnation of God. The goal is to answer the question on how Christ can be present for us today. With deep incarnation, the accent is on the uniqueness of Christ, and therefore this research also attempts to clarify who Christ is and will be forever.

## Love in the flesh

It is in Jesus Christ that the new image of God is revealed in answer to the question: Who is God? It is ‘not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc.’ (Bonhoeffer in Küng 1987:553). God’s divine nature is presented in the substantial presence of the incarnate Christ, the human Jesus of Nazareth (Bosch 2012:524; McGrath 1994:304; cf. Bauckham 2015:28). The pivotal character of the Christian faith lies in the embodiment of God. This is the ‘core of most Christian spirituality’ (Bartlett 2005:364). Johnson (2011) confirms this statement in a more personal and passionate manner by writing that the experience central to Christian faith is that of the embodiment of God as love in the flesh – one which runs concurrent to our dealings with ‘our brother Jesus of Nazareth’. Gorman (2018:178), in his commentary on the Gospel of John, states that Jesus is the one who incarnates, models and enjoins God’s love.

The Christian faith is very radical and unique. ‘One of the most radical statements that Christianity dares to make is that God became material’ (Johnson 2010; see para. 3). Incarnation incorporates ‘God’s self-embodiment and God’s self-identification’ (Gregersen 2013:253).

### John 1:14

John 1:14 is the *puteus-notus* of the incarnation of God. This verse is the ‘fundamental Christological tenet’ (Moltmann 2015:126) and, as Johnson (2011) puts it, the ‘most influential expression’ of it. The concept ‘incarnation’ derives from this famous verse of the gospel writer John: ‘The Word (*logos*) became flesh (*in carne*) and lived among us, and we have seen his glory’ (John 1:14). Deane-Drummond (2015:178) also believes that John’s words, ‘the *logos* became *sarx*’ and ‘in the *sarx* is seen the divine *doxa*’, are of primary theological significance in explaining incarnation. However, the term ‘incarnation’ is not found in the Bible (Azumah 2011:61).

John 1:14 has a unique historical character. This verse is nestled in the prologue to John’s gospel, with a ‘cosmological setting’ (Deane-Drummond 2015:177). Further, John 1:14 is an adaptation of an older Jewish hymn to Holy Wisdom, with an anti-gnostic character (Johnson 2011). This hymn opposes the thought that God briefly appears in Christ, remaining unaffected by the so-called smear of matter (Johnson 2011). It also discards the thought that Jesus’ humanity was merely a ‘cover up, a masquerade in borrowed plumes ...’ (Johnson 2011). Gnosticism rejects the body and regards it as a prison for the soul; it opposes incarnation (Van Niekerk 2012:371; cf. Gregersen 2013:259). This argument says: ‘Christ could not possibly have a body: (1) because the absolute cannot enter into a real union with the finite and (2) because matter is evil, and the spiritual world is ever in conflict with it’ (Heick in Gregersen 2013:259). Johnson (2011), however, wrote:

Far from the Greek dualism that envisioned the human being composed of separable body and soul, Hebrew anthropology knew only of the body-person, dust of the earth and breath of God in unbreakable unity. (n.p.)

In Jesus the body-soul dualism is bridged.

### Logos

The incarnate Christ is the embodied *Logos* (Gregersen 2015a:2). *Logos*, as a title for Jesus in the Gospel of John, serves as the reference to the content of God’s revelation. It is a verbal echo of the verb’s meaning ‘to speak’ in Genesis 1, and in the many utterances of the prophets – such as word, message and more (Louw & Nida 1989:400). According to the *Book of Hebrews*, Jesus is the ‘sayings’ of God after the prophets tried to make God known (Du Toit 2000:133–134). It is as if the author of the *Book of Hebrews* says the following: So many things were written and said of God, but currently, if we really want to understand God, we should look at Jesus (DuToit 2000:133–134). Jesus is the final revelation of God to the world (Du Toit 2000:133–134; cf. Gregersen 2015b:234). Consensus is growing that Jesus was ‘of the same substance (*homoousios*) as God’ (McGrath 1994:250).

The title *Logos* is found six times in three different places in the writings of John (König 2001:160) and is unique to the Gospel of John. Cloete (2008:1201) explains further: *Logos* emphasises the spoken word, rather than the grammatical word; it refers not really to the external and written form but to the inner and unseen thought. John probably refers to the realisation of the spoken thoughts of God in the creation narrative (Gn 1) but also to Jesus, the visible and audible Word of the unseen God (Cloete 2008:1201; cf. König 2001:162). Deane-Drummond (2015:179) sees *logos* as an extension of *sophia*, ‘so that *sophia* becomes *logos* and *logos* becomes *sarx*’ (cf. Johnson 2015:135; Louw 2008:82; O’Collins 2015:65). Or, as Gregersen (2015c:362) puts it, ‘*logos* and *sophia* must be one’ (cf. Athanasius in Edwards 2015:160).

