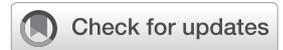


Jesus and disability: A theological and practical reflection for churches in Nigeria

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Jesus Christ remains a grand model for the church in many ways. Particularly, Jesus' attitude and actions towards people with disabilities remain exemplary for the contemporary church. Advocacy for people with disabilities is unpopular, and their voices are unheard even in the academic space. Oftentimes, disability studies are yet to receive adequate engagement from biblical, exegetical and theological standpoints. This study employed literary investigation and exegetical analysis, which eventually resulted in a real-world application of the findings from earlier investigation and analysis. The findings reveal that Jesus' attitudes and actions towards people with disabilities are exemplary for churches in Nigeria. Jesus' approach was counter-cultural as the socio-cultural and religious barriers prevented those with disabilities from entering the temple.

Contribution: People with disabilities should be viewed as individuals made in the image of God. Also, they are included in Jesus' redemption. People with disabilities are part of the universal church, and this is a springboard for local church assemblies to be inclusive and integrative.

Keywords: church; Jesus Christ; disability; inclusion; Nigeria.

Introduction

The narrative of Jesus reflects, in many respects, God's approach towards those whom society often neglects. Travelling along the dusty paths of Galilee and through the bustling streets of Jerusalem, he frequently transcended boundaries – geographical, cultural and religious – to connect with individuals who had been marginalised. Among these were those society deemed 'disabled': the blind man shouting by the roadside, the paralysed man lowered through a roof, the leper ostracised from community life and the woman who had been bent over for 18 years. For each of them, Jesus provided not only physical healing, but also a restoration of dignity, belonging and spiritual identity. His touch, his words, and even the attention he gave them in public challenged the societal norms that rendered the individuals invisible.

In the Nigerian context, the topic of disability is highly intricate, influenced by traditional beliefs, economic conditions, and the impact of both colonial and modern religious interpretations. In numerous communities, disability is still perceived as misfortune, an ancestral curse, witchcraft or divine retribution. These views frequently result in stigma, exclusion and even maltreatment (Haruna 2017; Iyabo 2014). While these perspectives are not universal, they are prevalent enough to foster an environment where individuals with disabilities often encounter social and ecclesial marginalisation. Research in African disability theology affirms that the church, despite often serving as a place of refuge, can mirror the same biases found in the broader society, sometimes, unintentionally perpetuating them through language, liturgy or limited theological perspectives.

Nevertheless, the gospel offers a profoundly different perspective. The biblical story consistently demonstrates God's compassion for the vulnerable. In the Mosaic law, specific measures were established to protect those who might be socially disadvantaged, including individuals with impairments. The prophets foretold a future where the lame would leap like deer and the mute would rejoice (Is 35:5–6). Jesus' own ministry, which he announced in the Nazareth synagogue, proclaimed 'good news to the poor' and freedom for those oppressed in body, mind or circumstance (Lk 4:18–19). These scripture foundations urge the church in Africa to reconsider its stance on disability, viewing it not as a marginal topic or a 'special ministry', but as integral to the mission of God.

The importance of such reflection is highlighted by demographic and social realities. The World Health Organization reports that over 80 million Africans live with various forms of disability, many lacking sufficient access to education, healthcare or job opportunities (World Health Organization [WHO] 2023). These forms of disability include blindness, deafness, speech impairment, dementia, mobility impairment, loss of limbs, developmental delays, autism, schizophrenia and so on. This figure transcends mere social policy; it poses a pastoral challenge for the Nigerian church. In almost every congregation, there are current or prospective members whose experiences of church are influenced by how accessible the environment is, whether sermons and liturgies affirm their value, and whether they are regarded as full participants in the body of Christ. A theology that neglects to incorporate disability is, in essence, a theology with some members missing.

This study aims to provide both a theological and practical exploration of the connection between Jesus and disability, concentrating on the Nigerian church. Theologically, it will examine how Jesus' ministry redefines human value, contests exclusionary practices and portrays the kingdom of God as an incredibly inclusive space. Practically, it will discuss how the Nigerian church can embody this vision through concrete actions, including architecture and design, pastoral support, leadership development, discipleship and community advocacy. The goal is not to formulate a separate 'disability theology', but to reclaim a biblical understanding of humanity in which every individual, irrespective of ability, mirrors the image of God and fully engages in the mission of Christ.

