

Full title:

“Autism Spectrum Disorders and The New Testament: Preliminary Reflections”

Short title:

“Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament”

ABSTRACT:

The dramatic increase in the diagnosed incidence of Autism Spectrum Disorder conditions presents a challenge for those within Christian communities who are committed to “thinking biblically” about all matters of faith and life. The problem is not identified as such within the Bible, and those who wish to think about it biblically must engage in a more reflective interpretive process that asks how it might be considered in the light of relevant themes and values in the biblical writings. This article examines a set of values and images that are particularly significant for how ASD is considered by Christian communities.

# Autism Spectrum Disorders and The New Testament: Preliminary Reflections/Towards a Responsible Discussion

## Introduction

The diagnosed incidence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)<sup>1</sup> has risen dramatically over the last three decades. Prior to 1990, around 1 in 10,000 was diagnosed with “autism”; since then, the figure has risen to 1 in 100, with some recent estimates as high as 1 in 50.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this rise will be considered below, but its significance for Christian communities is obvious: ASD is no longer considered to be rare, but relatively common, and the likelihood is that most communities are affected in some way by it. For the majority of Christian communities, which consider Scripture to play a normative role in the formation of their moral identity (however variously that normativity may be conceived), this poses a question: what does it mean to “think biblically” about ASD? If we are committed to the authority of

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<sup>1</sup> I use this particular designation throughout the article because it has become the standard diagnostic term. While we may want to question the appropriateness of the word “disorder” (and its implications), the terminology is standard and our usage of it reflects this. For a helpful discussion of the debates around terminology, see Cox, 2017, 23–25.

<sup>2</sup> Formally, the figures vary from 0.76%–2.6%, depending on the protocols used and their implementation with regard to specific geographical populations. See Lai *et al.* (2017). The most recent snapshot of clinical diagnosis in the U.S. has yielded a figure of 1.46%, but this itself is based on the analysis of a particular age group (Christensen *et al.*, 2016). One of the highest incidences to be claimed is that in Kim *et al.* (2011), interestingly in a South Korean context.

Scripture, then what are the particular ways this authority shapes our reflection on ASD and its place in the experience of Christian communities? The question, of course, demands that we move beyond simplistic accounts of how exegesis and ethics are to be related, for the issue is not encountered or addressed *as such* in the New Testament. We cannot, in other words, identify a set of passages that describe the condition and tell us what we are to think about it.<sup>3</sup> Rather, we must see our task as one of thinking about this particular issue in dialogue with a broader set of resources found in the New Testament. Some of these will be moral resources that bear more generally on the question of how we ascribe value to the individual person; others will

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<sup>3</sup> This is probably why, to date, nothing has been done on the topic from within the discipline of biblical studies. In fact, there has been little done in general on disability from within biblical studies, one notable exception being the collection of essays in Moss and Schipper, eds., 2011. Even here, however, the need to maintain the form of exegesis, as generally practiced in the modern university, largely confines the works to engagement with physical disabilities; cognitive disabilities are left to one side. The more recent study of Lawrence, 2013, which engages with sensory disabilities, offers more significant resources for the study of ASD (in which sensory issues are significant) in future, though it is still focused particularly on the physical dimension of these.

Some of the research on ASD that has been developed within the related disciplines of pastoral theology and theological ethics (such as Cox, 2017, and Brock, forthcoming) has involved some close engagement with biblical texts, but the extent of this is understandably limited and it generally does not interact with recent developments in biblical scholarship.

be theological resources that might address the distinctive needs of those with ASD and the distinctive challenges of those around them. In truth, most of our movements from biblical authority to theological ethics involve such dynamics, but the particular focus on ASD leaves no room for a naïve account of the place of exegesis in ethics.

This article is intended as a preliminary set of reflections on how the New Testament might shape the values of Christian communities in relation to autism spectrum disorders, and is offered as a contribution from the discipline of biblical studies to the disciplines of pastoral theology and theological ethics. It is an article intended to move us towards a more integrative account of what it means to think biblically about autism spectrum conditions. In presenting the purpose of the article in such terms, I stress that it is not itself a work of pastoral theology or theological ethics. Those disciplines provide the necessary further bridges between the text and its contemporary applications, but they are themselves “rooted” disciplines, drawing their own particular identity from the biblical material. They must, then, be fed by reflection on that material. What follows is not a singular argument, but rather a set of interwoven reflections intended to begin the conversation about how the New Testament (my area of competence within the broader field of biblical studies) might inform pastoral theological and ethical reflection on ASD. Some context on the shifting paradigms of ASD research is required before moving into this, however, and I will begin with a brief overview of these changes.

## 1. Autism Spectrum Disorders: Paradigms and Perceptions

Serious research into what we today label “the autism spectrum” began in Germany in the 1930s, through the pioneering work of Hans Asperger (published as Asperger, 1944). Asperger recognised that the phenomenon involved a range or spectrum of presenting characteristics that marked particular individuals as developmentally different from the general population. Those characteristics particularly involved the nature of their interactions with other people, which appeared to be compromised in key regards, leading to the application of the label “autistic”: to greater or lesser extents, they occupied their own worlds, insulated from “normal” social or environmental interactions. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Asperger’s research was marginalised, with the dominant paradigm being that of Leo Kanner. His work (notably Kanner, 1943) did not acknowledge a spectrum of conditions, but focused instead on the highly particular set of traits manifested by individuals whose social interactions were severely compromised. Rather than observing an autism spectrum, Kanner simply examined the category of “autism,” a rarely occurring condition marked by a consistent set of symptoms. Such was Kanner’s dominance in the study of this condition that the syndrome was also referred to as Kanner’s Syndrome. So-called “classical autism” is still sometimes referred to as Kanner’s autism.

The reasons for the dominance of Kanner’s approach are complex and quite political: Steve Silberman’s recent work *Neurotribes* (Silberman, 2015) explores this through some impressive research journalism, and readers who are interested in pursuing the question further are encouraged to read his study. In the 1980s, however, the dominance of Kanner’s paradigm began to be seriously challenged in academic circles by figures such as Lorna Wing (Wing, 1981) and Simon Baron Cohen (Baron-Cohen, *et al.*, 1985; for further key works, see bibliography); alongside these, the

writings of Temple Grandin on her own experience of the condition are generally recognized to have played a key role in the erosion of Kanner's dominance, since they began to be published from the mid-1980s onward (e.g., Grandin and Scariano, 1986; Grandin and Panek, 2013). Researchers again recognized a graded continuity of presenting characteristics—a spectrum—that stretched from the “seriously debilitating” through to the merely “different.” Asperger's paradigm was “rediscovered,” and began to function within the nomenclature of autism research: not only was there an autism spectrum—rather than simply “autism”—but a broad section of that spectrum was also now associated with “Asperger's Syndrome.” This label was associated with a fluid set of characteristics that were less obviously debilitating than those of classical autism, though typically involved some measure of social difficulty, often accompanied by unusually high levels of ability in certain areas. As research developed, fine-grained distinctions would emerge to allow clearer distinctions to be made between high-functioning classical autism and Asperger's Syndrome, particularly but not exclusively around the stages of speech development (Planche and Lemonnier, 2012), although more recent diagnostic guidelines have sought to efface some of these distinctions by removing Asperger's Syndrome as a discrete diagnosis,<sup>4</sup> while also allowing new labels to be employed (such as sensory processing disorder). Despite the movement towards eliminating Asperger's Syndrome as a diagnosis, it remains an identity label used by those marked by the

