

Autism and the Body of Christ: Understanding, Accommodating, and Accepting Autistic
Believers in the Church

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Abstract

Autism is a neurotype that causes a different set of strengths and weaknesses and thus should be embraced and accommodated within the church. Not only are autistic believers able to grasp Christian concepts, but they also have different perspectives and skills that can be instrumental in building up the church. Promoting a correct view of autism and accommodating neurodiversity within the church will allow autistic believers to follow God's command to be part of a body and build up the church. The church can employ several strategies to create an accessible environment for believers on the spectrum, including creating sensory-safe spaces and cultivating informed leadership. This thesis will educate the church on autism and equip leaders and church members to welcome autistic believers into their communities.

Autism and the Body of Christ: Understanding, Accommodating, and Accepting Autistic Believers in the Church

Autism is a developmental disability that profoundly affects individuals, their families, and their communities. The church has historically been a place where autistic believers have been excluded, marginalized, and even cast out due to their differences. Autistic individuals within the church require support from their brothers and sisters in Christ but are often faced with rejection when seeking support. This is especially true of the individuals who mask their autistic traits and deny their unique needs, as this leads to a harsh environment in which autistic individuals are not able to fully experience the church and Christian community. This thesis seeks to show how and why the church should accommodate autistic children and adults across the spectrum in order to make church more accessible for all autistic members of the community. Promoting a correct view of autism and accommodating neurodiversity within the church will allow autistic believers to follow God’s command to be part of a body and build up His people.

This thesis will keep with the preferences of the autistic community and use identity-first language (autistic person) rather than person-first language (person with autism).¹

Understanding Autism

The UK National Autistic Society defines autism as “a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world.”² Grant Macaskill identifies four clusters of characteristics that make up the autism phenotype. The first cluster of

¹ Grant Macaskill, “Autism and Biblical Studies: Establishing and Extending the Field beyond Preliminary Reflection,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 25, no. 4 (April 16, 2021): pp. 388-411, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2021.1911742>, 390.

² “What Is Autism?,” UK National Autistic Society, accessed January 30, 2024, <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism>, quoted in Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 11.

characteristics involves social and communication differences. Many autistic individuals perceive nonverbal means of communication in different ways. They may also struggle to recognize the meaning of different social cues or decline to participate in social customs they do not understand. Autistic people may also struggle to notice different emotional states in others.³ The second cluster of characteristics involves differences in the use of language. Autistic individuals may not recognize unsystematic ways of speaking, such as sarcasm. Many autistic individuals are nonverbal or nonspeaking.⁴ Both the first and second clusters involve a high degree of honesty, even when said honesty may not be welcome.⁵ A third cluster is systematic thinking. Autistic individuals are gifted at systematizing and creating order, and systematic thinking allows autistic individuals to find comfort and control in an unpredictable world. Systematic thinking manifests itself in the autistic preference for structure and routine, as well as autistic special interests. Systematic thinking may also manifest in a love for numbers.⁶ A fourth cluster of characteristics is a difference in sensory processing. The autistic brain does not filter out sensory information like neurotypical brains do. Sometimes, an autistic person can be overwhelmed by a particular sound or smell that trumps all other sensory input. Other times, an autistic individual can be overcome by a large amount of competing sensory input, which can lead to meltdowns and shutdowns.⁷

³ Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 18-19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

Autism is often referred to as a spectrum, but the spectrum operates differently than a linear spectrum that runs from low- to high-functioning. The autism spectrum is circular, similar to a color wheel, indicating the level at which an autistic person exhibits individual autistic traits. Some individuals may struggle more with social issues and sensory issues but not as much with language. Others may have profound language difficulties but may barely struggle with sensory input. Each autistic person is different, and autism manifests itself in a variety of ways. No two autistic people will have the same needs.⁸

In addition to changing how the autism spectrum is viewed, the psychological community has changed how autism is classified. Previously, autism was classified as high- and low-functioning. However, this terminology was inaccurate. These labels were often used to describe how autism appears to those around the autistic individual rather than the degree to which an autistic person functions.⁹ Thus, an autistic person who was extremely high-masking and able to disguise their struggles was classified as high-functioning even though they were struggling. Now, the psychological community describes autism in terms of high, medium, and low support needs in order to describe the level of support autistic people require from those around them.¹⁰

When thinking about autism, many define it in terms of its deficits. However, a recent movement called the neurodiversity movement has sought to define autism as a different wiring of the brain. Autistic professor Daniel Bowman Jr. compares the different wirings to the different operating systems of computers. A Mac computer is not defined by its absence of the Windows

⁸ Pia Bradshaw et al., “‘Autistic’ or ‘With Autism’? Why the Way General Practitioners View and Talk About Autism Matters,” *Australian Journal of General Practice* 50, no. 3 (March 1, 2021): 104–8, <https://doi.org/10.31128/ajgp-11-20-5721>, 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

OS but by the presence of a Mac OS. In the same way, autistic individuals should be defined by their autistic traits rather than their lack of neurotypical traits.¹¹ This movement seeks to recognize that autism should be accepted rather than fixed, as many means of “fixing” autism are deeply harmful.¹² However, the neurodiversity movement does not seek to diminish the fact that autism is a disability or that autistic people will need support from their communities. Rather, the neurodiversity movement seeks to change the way autism is viewed to one that is more accurate to the condition, showing that it can be both an asset and a liability and eliminating some of its associated stigma.¹³

Creating a Biblical View of Autism

Incorrect Views

When addressing autism and the church, one must address some of the incorrect prevailing views regarding autism and the church. One manner of addressing autism prevalent in the Christian community is retroactive diagnosis. Scholars have gone through the Bible and identified biblical figures, such as Samson, who seem to meet the criteria for autism and have identified them as autistic. This approach ignores the original intent of narratives. It is impossible to diagnose a person with autism based on the limited narratives found in the Bible.¹⁴

Another manner of addressing autism prevalent in the Christian community is the belief that autism is a result of demonic possession. Those who hold this belief state that autism mirrors

¹¹ Daniel Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 39.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁴ Grant Macaskill, “The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 26, no. 4 (February 8, 2021): pp. 414-438, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2021.1881024>, 418-419.

the state of demonic possession expressed in the Bible, such as in Matthew 9:32-33, Mark 5:1-20, and Acts 16:16-18. The proponents of this idea state that the way to treat autism is through exorcism. Not only is this approach inconsistent with biblical accounts of demonic possession, but it also ignores the overwhelming evidence for the genetic and neurological roots of autism.¹⁵

The third view commonly held in the Christian community is that autism can and should be healed through prayer. This view is based upon the teachings of the prosperity gospel. It ignores the fact that healing miracles are miraculous, not commonplace. It also communicates to autistic believers that they cannot be fully involved in the body unless they are neurotypical. This view stems from the idea that a person cannot have true joy unless they are completely healthy and independent.¹⁶ This also ignores the plethora of benefits of having an autistic neurotype and the fact that autistic people often do not want to be “cured.” Autistic people do not desire to be “healed” or “cured” of their autism. Autism influences everything about a person, and removing the autism would be removing the person.¹⁷ Autism is not something that can be separated from the person, and autistic individuals do not have a neurotypical person inside of them waiting to escape. While autistic individuals face immense struggles on a daily basis, there is no separating the autism from the person.

¹⁵ Macaskill, “The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics, 419-420.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 420-423.

¹⁷ Olivia Bustion, “Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 3 (September 2017): pp. 653-681, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfw075>, 672.

