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Book Review

Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community

Grant Macaskill

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In recent decades autism has entered the mainstream consciousness. It has moved from being unrecognised, through classification under 'childhood schizophrenia' or as an extremely marginal and severe condition, towards its current status as a broader and better (though by no means perfectly) understood condition characterised by a spectrum of symptoms and severity. This is a wider societal shift, particularly but not only in the Anglophone world, driven by research, education, diagnosis, and support (even if all of these have been and remain patchy and uneven). As such, it has also inevitably affected the churches, in our pastoral care, mission, worship — indeed in pretty much everything we do. Most congregations will have members with autism, or at least members who are intimately connected with autistic individuals, whether as family members, carers, teachers, or in other capacities. Grant Macaskill, Kirby Laing Professor of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, sets out to ask what it means to think biblically about autism, and what this might mean for the church.

Macaskill first sets the scene, offering a brief survey of what is known about autism, attributing the increased incidence levels primarily to better understanding and more diagnosis, rather than other causes such as parenting (as was previously widely held by clinicians) or vaccination (as is, sadly and in the face of no causal evidence, tenaciously held by a minority at a popular level today). It is a

neurological developmental condition, characterised in terms of struggles with social interaction and communication, language acquisition and use. Macaskill also draws attention to the systematising tendency of those with autism and, importantly, the sensory issues that autistic people face.¹ It is a non-linear spectrum, encompassing a wide variety of symptoms and levels of severity. As the saying goes, if you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism. Macaskill also in this first chapter addresses the question of healing, and makes the interesting suggestion that because those with autism rarely present as physically different, we in the church might more readily assume that healing can happen; pushing against this, he notes that autism is a lifelong condition and that while change might occur, it is not something that will simply vanish.

Chapter II is a short lesson in biblical interpretation: as Macaskill notes, the principles here are relevant to discussion of any modern issue which the Bible does not directly address (and, indeed, to many that it does). He first dismisses three problematic approaches: the potentially innocuous but fruitless (and ultimately impossible) attempt to diagnose biblical characters; assimilating autism to demonic possession and responding with exorcism; and pursuing healing (see comments above). His guide to a Christian reading of Scripture involves six principles: 1) read it christologically, as governed supremely by the person and story of Jesus; 2) read it as a complex whole, including across its various genres and parts; 3) respect its historical particularity, both in its context and in allowing that the historical authors may have had views we would not share or find acceptable; 4) read it within the communion of the church, recognising the 'irreducibly social dimension' not only of the Bible but also of autism, which affects and calls forth a response from the whole body of Christ; 5) read it humbly, as fallible interpreters and recognising that many parts of Scripture are directed *against* the believing community; 6) read it spiritually, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

In Chapter III, Macaskill begins the theologically constructive work of exploring autism in relation to the biblical themes of incarnation and the church as the body of Christ. The gospel message pivots on marginalisation and weakness, and

¹ The terminology is contested, with some preferring 'autistic person' and others 'person with autism', with people on the spectrum and neurotypicals on both sides; following Macaskill's practice I use both in this review.

its message is therefore one of inclusion, which does not mean 'anything goes' (Jesus had weighty moral expectations of those who would follow him) but does confront our tendency to gravitate towards the powerful and 'normal'. Humans are God's image-bearers, and this image consists in our participation in God through Christ, not in any outward capacities or characteristics we may have. Two key motifs surface here: first, a struggle or even a war between good and evil, between sinful human flesh and the Holy Spirit. This may seem rather stark, but in fact it is a cornerstone for good pastoral practice: 'Nothing should make us expect that churches will be safe spaces for the vulnerable; they will only become so through the Spirit's war with the flesh' (p. 97). The second key motif is that of worldly value systems, which Macaskill addresses under the term 'social capital'; these often subtle and implicit systems are critiqued by the gospel, which makes the unlovely and the marginal central. Such a message speaks of the unconditional inclusion of autistic people, and of their ability to mediate the gospel to us by challenging our often unrecognised 'normal values'; it also speaks to people with autism as part of a common humanity that is both confronted and affirmed by the gospel.

Chapter IV turns to a vision of what the church could and should be, a 'sensory space for all God's people'. Here Macaskill explores the relationship of unity and diversity (1 Cor. 12), the foundational role of love (1 Cor. 13), love's intimate connection with truth (in the Johannine literature), and the practical outworking of love in the way the 'strong' relate to the 'weak' (Rom. 14-15). Again, questions of values come to the fore: our conception of social capital and the practices that embody it will determine how we express unity, and these norms (so often implicit and unarticulated, even to ourselves) may not be gospel-shaped and might unintentionally exclude others. The call to Christian community is a call to forgo my freedoms for the sake of my sister or brother.