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<sup>4</sup> Planche and Lemonnier (2012) is one example of a cluster of articles that argued against the removal of the distinct category of Asperger's Syndrome in DSM-V for precisely this reason.

condition, who often label themselves as “Aspies” and distinguish themselves from “neurotypicals.”<sup>5</sup>

It is necessary to be aware of this historical backdrop to the contemporary situation if we are to contextualise rightly the massive rise in *diagnosed* incidence of ASD. While some have argued that there has been a rise in incidence triggered by some causative factor, such as vaccination programmes,<sup>6</sup> the key factor that must be taken into account is the change in diagnostic principles, the shift from diagnosing only Kanner’s Syndrome to diagnosing across the spectrum. While this does not rule out the possibility of other factors, it does mean that there is no justification for invoking them unless the diagnostic rates conflict with what we might expect based on the changing diagnostic protocols. As we anticipate our discussion of the New Testament, it also has two important implications. First, we need to recognise the breadth of the issue and to consider how the New Testament might speak to both ends of its spectrum. That is, our reflections need to take into account the person who is not neurotypical, who might simply be seen as “eccentric” (even if this label carries its own problems), as well as the person who requires constant care, and those who must

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<sup>5</sup> As well as online communities, one might point to the catalogue of books published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers (London), which has been the principal provider of support publication for those with ASD and their families. The value of the label to many has been significant.

<sup>6</sup> Notoriously, Wakefield *et al.* (1998, Retracted). The impact of this article, later retracted by the journal, continues to be felt; Wakefield himself has subsequently published a popular book reasserting his claims (Wakefield, 2010) and has supported campaigns that maintain the link between autism and vaccination programmes.

provide it. We must not minimise the challenges posed by those with severe problems—to themselves, their carers or to the communities in which they live and worship—by viewing the whole spectrum through the lens of the end that is closer to “normality,” that is more easily accommodated to our values of autonomy and function. But neither should we return to the paradigm of Kanner, even without realising we are doing so, by applying using a label like “autism” in a dominantly pejorative sense, understanding it to label only a particular form of the condition. Secondly, the discussion highlights the likelihood that the communities of Israel and the early church would have included individuals who today might be diagnosed with ASD. This is not to suggest that our task is to identify such characters in Scripture, although some have tried to do so (Matthew and Pandian, 2010), but rather to acknowledge that the kinds of resources we identify have always been pertinent to the evaluation of this reality, even if the reality was not labelled or identified as such.

Those on the autism spectrum are marked to varying degrees (and, as importantly, in differing ways) by clusters of characteristics that are worth considering briefly before we move on to consider the New Testament material. The first cluster of such characteristics involves difficulties in social interaction: ASD individuals appear to struggle with certain forms of non-verbal communication, or to exhibit limited joint attention, or to lack intuition or empathy. In more extreme cases, these difficulties can present in the ways classically associated with autism, with individuals appearing closed off to social interaction; in more subtle cases, they leave individuals appearing socially awkward, making inappropriate eye contact or reacting in unacceptable ways to cues.

The second cluster involves a tendency to systematize details. This may present in a preoccupation with systems encountered in the world, often manifesting in



obsessive behaviours: those with ASD are often drawn to areas of interest that are marked by systematic qualities, a characteristic that is at the root of many of the popular perceptions of Asperger's Syndrome, such as the interest in railways and trains or mathematics. It is also one of the reasons that those with ASD can exhibit remarkable islets of ability: interests that would be regarded as obsessive by most people, combined with a mind that more readily identifies and assimilates patterns, can lead such individuals to a mastery of areas of study or performance that most will never attain. The tendency to systematize can also present, however, as a need to maintain order and system in life: individuals will often find disruptions to routine to be distressing and, conversely, will take comfort in repetition and predictability.

The third cluster involves sensory processing. Those with ASD typically process sensory information in ways that are different from the rest of the population. Commonly this presents as a hypersensitivity to stimulation, though the truth may lie in the *processing* of sensory data, rather than in the sensitivity of the senses themselves: perfumes or hair products may be overpowering, the feeling of clothing or the touch of another person on the skin may be uncomfortable or unpleasant, certain frequencies may be painfully loud while others can be heard only by these individuals. The result is often described as "sensory overload" and is frequently exhausting for those affected, as the brain and nervous system struggle to comprehend the mass of information being processed through their networks. For others, the opposite is true: senses may appear to be duller than is normal, requiring excessive stimulation to bring about the same experience that the general population enjoys. Whether the issue is one of over- or under-stimulation, this particular feature varies between individuals, particularly in terms of which of the senses are affected. More

recent diagnostic protocols make room for a distinct variety of ASD that is principally marked by such sensory characteristics.

Clearly, there are neurophysiological dimensions to ASD and today's principal explanatory accounts are rendered in such terms.<sup>7</sup> As the concept of the spectrum was reasserted in the 1990s, researchers used categories like "mindblindness" and "theory of mind" to describe the apparent difficulties that those with ASD experienced in recognizing the mental states of others and in understanding their own mental state (Baron Cohen 1995; Baron-Cohen, 2001): ASD compromised the individual's "theory of mind," their capacity to comprehend the different mental state of other people. Such terminology dominated much of the literature around Asperger's Syndrome, including popular works;<sup>8</sup> as a result, it continues to be a significant feature of popular discussion of the spectrum. The limits of such categories have become increasingly evident, however, not least the awkward hybridisation of philosophical and neurological categories. More recent work has focused on the neurological mechanisms of empathy and systematizing, observing distinct differences in the "mirror system" of those on the spectrum (surveyed in Hamilton, 2013): their apparently compromised social abilities are linked to differences in the neurophysiology that would normally generate empathy, allowing non-verbal signals to be understood intuitively. Other parts of the brain, associated with logic and

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<sup>7</sup> This was not always the case. The early explanations of autism offered by Kanner and others centred on psychogenic theories, reflecting the dominant psychological paradigms of the period.

<sup>8</sup> A number of the works published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers have used this as the key feature of ASD, establishing its place in popular discussion of the spectrum.

systematizing, are seen to be more developed than in the general population. Simon Baron Cohen and others associated with the Autism Research Centre at Cambridge University argue for an explanatory account based on quadrants of high/low empathy and high/low systematizing: those with ASD will fall somewhere within the low empathy/high systematizing quadrant. Baron Cohen has also suggested that this might be seen as a form of extreme maleness, noting the distribution of scores within the “normal” population, the distribution of ASD across genders<sup>9</sup> and research into developmental factors, such as the levels of intra-uterine testosterone (Baron Cohen, 2002; cf. James, 2014). The approach has generated the concept of the “autism quotient,” a quantifiable score based on responses to a questionnaire that has proved valuable in giving preliminary indication that an individual may have ASD (Baron Cohen, *et al.*, 2001).