The unique relation between wisdom and God, for example, in the *Book of Proverbs*, applies almost similarly to Jesus (König 2001:190). In the Old Testament, wisdom personifies

a woman; this also indicates the link between women and Jesus (König 2001:191; cf. O'Collins 2015:66; Prov 31). Augustine communicated the reality of incarnation by using 'sophia language which is grammatically and imaginatively feminine' (Johnson 2015):

Writing of Christ being sent into the world, he did not hesitate to say divine *Sapientia*: 'But she is sent in one way that she may be with human beings; and she has been sent in another way that she herself might be a human being'. In other words, Jesus Christ is the human being Sophia. (p. 152)

Johnson's (1992:51) 'idea that the Word might have become female flesh is not even seriously imaginable, so thoroughly has androcentric Christology done its work of erasing the full dignity of women as christomorphic in the community of disciples' proves to be imaginable over time.

We find fascinating images of God in the Bible as a woman, for example, Ezekiel 16:6–14 (Deist 1991:14–15; König 2001:191) (see Gn 1:27; Hs 11:3–4, 13:8; Is 66:13 and Ps 131:2). Surprisingly, the patriarchal and androcentric roots of the Bible have feministic springs. The process and feminist theologian Case-Winters (1990:217) argues God is neither masculine nor feminine; both women and men are created in God's image.

Traditionally, male images of God are used, whereas she opts to speak of God in personified feminine images, in order to give the whole picture of God (Case-Winters 1990:217). Leene (2013:103) rightly contends that if God was masculine, then women would not have been created in God's image (e.g. Gn 1:26, 27).

Sameth (2016), a Reform rabbi, writes on the history of the *Tetragrammaton* YHWH. He claims that the Israelite priests read the letters YHWH backwards as *Hu/Hi* ('He/She'), giving the God of Israel a 'dual-gendered deity'. Wallberg (2016) agrees with the possibility that the *Tetragrammaton* may have 'male and female components', but this does not mean God is transgender. 'God transcends gender' (Wallberg 2016).

Some people use the 'Middle English spelling of God', namely, *Godde* on the internet. *Godde* is gender-inclusive and 'falls in between' 'God' and 'Goddess' (McColman 1997:17).

Like God, who is beyond gender, Jesus' masculinity is not a necessity in order to reveal God and not a precondition to being the Saviour (König 2001:191; cf. Eiesland 1994:10). We may view Jesus' masculinity as human, but Jesus is not literally and sexually speaking God's Son, because Jesus is not born from the Father (Leene 2013:103). Moltmann (1981:53) speaks of a motherly Father and a fatherly Mother (see Moltmann 1985:223). This makes God gender-friendly, God's all-inclusive justice-love is presupposed. Downey (2005:624–625) argues that, "'Father" is not God's proper name ... Nor does the name "Son" exhaust the depth and complexity of God's Word disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth'.

The Word (*logos* in Greek and *dabar* in Hebrew) conveys 'God's active will at work in the world', according to Fretheim (O'Collins 2015:59). Deane-Drummond (2015:180) accepts the dynamic energy of the term 'Word', and that it entails more than a speculative abstraction. But she argues that this dynamism is more explicit in *dabar* in the Jewish tradition when it is compared to the abstract philosophical applications of the Greek *logos*. Her argument is sound, keeping the character of the old Jewish hymn of John 1:14 in mind. Nevertheless, the power of the Word of God is either/or revelatory, creative, transforming, saving and gifted (O'Collins 2015:60–62).

The Word Jesus is the beginning or author of creation, but also of re-creation, according to Cloete (2008:1201; cf. König 2001:191). Thus, Jesus is the living Word who revealed the deity to us (Cloete 2008:1201). The *Logos* was with God from the beginning, but it was also God (see Jn 1:1–2). John identifies *Logos* as 'He was God', but he immediately relativises it with the words, 'He was with God' (König 2001:163–164, 190). On the one hand, Jesus is God's self; on the other hand, Jesus is not identical to God (König 2001:163–164, 190). A similar pattern is found in Hebrews 1:1–4. John does not just say about Jesus 'This is God' (Gregersen 2015b:235). To a certain extent, John is claiming 'Thus is God'. 'Just as Jesus *was*, in the unfolding of his spatiotemporal life story, so God *is* – in the past, now, and forever' (Gregersen 2015b:235). Jesus, the divine *Logos*, is no substitute for the Father but conveys 'the mind and heart of the Father who is greater than the Son (Jn 14:28)' (Gregersen 2015b:235). Jesus fulfils the prerequisite of being wholly transparent to God, for example, John 14:9 (Gregersen 2015b:235). Jesus is the only human being who lives in 'full resonance' with, and is transparent and in continuous atonement to, the will of God (Gregersen 2015b:234–237). God's nature and intention are especially characterised through the 'deeds, character, and theological identity of Jesus Christ' (McGrath 1994:170). Jesus did not replace God but expressed God's nature (Gregersen 2015b:238–239). The incarnation reveals Jesus partaking in God's identity, nature, will and way (Jn 14:6) (Zahniser 2011:34). The incarnate existence of God in Jesus is revelatory and salvific (Bauckham 2015:32).