A fourth common view held within the church regarding autism is that autistic people are not cognitively capable of understanding Christian truths.¹⁸ This view is rooted in the stigma that views autism as an intellectual disability and autistic people as having extreme intellectual disabilities, rendering them incapable of any normal functioning. This view is entirely false. While many autistic people have an accompanying intellectual disability, autism does not necessitate an intellectual disability, and many autistic people are perfectly capable of complex, intelligent thinking and grasping Christian truths. Even nonverbal autism does not indicate an intellectual disability, as the ability for oral communication does not dictate a person's intelligence.¹⁹ Furthermore, even those with intellectual disabilities can grasp Christian truths and participate in genuine religious expression.²⁰

A final incorrect view that needs to be addressed is the idea that autistic people are incapable of forming relationships within the church body and cultivating a personal relationship with God.²¹ This view is rooted in the absent self theory, which explains the features of autistic people by claiming that they lack a sense of self. This means they are unaware of their intentions, cannot predict their actions, and do not see other people as conscious beings with their own beliefs, thus rendering them unable to form relationships with God and other people.²²

¹⁸ Krysia Emily Waldock and Rachel Forrester-Jones, "An Exploratory Study of Attitudes toward Autism Amongst Church-Going Christians in the South East of England, United Kingdom," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 24, no. 4 (June 11, 2020): pp. 349-370, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2020.1776667>, 357.

¹⁹ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," 657.

²⁰ Susannah Turner et al., "Religious Expression amongst Adults with Intellectual Disabilities," *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 17, no. 3 (September 2004): 161–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-3148.2004.00192.x>.

²¹ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," 657, 661.

²² *Ibid.*, 655.

Knowledge of other people's mental states is also known as the Theory of Mind, and many people believe that autistic people are deficient in theory of mind, which is entirely untrue. The issue with this theory is that it cannot be tested.²³ The proponents of this theory argue that autistic people are unaware of their own mental states, and when they try to describe their experiences, they are simply mimicking other people. This means an autistic person's personal testimony of their subjective experiences is invalid according to this view. If autistic testimony is invalid, then there is no way to disprove this, but also no definitive way to prove it.²⁴

One area of this theory involves the idea that autistic people lack empathy, leading to an inability to form relationships. This idea stems from research on the mirror system. The human body has a system that allows neurons to fire in sympathy with other people's neurons. Small movements of the face, such as pleading with one's eyes, trigger these neurons, which allow people to discern the mental states of others. This research claims that autistic people's mirror systems do not function correctly, meaning that autistic people cannot identify emotional states in others and thus lack empathy.²⁵ The issue with this is that it confuses cognitive and emotional empathy. Empathy is more than the firing of neurons; it is "the condition of recognizing and responding to the affective experience of another, so as to participate with them in that state."²⁶ Autistic people may be deficient in cognitive empathy, but they have extremely strong emotional empathy. An autistic person, while lacking the neurological mechanism for identifying other

²³ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," 659.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 659-660.

²⁵ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 33.

²⁶ Macaskill, "Autism and Biblical Studies: Establishing and Extending the Field beyond Preliminary Reflection," 394.

people's emotions based on microscopic facial movements, is still able to attribute emotional states to other people, although they must use different means to do so.²⁷ Many autistic individuals have adapted to their lack of cognitive empathy, learning how to discern emotions based upon context. In fact, many autistic people, rather than lacking empathy, can often be described as hyper-empathetic, having stronger emotional empathy than neurotypical individuals.²⁸

Although autistic individuals lack the mirror system, many autistic people learn through experience how to identify and respond to other's emotions.²⁹ Rather than a lack of empathy, autistic and non-autistic individuals face what is known as the double empathy problem. Autistic and non-autistic individuals have different social and communication dispositions. When communicating with each other, these differences are perceived as breaches in the "natural attitude" of social relations.³⁰ The double empathy problem describes this phenomenon, in which autistic and non-autistic individuals can socialize and communicate well with those who share their neurotype, but often experience social and communication blunders when communicating with members of the opposite neurotype. Since autistic individuals are in the minority, these differences often result in the autistic individual being seen as rude or disrespectful, with the

²⁷ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 34-35.

²⁸ Ido Shalev et al., "Reexamining Empathy in Autism: Empathic Disequilibrium as a Novel Predictor of Autism Diagnosis and Autistic Traits," *Autism Research* 15, no. 10 (August 20, 2022): 1917–28, <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2794>.

²⁹ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 34-35.

³⁰ Damian E.M. Milton, "On the Ontological Status of Autism: The 'Double Empathy Problem,'" *Disability & Society* 27, no. 6 (August 16, 2012): pp. 883-887, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008>, 884.

non-autistic individual ascribing negative motivations to the autistic counterpart.³¹ This often contributes to difficulty forming relationships.

Within the church body, it may seem challenging to form a close relationship with an autistic member. Autistic people often appear uninterested or unable to form relationships. While it may appear that way, this is untrue. Autistic people yearn for close connection and are capable of forming close bonds with friends, family, and romantic partners.³² Many autistic behaviors, such as infrequent eye contact, stimming, and echolalia, often give off the impression that an autistic person is socially uninterested. However, autistic people do not intend to seem indifferent, and these behaviors are usually done to make social interaction more comfortable for the autistic individual.³³ Additionally, autistic individuals express love, affection, and interest in different ways, which can lead others to believe they are not interested in connection.³⁴ Differences in communication and social skills can also make it difficult for autistic individuals to join activities.³⁵ While autistic people experience difficulty forming relationships, autistic people are perfectly capable of creating close connection with others.

Engagement between autistic and non-autistic individuals requires effort on both parts to ensure successful communication. However, many autistic individuals have learned from a

³¹ Milton, "On the Ontological Status of Autism: The 'Double Empathy Problem,'" 885.

³² Amanda Girardi, Mary Sharon Curran, and Briana L. Snyder, "Healthy Intimate Relationships and the Adult With Autism," *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association* 27, no. 5 (August 18, 2020): 405–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078390320949923>, 406.

³³ Vikram K. Jaswal and Nameera Akhtar, "Being Versus Appearing Socially Uninterested: Challenging Assumptions About Social Motivation in Autism," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 42 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x18001826>, 8.

³⁴ Girardi et al., "Healthy Intimate Relationships and the Adult With Autism," 406.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 406.

young age to engage in neurotypical communication styles and need neurotypical individuals to meet them in the middle.³⁶ One way in which allistic believers can improve communication with autistic believers is to lower their expectations regarding small talk, eye contact, and other social protocols. Autistic people find little benefit in engaging in small talk, and these conversations are often short, which may seem to indicate a lack of interest in forming a relationship. Lack of eye contact may also communicate disinterest. However, when non-autistic believers lower these expectations and include autistic believers despite a lack of eye contact, autistic believers greatly appreciate the effort to include them.³⁷ One way to engage autistic individuals is to ask about their special interests. However, one must wait to do this when there is ample time for a long conversation.³⁸ Another way to engage autistic individuals is to participate in parallel play, which is a manner of social interaction where two people are in the same room together but engaging in separate activities. This is an excellent way for autistic people to enjoy quality time without having to worry about social protocol.³⁹

One way of using nonverbal communication with autistic people is to engage with them in stimming. Autistic people use stimming as a means of communicating how they are feeling; it is a rhetorical means of interacting with the world.⁴⁰ Stimming is a means of connecting with the world through sensory means, and engaging an autistic person in stimming can help allistic

³⁶ Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*, 214.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

³⁸ Erin Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church* (Middletown, DE: Erin Burnett, 2022), 44.