That there are differences in the brain types of those with ASD is generally acknowledged, but care is still required with empathy/systematizing approaches. For one, the mirror system is still a poorly understood and widely debated area of neurophysiology<sup>10</sup>; more importantly, there is a danger that the concept of empathy is reduced (through an essentially reductionistic mode of investigation) to a component of its neurological mechanism. That component may well be compromised, and with

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<sup>9</sup> The condition is still considered to be more common in males than in females, but the ratio of diagnosed incidence has fallen in more recent studies from 4:1 to between 2:1 and 3:1. See Lai *et al.*, 2017, for the relevant studies.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the dedicated volume of *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 369: 20130169 (2014) on the theme “Mirror neurons: fundamental discoveries, theoretical perspectives and clinical implications.”

it a level of intuition, but this does not necessarily prevent the individual from comprehending the state of others and seeking to be present with them in it; rather, they may reach a position of empathy by a different pathway. The point is a semantic and a philosophical one that will have real theological significance: unless we distinguish between different categories of empathy (e.g., “intuitive empathy” and “considered empathy”), we run the risk of reducing the concept to one particular neurophysiological phenomenon. If, instead, we allow that the word labels an emergent phenomenon, one that arises superveniently from a combination of factors, then we can also allow that it may emerge from different combinations in different individuals. While the term “empathy” may be used problematically, however, the research has highlighted the different “wiring” of those with ASD, and its implications for how non-verbal cues are processed, whether this can be done intuitively or by learning. As the sensory dimensions of autism become more prominent in research and discussion, we may expect these to take on greater significance in explanatory accounts.

This, of course, is a far from complete discussion of ASD, but it provides some necessary reference points for our discussion of the New Testament material, to which we turn next. In relation to this, it helps to frame the problematic character of the experiences of the autistic within the Christian community: those with ASD will think differently to other Christians, they will respond differently to stimuli and they may exhibit social behaviours that are considered difficult or even unacceptable, sometimes justifying these to themselves on the basis of their identification with an ASD community. This means that they will constitute to the Christian community a complex of problems, needs and resources to which our reflections on the New Testament must speak.

## 2. The New Testament and Autism Spectrum Disorders

### *2.1 Frameworks for Ascribing Value*

It is important that we begin with an issue that has significant implications for the Christian evaluation of ASD, but does not bear on that issue alone. At the heart of New Testament moral teaching is a framework for ascribing value that bears on all conditions that are “outside the norm,” that calls into question all of the standards by which we circumscribe normality. This is something that is seen and widely recognized in the life of Jesus and the community that he ordered around himself: the accusation that he was “a friend of tax-collectors and sinners” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34) highlights the extent to which he disregarded conventions concerning appropriate fellowship and numerous stories highlight the value that he gave to those who were deemed of lesser value in society, notably infants (Mark 10:13–15 and parallels), women (Mark 14:3–9 and parallels; John 12:1–8) and the disabled (see the cluster of stories in Matthew 8&9; examined in depth by Novakovic, 2003). The latter include those who are of no utility, yet are owned and carried by their wider Jewish community, such as the paralyzed man of Matthew 9:2–8, as well as those whose conditions make them truly outsiders, such as the leper of Matt 8:1–4.

Pastoral theology and theological ethics have to be careful how they handle the gospel material, however, if they are to avoid a simple exemplarism that may, itself, be subject to critique. For one thing, it may be over-simplistic to suggest that Jesus

was a model of inclusivity (Bockmuehl, 2011). For another, we need to be careful not to limit our values to those demonstrated *by* Jesus at the expense of other New Testament passages that speak of values as manifested by the community *in* him. This is to recognise that the moral vision of the New Testament is not simply one of following Jesus, but of living in him, of sharing in his eschatological life and identity through the activity of the Holy Spirit. While his particularity determines the moral identity of those who live in him, their own particularity is not lost, and nor is the distinctiveness of the moral questions that they face. The deliberations of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 highlight this point effectively: faced with a fresh set of particularities not encountered in the ministry of Jesus (the reality of Gentiles who have clearly experienced the outpouring of the Spirit), the community is forced to engage in serious reflection on the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scriptures, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to decide which of the commandments might bear upon Gentile Christians. They do not simply ask, “What would Jesus do?” because the particularities of his story do not contain the realities with which they are faced.

When this is recognized, what becomes all the more striking is that across the New Testament a pneumatic participation in Christ is represented as generating a new set of values that call our old ones, and those celebrated by society in general, into question.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view (lit: according to the flesh, *κατὰ σάρκα*); even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor 5:16–17)

While we could trace this emphasis on newness through the New Testament, and examine the ways in which it is linked to a revision of values, there is some value in beginning our reflection on the issues by focusing on the writings of Paul, and particularly the Corinthian correspondence. The emphasis on the disruption and reorientation of values is most explicit in the Pauline corpus, especially in the Corinthian correspondence, where the values of the gospel are most extensively and thoroughly set over and against those of the Corinthian constitution. The point has recently been argued by Bradley Bitner (Bitner, 2015), who has identified the distinctive character of Corinth as a newly re-established city with a Roman constitution that enshrined social and civic values. Bitner argues that Paul sets the “constitution” of the gospel in dialogue with this, compelling Corinthian Christians to reconsider their identities in relation to both constitutions. This is an important parallel strategy to what we see in Galatians, where Paul essentially does the same in relation to the constitutional significance of the Law. It would be crude to suggest that Paul simply rejects those constitutions, but he does not allow them to govern identity in the way that they did previously: now they must be subordinated, aggressively if need be, to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The material found in the Corinthian correspondence will serve as the principle anchor for what will follow in this article, then, although I will draw in other parts of the New Testament to our discussion.

The Corinthian correspondence deals explicitly and extensively with values of honour and shame, challenging the ascription of worth based on success or the commodities of either wealth or wisdom.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards (κατὰ σάρκα), not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not (τὰ μὴ ὄντα), to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor 1:26–30).

The point is rather important for our discussion of ASD. The context of this statement is one in which factions have formed around particular teachers (whether or not they invited this): honour is ascribed to these figures, perhaps intuitively, on the basis of their impressive qualities. These qualities have effectively become commoditized: they are possessed in relative quantities, which are the basis for the ascription of status. Much classical literature recognizes that such qualities are not simply intellectual or cognitive, but involve other elements of presence and delivery. Impressive rhetoricians knew how to use language and voice in compelling ways and knew that physical appearance was an important part of their communicative act (Holland, 2016: 120). Their communication involved both verbal and non-verbal elements. The perception that such individuals were impressive, and the correlated ascription of worth, would be an intuitive one for most, in the sense that we have noted to be problematic in many cases of ASD: it would proceed from an overall impression and not merely from an evaluation of the verbal substance of their message. When the Corinthian Christians began to form factions around particular celebrated teachers (1 Cor 1:12), the likelihood is that they were simply continuing to



practice the intuitive ascription of worth with which they were familiar. They judged κατὰ σάρκα, “according to the flesh,” and had to be reminded of the incongruence of God’s standards with human ones. In particular, the assertion that God’s electing activity is attached to “the things that are not” (τὰ μὴ ὄντα) and uses these to nullify “the things that are” (τὰ ὄντα) is a radical and fundamental rejection of natural evaluative principles at their most basic or essential level. For what it does is to reject an account of worth based on perceived commodity or capital: by definition, “the things that are not” are without capital or commodity of any sort and yet these are the things that are celebrated by God.