This discussion is important, especially in Nigeria, where the church is one of the most influential social institutions. In many rural areas, the church is not only a place of worship but also a centre for education, social support and moral guidance. This influence places a moral responsibility on the church to lead in dismantling stigma and building communities of belonging. By reflecting on the example of Jesus, the Nigerian church can help to transform cultural narratives, affirming that disability is neither a divine curse nor an obstacle to spiritual significance, but part of the diversity of the human experience in which God's glory can be revealed.

A biblical and theological vision of disability

A biblical theology of disability must begin with the recognition that scripture approaches human limitation with complexity and theological depth, refusing reductionist or purely functional definitions. The biblical witness affirms the inherent dignity of all persons, grounded in the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* (Gn 1:26–27), irrespective of physical, sensory or cognitive ability. This foundational truth precedes and transcends cultural, social and even ecclesial categorisations, establishing that human worth is neither contingent upon capacity nor diminished by limitation.

Disability in the Old Testament

The Old Testament presents a multifaceted perspective on disability. Certain priestly regulations exclude those with physical impairments from cultic service (Lv 21:16–23), a reality which, read without context, has sometimes been used to legitimise marginalisation. Keener (2009:502) noted that teachings from the *Mishnah Hagigah* and other Jewish texts would have prevented those who were lame and blind from entering the temple. However, within the covenantal framework, these restrictions pertained to the symbolic requirements of ritual purity rather than ontological statements above the value of persons. Significantly, the Torah also contains explicit commands to safeguard and honour individuals with disabilities; prohibitions against cursing the deaf or placing obstacles before the blind (Lv 19:14) and imprecations upon those who mislead the blind (Dt 27:18–19) articulate divine concern for the vulnerable as a matter of covenant faithfulness (Wright 2004:187; Hull 2001).

The prophetic literature expands this concern, incorporating disability into eschatological visions of restoration. Isaiah announces a future in which 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped' and 'the lame shall leap like deer' (Is 35:5–6). These images do not present disability as divine rejection, but as a condition that God himself will address in the consummation of his redemptive purposes. Yong (2011:45) argues that such visions should not be interpreted as a negation of disability identity; rather, they anticipate the removal of societal, physical and spiritual barriers that hinder full participation in communal life. Thus, the Old Testament situates disability within the broader framework of God's justice, covenantal inclusion and eschatological hope.

Jesus' ministry: Restoration and inclusion

In the 1st-century context, disability was often associated with moral failure, ancestral sin or divine punishment. This assumption is explicitly challenged in John 9, where Jesus rejects the causal link between sin and a man's congenital blindness, asserting instead that the situation exists 'so that the works of God might be displayed' (Jn 9:3). In this reframing, disability is not a theological problem to be explained away, but a context for divine self-revelation.

The healing narratives within the Synoptic Gospels illustrate that Jesus' ministry to persons with disabilities was characterised by personal engagement, restoration of agency and social reintegration. In Mark 10:46–52, Bartimaeus is addressed directly with this question, 'What do you want me to do for you?' – a recognition of his personhood and capacity to articulate his own needs (Witherington III, 2001). Similarly, the paralytic in Mark 2:1–12 experiences both physical healing and the forgiveness of sins, signalling that restoration in the kingdom of God encompasses the whole person – body, mind and spirit.

These actions also dismantled social exclusion. Lepers were restored to communal life (Lk 17:11–19), and a woman suffered for 18 years was publicly affirmed as a ‘daughter of Abraham’ (Lk 9:35–38). In each case, healing functioned both as an act of compassion and as a public redefinition of communal boundaries.

Disability in the Nigerian cultural context

The Nigerian perspective offers a unique way to comprehend disability, significantly influenced by a blend of historical customs, spiritual beliefs, language structures and socio-economic conditions. Throughout the nation, views on disability are neither homogeneous nor fixed; they differ based on geographical location, ethnic background and religious affiliation. Nevertheless, some recurrent themes persist that continue to influence societal attitudes as well as institutional responses, including those from the Christian church.

In numerous Nigerian communities, disability is perceived through a holistic lens where the physical, spiritual and social aspects of existence are interconnected. Illness, impairment or congenital differences are seldom viewed solely as biological issues. Instead, many cultures interpret these conditions in moral or spiritual contexts, often regarding them as indications of ancestral discontent, divine retribution, negative spiritual influences or violations of community taboos (Kabue 2011:33). In certain East African traditions, for instance, some particular disabilities are connected to curses placed by adversaries, while some central African cultures attribute disabilities to witchcraft or sorcery (Nzegwu 1992:442).