³⁹ Benjamin T. Conner, "Affirming Presence: Spiritual Life and Friendship with Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 15, no. 4 (December 10, 2010): 331–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436x.2010.533479>.

⁴⁰ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," 659.

believers connect with their autistic brothers and sisters in Christ. By mirroring the stims of autistic people and engaging autistic people in the means by which they communicate, allistic believers can convey to them a sense of belonging.⁴¹

A Correct View

The correct way to view autism is that while it is a disability, autism is also “a different way of being human.”⁴² Autism creates unique and necessary roles in the church and should be accommodated, accepted, and celebrated within the body of Christ. Autism is a neurotype with genetic and neurological roots; it is embedded into the wiring of the brain and cannot be healed or exorcised. Just like allistic people, autistic people are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” and “intricately woven in the depths of the earth,” as said in Psalm 139. Autistic people are given to the church by God; they should be celebrated, and the whole church should share in bearing their burdens.⁴³ Autistic believers are sinners in need of God’s grace, addressees of God’s Word, and members of the body of Christ, just as allistic believers are.

Autism is a reality and should be faced by the church community as a whole. The church should “approach autism as something that has been united to Christ and His body.”⁴⁴ While the church will not naturally be a good, safe environment for autistic individuals, the church is

⁴¹ Phoebe Caldwell, *Finding You Finding Me: Using Intensive Interaction to Get in Touch with People Whose Severe Learning Disabilities Are Combined with Autistic Spectrum Disorder* (London, United Kingdom: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), 108-111.

⁴² Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*, 70.

⁴³ Grant Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 22, no. 1 (October 11, 2017): pp. 15-41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2017.1373613>, 24.

⁴⁴ Macaskill, “The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics,” 432.

responsible for growing and creating an environment that is safe for autistic believers.⁴⁵ Autistic people will bring challenges to the church body; miscommunications and social difficulties will happen often. However, the church is commanded to carry these burdens, “bearing with one another in love,” as said in Ephesians 4:2.⁴⁶

Acceptance, Accommodation, and Inclusion in the Church

The Image of God and the Biblical Mandate for Acceptance and Accommodation

A correct understanding of the image of God is foundational to a biblical view regarding acceptance and accommodation. Genesis 1:27 says, “so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”⁴⁷ Humans image God structurally, functionally, and relationally. Structurally, humans image God in that they are human. Functionally, humans image God by helping creation flourish.⁴⁸ Relationally, humans image God in their relationship with God, others, themselves, and the world.⁴⁹

Because the image of God is embedded in personhood, all autistic people are imagers of God and thus in need of God’s grace. Autistic people are also in need of Christian community. Hebrews 10:25 encourages believers toward “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Autistic people need to meet together with the church body.

⁴⁵ Macaskill, “The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics,” 432.

⁴⁶ Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” 34.

⁴⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all scriptures are in ESV.

⁴⁸ Bruce Riley Ashford and Heath Thomas, *The Gospel of Our King: Bible, Worldview, and the Mission of Every Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 26-29.

⁴⁹ “Imago Dei,” presented by Chris Hulshof, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, October 4, 2023.

Not only do autistic members need to be part of the body, but the body also needs autistic members. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 talks about the church as a body with many different members, all having varying functions. A member cannot be excluded based on ability or disability, and a member cannot say he does not belong due to ability or disability. When members of the body do not conform to the expected social practices of the church environment, they are marginalized and often feel as if they are not part of the body.

In this passage, Paul depicts the unity of the body as the basis of Christian practice. Members of the body who feel marginal are a vital part of the body, and those who marginalize other members are scorning the unity of the body that comes from God.⁵⁰ In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Paul mentions that the foot cannot say it is not part of the body because it is not a hand, and the head cannot tell the foot it is not needed (1 Corinthians 12:15, 21). Paul goes on to say that, “on the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require,” (1 Corinthians 12:22-24). Paul’s use of the word “foot” is significant because in biblical times, the feet were like the reproductive organs, seen as unsightly, dishonorable parts of the body. However, feet are necessary for mobility, and reproductive organs are crucial for reproduction. Though often seen as dirty and unsightly, these parts perform essential functions.⁵¹ Similarly, the church needs the members of the body traditionally seen as dishonorable to become mobile and reproductive. “A church that wants to get around and reproduce must be one

⁵⁰ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 113.

⁵¹ Brian Brock, “Autism and the Image of God: on Becoming a Mobile and Reproductive Church,” *Cultural Encounters* 16, no. 2 (September 2021): pp. 5-20, 13.

that is genuinely appreciative of the gifts of the Holy Spirit received through those society considers unpresentable.”⁵² When the church is closed off to those who are different, it cannot grow. Just as the feet and reproductive organs were not inherently dishonorable, autistic members of the body are not dishonorable, but many are seen as such by society because they lack the social capital to be seen as presentable members of the community and often have mannerisms deemed unpresentable by the community.

In 1 Corinthians 12:24-26, Paul elaborates on his point even further, saying that God composed the body with the more dishonorable parts being indispensable to create unity and care among the members, where all suffer and rejoice together. The church is to be a community, and believers are to participate in that community. When autistic members of the community suffer, the whole church should suffer with them. Marginalizing or excluding autistic believers from the church goes directly against God’s commands for Christian community. However, when the church matches its speed to that of those it deems its least presentable members, creating genuine community alongside them, this allows these members to give to the church what they have, which will create a greater church.⁵³ Bringing autistic people into the body involves more than simply accepting the presence of autistic individuals. The church needs to move beyond simple acceptance by creating an environment where autistic individuals are welcomed and accommodated, as it is only then that full integration into the church is possible.

⁵² Brock, “Autism and the Image of God: on Becoming a Mobile and Reproductive Church,” 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15.

The Need for Accommodation: Barriers to Autistic Integration Within the Church

Although autism is not a commonly discussed subject within the church, it affects nearly every church body in some form. Diagnostic rates for autism are rising as more people are becoming informed of autism. The most recent report from the CDC states that one in thirty-six children has an autism diagnosis.⁵⁴ Autistic people are eleven percent as likely as their allistic peers to be religious.⁵⁵ This means that autistic people represent a local demographic that is largely unreached. If the church is a body, it is missing some of its integral parts.

While many autistic people have an interest in God, they struggle to participate in church life, as they face numerous barriers when trying to engage in the body. It is the job of the church to recognize and try to remove these barriers. The church environment can be overwhelming for autistic individuals. The music may be too loud, and the lights may be too bright, creating a harsh environment for autistic people. Additionally, church environments contain many sounds and smells that may cause sensory overload for autistic individuals. Harmless things such as wearing perfumes, chewing gum, clicking pens, and using scented soaps in the bathrooms can all cause harm to autistic people. Church often involves engaging in a crowd of people and participating in a lot of physical touch, which can be overwhelming for autistic Christians. Church also requires a specific dress code that may be uncomfortable for autistic Christians.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ “Autism Prevalence Higher, According to Data from 11 ADDM Communities,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 22, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2023/p0323-autism.html>.

⁵⁵ Ara Norenzayan, Will M. Gervais, and Kali H. Trzesniewski, “Mentalizing Deficits Constrain Belief in a Personal God,” *PLoS One* 7, no. 5 (May 30, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0036880>.

⁵⁶ Bustion, “Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention,” 670.