I focus on this because it bears in a range of ways on ASD and other deviations from “normality.” Those with ASD are often less likely to be admired in the way of these charismatic figures (using charismatic in the popular sense of the word), lacking as they do the kinds of social capacities that draw the admiration of others, and are also less likely to be drawn to such intuitive ascriptions of worth. They may be brilliant, but not necessarily impressive: others in the church may not find them particularly “likeable” or perceive them to be charismatic, even if their mastery of subjects is recognized. In more severe cases, their behaviour may be seen as unacceptable to the community and they will be considered a problem rather than a gift. Those with ASD may also be blind to the qualities that have attracted others to their chosen celebrities, and this may be baffling to those who judge by the flesh. At the same time, it is possible that some with ASD have learned to *perform* such skills in their own impressive ways, through sheer diligence of learning and adaptation.

That Paul rejects the Corinthian “normality,” then, proves to be quite relevant to the evaluation of ASD; indeed, the “abnormality” of autistic insensitivity to social evaluative standards may align rather more closely with the gospel’s rejection of

human standards. We cannot, of course, make sweeping statements that pass over the details of each particular situation, but we can highlight that Paul’s account of the gospel requires us to be suspicious of what comes naturally to most. This may also throw a surprising challenge towards those with ASD who have learned to perform the relevant skills, to engage in “camouflaging” (see Lai, *et al.*, 2016); they might reflect on whether this is necessarily a good thing. I will add an important qualification to this at the end of this section.

This emphasis on the incongruence of God’s standards with ours runs through 1 Corinthians, connected not just to the ascription of worth to those with the commodities of wealth or wisdom, but also to the social practices that accompany it, the various ways that honour is worked out within the community. Here, the descriptions of the Eucharist and of the body of Christ, in 1 Corinthians 11 and 12 respectively, are particularly significant. It is clear that Paul considers the practices of the Christian community in Corinth to be at odds with the gospel: honour is ascribed to individuals based on societal values of wisdom and success, and the dynamics—and probably seating arrangements—of the Lord’s Supper reflect this: those of high honour are seated separately<sup>11</sup> and eat before others, humiliating “those who have not” (τοὺς μὴ ἔχοντας in 1 Cor 11:22, paralleling τὰ μὴ ὄντα in 1 Cor 1:28). Again, such practices are based on an evaluation of capital and Paul considers this to be so fundamentally at odds with the gospel that the meal ceases to be the Lord’s Supper at all (1 Cor 11:20). His response is inseparable from the subsequent description of unity and diversity in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12), for to eat the Supper properly requires

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<sup>11</sup> See Macaskill, 2013: 208–9.

that the body of the Lord is discerned (1 Cor 11:29), which contextually must involve some recognition of the corporate status of others in the church.

The description of the body of Christ in chapter 12, which I will discuss in greater detail below, is important to our discussion for two reasons. First, it affirms the diversity of constituent members of the body and does so under the controlling motif of “gift.” The condition of each part of the body is “given” by the Triune God:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:4–7)

This, of course, is often read simply in terms of “spiritual gifts,” but those things that might easily be categorised as such are found alongside other properties that are less obviously discrete empowerments to specific tasks, such as “faith” (1 Cor 12:9). Further, the description moves from these gifts to speaking in more general terms about diversity within the body:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:12–13)

The emphasis on a “given” or “gifted” corporate reality with which the chapter begins, then, moves seamlessly into a description of a unity of ethnically and socially

diverse individuals. Their unity, importantly, is derived not from any common intrinsic properties, but rather from a common extrinsic one: the alien gift of the Holy Spirit. Importantly, the experience of this gift is also in a vital sense passive: “we were all baptized into one body” and “were all made to drink of one Spirit.”<sup>12</sup> The membership of the body, with all its diversity, owes its presence to the work of God: each member is given *to* the body by God and is gifted *within* the body by God. Each individual, with their capacities and their burdens, their strengths and their deficits, is “owned” by the community within an economy of gift, something that cuts across the economy of capital or commodity that we have seen to be at work.<sup>13</sup>

Again, the point radically changes the way in which disorders of any kind are evaluated. Rather than, in the first instance, being considered problems to be addressed or deficits to be countered, they are considered to be *givens*, accepted with

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<sup>12</sup> This emphasis on passivity is a matter of being the object of the verbs of divine action; passivity is not the same as inertness. The failure to make this distinction has been a problem in much of the New Testament scholarship of the modern period, with the rejection of “Lutheranism” often based on an assumption that Luther’s account involved a concept of passivity that was identical to inertness. Recent biblical scholarship affirming Luther has highlighted ways in which the concept of gift furnishes appropriate modes of thinking about reciprocity, between God and his people, and within the body of the church itself. Most importantly, see Barclay, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> My language here is heavily shaped by interaction with the work of Griffiths, 2009. This work concerns the virtuous shaping of intellectual life in general, but his application of the category of gift is suggestive and helpful for how we evaluate the cognitive identities of ourselves and others.

joy and thanksgiving, with *eucharist*. Then, and only then, can the burdens that they bring be considered and addressed, as burdens owned and borne by the community, received alongside the enrichment that they bring. Paul's reflections on the Lord's Supper and on the body of Christ offer particular resources by which we can reflect on the place of those with disorders of any kind, including ASD, within the Christian community.

Two further comments must now be made on this altered framework of evaluation. The first is the simple observation that Paul's words are written to a church that does not embody the values of the gospel and has to be challenged and rebuked. In fact, much of the writing of the New Testament is directed towards communities who live at odds with the will of God, who are rebuked by Scripture. The implication of this should be obvious: as Christian communities, we need to be prepared identify ourselves with those here accused, and not to assume that we (or the congregations to which we belong) are, in fact, aligned with the values of the gospel. We should not be deluded that churches are automatically safe places for those with ASD or other disorders and should not represent Christianity, as a religion, and the communities that it comprises as if it were the answer to a problem. They may, in fact, be rife with worldly values that marginalise or denigrate those who are not perceived to have the right capital or commodity, just as was true in Corinth. In reality, churches may behave in hellish ways towards the autistic.

It is important that Paul's response to such worldly behaviour is not one of naked moral injunction, but rather involves an assertion of what the church actually *is* in its union with Christ and moves from this revealed ontology of the body of Christ to an account of how the members of that body should view each other. The starting point for Paul's challenge to the imperfections of the church is the perfected reality of

God's work in Christ; but those imperfections are exposed nonetheless, and we must be prepared to acknowledge ourselves to be the objects of critique.