In the following chapter, Macaskill examines autism's 'dark side': the comorbidities that have a higher than average correlation with autism, particularly anxiety, depression, and addiction. While the causes are complex, and these three conditions may interrelate with one another as well as with autism, there are indications that the neurological or physiological make-up of autistic individuals leave them more prone to both anxiety and habit-forming behaviours which could

lead to addiction. In the face of this, Macaskill points to the foundational truth that Christ is the rock of our salvation, not our experience. From Hebrews, he explores Jesus' high priesthood, as one who knows human temptation and weakness, and also offers assurance of purification and cleansing. Returning to the theme of the flesh, Macaskill draws out its weakness in terms of a dual nuance of moral sinfulness and physical helplessness. In the light of the Holy Spirit's help, through the church and in cooperation with our own spirit, there is hope for change. For people with autism, this emphatically does not mean camouflaging or masking to fit into a neurotypical world, but may mean adaptation — and it is a journey they do not make alone.

The final chapter explores a range of pastoral issues: how this applies to nonverbal autistic people (pointing to the Spirit's interceding role in Rom. 8); particular challenges around prayer for those with autism (pointing especially to the Psalms); sexuality and autism (exploring the biblical material briefly to argue for the priority of gospel unity over one's own sexuality or position on these questions); and the possibility and desirability of autistic theologies and readings of biblical texts (where their approach to language and systematising tendency may be a gift). In concluding, Macaskill draws out several key themes: a *theology of weakness and gift*, wherein our worth is linked not to our abilities but to God's gift; and the notion of *providence*, which affirms our created particularity. Here there is a momentary reflection on whether autism will continue into the resurrection, where Jesus' risen body with its wounds — healed, yet still present — is suggestive: 'mortality is transformed and transcended, but it is not obliterated or effaced' (p. 196). Two final themes are the importance of the whole *community*, and a question of whether and how those with autism might be enabled to *lead* in our churches. In his closing note, Macaskill reminds us that for Christians autism, like any other aspect of human identity, is ultimately subordinate to Christ: 'For in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, able nor disabled, autistic nor neurotypical, but all are one in Christ' (p. 200).

This is an immensely important book. It is by no means the final word on a theology of autism, but it is a very encouraging and remarkably wide-ranging early step. Some may be distracted by Macaskill's brief excursions on women's ministry

(to illustrate questions of biblical interpretation) or on sexuality (to make a pastoral point as well as an interpretative one), and he is well aware of this danger; however, overall even these parts serve their purpose for the reader who will hear him out carefully. One could respond to such a book by wishing more of certain things: more on the history of autism; or on the 'triad of impairments' and diagnosis; on subtypes or severe cases; more on the exploration of certain texts (he covers much of Paul, the Gospels, Hebrews, with the Johannine literature thrown in for good measure); or more on specific pastoral applications. Yet this would be to miss the point, for to extend the book or make it more technical would undermine its core purpose, which is to be thoughtful and wide-ranging whilst at the same time remaining generally accessible to a range of scholars, ministers, and (if I dare use the word) 'ordinary' folk, both autistic and neurotypical. Macaskill achieves this end, with a book that is concise, lucid, and accessible. I wish to highlight three points of particular strength.

First, Macaskill writes from personal experience of autism (as do I as reviewer); he has also listened to others' experience of autism, either in themselves or in friends or family members. This gives the book a grounded pastoral edge. His description of the sensory challenges of church (pp. 26-31) would be immensely helpful reading for ministers, welcomers, musicians, PA technicians — indeed, the whole congregation. Examples given in detail here surface in passing throughout the book: the pleasant perfume, the ubiquitous but minor PA system glitches, cheerful whistling, all of which neurotypicals can enjoy or screen out but can be a violent assault on the senses of someone with autism. This realism and understanding informs a loving and practical pastoral response.

Secondly, this is a book born of community: Macaskill writes as a practising Christian and church member, and relates anecdotes and experiences from friends and contacts near and far. He also testifies to the immensely generative academic community at Aberdeen, with his colleagues Brian Brock and John Swinton having written extensively in this area. Our theology, like the rest of life, cannot be done in isolation. And thirdly, this is an excellent example of what evangelical practical theology might look like, moving from a pressing issue in the world and the church that the Bible does not directly address, to a series of relevant scriptural passages, and back again. It is scripturally rooted, hermeneutically sophisticated, serious about

sin and salvation, embodied, practical, and readable. May we love and serve our autistic brothers and sisters, and they love and serve us, as together we are transformed in Christ.

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