## Deep incarnation

According to Macquiritie (1990:392), incarnation is a process that starts with the creation, and which progresses in the presence and is self-revealing of the *Logos* in the 'physical and historical world'. The *Logos* becomes flesh and tangible. God became material, visible, exposed, and assumes flesh in an earthly Jesus. '*Flesh* means what is material, perishable, vulnerable, finite, the very opposite of what is divine' (Johnson 2010; cf. Louw 2008:398). According to Johnson (2011), *Logos* does not become 'human (anthropos), but flesh (sarx), a broader reality' (cf. Russell 2015:339). Gregersen (2015b:228) agrees, stating that there is no reference in the New Testament to God becoming human. Gregersen (2013:260) reminds his readers that the closest reference to that of a human being is in Philippians 2:6–7, wherein Paul

refers to the *kenosis* of Christ by taking the nature of a servant. Christ's humanity is portrayed generally as 'being born in human likeness' and 'being found in human form' (Gregersen 2013:260). Christ is not just a 'solitary individual, but ... [a] person living in solidarity with other human beings and sharing the formal features of humanity with them' (Gregersen 2013:260). Generally, *sarx* means 'the flesh of both animals and human beings' (Louw & Nida 1989:102). Likewise, the Hebrew word for flesh – *bāsār* – is 'transitory, weak and mortal', and 'refers basically to animal musculature, but by extension it can mean the human body, blood relations, mankind, living things, life itself and created life as opposed to divine life' (Harris, Archer & Waltke 1980:136). *Bāsār* refers not only to the weakness of mortal creatures but also to their weakness in being faithful to God and to do the will of God (Wolff 1974:49–56).

As indicated above, *bāsār* is rich in meaning and found in different contexts. All the different meanings are relevant and applicable to John 1:14 (Moltmann 2015:126–127). God's Spirit is poured into all the meanings of 'flesh' listed below (Moltmann 2015:129).

According to Moltmann (2015:126–127), *bāsār* means:

- the 'whole human being, body and soul', for example, Psalm 65:2 and Psalm 145:21
- any body part of a human, for example, Job 19:26, Psalm 84:2 and Genesis 2:24
- 'everything that lives, in its weakness, helplessness, transience and mortality', for example, Isaiah 40:6–7 RSV
- 'the whole human race, in community with all the living', for example, Jeremiah 25:31 and Genesis 9:9–10.

And Moltmann (2015) is of the view that *bāsār* is best translated with 'life', particularly in the phrase *kolbāsār* (all flesh):

The human being is living in his or her totality; the human race is living in its community with everything that lives on earth. Everything living shares the fate of vulnerability, mortality, and transience. Everything living is promised a common future in the kingdom of God's glory: The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together (Is 40:5 RSV). (p. 127)

Thus, it is vital to value and keep hold of the community of all living things (Moltmann 2015:127). We (human beings) are fellow creatures (part of nature), and only together will the glory of the Lord be visible (Moltmann 2015:127).

With the incarnation of God, God presupposes the nature of all the living (Moltmann 2015:128). God became a human, social, living and material being (Gregersen 2015a:7). God lived with and for others, was as vulnerable as sparrows and foxes, was made out of stardust and earth, and was exposed to death and disintegration (Gregersen 2015a:7). Similarly, 'the divine *Logos* assumed an ensouled human person with human mind, will, and passions (not an omniscient superhuman being)' (Gregersen 2015a:7).

The wide scope of views and interpretations of God's incarnation have led to the 'birth' of the concept 'deep incarnation'. The Danish scholar Niels Gregersen coined (over a decade) this phrase as a theological concept to indicate the drastic divine contact with the smallest particle of living existence (cf. Gregersen 2015c:363; Johnson 2011; Russell 2015:339). Gregersen (2015c:371–372) structured deep incarnation within the borders of an 'evolutionary Christology', inspired by theologians like Karl Rahner, Thomas Torrance and Jürgen Moltmann. Gregersen (2013) defines deep incarnation as follows:

God's own *Logos* (Wisdom and Word) was made flesh in Jesus the Christ in such a comprehensive manner that God, by assuming the particular life-story of Jesus the Jew from Nazareth, also conjoined the material conditions of creaturely existence ('all flesh'), shared and ennobled the fate of all biological life-forms ('grass' and 'lilies'), and experienced the pains of sensitive creatures ('sparrows' and 'foxes'). Deep incarnation thus presupposes a radical embodiment which reaches into the roots (radices) of material and biological existence as well as into the darker sides of creation: the *tenebrae creationis*. (n.p.)