The second comment involves a necessary recognition that if those with ASD are identified as part of the church, then they too must be prepared to identify themselves as objects of moral criticism. The point must obviously be handled with care, and with awareness of the varying capacities for change associated with individuals at different points on the spectrum: it will devolve rather differently upon someone with severe classical autism to someone with Asperger's Syndrome. But there is a growing recognition of the capacity of individuals on the spectrum to develop in their social interactions. In secular literature, this may be rendered simply in terms of their greater capacity to function happily and beneficially within society. In Christian terms, we might instead emphasise their capacity to attain new ways of fostering and enjoying the love and fellowship of the community, even if this is quite different for them than for neurotypicals. Articulated in the context of the frameworks we have just outlined, this is not a matter of those who are autistic conforming to a pattern of social expectation, but rather of the body growing up together into "him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph 4:15–16). As noted earlier, it is important that those with ASD learn to distinguish good adaptation from bad: learning to be worldly is very different from learning to be godly. Similarly, however much they may identify themselves with an "Aspie" community, defined in distinction from neurotypicals, they cannot allow themselves *not* to be identified with the body of Christ.

This leads to one final comment on this framework of evaluation. If Paul's writings are directed towards a community that is castigated for its moral practices, but on the basis of its failure to manifest what it truly is in Christ, then inclusion within the body is not defined on the basis of moral perfection, but on the basis of the

Christ event. This, perhaps, is a rather obvious point to make, but in the wider New Testament it is connected both to an account of moral transformation and to the forgiveness, patience and love that must accompany this. Jesus' injunction that we are to forgive a brother "not seven times but seventy times seven" (Mat 18:21–22) has a particular relevance when brought to bear on an issue that may involve significant behavioural issues on both sides. Those with ASD may, at times, be genuinely offensive to others, just as the worldly values or even just the thoughtlessness of others will sometimes cause distress to the autistic.

## 2.2 A Christological Anthropology

The framework for evaluation that the New Testament provides does not draw only on the example of divine election, as we have seen to be the case in 1 Corinthians. It also addresses at a more basic level the concept of anthropology itself, and it is important to trace the shape of this. The core point I would make is that the expression "the image of God" (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ) is generally used in the New Testament very specifically of Jesus (Col 1:15; Col 3:10; 2 Cor 4:4; cf. Hebrews 1:3). Only once is it used in non-qualified sense of human beings (1 Cor 11:7), and this must be treated as exceptional. The point may seem surprising to some readers, familiar with the emphasis on human beings as image-bearers that is derived from Genesis 1:26–7. But there, the relationship between humans and the image of God is qualified by prepositions: the Hebrew *beth* and *kaph*, and the Greek *kata*, which does double duty for both of these. Man is made "in", "after" or "according to" the image, depending on how we want to translate these prepositions; he is not the image itself.

Jewish tradition, nervous about anything that would compromise the divine uniqueness, played with such prepositions and the nouns to which they were connected: Adam *ha Rishon*, the first Adam, was made “in the image of the likeness of God” (b.Ket 8a; see Bockmuehl, 1997), thus maintaining as much ontological distance between God and humanity as language will allow, without effacing the reality of the analogy.

That Christ is described as the image itself, then, has real significance. That significance has been recognised by theologians through the centuries and, in current theological scholarship, Kathryn Tanner has been particularly sensitive to its implications for our evaluation of human beings. Her language of “strong” and “weak” imaging takes seriously that Jesus is the definitive and constitutive image of God: all other “imaging” derives its significance by analogy with his (Tanner, 2001; Tanner, 2010). Because it is analogical, no other imaging will share in his perfection and it does not need to do so for the correspondence to be real. The implications for disabilities and disorders are massive, for now the *only* standard of normality that matters is his.

This takes us away from a well-intended, but problematic, account of human being that seeks to define the image of God principally in Adamic, rather than Christological, terms. Such an approach will always tend towards understanding disability or disorder as a departure from the normality of the created order and, indeed, some of the discussion of autism has done precisely this. To be autistic is considered to involve lacking something that is proper to the image of God, an approach that involves some notion of the image being damaged by the fall and requiring repair. This inevitably reinforces the impression that those who are autistic are lesser, in some sense, paralleling the tendencies of society to deem those with



ASD as sub-optimally human.<sup>14</sup> The proper emphasis on relationality as a necessary component of the concept of personhood is particularly vulnerable to distortion through such approaches, with the relational difficulties that are involved in autism leading to the view that those with ASD are incomplete. Rather than the proper rejection of the Cartesian *cogito*, the idea of the buffered or self-subsistent person, personhood can be defined in terms of capacities and their compromise.

An affirmation that the truly paradigmatic image of God is Christ leads us somewhere else. Because it affirms that our image-bearing is by limited correspondence or analogy, and does so in acknowledgement that each of our particularities departs from his human particularity in various ways, it allows us to speak of all humans as existing in a relationship of real analogy to Jesus, the image of God. No-one shares entirely in his particularity, but all enjoy analogy with it.

It is important, too, that this anthropology has an eschatological dimension. The commonly affirmed connection between *Urzeit* and *Endzeit* takes on a distinctive shape, for Christ is at once the “paradigmatic eschatological *anthrôpos*” (Martyn, 1997: 280) and the paradigmatic protological one: he is the one after whom humanity is patterned and the one in whom humanity is restored. Crucially, that eschatological

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<sup>14</sup> Cox, 2017, 39–69, deals more sensitively with the *imago dei* question in relation to autism and is alert to the need to approach anthropology in christological terms, but there remains a sense in her discussion that autism is a distinctive consequence of the Fall and that the particular imaging of God that the autistic embody needs to be redeemed. I remain somewhat uncomfortable with this way of using the concept of the image, for all that in Cox’s work, it is carefully embedded in christology and eschatology.

restoration is further defined by the concept of *parousia*, of the return of Jesus. As Bauckham argues (Bauckham, 2001), a right appreciation of the New Testament concept of the *parousia* ensures that any notion of progress is properly limited, kept from the kind of ultimacy that has been attached to it in the modern myth of progress. This, too, is vitally relevant to the relationship between ethics and eschatology, for it resists the idea that the perfection of humanity can be accomplished by progress, that humanity is a thing that can be engineered to a state of completeness, whether by manipulation of genetic material or by artificial selection. This, of course, is an issue that bears on current debates around antenatal screening for disorders such as Down's Syndrome, but it is one that may also come to be significant around ASD, as further diagnostic elements bearing on particular conditions develop.<sup>15</sup>

The point developed here is not one of theological nicety: it is more fundamentally a point about what is considered to qualify as human and how this is related to the image of God. A Christian anthropology must obviously do serious justice to the relevant material in the Old Testament, but it must also reflect on how the New Testament sets this in fresh perspective and must be sensitive to the historical dynamics of interpretation that have taken the creation account of Genesis, and the narratives that follow it, and made this serve the ends of subordination and terror.