This worldview is bolstered by the communal character of African societies. The individual is not seen as a separate entity, but as a vital component of a family and larger community. Within this paradigm, disability often becomes a collective issue, which reflects not only on the person but fostered compassionate inclusion, where communities take joint responsibility for care. Conversely, it can also lead to concealment or exclusion because of fears of public disgrace or spiritual pollution (Eze 2015:17).

In Nigeria, these traditional beliefs manifest in various ways. In some Yoruba communities, disability has historically been associated with supernatural origins or the spiritual repercussions of a parent’s misconduct. Among certain Igbo groups, the notion of *Ogbanje* [a spirit child believed to die and be reborn repeatedly] has been employed to explain recurring illnesses or physical impairments. In the Hausa-Fulani regions of the north, disability is sometimes seen as *Kaddara* [destiny], reflecting the considerable Islamic influence in the area’s cultural thinking (Obadare 2010:65). While such interpretations can provide meaning amid suffering, they also risk promoting fatalism and discouraging proactive inclusion.

Throughout Africa, proverbs, idioms and fables act as bearers of cultural wisdom, passing down values through generations. However, these oral traditions also mirror and perpetuate societal perspectives on disability. In many African languages, terms for disability often suggest notions of incompleteness or deficiency. For example, in some Swahili dialects, the word for a person with a disability comes from a root meaning ‘broken’, whereas in various Bantu languages, terms for the blind or the lame are frequently used metaphorically to signify ignorance, weakness or moral failings (Fatokun 2008:84).

This figurative employment of disability-related language is prevalent in West African contexts, including Nigeria. In Yoruba, the word *arun* [sickness] is often used more broadly to describe chronic disabilities, primarily framing them as pathological. Meanwhile, the term *guru* [crippled] in Hausa is employed descriptively and in a derogatory manner, and in Igbo, blindness may symbolise spiritual ignorance. Although such usages may not always be meant to belittle, they inevitably reinforce symbolic links between disability and inferiority.

Nonetheless, African oral traditions also encompass counter-narratives that celebrate dignity and resilience. Within the Akan community of Ghana, the existence of a blind elder is often venerated for the wisdom they possess, while in Yoruba culture, the proverb *A ki I fi omo eniyan se awada* [One must not make a human being the subject of ridicule] discourages mocking physical differences. In Hausa culture, the saying *Rashin gani ba rashin zuciya ba ne* [The absence of sight does not equate to a lack of intelligence] emphasises that losing one’s sight does not reduce intellectual ability. However, positive narratives like these are not as commonly referenced in public discussions compared to those focused on deficits.

Cultural perceptions of disability in Africa are closely linked with economic and structural realities. Throughout the continent, individuals with disabilities encounter significant obstacles when it comes to healthcare, assistive devices, inclusive education and formal job opportunities. In rural regions, basic infrastructure often lacks fundamental accessibility, transportation systems are inadequate, and rehabilitation services are few and far between. Although urban areas have slightly better conditions, they are still affected by inconsistent policy application, underfunded initiatives and persistent stigma.

These socio-economic challenges are evident in Nigeria. While the country’s *Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018* marks a significant legislative achievement, its enforcement is still lacking. Public buildings commonly do not have ramps or elevators, public transport seldom accommodates individuals with mobility impairments, and sign language interpretation in public services is minimal. In the realm of education, numerous children with disabilities are still out of school

despite policies promoting inclusion. Some are kept out as a result of schools being inaccessible and a shortage of trained educators, while others are withdrawn by parents who fear mockery or believe education holds little value. This educational exclusion directly leads to economic disenfranchisement.

The Nigerian church's response and pitfalls

The Nigerian church stands as one of the most influential institutions on the continent, shaping not only the spiritual lives of millions but also their cultural attitudes, moral frameworks and social practices. In many communities, the church is the primary provider of social services, a trusted mediator of conflicts, and a central space for communal gathering. Given this position of influence, the church's response to disability, whether intentional or inadvertent, carries profound implications for both theology and daily life.

In many African contexts, the church has been at the forefront of offering charity and pastoral care to persons with disabilities. Such acts range from providing food and clothing to facilitating access to wheelchairs, hearing aids and other assistive devices. Some congregations have established ministries specifically dedicated to supporting people with disabilities, often led by compassionate lay members or pastors with personal exposure to disability. In rural settings, church-based networks sometimes serve as the only source of material assistance, filling gaps left by under-resourced government agencies.

