

Deanna A. Thompson. *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016. 144 pages. \$19.99.

This volume by Deanna Thompson dares to compel its readership, against probable reluctance, to consider the virtuality of the body of Christ. Adopting language of conversion and testimony, Thompson relies upon her own experience with stage IV metastatic breast cancer to share how she came to embrace, and be embraced by, the virtual body of Christ. Throughout her book, Thompson rightfully anticipates pushback from those who are familiar with research concerning the negative impacts of technology and internet dependence. Without dismissing these concerns, Thompson asserts that technology is a growing aspect of human life, and that Christians are faced with the task of how to better utilize technology in order to manifest Christ to those who suffer.

In the first section of her book, she shares her “conversion story,” with moving descriptions of how she was embraced and carried by a virtual community of both strong and weak ties as she suffered through illness and treatment. She then explores the technological revolution, and engages ethical and philosophical angles of increasing human interdependence with technology. She argues that virtual relationships of support can lead to the strengthening of relationships beyond virtuality.

In part two, she really begins to develop a theological claim concerning the virtual body of Christ. By first appealing to the letters of the New Testament, with a special emphasis on Pauline material, she explores Paul’s “virtual” relationship with many of the New Testament churches, as his relationships are largely sustained through letters. She pays special attention to the implications of the language of the body in 1 Corinthians 12, highlighting the corporeality of the fellowship of believers as the body of Christ, while simultaneously sustaining Christ’s physical absence. In this sense, Christ’s body is necessarily virtual, living on through the fellowship of believers, unified throughout past, present, and future. The universality of the virtual body of Christ, by way of technology, exponentially expands the possibilities of care, support, and service for those who are suffering. At the end of chapter two, she raises the question, “But are virtual spaces real enough to bear the incarnation?”—a worthwhile question which launches her into a thoughtful reimagining of incarnational living to include virtual spaces. In chapter three she strives to break down frameworks which understand embodied interactions and virtual interactions to be oppositional, arguing, rather, for the idea of continuity between the two. Perhaps virtual engagements can foster and enhance face-to-face relationships.

It is in this third chapter that the reader will find what may very well be the most poignant and insightful section of Thompson’s argument. She explains, as only one who has truly suffered can, the very complicated dynamics of social interaction for a person who is enduring bodily suffering. She carefully navigates matters of selfhood, emotional and psychological trauma, and communication barriers that emerge in face-to-face interactions. Here she explains that in many ways, virtual engagement of a person who is suffering can provide alleviation of pressure from the person who is struggling to communicate through the battlefield of suffering. It may be important to note that never in this volume does she argue that virtual engagement is superior to, or a proper substitution for physical engagement.

Thompson then reiterates her proposal for the virtual body of Christ meeting the needs of those who suffer. Here she addresses the many challenges that technology raises in human attentiveness. How will people be aware of suffering, and give rightful attendance to human needs, if research indicates that technology is depleting human ability to sustain attention and

careful attendance? She argues that inattentiveness is as much a learned behavior as attentiveness. Attentiveness and sensitivity to suffering are skills which one must hone, sometimes over and against the challenges of technology.

She also addresses practical matters of online presence for churches who strive to negotiate virtual space with their face-to-face worship experiences. Ministers will likely feel inspired by this section to imagine new ways of utilizing online resources to help their congregations flourish in personal relationships.

In the final section of her book, Thompson explores some of the potential limitations and challenges of her proposal. Persons who are suffering from various cognitive diseases, mental illness, persons who are visually impaired, or those who do not have access to technology due to socio-economic circumstances, may not be able to fully participate in the virtual life of the body of Christ. Thompson's overview of these limitations and challenges is perhaps too brief, as the reader is left with an abundance of questions concerning the experiences of those who suffer in ways unaddressed by the majority of the book.

While Thompson carefully anticipates rebuttals that may emerge from her readers, and aptly addresses concerns along the way, she does not thoroughly address matters of *communal* trauma or suffering, as one might have expected to find in a book that is supposed to address a suffering *world*. However, granted the concision of this volume, Thompson's exploration of suffering through her own testimony is quite profound. Readers should anticipate a change of mind, and an expanded perception on the role of the internet and technology in the church's mission to embody Christ to the suffering.

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