### *2.3 Belonging to the Body of Christ*

To this point, our reflections on the New Testament have been directed towards the evaluation of those with ASD and their place in Christian communities. In this third

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<sup>15</sup> Silberman (2015) describes the fate of those with cognitive disorders, including ASD, during the Nazi era. His account is restrained and harrowing.

sub-section, I want to explore how those same resources that help “normal” Christians to evaluate those with ASD might also serve as the basis for the latter recognizing their own place within the community. This particular observation proceeds from what we noted to be true of the Corinthian church: its ascription of insider/outsider status and its ordering of the value of insiders was one that conformed to normal societal practice, rather than holding that practice to account based on the gospel. As an extension of this, we have to ask whether contemporary Christian communities rest their own practices of inclusion on what is assumed to be normal, rather than on the gospel. In particular, there is a real danger that churches have come to equate inclusion itself with a specific natural way of experiencing this: social interaction and its empathetic (mirrored) dimensions. The *perceived* sense of the church’s oneness, its unity, may rest on social interactions and empathetic cues that are non-verbal and non-linguistic. This may be associated with particular forms of human contact, with a use of language that is dissociated from literal meanings, and with emotional or affective practices. Those who find such practices to be incomprehensible, impenetrable or even upsetting may find themselves feeling distinctively *excluded* by such practices, feeling abnormal; they may, indeed, be made to feel sub-Christian or even sub-human.

It is important, then, that the New Testament represents *belonging*<sup>16</sup> by using a set of quite concrete images, including the body, the temple, the vine, the kingdom and

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<sup>16</sup> While I used the term “inclusion” earlier in this section, referring to practices of social construction within Christian communities, I shift here to the term “belonging,” which has begun to be used with a somewhat contrastive sense in pastoral theology. Where “the rhetoric of ‘inclusion’ still suggests that the (ecclesial and institutional)

the assembly. The first two of these are particularly prominent in Paul's writings and especially in the Corinthian correspondence. We have seen already how the imagery of the body is used by Paul in relation to diversity and in resistance to commoditised accounts of worth (1 Cor 12). Paul also uses temple imagery in 1 Corinthians (6:19; 8:10), but not necessarily with strongly corporate overtones. In 2 Corinthians, however, he does use the imagery with a corporate sense:

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,  
    "I will live in them and walk among them,  
        and I will be their God,  
        and they shall be my people." (2 Cor 6:16).

More explicit corporate uses of this temple imagery is found in Ephesians 2:19–22 and 1 Peter 2:4–8 and I have argued elsewhere that this is a theme that can be traced back through the New Testament (including, importantly, Acts 15) to dominical traditions and the reading strategies of Jesus himself.<sup>17</sup> As several of the texts in the New Testament highlight, the various corporate images are intertwined and can be juxtaposed and sometimes hybridized: growth and construction imagery merge (Eph

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retains some measure of authority in widening the margins, the rhetoric of 'belonging' counteracts such hierarchical and authoritarian tendencies by relocating the power and agency to define the church—the body of Christ and the fellowship of the Spirit—to the people." Yong, 2016, 262; Cf. Swinton, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> See Macaskill, 2013: 147–171.

4:15–16) and the architectural language of “house” is paralleled with the vocational language of “priesthood” (1 Pet 2:5).

Importantly, the images of body and temple represent inclusion in the community as a function of our union with Christ: the grounds for unity are not theological agreement or shared values and practices, but rather a shared union with him. In fact, Paul’s various assertions of the unity of the body *in the face of* conflicting beliefs and practices highlight this further. The point has to be emphasized, for there is a tendency in certain circles to identify unity as a function of shared theology, or to consider a certain position to be the *sine qua non* of membership; in others, the experience of certain practices or phenomena functions in the same way. Effectively, this equates the unity of the Christian community with the common mind-state of those within it: a shared set of beliefs embedded in our neurons or a shared experience that has fired through them. The image of the body and the temple, however, is of a unity that is derived from outside, through the common shared relationship to Jesus, regardless of the mind-state associated with the beliefs of each participant: it is the truth of what we are, but only because what we are is “in him.”

The significance of this should be obvious. For those with ASD, the neurophysiological capacity to recognize and respond intuitively to non-verbal means of generating group solidarity is limited; if such means are the predominant way by which solidarity is accomplished in practice, then this will be problematic for them. By contrast, the New Testament fosters solidarity by inviting readers to consider a set of images that are quite concrete in character. The accessibility of such images to those with ASD is widely recognized, as attested by Temple Grandin’s writings on

the topic.<sup>18</sup> The place that Lego has come to occupy in supported learning and therapy approaches for children with ASD (LeGoff, 2004; LeGoff and Sherman, 2006; Owens, et al., 2008) also reflects the potential that concrete and re-workable building blocks can play in the development of social skills and imaginative comprehension. In fact, that particular toy may be a very useful aid in reading some of the key texts and accessing their imagery: its capacity to form both multipartite architecture and multipartite creature, and to exist in both states, might be a particularly helpful feature in representing unity and diversity.

Crucially, though, inclusion in the body does not rest on the apprehension of these truths, on attaining a particular mind-state: apprehending these truths through reflection on the concrete images by which they are rendered is instead an *enjoyment* of those truths.

If this is helpful in fostering a genuine inclusivity for those with ASD, it also prompts those without the condition to re-evaluate their frameworks and practices for generating solidarity. It invites them to reflect on whether they have substituted something else in place of sustained attention to these biblical images and whether that thing has, in fact, become quite excluding for those who do not fit the presumed paradigm. Have we substituted theological agreement, shared experience or a particular *habitus* of “being Christian” that becomes its own kind of tyrannical

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<sup>18</sup> The point requires to be nuanced slightly. Grandin (2009) complicates her original belief that those with ASD all think in terms of concrete visual pictures (mental photographs), offering three categories: i. Photo-realistic visual thinkers; ii. Pattern thinking—music and math mind; and iii. Word-fact thinkers.

normality, as sweet and loving as it may claim to be? The abnormality of autism may again expose the dangerous natural normality of the church.

As well as these concrete images of body and building, the New Testament also represents inclusion with the dramatic performance that is involved in the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper. I have highlighted the significance of these already in relation to unity and diversity and the rejection of a commodity-based mode of evaluation. All that needs to be said here is that these dramatic practices have an important role to play in fostering and communicating inclusion and this role is connected to their ritualised, repeated form, to the fact that they are performed in the same way with some regularity. The two are not identical in these regards, of course: the Lord's Supper is inhabited and enacted regularly, while regular participation in baptism is a matter of witness, rather than personal experience. Properly understood, however, both sacraments communicate something of the nature of the body of Christ and membership in it.

#### *2.4 Virtue, Character and Ethics*

The fourth point is rather more speculative than those I have made so far and concerns the ways that we think about moral life and personal growth. Recent decades have seen a renewal of interest in Protestant circles in virtue- or character-centred accounts of Christian moral identity. The trigger factors have been discussed elsewhere, but the influence of Hauerwas on theological ethics is an obvious one to note. For Protestant biblical scholarship, the turn to virtue has meant a recovered awareness of the moral shape of the agent as key to his or her performance of good. This awareness had never been lost to Roman Catholic moral theology, of course, but its recovery within

Protestantism has involved a complex of reflections on the alien character of Christian righteousness (as conceived within Protestantism), as well as on the relationship of Protestant theology to modernity. These two points are more closely related than may at first be obvious. Ethics for much the modern period have been governed by the same concerns with justification as epistemology: moral good, like epistemic goods, must be justified by some “warrant.” In ethics, this has involved recourse to an absolute account of good, associated with the concept of divine Law. Accounts of salvation within Protestantism have traditionally been dominated by such an account of good, and its opposite, evil: to be evil is to be a Lawbreaker, and Jesus saves such individuals by taking the punishment that they deserve and fulfilling the Law on their behalf, with his “righteousness” then credited to them. As the concept of virtue has been recovered in Protestant circles, the recognition that Law or Torah are not the exclusive means within Scripture by which the concept of “goodness” or even of moral normativity has been articulated has been important, but so has the recognition that to speak of an “alien righteousness” is not merely to speak of imputation, but of transformation by a power that is external to our own will, towards ends that are external to our own desires.