The combined sensory overload often causes autistic people to choose not to engage in the sensory environment.⁵⁷

In addition to an intense sensory environment, autistic people also face the barrier of an inaccessible social environment. The social environment of the church often involves significant amounts of small talk, knowledge of an immense number of social customs, and an expectation to follow the unwritten rules of the community. Autistic people often struggle with these social rules, which can result in their exclusion from a community.⁵⁸

Another significant barrier to autistic people regarding church participation is the apparent discrepancies within the Christian faith. For example, autistic people have a very strong moral compass and sense of justice. Hypocrisy in the church is more likely to disturb an autistic individual. Similarly, when churches and religious institutions enact control over people in the name of God, autistic individuals are likely to associate Christianity with extreme legalism and see it as a means of control rather than connection with God. Unbiblical rules enacted in the name of God, such as the prohibition of dancing, pose a challenge to the Christian faith for autistic people. Additionally, autistic people may not experience emotional worship the same as allistic members. Many churches manufacture emotional experiences within the congregation using chord progressions, lights, images, and repetition.⁵⁹ Autistic individuals often struggle with alexithymia, which is the reduced ability to identify and describe one's emotions, as well as the

⁵⁷ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," 671.

⁵⁸ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 113.

⁵⁹ Jill C. Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University Of Michigan Press, 2013), 203.

“blunting of emotional experiences.”⁶⁰ When emotional experiences are at the center of worship, this creates a degree of separation between autistic people and the rest of the body, who can fully engage in the emotional connection. Finally, autistic people tend to ask difficult questions in all areas of life, and religion is no different. Often, when autistic people ask questions to the church, they are misconstrued as challenges to Christianity rather than efforts to gain a better understanding. Often, when asking these questions, autistic people are told to “just have faith.” The words “just have faith” are of little consequence to autistic individuals when it comes to questions of the apparent age of the world, evolution, sexuality, gender, abortion, and other controversial issues within the church. Many autistic people, when punished for asking these questions, conclude that the church must have no answer and believe that Christianity is incompatible with science and morality.

Another barrier faced by autistic Christians is the fact that church activities can be draining for autistic individuals. Even though autistic individuals enjoy being in community with God’s people, church activities can often be taxing for autistic individuals due to the intense social and sensory environment and the unpredictability of the activities. This may cause an individual to attend service but forgo fellowship with other church members due to being overwhelmed. This puts distance between the autistic member and the rest of the community.⁶¹ Autistic individuals may also experience fear, which stops them from engaging with the church. An individual with extreme sensory issues may forgo church due to fear of sensory overwhelm. Other individuals may avoid interacting with other church members due to fear of rejection.

⁶⁰ Sebastian B Gaigg, Anna SF Cornell, and Geoffrey Bird, “The Psychophysiological Mechanisms of Alexithymia in Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *Autism* 22, no. 2 (2018): 227–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316667062>, 230.

⁶¹ Bustion, “Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention,” 670-671.

Autistic church members often experience mistreatment due to their disability, especially when they have not disclosed their autism. They are perceived as different and thought to be undesirable.⁶² However, many autistic church members who need accommodation within the church setting may not disclose their disability due to the stigma that surrounds it, as autism is often viewed in a negative light. Many autistic people have experienced discrimination, infantilization, and rejection when disclosing their disability. Thus, they choose not to disclose to the church, which creates an environment where accommodation is difficult. This ends up being a double-edged sword, where both disclosure and non-disclosure present negative outcomes.⁶³

The church is largely uninformed when it comes to autism. One study on church views regarding autism revealed a general lack of knowledge among churchgoers, with most knowledge coming from experiences with friends or family members. In this study, churchgoers often described autistic individuals in terms of deficits.⁶⁴ Many described autistic people as outsiders, believing that autism could be “prayed away” or exorcised, and many participants had negative views regarding the capabilities of autistic people.⁶⁵ The lack of knowledge about autism within the church presents a barrier, as autistic individuals who desire to become part of the church are entering an environment where accommodation is difficult, and the people around them see them as inherently less valuable. Because the church is uninformed about autism, autistic members often face rejection at the hands of the church. Autistic churchgoers often feel

⁶² Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” 23.

⁶³ Monique Botha, Bridget Dibb, and David Frost, “‘Autism Is Me’: An Investigation of How Autistic Individuals Make Sense of Autism and Stigma.,” October 6, 2020, pp. 427-453, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/gv2mw>, 435.

⁶⁴ Waldock and Jones, “An Exploratory Study of Attitudes toward Autism Amongst Church-Going Christians in the South East of England, United Kingdom,” 354-358.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 354-358.

lonely, misunderstood, and undervalued in their church communities, believing that the church is unable to appreciate their unique autistic gifting.⁶⁶ Because most church members are uninformed about autism, autistic people are often asked to leave churches due to behaviors that differ from what is considered acceptable. Autistic people are often regarded as rude and disruptive, leading them to be excluded from church communities.⁶⁷

Despite the many barriers to church participation, many autistic individuals attend church regularly, participate in church programs, and enjoy being an integral part of a local body. However, autistic believers continue to represent a significant minority in the church, and removing these barriers is necessary if the church is to welcome more autistic members. When the church works to remove these barriers, not only will more autistic believers be able to fully enjoy the love of the church body, but the church will also be able to recognize the beauty of neurodiversity within the body of Christ.

The Beauty of Neurodiversity

Benefits of Autistic Church Members

The body of Christ comprises many parts, all functioning differently. However, it is essential when discussing this to remember that autistic people do not add value to the church because of their ability to add a perceived asset to the body but because they are made in God's image and are a part of God's people.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," 670-671

⁶⁷ Macaskill, "The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics," 432.

⁶⁸ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 95-96.

One benefit of autistic church members is autistic people are less sensitive to the evaluative standards of society, which allows autistic members of the body to see past labels placed on believers much easier than an allistic believer can. Autistic people are more easily able to look past disability, life circumstances, and economic status to see the whole person and love them as they are.⁶⁹ This is in tune with the disposition of Christ, as Jesus often associated Himself with those who were outcasted in society including tax collectors (Mark 2:15, Luke 5:27), those who were ceremonially unclean (Mark 1:40-45), sinners (Mark 2:15, John 4:1-30), women (Luke 8:1-3), and disabled individuals (Luke 14:13-14, John 5:1-9). While this is possible for allistics, it is much more difficult, as it involves going against an instinct not possessed by autistic people.⁷⁰

Additionally, autistic people do very well at “being in the world without being of the world.”⁷¹ In Romans 12:2, Paul commands believers, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Autistic people do not fit the mold of this world because they are fundamentally different from the allistic individuals around them. Because of this, autistic individuals become separated from neurotypical social circles. Autistic differences make it easier for individuals to “be in the world but not of it,” autistic individuals can do so more easily because they are familiar with being different from those around them. This separation from neurotypical social circles also allows autistic individuals to separate themselves from the sinful attitudes and pursuits of the current culture, meaning that they are less likely to

⁶⁹ Bustion, “Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention,” 673.

⁷⁰ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 99.

⁷¹ Bustion, “Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention,” 673.

become part of worldly social activities such as gossip, rumors, and popularity competitions. While autistic people are not immune to worldly temptations, their separation from worldly social circles, coupled with an enhanced moral compass, make them less likely to experience and succumb to many sinful temptations. The autistic brain wiring also predisposes autistic people towards loyalty, sincerity, honesty, and the ability to accept those who are different.⁷² Autistic people are also known to be naïve, which allows them to see more clearly the world as it should be, rather than as it is, tainted by sin.⁷³ Autistic people can thus serve as examples to other believers in these areas, allowing others to see a model of genuine piety.