With deep incarnation, the accent is put on the uniqueness of Christ. This (deep incarnation) broadens the anthropocentric scope, with the focus being on 'biocentric' and 'cosmocentric' facets of Christology (Van Niekerk 2018:182). Johnson (2015:133) notes that it relates Christ to ecology and science. Such a wide vision of incarnation lets Christology to be significant in a scientific age. It is important to note, according to Bentley (2016:2), that this theology of incarnation is not pantheism. 'God is not incarnate *in* all other reality, but he is incarnate *for* all other reality', according to Bauckham (2015:32; cf. Van Niekerk 2018:182).

On the one hand, the inspiring, creative perspective of the radical embodiment of God makes God's liberative presence in, and intimate relation to, life intense – giving divine value to the quality of living, providing ethical signposts to a just and transformed society. On the other hand, God's radical presence in flesh makes God part and parcel of nature's vulnerability, pain and suffering (Van Niekerk 2018:183). According to Gregersen (2015a:7), in the face of all malevolence, Jesus the Christ as creature personally and directly embraces God's whole creation:

Incarnation here means to understand human and creaturely conditions from an internal firsthand perspective, and not only from a lofty third-person perspective beyond the engagements, struggles, passions, and anxieties of being a human-in-the-world-with-others. (p. 8)

Lisa Isherwood (2004:148), the feminist liberation theologian, considers that what incarnation calls us to is a deep connection related to the physical ('bodies') – and not the metaphysical. Isherwood (2004:148) puts the emphasis on bodies that materialise as a 'place of revelation and moral imperatives', making it important for the flesh to be heard. She suggests that flesh should become Word, instead of the other way round. 'The flesh liberation theologian, the kick-off point for theologian reflection is the experience' (Isherwood 2004:148).

## Jesus' powerlessness and vulnerability

'It is clear that in the incarnation God took upon God's selflimits; emptying God's self of power in order to bring about the redemption of the world' (Phlp 2:5–11) (Swinton 2011:290). In Jesus, God allows God's self to be embodied with the limits of humans. Bonhoeffer (1971) writes most strikingly about God's divine self-limitation:

God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us ... The Bible directs us to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.

God is the true friend of humanity. God's friendship with humankind shows God's solidarity with human beings, which is best revealed in the suffering and vulnerability of Jesus. Jesus was sent by God to be with and alongside all creatures, to embrace their suffering (Gregersen 2015b:240). God's vulnerability is driven to the edge in Christ (Balía & Kim 2010:122–123). 'Jesus Christ is God's wound in the world. In the suffering Jesus, God embraces the suffering of the world for the sake of humanity' (Balía & Kim 2010:122–123). Jesus is the 'fellow-sufferer who understands', according to Whitehead (1978:351; cf. Swinton 2011:293; Balía & Kim 2010:123). (p. 360)

Jesus lives among us as the lowest of the low. John 1:14 means literally 'Jesus came and pitched his tent amongst us' (Van Niekerk 2012:370). Interestingly, Paul refers to our bodies as tents in 2 Corinthians 5:1:

- The metaphor of a tent as a body indicates everyone's susceptibility. 'Our bodies are vulnerable, exposed to the powers of nature, wind and weather; bodies that could be contaminated with viruses and venom ...' (Van Niekerk 2012:370). Human bodies are, or can become, frail, weak, disabled and are finite. In fact, from the perspective of deep incarnation, all living beings share the 'fate of vulnerability, mortality and transience' (Moltmann 2015:127).

The rationale behind the incarnation is 'to touch and heal the world of *sarx* while transforming it' (Gregersen 2013:259), because 'bodies matter to God' (Johnson 2015:145). Therefore, God presupposes the totality of nature's vulnerability by 'becoming human, [so] that it may be healed, reconciled, and glorified' (Moltmann 2015:128). McFague (1993:161) agrees, and she summarises Jesus' ministry as 'liberating, healing and inclusive'. No wonder that the deep meaning of Jesus' ministry strongly focussed on the down-to-earth, physical well-being of people, on Jesus' compassion and social justice (Johnson 2015:142, 145).

Jesus accentuated the dignity of all bodies, not only those of the beautiful and energetic but also of the broken, dishonoured and dying (Johnson 2015:145). Actually, Jesus was sent particularly to the marginalised (e.g. Lk 4:16; cf. The Confession of Belhar 1986). In Matthew 25:31–46, one reads of Jesus' embodiment of a human in serious need.

Most examples refer to bodily needs like hunger, sickness, nakedness, etc. (Pope Francis 2013):

Jesus' whole life, his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily acts of generosity, and finally his complete self-giving, is precious and reveals the mystery of his divine life. (p. 197)

Jesus shares his humanness with other human beings and the whole of creation. 'God has descended into our human reality with all its problems' (Heitink 2001:155).