For our purposes, what is potentially significant about this is the recognition that moral transformation is not just about adherence to a set of external commandments, but about the learning and training of habits, dispositions and appetite. Whatever differences remain between Protestant and Roman Catholic account of virtue, neither sees virtue as something fixed at birth, but rather as properties of the person that are acquired through formation and learning. Character is built; it is not innate. That such character has recognisable form is important, setting it apart from an account of ethics



that is merely intuitive or instinctive: our intuitions are naturally dangerous, and can only be trusted if they have been properly shaped and trained.

For those with ASD, this emphasis on learning and training has a significance that is perhaps best recognised if we use a synonym for these processes: “adaptation”. Obviously, levels of adaptation vary between individuals, but those who are described as high-functioning are also typically described as “well-adapted”; they have learned socially appropriate behaviour, as something that begins as *alien*, and have adopted and eventually inhabited it. In fact, recent research has demonstrated greater potential for adaptation based on educational intervention than was previously believed possible. Individuals with ASD can learn appropriate behaviour and can learn to read appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in ways that allow them to manage or move beyond their neurophysiological limits. In fact, there may be distinctive freedoms and potential for acquisition associated with the lack of a potentially limiting intuitive framework; there may be less to be “unlearned.” Framing Christian moral life in terms of learning behaviour, training instincts, or adapting appetites—that is, in terms of virtue—may be helpful for those on the spectrum, as an alternative to a problematic account of mere adherence to law, or an equally problematic account of intuitive response. Here, again, those with ASD may constitute an important and helpful challenge to church cultures that have given pre-eminence to these very things in their accounts of morality, exposing the limits of such ways of thinking.

Interest in such themes of character or virtue has been growing in biblical scholarship, as it has responded to the shifts in moral theology and theological ethics.<sup>19</sup> On balance, the research has predominantly been in the area of Old

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example Briggs (2010) and the various articles in Brown ed. (2003).

Testament studies and this may itself be an important factor to consider: Christian accounts of moral theology must either take such research seriously, recognising the place of the Old Testament in the canon of Scripture, or must offer defensible accounts of why this material is to be excluded. The reality, of course, is probably that much Christian theology is functionally Marcionite, neglecting the Old Testament material because it cannot neatly be comprehended within Protestant theologies. Some New Testament scholarship might, with some justification, be labelled similarly: seeking to offer a properly Christocentric account of Christian moral life, rightly centred on grace, it has been somewhat closed to ideas of formation and personal discipline, a position reinforced with reference to the radical newness of eschatological life in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Reflecting on the place that virtue- or character-centred accounts of Christian ethics might have in the experience of those with ASD highlights one of the points where the fine detail of such accounts can have serious pastoral significance. I would suggest that those scholars who see their work ultimately as being of service to the church should give thought to this and allow it, in turn, to speak into their exegetical activity. Moving forward, I would also suggest that a priority for further research is a tracing of the lines of virtue and character from the Old Testament into the New: there may be a fundamental rupture within the line of covenant and law that is associated with the incarnational narrative, but continuity between the testaments on what good agency looks like may be more readily identifiable.

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<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most striking example of this is Campbell (2009).

## *2.5 ASD, Insight and Leadership*

The systematising abilities that typically come with ASD can make individuals great thinkers, with distinctive potential to understand and develop areas of research and study that are of enormous benefit to the church, particularly those of the disciplines of theology. Yet, as we have noted, this can come with a certain blindness to social situations and non-verbal communication, what is often labelled as a lack of empathy or as insensitivity.

This raises an important set of questions about the roles that autistic individuals perform within the leadership of the church, whether or not these are in formalized offices. It is likely that many pastors or teachers are, in fact, somewhere on the autism spectrum and that the shapes of their ministries may have reflected this, positively and negatively. It is also likely that churches will have to give thought to whether autistic individuals within their midst might play leadership roles of some kind or another in future. Does the New Testament have anything to say to such matters?

It is not immediately obvious that it does, but this is itself, perhaps, an interesting point. There is certainly nothing that can be generalised, since each individual will present with her or his own set of characteristics that must be weighed distinctly, something that is true of all candidates for leadership. What we have seen already about the difference between God's wisdom and human wisdom is of clear relevance: our perception of leadership qualities is often based on natural properties of commodity or capital (perceived "wisdom") that are effectively negated by Paul at the beginning of 1 Corinthians. Reflecting on the place that those with ASD might have in leadership invites us to reflect on whether we are drawn to those who possess a certain set of natural qualities or personality traits and whether our values are, in fact,

sub-consciously biased towards normality. The possibility that we overlook the capacity that those with ASD may have for leadership because they may lack such qualities is one that we must consider.

Again here it is important to note the language of “gift” (and its cognates) that we saw to be important in relation to the discussion of the body in 1 Corinthians 12. The key listing of leadership roles in Ephesians 4:11 links these to the gifts given by Jesus through his ascension, with this presented using the creative reworking of Psalm 68:

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.  
Therefore it is said,

“When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;  
he gave gifts to his people.”

(When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ... (Eph 4:7–12).

These roles, and the qualities that underpin them, can never be considered in merely natural terms, then. Even if the properties of an individual are a function of their distinctive neurophysiology, their appointment to a role of leadership, as with their

membership of the church, is a matter of providence and the work of the Spirit. This emerges also in the description of the body in Romans 12:

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Rom 12:6–8).

That such gifts are given according to divine wisdom is crucial to their intended end:

To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Eph 4:12–16).

In aligning the gifts with the ends ordained by God's true wisdom, this also points to the true criteria by which the properties are to be evaluated: do they serve such an end?

We may suggest that this lies behind some of the particular criteria for evaluating leadership candidates outlined in the Pastoral Epistles, in 1 Tim 3:1–13, for example.

Without discussing these in depth, or even quoting them at length, they point to a set of positive features of manifest character, or even to a virtuous reputation, rather than to any set of natural qualities.