Additionally, autistic people are extremely honest. Autistic people have a very strong moral compass and choose not to engage in immoral actions. One study found that autistic individuals are much less likely than allistic individuals to engage in immoral actions for personal gain. This study also found that autistic individuals were more likely to make the same moral decisions when in the presence of a witness as they would in private.⁷⁴ Thus, autistic people are well-suited for areas of church practice that require honesty and integrity, such as counting the offering, and can serve as an example of integrity for other church members.

Additionally, autistic people are gifted at systematic thinking. Administration, organization, and other logistical tasks can be done incredibly well by autistic church members. Additionally, many autistic believers can be highly knowledgeable about God's Word, as many develop a special interest in the Bible.

⁷² Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," 673.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 673.

⁷⁴ Yang Hu et al., "Right Temporoparietal Junction Underlies Avoidance of Moral Transgression in Autism Spectrum Disorder," *The Journal of Neuroscience* 41, no. 8 (February 24, 2021): 1699–1715, <https://doi.org/10.1523/jneurosci.1237-20.2020>.

If the church can provide a safe space for autistic individuals in which there is an escape from the harsh sensory and social environment of the world, the church will be able to experience the many blessings that come with autistic members of the body. There is a vast array of benefits that autistic people provide the church, but in order for autistic people to flourish, they must feel safe.⁷⁵ Accommodation and acceptance will provide the safety needed for autistic people to become active, integral parts of the body.

The “Idol of Normalcy”

The world has a particular set of value systems with which it judges others. When churches operate within the value systems of the flesh, they tend to elevate and sometimes even idolize the people and practices deemed by their natural instincts to be desirable while disparaging those who do not fit into these categories, creating what theologian Brian Brock calls an “idol of normalcy” within the church.⁷⁶ Often, the church’s unity is perceived to lie in common traits, practices, and forms of communication, which inadvertently leave autistic and other marginalized believers feeling inferior and excluded.⁷⁷ Churches often tend to place value on the more charismatic individuals within the body. Those with high social capital are deemed to be more valuable to the church. The natural instinct is to lift these people up.⁷⁸ This elevation

⁷⁵ Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*, 80.

⁷⁶ Brian Brock, “Seeking a Method and Finding Philological Practices of Re-Membering,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 26, no. 2 (March 18, 2022): 144–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2022.2049427>, 145

⁷⁷ Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” 28.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

of certain people and practices may be seen by churches as biblical, but they are often simply manifestations of evangelical culture which have become idols.⁷⁹

Because autistic people do not fit into these value systems, they highlight the human nature of these value systems and allow the church to humbly evaluate their values and redirect them toward God. Autistic people are also less sensitive to the standards by which society evaluates others, meaning they are less likely to elevate a charismatic figure or participate in a custom that has cultural but not religious significance. This rejection of standards is similar to how the gospel rejects human standards of viewing the world.⁸⁰ Additionally, autistic people often struggle with these cultural performances, leading them to be seen as inferior Christians.⁸¹ For example, the emotionally charged worship characteristic of modern churches is an excellent way for many people to connect with God, but many autistic people cannot connect with God this way.⁸² Those who do not participate in church rituals and lack significant social capital can be undervalued and marginalized within the church, often seen as undesirable and even non-Christian. When autistic members are judged this way “according to the flesh,” they tend to be ostracized, as many autistic traits do not fit in with the socially acceptable traits defined by society.⁸³

⁷⁹ Macaskill, “The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics,” 433.

⁸⁰ Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” 23.

⁸¹ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 126.

⁸² Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church*, 33.

⁸³ Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” 23.

The presence of autistic members in the church requires church members to abandon their worldly judgments and embrace the radically different value system of the gospel.⁸⁴ According to Brian Brock, “disability usefully exposes the church’s fundamental resistance to the gospel promise that difference is enriching.”⁸⁵ This especially has bearing upon those who have higher support needs, as their differences are more noticeable to the average church member, meaning they are going to be more disruptive to the typical patterns of church life. The presence of these church members is a gift from the Holy Spirit, as God uses them to “liberate the congregation from any pretention that [they] are a church devoted to presenting a culturally and aesthetically flawless performance.”⁸⁶

Being in Christ means adopting a set of values that upends one’s natural personal and societal perceptions, as evidenced in 2 Corinthians 5:16-17.⁸⁷ The church body must be open to the idea that the church’s conception of normality may stem from societal rather than Biblical standards and may be tainted by sin.⁸⁸ Many churches operate under the assumption that in order to enjoy the benefits of that particular community, an individual must “fit in” with the rest of the community.⁸⁹ This assumption inadvertently marginalizes those who are different, especially those with disabilities. However, when the church makes an effort to include those with autism, this entails a reevaluation of the ideas of normality and unity, forcing the church to think about

⁸⁴ Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” 36.

⁸⁵ Brian Brock, “Fostering Delight in Difference,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 26, no. 2 (March 18, 2022): pp. 176-178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2022.2049429>, 176.

⁸⁶ Brock, “Autism and the Image of God: on Becoming a Mobile and Reproductive Church,” 19.

⁸⁷ Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” 21.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸⁹ Brock, “Fostering Delight in Difference,” 176.

whether their practices and methods of creating unity are biblical or cultural.⁹⁰ The church may see that the way they try to build community is based upon culture rather than theology.⁹¹ When the church makes an effort to accommodate autistic believers, the body will recognize that unity lies in the Holy Spirit, Christian love, and the sharing of the gospel, not the sharing of common communication and social practices (Colossians 3:13-14, Ephesians 4:3-6).⁹²

Autism, Faith, and Creating a Friendly Church Environment

The Manifestation of Faith in Autistic Believers

Because autistic people are neurologically wired differently, they express their faith differently. It is necessary within the church to affirm different manifestations of the Holy Spirit and refrain from condemning others for not showing their faith in a certain way. There are many different ways autistic believers show their faith. Many autistic believers have a close relationship with God, while others express difficulty engaging in what would be considered a “personal relationship.”⁹³ In these cases, one must remember that God addressed the Bible to communities, not individuals, and that if an individual truly believes that Jesus is Lord and was raised from the dead, that feeling far from God may not negate salvation (Romans 10:9-10).⁹⁴ Many autistic individuals develop a special interest in the Bible, leading to autistic believers having rich biblical knowledge and an immense interest in having spiritual conversations. Many autistic believers may need structure for prayer and may enjoy liturgical services more than

⁹⁰ Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” 30.

⁹¹ Ibid., 36.

⁹² Ibid., 24.

⁹³ Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church*, 32.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 38-39.

contemporary churches due to the liturgical structure.⁹⁵ Autistic believers may have an immense amount of love for those in the church who are often deemed outcasts by society, and will exhibit God's love for the marginalized.⁹⁶ Autistic people also do not believe that their autism is negative in relation to their faith, they believe they are wonderfully made by God, often citing Psalm 139:14.⁹⁷ While living with autism is difficult, many rely on God as a source of strength (Ephesians 6:10, Psalm 73:26).⁹⁸

Although many autistic believers avoid the church environment, they build Christian community through online forums, through which users engage in fellowship, discuss spirituality, encourage one another, pray for one another, and seek Christian advice.⁹⁹ Autistic believers foster close connections with God, believing that God can speak their language and connect with them unlike anyone else can.¹⁰⁰

Autistic faith can often be marked with guilt and shame. Many autistic believers struggle with believing they are bad Christians because of their atypical means of expressing faith and their limitations regarding the sensory and social environment.¹⁰¹ Reluctance to participate in certain church customs such as "popcorn prayer" or greeting other believers with a hug can cause

⁹⁵ Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church*, 26.