These compassionate ministries embody Christ's command to love 'the least of these' (Mt 25:40) and resonate with biblical visions of inclusion such as Paul's teaching that those who seem to be weaker members of the body are 'indispensable' (1 Cor 12:22). However, the church's emphasis on charity often reflects a benevolent paternalism rather than a theological conviction about equality. While charity meets immediate needs, it can inadvertently reinforce hierarchical relationships in which people with disabilities remain passive recipients rather than active participants in the life of the church.

One of the most visible ways in which Nigerian churches engage disability is through healing ministries. Across the continent, healing crusades, prayer camps and deliverance services frequently feature testimonies of people being 'set free' from physical or sensory impairments. In contexts where traditional beliefs already link disability to spiritual forces, such ministries often attract large crowds that seek out miraculous cures to their ailments.

While these ministries can provide hope, they also risk reinforcing the perception that a life with disability is inherently undesirable or incomplete. When church narratives construe disability chiefly as a spiritual malady

requiring eradication, they risk inadvertently marginalising persons whose disabilities persist. In some Nigerian Pentecostal contexts, for example, the testimonies most celebrated are those of dramatic physical healing, while ongoing discipleship and inclusion for those not healed receive less emphasis.

A notable shortcoming evident in many Nigerian churches is the under-representation of persons with disabilities in leadership roles. While some denominations have made deliberate efforts towards inclusion, for example, appointing visually impaired pastors or sign language interpreters, these remain an exception rather than the norms (Northcutt 2011:159–160). In most cases, disability is still viewed as a limitation to leadership capacity rather than as a dimension of diversity that can enrich the church's witness.

In Nigeria, this under-representation is particularly visible in theological education and pastoral training institutions. Few seminaries have accessible facilities, and even fewer actively recruit students with disabilities. As a result, the pipeline of leaders who articulate a theology of disability from lived experience remains limited. Without such representation, church policies and programmes often fail to reflect the priorities and insights of the disability community.

Given its social influence, the Nigerian church is uniquely positioned to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities in public life. Yet, in practice, church engagement with disability rights movements has been inconsistent. In some cases, churches have supported campaigns for inclusive education, accessibility and anti-discrimination legislation. In others, they have remained silent, either out of theological indifference or a reluctance to challenge prevailing cultural attitudes.

In Nigeria, for instance, while some faith-based organisations contributed to the push for the *Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018*, many church bodies were notably absent from the advocacy process (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2018). This lack of coordinated engagement reflects a broader theological gap: disability is often treated as a matter of pastoral care rather than as an issue of justice and human rights.

At the root of many of these shortcomings lies a limited theological engagement with disability. While African Christianity is vibrant in worship, evangelism and social outreach, its formal theological reflection on disability remains under-developed. In seminaries and theological colleges, courses on pastoral care rarely address disability as a theological category. Where disability is mentioned, it is often in the context of healing, charity or moral metaphor, rather than as a lens for understanding the gospel's call to inclusive community.

This theological gap has practical consequences. Without a robust biblical anthropology that affirms the full dignity and

vocation of persons with disabilities, the church is likely to continue oscillating between pity, neglect and over-spiritualisation. By contrast, a church grounded in a theology that sees disability as a part of the diversity of creation and recognises the indispensable gifts of all its members, can avoid an alternative vision not only for its own community but also for African society at large.

Implications for churches in Nigeria

The ministry of Jesus towards individuals with disabilities does more than motivate acts of charity; it creates a theological framework for how the church should embody the kingdom of God. His life presents the Nigerian church with a set of responsibilities that cannot be ignored without compromising the gospel's call for inclusivity.

To start with, Jesus' example compels the church to rethink its understanding of ecclesiology. The body of Christ cannot be considered complete unless all its members are acknowledged, respected and empowered to participate. Paul's imagery in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 points to the significance of inclusion of people with disabilities when viewed through the lens of Jesus' interactions with marginalised individuals. The Nigerian church cannot claim to reflect the ministry of Christ if its worship environments, leadership structures and theological education are not accessible. An ecclesiology influenced by Jesus will assess health not only by numerical expansion but by the degree to which the most marginalised individuals are included in the community's life.