God's deed of incarnation is not only an expression of loving solidarity with all people but an essential feature of Jesus' loving practice throughout Jesus' life (Bauckham 2015:33–34). To love someone can be a dangerous act and loving relationships sometimes end in broken hearts. Webb (2012:200) writes that God's incarnation in Jesus is therefore an unsafe undertaking – giving of oneself makes one vulnerable and fragile because there are no guarantees of good and well-intentioned responses (see Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:123). Rollins (2011:112) wrote about the tendency of humans who want to escape this world and become like gods. But according to the gospel narratives, the 'Incarnation tell[s] us that if we want to be like God, then we must be courageous enough to fully and unreservedly embrace our humanity' (Rollins 2011:112).

## The passion of Jesus

Christ's voluntary surrender to the weakness of being born and dying on the cross was the calculated break-through of God in the history of humanity (Nouwen 2001:31–35). Jesus' story of passion began with the incarnation, his birth (Bosch 2012:525). But 'Jesus' death on the cross should not, however, be isolated from his life' (Bosch 2012:525; cf. Gregersen 2015b:249; Moltmann 2015:1, 124). Jesus' life did not only start in a manger and end on the cross. God's love, which was revealed with the birth of Jesus, continued throughout Jesus' earthly journey, reaching its climax on the cross at Gethsemane and resulted in Jesus' dynamic resurrection. We have a more or less detailed account of Jesus' bodily existence, both as a biological and as a social being, thanks to the Evangelists (Gregersen 2012:234). And the reason why little attention was paid to the body of Jesus (as opposed to that paid to the church as the body of Christ), according to Gregersen (2012:234), was because Paul was less interested in the 'earthly Jesus'. Instead, it was the Evangelists who provided a detailed account of the bodily life of Jesus on earth – biologically and socially, Jesus' actions, travels, meetings and sayings – from the beginning, to the end of suffering on the cross (Gregersen 2012:234).

The deep incarnation of Christ is not complete without a deep cross and resurrection (cf. Deane-Drummond 2015:196; Gregersen 2015b:248; Guðmundsdóttir 2011; Johnson 2011). Johnson (2011; cf. Johnson 2015) writes about the crucified God in loving solidarity with the suffering of people:

The end of Jesus' life in death and resurrection provides yet another chapter in the astonishing narrative of God's immersion

in matter. No exception to perhaps the only iron clad rule in all of nature, Jesus died, his life bleeding out in a spasm of state violence. Theology has always seen in the cross the love of God writ large: the Son of God entered into suffering 'for us'. Contemporary theology is replete with the idea that in Christ God suffered not just once on a certain Good Friday, but suffers continuously through history, in solidarity with the ongoing agony of the human race. Crosses keep on being set up in history. Ecce homo: behold the human being, with tear-stained, starving, tormented faces. The crucified God suffers with human beings, and will continue to do so until we take all the crucified peoples down from the cross. (pp. 145–146)

The cross reveals the character of God as the 'Compassionate One' (Webb 2012:201), the 'suffering God' (Guðmundsdóttir 2011:155). It is on the cross that God identifies with those who are suffering; the cross discloses God's weakness and vulnerability (Louw 2008:99, 441). Because of love, God volunteers to suffer with other suffering people, giving them hope and strength (Louw 2008:99, 441; see Southgate 2015:208).

'On the cross, Christ becomes the absolute outsider', in being 'left naked, alone, dying' (Rollins 2011:27). It is this which indicates God's complete self-suffering and self-giving love, through Christ, for the sake of people, especially those suffering, the outsiders and marginalised. God discloses Godself as the God of 'compassion' in the cross of Jesus Christ (Koopman 2013:48). 'Some theologians would even go further and state that in Jesus Christ we meet God as the vulnerable God, even the disabled God' (Koopman 2013:48). Coming from a different angle, of a person living with a disability, Nancy Eiesland (1994:102) contends that Jesus Christ is neither the suffering servant, nor the conquering Lord, but the disabled God:

The disabled God embodies to see clearly the complexity and the 'mixed blessing' of life and bodies, without living in despair. This revelation is of a God for us who celebrates joy and experiences pain not separately in time or space, but simultaneously. (Eiesland 1994:102; see Moschella 2015:102)

Christ binds different bodies into one body, through his suffering on the cross, which refers to the unity of the body and the Eucharist (Volf 1996):

[T]he one bread stands for the *crucified* body of Jesus Christ, the body that has refused to remain a self-enclosed singularity, but has opened itself up so that others can freely partake of it. (p. 47)

Volf (1996:47–48) correctly refers to the New Testament writer Paul's understanding of the Christian community (e.g. 1 Cor 10:17) as the *one body in the Spirit* with many *discrete members*, but there is more to say if one reads this not through an ecclesiastical hermeneutical lens, but rather, at face value, as a result of Jesus' bodily crucifixion.