⁹⁶ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," 673.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 672.

⁹⁸ Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*, 193.

⁹⁹ Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," 670.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 674.

¹⁰¹ Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*, 12, 94.

an autistic person to feel as if they are not suited for the church body.¹⁰² Many autistic believers also struggle with legalism, often becoming obsessed with whether they are thinking about God enough, praying enough, and repenting enough. Thus, it is essential to emphasize grace when talking to autistic believers.¹⁰³ Because of this, it is important to affirm the faith of autistic individuals and how that faith manifests, even if its manifestation is different, and to remember that grace is through faith, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast,” as evidenced in Ephesians 2:8-9.

When discussing autistic faith, one must discuss how faith can manifest in those who are nonverbal, have higher support needs, or have an accompanying intellectual disability. For those who are nonverbal or have higher support needs, it is important for church communities to presume that they can comprehend what is going on, include them in church activities, and look for ways they communicate when words are not there.¹⁰⁴ For those who have an intellectual disability, theologian Grant Macaskill argues that faith and confession are “simply the expressions of God’s transforming and recreative work within us.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, those who express faith do so because God has transformed them. Confession is the work that is brought on by God’s transformation, not what brings God’s transformation. God is perfectly capable of working in those who do not have the cognitive capacity for traditional faith, and many parents

¹⁰² Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*, 111.

¹⁰³ Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church*, 47-48.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰⁵ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 165.

of children with intellectual disabilities are confident of God's transforming work in and through their children.¹⁰⁶

Genuine Christian Community

As part of the body of Christ, autistic believers must become part of the genuine Christian community in the church. Christian community goes beyond today's understanding of community. In today's culture, community is marked by living in close proximity to or sharing common interests or traits with others.¹⁰⁷ Biblical Christian community goes far beyond this definition, as it is marked by believers acting as one body, "individually members one of another," (Romans 12:5). Christian community finds its basis in the unity of the Trinity. During His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prays that those who believe in Him "may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you," (John 17:21). Christ compares unity among believers to the unity found in the Trinity. Just as the Trinity operates in unity, so should the body of Christ. Thus, genuine Christian community must be marked by full inclusion into the body. This includes loving accommodation of the weaker believers, rejoicing and suffering as one, and bearing each other's burdens (Romans 14:13-15, Romans 12:15, Galatians 6:2). Genuine Christian community is also marked by sacrificial love, being willing to give up one's liberties or resources for another.

Genuine Christian community is also marked by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is active within the church, gifting each member with abilities that will edify the body as a whole. The church should seek to cultivate the unique giftings of every believer, allowing each member to

¹⁰⁶ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 165-166.

¹⁰⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "community (n.)," March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1005093760>.

serve the body with their gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 2 Timothy 1:6). The Spirit should also be active in the church through the fruits the church bears. The church should embody the fruits of the Spirit enumerated in Galatians 5:22-23, as it is the genuine bearing of fruit that will attract people to the church.

The idea of genuine Christian community is important to autism because when discussing the integration of autistic believers into the church, one is tempted to adopt the mindset of a caretaker. Those with unique needs in the congregation can often be seen as needing care and can be perceived as unable to contribute in a positive way to the congregation. However, in order for proper integration to happen, autistic individuals need to be regarded as equal members of the congregation. This can be done when believers “worship with, in deliberate and sympathetic communication with (not merely in the same room as) those who are labeled disabled.”¹⁰⁸ When autistic believers are fully integrated into the body, not as burdens that need to be carried, but as full members who can build up the church as they are built up by the church, then the church can benefit from the unique gifts and insights provided by autistic members of the body.

This is not meant to communicate that autistic believers have higher spiritual abilities. When the church worships together, God’s voice can be heard, and when autistic believers join in that song, God’s voice can be heard in new ways.¹⁰⁹ According to Brian Brock, “if we grant that autistic Christians have been called by the voice of God into the body of Christ, we should

¹⁰⁸ Joanna Leidenhag, “Autism, Doxology, and the Nature of Christian Worship,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 26, no. 2 (September 29, 2021): pp. 211-224, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2021.1982840>, 214.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

consider it likely that they have heard tones of voice rarely heard by neurotypical listeners.”¹¹⁰

The church must listen to the communication of autistic believers, even those who do not communicate verbally, as they will have unique ways of hearing God’s voice.

To create a church environment with genuine community, one must listen to autistic stories. Gaining a basic understanding, asking questions of autistic members, and listening with empathy can all create an environment where autistic believers feel welcome in the church. Learning from autistic believers and listening to their stories can be a powerful act of love.¹¹¹

Christian Freedom and the Weaker Members

Christianity is extremely countercultural. This is exemplified in the Bible’s theology of weakness, in which God speaks of not only valuing but also using those who are weak to exemplify His power. Both in ancient culture and today, strength and power were highly valued. However, God valued those who were weak and used them to accomplish His purposes. In this countercultural gospel movement, those who were weak were considered equal members of the body, worthy of the same love and respect as the stronger members (Romans 14-15). Paul addresses the different needs of the weaker and stronger members of the body in Romans 14-15. The weakness discussed in this passage is one of faith, but it still bears upon the needs of autistic believers today.

Paul’s writings contain a large discourse about weakness and strength. Throughout these writings, Paul represents weakness as the vessel through which God displays His strength, and he

¹¹⁰ Brian Brock, “Going Even Further with Autism: The Kenotic Foundations of Communication,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 26, no. 2 (March 21, 2022): pp. 225-228, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2022.2051679>, 227.

¹¹¹ Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*, 113, 195.

discusses the idea that the weaker members are an equal part of the body of Christ.¹¹² Some examples include 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, 2 Corinthians 4:7, 2 Corinthians 12:8-9, and Romans 14-15. This discourse ties into Paul's discussion in Romans 14-15, in which Paul highlights the equality of the weaker members of the body, stating that the stronger members are obligated to respect weaker members of the body and accommodate their needs with love, in order to ensure unity and harmony among the body.¹¹³ Romans 14:13-15 illustrates this:

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

This passage is set within a discourse on food sacrificed to idols. While it was not immoral to eat food sacrificed to idols, it did cause some members of the body to stumble, as many members of the Corinthian church were once part of the local Pagan religions.¹¹⁴ Paul was commanding them, saying that if eating food sacrificed to idols would cause a brother to stumble, then they must abstain.

While the passage itself discusses food sacrificed to idols, the underlying principle can be applied to the loving accommodation of all types of believers. Paul's letter to the Romans is an epistle, and as with all epistolary literature, the Book of Romans was not intended to give a systematic theology. Instead, epistles take the author's theology and apply its principles to

¹¹² Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 119.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹¹⁴ Chad Brand et al., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 346.

specific situations happening during the time the letter was written.¹¹⁵ Underlying the passage is the principle of unity and the idea that the weaker members must be accommodated with love as equal parts of the body, while stronger members willingly give up their freedoms for the good of their brothers. Paul says in Romans 14-15 that “the freedom of the gospel is constrained by the obligation to love.”¹¹⁶ All members of the church are to act as one, bearing the burdens of one another. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:26 that, “if one member suffers all suffer together with it.” Unity in suffering entails loving accommodation.