Additionally, the ministry of Jesus redefines the concept of healing. Throughout the Gospels, healing is never merely for its own sake; it signifies a restored relationship with God and others. The Nigerian church, particularly in Nigerian Pentecostal and charismatic contexts, frequently devotes considerable efforts towards seeking miraculous healings (Anderson 2014). While prayer for healing is indeed a faithful practice, Jesus' example requires that the church also tend to those whose situations do not physically improve. A pastoral theology based on Jesus' vision for the kingdom acknowledges that wholeness can exist even in the presence of impairments. This perspective encourages the church to shift away from equating faith solely with physical change and to instead appreciate ongoing discipleship and inclusion.

Moreover, Jesus' public ministry to individuals with disabilities confronts cultural attitudes that foster exclusion. Numerous African cultures have long linked disability with misfortune, curses or displeasure from ancestors (Oyelaran 2015:55). These beliefs continue to influence perceptions subtly, even within Christian communities. By directly engaging with persons with disabilities, affirming their worth and placing them in prominent public roles, Jesus challenged the stigmas ingrained in his own culture. The message for the Nigerian church is unmistakable: it must actively address rather than passively accept the biases present in its cultural context. In this scenario, silence equates to complicity.

The example set by Jesus compels the church to engage in advocacy as a vital component of discipleship. His readiness to confront Sabbath laws for the sake of a suffering woman's liberation (Lk 13:10–17) exemplifies a faith that puts human dignity above rigid traditions. For the Nigerian church, advocacy encompasses promoting inclusive education, urging governments to uphold accessibility laws and openly challenging discrimination. In Nigeria, this entails more than just celebrating the *Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018*; it necessitates that congregations act as watchdogs and collaborators in its enforcement. Advocacy, in this context, is not simply optional activism; it represents a continuation of Jesus' own prophetic response to injustice.

The ministry of Jesus indicates that disability is not a theological dilemma to be resolved, but a human experience through which God's grace is manifested. In John 9, when questioned about the reason for a man's blindness, Jesus declines to lay blame and instead reinterprets the situation as a chance for God's works to be revealed. This viewpoint encourages the Nigerian church to regard persons with disabilities not as subjects of pity or tests of faith but as co-bearers of God's image whose experiences can highlight aspects of divine grace that those without such experiences may not access. The implication is significant: the mission of the church is diminished if it overlooks the voices and contributions of people with disabilities.

Conclusion

The testimony of Jesus towards individuals with disabilities serves as both encouragement and a challenge for the Nigerian church. It brings comfort, as it affirms that those marginalised by society are acknowledged, valued and embraced by the one whose kingdom invites every human narrative. It presents a challenge because it highlights the gap between his inclusive ministry and the church's frequently selective compassion. The Jesus depicted in the Gospels not only gave sight and mobility; he restored dignity, agency and community. Following him means adopting that same attitude in worship, leadership, theology and public life.

In numerous African contexts, and particularly in Nigeria, the church plays a vital role in people's lives. This presence is both a blessing and a duty. The church must not replicate the cultural stigmas it is meant to challenge. Traditional beliefs linking disability to misfortune, ancestral curses or moral failings must be replaced with the gospel truth that every individual reflects the image of God. The ministry of Jesus dismantles these negative narratives, not through theory, but through communal meals, public validation and empowering those who are often silenced by society.

This goes beyond mere acts of charity or goodwill; it speaks to the faithfulness required by the gospel. A church that prays for healing while overlooking accessibility, that speaks of love yet restricts participation in leadership, that sings of

unity while failing to build ramps or provide interpreters, is presenting an incomplete gospel. The example of Jesus compels the Nigerian church to align its messages with its actions – to ensure that its environments, liturgies and structures manifest the coming kingdom where everyone is included.

Realising the desired transformation will not occur by chance. It necessitates theological re-education, pastoral retraining, structural modifications and ongoing advocacy. Congregations must learn to view individuals with disabilities not merely as those to be helped, but as vital partners in God's mission. It will also demand the humility to learn from those whose lived experiences reveal aspects of God's grace that may be unfamiliar to others.

Finally, how the church engages with disability reflects its Christlikeness. Exclusion disguised as compassion is not the way we honour Jesus. Jesus is glorified when the church – that is also his body – becomes a community where every individual is essential, where leadership mirrors the diversity of his followers, and where the world can glimpse a foretaste of the future banquet. In that gathering, just as in Jesus' ministry, the poor, the blind, the lame and the marginalised are not seated at the edges. They are the esteemed guests, and the joy of the feast is incomplete without their presence.

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Michael D. Olajide: Data curation, Visualisation, Writing - original draft. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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