In her reflection on Christ's suffering, Guðmundsdóttir (2011:142) differentiates between the passive and the active aspects of the cross. As a feminist theologian, she describes Christ's identification with suffering women as the 'passive

aspect of the cross' when their suffering is comforted by God's company. The active aspect of the cross refers to the resurrection: It is empowering, women are able to resist oppression, and it provides liberating hope (Guðmundsdóttir 2011:142). These passive and active deeds of God are also applicable to others who are marginalised, for example, individuals living with disabilities, who struggle to live a life of human dignity.

Peter Rollins provides a realistic view of the empowerment of humans living in darkness and angst. He (Rollins 2011) regards the resurrection as:

[T]he state of being in which one is able to embrace the cold embrace of the Cross. If the Crucifixion marks the moment of darkness, then the Resurrection is the very act of living fully into this darkness and saying 'Yes' to it. The faith that is born in Resurrection does not enable us to escape these deeply troubling anxieties; it provides the power to face up to them. (p. 112)

Marilyn McCord Adams (2006) portrays Christ, during three stages, as a 'horror defeater' (cf. Gregersen 2015b:245–247). She understands horror 'as those aspects of creation (premature death, unjust suffering, and suffering without meaning, natural evils) that cannot be redeemed within the lifetime of a sufferer' (Gregersen 2015b:245). The first stage is to 'establish a relation of organic unity' between a person's horror participation and his or her intimate relationship with God (Gregersen 2015b:245). Christ is also exposed to these horrors (Gregersen 2015b:245). McCord Adams pictures the body of Jesus as not being perfect and sharing the same 'biological needs and drives' as other bodies (Gregersen 2015b:245). The second stage is the 'healing and otherwise enabling [of] the horror-participant's meaning-making capacities so that s/he can recognize and appropriate some of the positive significance laid down in Stage 1' (Gregersen 2015b:246).

The third stage refers to 'recreating our relation to the material world so that we are no longer radically vulnerable to horrors' (Gregersen 2015b:247). She believes this task cannot be achieved by only the 'human nature of Jesus or by the incarnate Logos' (Gregersen 2015b:247).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is presupposed (Gregersen 2015b:248). Otherwise, it would not be possible to 'talk about Christ suffering with the horrors of the members of the human race' (Gregersen 2015b:248).

The double event ('in tandem' – Gregersen 2015b:248) of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ indicates the:

[T]remendous divine dynamic that drives toward the transformation of all things into their true and abiding form. Nothing that *is* remains just *as* it is once it is accepted by Christ and transformed in him. (Moltmann 2015:120–121; cf. Johnson 2015:134)

The resurrected Christ is an important source of realistic hope; a hope which allows us to imagine what is feasible in the midst of the broken actuality (Jüngel 1969:417–442).

It is precisely the Christian conviction about Jesus' experience – of vulnerability, suffering and 'the ultimate specific disability of god-forsakenness' – during these events that, for people with disabilities, underscores the realistic hopefulness of 'heavenly solidarity' (Koopman 2013:48). Hull (2001:228) reminds us of the 'blindfolded Christ' (Mk 14:65 and Lk 22:64):

The dead face of Christ witnesses to the laying down of his life in the nothingness of death. The blindfolded face represents the living Christ who enters into the experience of literally blinded people, and becomes their brother. (Hull 2001:228; see Mt 25:40)

Eiesland (1994) writes that it was through the resurrection of Jesus that the disciples really understood the importance of the earthly life of Jesus:

In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the *imago Dei*. (p. 99)

The importance of the 'physical impairment of Christ' should be recognised as the 'truth of incarnation and the promise of resurrection' (Eiesland 1994:101; see Coyle-Carr 2014). This encourages a new conception of wholeness and a 'symbol of solidarity' (Eiesland 1994:101; Louw 2008:100). However, Swinton (2011:284) questions Eiesland's suggestion of the disabled resurrected body of Jesus: Jesus was more able to do things as before, he could walk through walls and disguise himself. Even more amazing was the fact that Jesus could rise from the dead. Jesus was 'scarred and battered, but not disabled'. However, Jesus' wounds will always be a reminder of Jesus' solidarity with the marginalised and a serious call to the church to stand up for the rights of the oppressed (Voskamp 2016):

Because Jesus, with His pierced side, is always on the side of the broken. Jesus always moves into places moved with grief. Jesus always seeks out where the suffering is, and that's where Jesus stays. The wound in His side proves that Jesus is always on the side of the suffering, the wounded, the busted, the broken. (p. 18)

Johnson (2011, 2015:147) argues that the resurrection of Christ's body has a lot to do with physicality, but that it cannot be compared to the story of Lazarus. Jesus' body was not revived in order to continue the biological way of life as we do in our current shape (Johnson 2015:147; cf. Green 2011:287–288). With Jesus' ascension and resurrection, Jesus' body and mind were drastically transformed into and extended as a social body, which is at home in God and universally accessible (Gregersen 2012:234). Luther gives emphasis to the 'social body of Christ' – the '*totus Christus* – Christ and community in one body' (Gregersen 2013:253). And, he (Luther) speaks of Christ as the 'comprehensive person (*maxima persona*) who is "immersed" in everything' (Gregersen 2013:253). A few years later, Gregersen (2015b) wrote:

The bodiliness of the risen Christ is not like a spatiotemporal being who is transported from here to there, from the grave in Palestine to a place up in the sky. It is exactly the extended body

of Christ that is risen from the grave in order to be present as a comprehensive body, living for and suffering with all other bodies, living or dead. (pp. 248–249)

Johnson (2010) offers in this respect Rahner's observation that in the incarnation, 'the divine Logos became flesh, and in the consummation of his finite reality he does not strip off this materiality but retains it eternally'.

Davies (2014:171) recognises the intermittent corporeality of the resurrected Jesus, for example, with regard to the *noli me tangere* expression. This Latin expression refers to the words of the resurrected Jesus to Mary Magdalene in John 20:17. Bieringer (2005:39) translates the expression from the original Greek text with 'Do not hold me'. Mary Magdalene should not seek a bond and closeness with Jesus during the period of Jesus' ascension and return, but with the community of faith in the Spirit (Bieringer 2005:41). The risen Christ is also omnipresent, working through his Spirit (Louw 2008:218). And, from a pneumatological perspective, persons are empowered by Christ's power of resurrection (Louw 2008:271).

When Jesus left the disciples at the ascension, Jesus' body 'disappears and goes into God and into his church' (Gregersen 2012:243). Jesus will never return physically from God's throne (Gregersen 2012:243). This throne refers to every place where God reigns. The resurrected Christ is compared with the kingdom of God – which cannot be observed, but is among us (e.g. Lk 17:20–21) (Gregersen 2012:243). Ritschl, the founder of the liberal theology, emphasises the present kingdom, which is 'within you' (Lk 17:20 RSV) (Goppelt 1981):

From the divine point of view, the kingdom is the highest good to which the love of God wishes to lead people; from the human point of view, it is the ethical community of the human race that is realized in mutual cooperation through love. (p. 51)

As indicated above, Jesus, as a body for others, is in the midst of the church, especially with the Eucharist (Gregersen 2012:243; cf. Harren 2009). 'The sharing of Jesus in our humanity and our receiving and sharing the broken bread, brings us into bodily relationship and unity: we are one body in Christ' (Naylor 1996).

Under the heading 'sacramental bodies', Eiesland (1994:107–108) wrote about the Eucharist that it is in Christ's call upon followers for the 'remembrance of his body and blood at table, [that] the disabled God calls us to liberating relationships with God, our bodies and others'. As a social body, Jesus Christ is 'present in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, i.e., the church' (Eiesland 1994:107–108). Jesus' body is transformed from a biological and cultural body to an extended body, which establishes, through the Spirit, a living connection between God and humans, and is accessible worldwide (Gregersen 2012:243–244).

The resurrection of Christ is not an event of the past but a 'vital power' and 'irresistible force' which fills the world and

brings forth beauty (Pope Francis 2013:206) – with the references to power and force presupposing the work of the Spirit. Or, according to the view of Keum (2013:8), the Spirit can be seen as the ‘continuing presence of Christ’.

While Jesus on the cross makes the passion and compassion of a suffering God known (*theologia crucis*), the resurrection of Christ overwhelms one with a living and faithful God (*theologia resurrectionis*) (Louw 2008):

Resurrection establishes life as a courage to be; it transforms life into the new mode of the fruit of the Spirit (pneumatology) in order to promote human dignity, justice and the *shalom* of the kingdom of God. (p. 441)

## Conclusion

This article focusses on the embodiment of God; it is mainly a discussion on the (deep) incarnation of God in Christ. Theology is placed in the sphere of humanity by the humanness of Jesus. Jesus, as a biological and social being, puts him on par with human nature, in direct contact with other human beings. Jesus’ bodily existence not only makes Jesus’ life and living inevitably fragile and vulnerable but also one in solidarity with the ongoing misery of humans. ‘Brokenness and woundedness are part of what it means to be human. Weakness and vulnerability are part of the strength of our spirituality’<sup>1</sup> (Christensen 2006:xi). Coyle-Carr (2014:n.p.) invited us to ‘revel in the fact that God has chosen flesh, real, fragile, warm, hairy human flesh to reveal the character of God and accomplish reconciliation in the world’.