Grant Macaskill illustrates this principle, saying, “whether the weakness is one of poverty, intellect, or faith, the principle is the same: this person belongs because of God’s welcoming, and their needs must now be met with love by the community.”¹¹⁷ While believers have freedom in Christ, God calls the body to limit that freedom when it hurts others, even unintentionally. For autistic believers, things such as chewing gum or wearing perfume in church, while intended to be completely harmless, can cause immense harm to autistic churchgoers, making these places inaccessible. Church members need to be willing to give up good things for the benefit of the weaker members. In the case of autism, this may mean giving up things such as gum and perfume when in shared spaces with other believers.¹¹⁸ Giving these things up is an act of love toward autistic believers and can make a world of difference for them. Forgoing these harmless items expresses a form of Christian love that is vastly different from the

¹¹⁵ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 60.

¹¹⁶ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 121.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

world. One of the best witnesses an allistic believer can provide to an autistic person is to lovingly accommodate their needs without argument or complaint. It is essential, however, for autistic individuals to communicate their needs so that the church can accommodate them. It is not immoral for churches to have scented soaps or fluorescent lights, nor is it immoral for church members to wear perfumes or chew gum. However, when the church becomes aware that these actions have been harmful to its members, the church must address the issues.¹¹⁹

How to Create a Friendly Church Environment

When creating a friendly church environment, it is important to create the environment from a young age. Many autistic children who grow up in unfriendly churches end up leaving the faith as adults. Growing up in a healthy church environment where differences are celebrated, questions are encouraged, and members are honest will be much more conducive to staying in the church. Creating a healthy environment involves cultivating the unique autistic gifting in individuals, allowing each individual to serve the body according to the gifts given to them by God (1 Peter 4:10). This may include having an individual who is good at systematizing help sort craft supplies for the children's ministry or coordinate church activities. Cultivating a healthy church environment also involves hiring servant leaders with upright character (Matthew 20:25-28, Titus 1:6-9), emphasizing spiritual growth and discipleship (2 Peter 1:5-8, Matthew 28:19-20), and promoting authentic fellowship among the body (Acts 2:42-47). A healthy church should not discourage its members from asking questions, and it should teach the Word according to its original meaning.

¹¹⁹ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 155.

When cultivating a healthy church environment, church members must avoid assigning moral value to differences in brain chemistry. Autistic individuals should not be condemned because of different communication styles, schedules, preferences, etc. A child with sensory issues should not be labeled as picky, needy, or dramatic. Non-autistic individuals often “assume understandings of the mental states and motives of other people.”¹²⁰ However, these assumptions are often inaccurate when applied to an autistic individual and can be threatening and insulting to an autistic person.¹²¹ Thus, when communicating with autistic individuals, one must avoid assuming harmful intentions behind their social and communication differences.

Practical Suggestions for Accommodation in the Church

Accommodation is not a means of pitying those who are disabled. It is a way of showing members that all people have equal value in the church, and that making the church accessible for disabled believers is done for the good of the whole body. Practical accommodation helps autistic individuals have access to the church and become a part of a Christian community. In a previous section, this thesis enumerated several barriers to church attendance faced by autistic members of the body. While these barriers seem significant, there are many steps the church can take to lessen or remove those obstacles. The remainder of this section addresses each of the aforementioned barriers and gives suggestions on how to remove or lessen each barrier.

Lack of Knowledge, Stigma

The most important part of welcoming autistic believers into the church is education. Before accommodation is possible, there must be awareness and understanding. Without

¹²⁰ Milton, “On the Ontological Status of Autism: The ‘Double Empathy Problem,’” 884.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 884.

education, autistic people will continue to be misunderstood and mistreated within the church. There are different levels of education, and education should address all disabilities. Education should begin at the leadership level. Anyone in a paid position responsible for shepherding the body, including senior pastors, youth pastors, and children's ministers, should be well educated on all disabilities, how they affect individuals, and how to best accommodate disabled members under their care.

Volunteers should be informed about disabilities and how to accommodate disabled individuals in relation to their duties. For example, greeters should be educated on how to engage deaf and hard-of-hearing church members at the door, and ushers should be instructed on how to best provide seating for individuals in wheelchairs. If there are any particular disabilities that affect a volunteer, such as an autistic child in a Sunday school class, those leaders should be given a more in-depth education so that they can better serve that child.

Members should be given a surface-level education on disability and how it relates to loving other members of the body from the Sunday morning pulpit. Teaching members of the church to love disabled members as equal parts of the body will help reduce fear, stigmatization, and ostracization. Disability education should be immersed in biblical truth. Disability education can be easily included with topics such as church life, Christian unity, and the body of Christ. Sermons on disability can be embedded into passages that explicitly mention disability, such as John 9, Luke 14, and Exodus 4, as well as passages that have implications for disability accommodation, including 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Psalm 139, and Romans 14:13-15. Education from the pulpit should also include more detailed information about autism and other commonly misunderstood disabilities, as well as ways the church can alter its practices to better accommodate different members of the body. Many church members want to learn how to be

more welcoming to autistic members of the body.¹²² Education from the Sunday morning pulpit will make this knowledge accessible. Within the children's ministry, children should be taught about disability and how to show Christ's love to their classmates. Children should be given simple explanations of different disabilities and then be instructed on how to include their disabled friends and classmates.

Sensory Environment

There are several ways in which the church can combat the barrier of a harsh sensory environment. One way is to provide spaces within the church to make it accessible. For example, a quiet broadcast room where the service is cast in a room outside the sanctuary can be extremely helpful for autistic believers who are overwhelmed by loud music and bright lights.¹²³ A sensory room within the church would be incredibly helpful in enabling autistic members to regulate while at church, allowing them to engage for more extensive periods of time.¹²⁴

Another way to combat the harsh sensory environment is to remove some common items that cause sensory overload. Using unscented soaps in the church bathrooms can help those who are sensitive to strong smells.¹²⁵ Using LED lighting instead of fluorescent lighting in the church will help make the environment more accessible, as fluorescent lighting is overwhelming to many autistic people.¹²⁶ Leadership can also encourage members of the congregation to consider

¹²² Waldo and Jones, "An Exploratory Study of Attitudes toward Autism Amongst Church-Going Christians in the South East of England, United Kingdom," 354-358.

¹²³ Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church*, 25-26.

¹²⁴ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹²⁶ Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church*, 25.

forgoing common things that present obstacles to autistic people, including wearing perfume and chewing gum.¹²⁷

A third way to combat the harsh sensory environment is to provide accommodation for areas of church practice that cannot be changed. While it is impractical to change the worship practices of the church, it is practical to provide earplugs for those who are overwhelmed by loud music or large amounts of background noise.¹²⁸ While it is impossible to ensure that the entire congregation does not chew gum, click pens, or wear perfume, it is possible to leave the back rows open so that those who need it can be a bit farther removed from the crowd.

Within the children's ministry, autistic children can often behave in ways that are deemed to be "misbehavior" when they experience sensory overload. In these instances, disciplining the child will not solve the behavioral issue. In these situations, the Sunday school leader should create a plan for the child to avoid sensory overload. This will often include allowing the child to take breaks during which he or she can go to the restroom, water fountain, or children's minister's office for some time to decompress. The child should be given the freedom to take these breaks as often as needed, as this will provide a sense of security for them.¹²⁹

Social Environment

Combatting the harsh social environment requires a shift in mindset. It first involves viewing autistic traits in a different light. Autistic traits are typically viewed in a negative light, seen as deficits rather than differences. When the overall mindset shifts to see autism as a gift

¹²⁷ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 118.

¹²⁸ Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church*, 25.