At the same time, the challenges associated with ASD must also be recognised, both by the church and by autistic individuals themselves. That there will be miscommunication is inevitable; that there will be social difficulties is inevitable; that the person with ASD will obsess over an issue and that this obsession may be both beneficial and problematic is inevitable. These challenges must be recognised and responsibility assumed by the community and the individual, without attempts to shift that responsibility to others or to refuse to acknowledge it oneself. But the challenges are governed by the same principles that govern all Christian interactions, by the commands to bear with each other in love (Eph 4:2). The way that problems present will be different for those with ASD than they will be for other Christian leaders, and they may perhaps be less easily accepted by the community, but there is no obvious reason that such individuals should be excluded from leadership. Rather, the community and its individual members must share collective and personal responsibility

## *2.6 Singleness*

I close with another somewhat speculative suggestion, this time concerning the representation of singleness in the New Testament, particularly in 1 Corinthians 7. The point that I make from this is not the one that might be expected, about the experience of marriage or singleness for those who are autistic. Neither does it

involve the connection that some might want to make between singleness and the social difficulties of those who are autistic. Such readings would, I think, be quite problematic. Rather, the point is simply that Paul's assertion of the place of singleness, or non-marriage, within the Christian community represents an important point of intersection of some of the themes already explored. By affirming—and even encouraging—non-marriage, Paul rejects the *norm*-ality of a particular societal custom. The point requires care: Paul does not reject the significance of marriage (7:36, “it is no sin”), and neither does he encourage sexual freedom. Rather, he refuses to allow marriage to be a norm by which the lives of all Christians are defined, as it broadly was within Corinthian society. He does so, however, with a clear sense of vocation and purpose: the state of non-marriage gives freedom to serve Christ and his body (1 Cor 7:35) without distraction (1 Cor 7:32–34) during the urgency and transience of the present eschatological time (1 Cor 7:29–31). This must be done with proper virtue and chastity: if the sexual needs of an individual need to be met, they must be so within the marital arrangement (1 Cor 7:9).

For all its place within the creational order, however, that arrangement no longer has a normative significance. The creational order itself has been re-evaluated and its significance relocated in relation to the Christ event, just as has the Law: it is striking that Paul sets this issue in apposition to that of circumcision (1 Cor 7:17–20). Again, it would be too simplistic to suggest that creational order or design are no longer recognized or affirmed: Paul's very acknowledgement of the sexual passions (1 Cor 7:9), including in relation to the setting aside of time both for these and for prayer (1 Cor 7:5), affirms the creaturely body and its needs. But the creational order is now viewed through the incarnational reality, its significance relativized by the latter. It is, perhaps, an important extension of our preceding discussion of theological

anthropology: anthropologies that treat the *imago dei* as a thing isolable from the incarnation will popularly result in an account of human being that sees marriage as completion. Accounts of Christian community that proceed from this will often see that community as built from family units involving marriage. Paul's account of the body never does so, however: it always negotiates diversity and unity in terms of the individuals within that body. His description of marriage and non-marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 reflects this: the non-married are affirmed not as free-floating singles, but as members of the body of Christ, with a particular set of advantages and freedoms to serve that body that are not enjoyed by those who are married. Taken as a whole within the context of the letter, it represents a radical and rich re-appraisal of how persons are conceived within the community of the church.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusions

The rise in the diagnosed incidence of autism spectrum disorders is one that the church must accept as a “given.” Those on the spectrum exhibit a range of behaviours that are associated with a neurophysiology that is different to the rest of the population. In some cases, the neurophysiological issues will be of such a severe sort that only limited adaptation will be possible and the associated behaviours will continue to be highly challenging for those around them, both family and community. In other cases, however, varying grades of adaptation may be seen and supported, with this typically understood in terms of an approximation to normality.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf Mark 3:31–35.



Because the condition is not identified *as such* in the ancient world, Christians who wish to think biblically about autism have to be prepared to reflect on more broadly relevant principles and to think creatively in relation to the exegesis of specific passages, leaving behind any naïveté about the place of the exegetical task in the development of Christian ethics. I have focused in this article on some of the ways in which the New Testament, in particular, might contribute to biblical reflection on ASD.

First, it demands that we use the language and conceptuality of “normality” with great care, recognising that our norms may be inherited from our society and that these may be compromised by sin, particularly by a tendency to assign value on the basis of perceived commodity, capital or utility. God’s evaluation, linked to his activity of election, negates such values and those in his church are expected to participate in that negation of such values. The perceived abnormalities of those with ASD may, in fact, represent challenges to our own society’s distorted value system. At the same time, the repeated targeting of the church within the New Testament as a body that is unwittingly assimilated to that system reminds us that churches will not be intrinsically safe spaces, but rather communities with both a capacity and an obligation to grow into such realities.

Second, the New Testament provides a radically different account of human being or anthropology, one that is itself derived from the incarnational narrative. This alternative account, properly conceived, is resistant to any attempt to define the image of God in terms of the possession of attributes (any lack of which constitutes abnormality). By its careful use of preposition to maintain, instead, the place of analogy or correspondence in human image-bearing, and by its demarcation of Christ alone as *the* image of God, the account rejects anthropologies that categorise those

who lack attributes or capacities as, in any sense, sub-human. The eschatological boundaries of this account are also important: any belief that human being can be perfected within the progress of history, is held to account by the Christian belief in the *parousia*. While treated above as a separate point, the discussion of non-marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 drew these two points together: while still of value as a creational ordinance, marriage can no longer be considered a norm by which community is defined.

Third, the New Testament provides a set of concrete images for inclusion within Christian community: body, temple, kingdom, et cetera. The very concreteness of the images, as well as their mutability and capacity for hybridisation, means that these images can be helpful and accessible ways of communicating and fostering inclusion for those with ASD, who may find empathy-based or socially normal approaches to inclusivity to be problematic. Further, the church that is attentive to them may find that its own dynamics of community are rather more dependent on natural social practice than on genuine theological account.

Fourth, precisely because the socially constructive functioning of those with autism involves learning and adaptation, the condition intersects with the concept of virtue, as a way of conceiving Christian moral identity. Virtue and character have been fairly peripheral categories in New Testament scholarship, though interest has begun to be shown in them again in recent years. Their potential relevance to ASD should be an incentive to engage with them more closely and extensively in future and, particularly, to pay attention to the connection of New Testament representations of moral good to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

Fifth, the question of how those with ASD may be evaluated in relation to the leadership of the church must be recast by the New Testament material. Leadership

issues are often compromised by the same evaluative systems that we saw to be highlighted in our first point: those considered leaders are respected because of the commodities of wisdom and personality, judged by worldly standards. The question of whether those with such disorders can function in leadership is, in many ways, a test of whether the church has genuinely grappled with the value-change demanded by the gospel. Obviously, this is a matter that needs to be considered on an individual basis, without naïveté over the challenges that will be experienced in such roles by those with ASD or by those whom they lead. Properly considered, however, churches can value the unique insights and strengths of those with ASD and, in the process, can reflect upon their own residual biases.

This essay was always conceived as a set of preliminary reflections; the full task of reading the New Testament in relation to autism spectrum disorders remains. That task will involve a deepening of the necessarily skeletal exegesis on display here, as well as a more extensive set of reflections on how to move from exegesis to ethics or pastoral theology. It will also involve a developing set of conversations with scholars of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, both Jewish and Christian, about the range of ways in which the testaments discretely and collaboratively contribute to “biblical thinking” about this particular condition. Finally, of course, the task will involve the contributions of those with ASD themselves or of their families, if the work is to move from abstract reflection to serious pastoral theology.

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