Believing in, worshipping and/or following the embodied God means that God is participating in ‘human spirituality in an embodied way’ (Ferrey 2010:12). From the beginning, it is obvious that humans participated in the ‘mystery of Revelation in and through their bodiliness’ according to Prokes (1996:78):

Human beings are an embodied soul and an ensouled body. As a created whole, a human being is designed for the cause of *doxa*: to reflect divine destiny (*telos*), a humane mode of living (Calvin: *la principale fin de la vie humaine*). (Louw 2014:12)

Murphy (2002) wrote:

[W]e are our bodies – there is no additional metaphysical element such as mind or soul or spirit. But, secondly, this ‘physicalist’ position need not deny that we are intelligent, moral and spiritual. We are, at our best, complex physical organism, imbued with the legacy of thousand years of culture, and most importantly, blown by the Breath of God’s Spirit; we are Spirited bodies. (p. ix)

Approached from the Semitic perspective, the traditional dichotomy between body and soul and/or the extension of a trichotomy between body, soul and spirit are unknown (Louw 2014:13; Van den Berg 2008:119–120). In the Old Testament, no distinction is made between the physical and spiritual nature of humankind (Prokes 1996:58):

1. Michael J. Christensen refers to Henri Nouwen’s spirituality of imperfection.

Stereometric reasoning<sup>2</sup> allows for the Semitic view of a person as an integrated unit within the whole cosmos. ... It does not view a person in terms of isolated, different parts, but as a functional unit (whole) within a network of relationships ... [*It is*] relational and systemic. (Louw 2014:13)

Any one of the concepts which are used interchangeably in Hebrew poetry to describe what a human is – heart, mind, soul, spirit – also refers to the totality of that life (Louw 2014:13).

‘People are in God’s image – they have a connection with God and are intended to be a reflection of God – as embodied beings and not apart from their bodies’ (Kilner 2015:277). A person is more than food and clothing (Mt 6:25). If you want to see the literal person, look through the eyes of God (Schottruff & Stegemann 1982:79). The corporeal facet of God’s image is equal to all people, and being in God’s image leads to the special worthiness of the sacredness in every person (Kilner 2015:290; cf. Green 2011:293–294):

As we delve into our corporeal nature to encounter its complexity, diversity, and vicissitudes, we experience God in us and with us. We are who we are because of who God is. (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:59)

The more we ‘imagine the reality of the divine as fully possible ... we can slowly be divinised by that reality’ (Ignatius of Loyola in Hernandez 2006:29).

Humanity as a whole is characterised by equality and unity (Kilner 2015:290). Socially marginalised people, like persons with disabilities, should not identify themselves according to their circumstances and the labels used by their oppressors (Kilner 2015:290). ‘[I]n the loving eyes of God ... there are no marginal cases of being “human”’ (Reinders 2008:119). Elsewhere, Reinders (2013:35–36), a disabilities ethicist, asks the rhetorical question: ‘[W]hat in the eyes of God is the difference between human beings who are marked as “disabled” and human beings that are not so marked?’. Diagnosing disabling conditions may be necessary for therapeutic reasons, but from a theological perspective, it is irrelevant (Reinders 2013:35–36).

But to deny anybody their human dignity, not only the kind-hearted marginalised persons, but also the evil-hearted, are against the will of God (Barth 1960):

On the basis of the eternal will of God we have to think of *every human being*, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him on this assumption. If the other person knows that already, then we have to strengthen him in the knowledge. If he does not know it yet or no longer knows it, our business is to transmit this knowledge to him. On the basis of the knowledge of the humanity of God no other attitude to any kind of fellow man is possible. It is identical with the practical acknowledgement of his human rights and his human dignity. To deny it to him would be for us to renounce having Jesus Christ as Brother and God as Father. (p. 53)

2. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, stereometry means ‘having, characterised by, or representing a readily measurable solid form or volume e.g. a house can have variety of interior but the outside is invariably a stereometrics body’.



Through our 'diverse and vulnerable humanity' (status, gender, ability, age, etc.) God reveals God's self and God becomes known to us, according to Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn (2013:61). Furthermore, our humanity is divinised through Christ's humanity (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:61). Jesus' presence in everybody gives them their unique dignity as 'created in the *imago Dei*' (Robinson 2011:175).

The embodiment of God with the incarnation of Christ gives God the status of a human. This Godly event gives people a divine status as true humans (e.g. Phlp 2, 2 Pt 1:4; cf. Athanasius in Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:58–59). 'God becomes human in order to turn us from being unhappy and proud gods into true human beings who accept their lowliness' (Luther in Moltmann 2015:120). A contemporary view on this would be that (Moltmann 2015):

[W]hen modern human beings renounce their unhappy 'God complex' (as the psychoanalyst H.E. Richter called it), they become more human, and in their human vulnerability and mortality experience the nearness of the incarnate God. (p. 120)

Being created in the image of God makes every person special in the eyes of God, but that does not make us God. Deland (1999:52) reminds us of our mortality, limits and imperfections. The radical embodiment of God, the body of the earthly Jesus, reminds followers of Jesus of the significance of leading creative lives, resulting in authentic Christian spirituality that is embodied and vulnerable.

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P.v.N. did the research and wrote most of the manuscript. N.N. was the research leader and supervisor, made conceptual contributions and did the final editing of the manuscript.

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This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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