¹²⁹ Barbara J. Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Friendship Ministries, 2006), 60-61.

and a difference that will enrich the church, the church will become a much more welcoming environment. The most significant way to combat a harsh social environment is purposeful inclusion. Instead of waiting for an autistic person to engage, engage the autistic member. Plan activities that will be accessible and appealing to autistic individuals. Intentionally seek out conversations with autistic individuals and listen to their stories.¹³⁰ When engaging with an autistic believer, be respectful, patient, and persistent. Respect the autistic person's needs and avoid infantilizing or assuming incompetence. Be patient with autistic individuals and be persistent in attempting to interact with them.¹³¹

Another way to combat the harsh social environment is to be direct in communication. Autistic people often struggle with hidden meanings. For example, if inviting an autistic person to lunch after church, instead of saying "We are about to go to lunch," ask, "Would you like to come to lunch with us?" Additionally, autistic people often struggle with defining relationships and knowing who wants to be their friend and who is considered an acquaintance. It is important to affirm friendship so as to be clear about the relationship. Saying things such as "you are a really good friend," and "I really enjoy spending time with you," helps an autistic person know how they relate to specific people.

Draining Activities

Church activities by nature often cause significant stress on autistic individuals, which can cause them to feel drained after participating in church events. However, many steps can be taken to decrease the amount of stress on autistic believers. One way to combat the draining

¹³⁰ Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*, 113, 195.

¹³¹ Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church*, 43-44.

nature of church activities is to create alternatives to youth groups for autistic youth. If an autistic member of the youth group is feeling overwhelmed by the youth service, the church could provide an opportunity for that teenager to be disciplined one-on-one by a church leader.¹³² The church can also create an opportunity to engage in discipleship with a small group of peers through a Bible study.

Another way to combat the draining nature of church activities is to provide detailed information on upcoming church activities. Autistic people find comfort in predictability, so having detailed information regarding church activities will make church participation more enjoyable for the individual. Providing itineraries, venue maps, and information regarding food will help make activities much more pleasant, as the autistic members will know what to expect, thus enabling them to relax. Receiving an outline of the Sunday morning service in advance can help autistic members know what to expect on Sunday morning.¹³³ Communicating any changes in routine in advance and providing a warning before transitioning between activities will help autistic individuals cope with the changes and transitions.¹³⁴

Fear, Mistreatment, and Isolation

The main way to combat the fear of participation is to communicate with autistic people about their needs and help ensure they are accommodated. Disability ministry advocate Barbara J. Newman suggests creating opportunities for those affected by disability to disclose their needs. Newman suggests providing a space where parents can disclose any special needs when

¹³² Burnett, *With All Your Mind: Autism and the Church*, 27.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³⁴ Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 78-79.

registering for the children's ministry and providing a congregational survey where there is a space that allows adults with disabilities to communicate their needs.¹³⁵ Allowing autistic believers to communicate their needs and find accommodations will greatly reduce the anxiety associated with church participation.

The best way to combat mistreatment due to differences is to encourage acceptance. Accept autistic people for who they are; do not seek to change the way they operate. This does not include confronting issues of sin, however. Autistic individuals, like allistics, are often in need of having someone confront them in their sin, but this should be done with careful evaluation, making sure that one is not assigning moral value to differences in brain chemistry.

Many autistic individuals who go to churches with special needs ministries participate in a system where they are partnered with a trained individual who will help care for them. While this is an excellent way to promote integration, the volunteer must ensure that the individual does not become isolated from the rest of the body, only focused on their aid. The trained volunteer helping the autistic individual should ensure that he or she is helping make church activities accessible and enjoyable, not removing the autistic individual from the church altogether.¹³⁶

Apparent Discrepancies in the Christian Faith

One of the most significant barriers to church participation is apparent discrepancies within the Christian faith in doctrine and practice. There are several actions the church must take in order to combat these discrepancies. First, church leaders must be prepared to answer difficult questions. Many autistic people often have challenging questions, even as young children. These

¹³⁵ Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 43-44.

¹³⁶ "Disability Strategies for Accommodation and Accessibility," presented by Chris Hulshof, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, December 1, 2023.

questions need to be answered with humility and grace. When an autistic person asks a difficult question, instead of saying, “just have faith,” admit to not knowing an answer and try to find one. Have intelligent conversations about theological issues. If these conversations are difficult or unenjoyable, then find someone in the church who is knowledgeable about the Bible and enjoys having those conversations.

Another thing the church must do is focus on building knowledge and relationships rather than creating emotional experiences. During worship, focus on bringing glory to God instead of bringing people to tears. Emotional experiences during worship are good but should not be artificially engineered. Worship leaders on stage should express emotion freely rather than being coached on “stage presence.” Sermons from the pulpit should be focused on the Bible rather than motivational speeches with small bits of scripture added.

A third action the church must take is to avoid creating nonbiblical rules in the name of God or Christianity. Rules such as the prohibition of dancing should not have a place in Christian community, as they are not scriptural. However, this excludes any actions the church takes to ensure that a member does not stumble, as commanded in Romans 14. Avoiding nonbiblical rules also includes avoiding prescribing uniform ways of following God’s commands. For example, an autistic believer may not be able to participate in serving the church the way allistic believers can. In these cases, the church should find ways in which the autistic individual can serve.¹³⁷

A fourth action the church must take is to create a genuine, honest environment. The church must stress genuine obedience, and leaders must take care to follow their teachings.

¹³⁷ Bowman, *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity*, 122-127.

Worship in the church should be focused on bringing glory to God, not creating an emotional experience for the congregation. When there are issues of wrongdoing in the church, the church must acknowledge them. Instead of making efforts to bury issues of immorality within the church, especially among church leadership, the church should communicate with the body that an issue is being addressed.

Accommodating Those Who Cannot Express Their Needs

Those working in autism ministry will encounter situations in which an autistic believer will have a strong reaction to something in their environment. Oftentimes, however, autistic members of the body are unable to express their concerns. Some members of the body are unable to speak, and others are unable to identify and communicate what is causing them pain.¹³⁸ In these instances, church leaders must try to identify the source of pain for the autistic individual. This may involve looking at the surrounding environment and identifying potential sources of discomfort, looking at the events immediately preceding and following an incident, recalling the events and environment surrounding other similar incidents, and communicating with close friends and family of the individual to try and discern what may be the source of the individual's discomfort.¹³⁹

Accommodating Undiagnosed, Undisclosed, and Masked Autism

When working toward the accommodation of autistic believers, church ministers will encounter the issue of accommodating masked, undiagnosed, and undisclosed autism. Biases in the healthcare industry contribute to many autistic people being misdiagnosed or

¹³⁸ Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 65.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

underdiagnosed, especially in women. For example, the diagnostic rate for autism in males to females has been historically thought of as 4:1. However, taking healthcare biases into account, one source estimates that the prevalence of autism in males to females could be up to 3:4.

Furthermore, eighty percent of autistic females are undiagnosed at age 18.¹⁴⁰

Additionally, because of the rejection many autistic believers have faced at the hands of the church, many autistic believers choose to mask their autism and refrain from disclosing their diagnosis. This is not done out of shame but out of necessity, as many autistic believers find that they are unable to find acceptance when they are openly autistic.¹⁴¹ Masking happens when autistic individuals recognize their differences and learn to mask or camouflage their difficulties to appear more “normal.” This can be extremely exhausting and damaging to the autistic individual and is often unsuccessful, as even masked individuals are seen as different. In these cases, autism may not be evident to most church members, as a masked autistic individual may simply seem to be slightly odd or different.¹⁴² Because there are so many who are not diagnosed or have not disclosed their disability, believers must discuss how the church can be made accessible for those who fall into these groups.

First, the church must discuss how to accommodate self-diagnosed individuals. Because of the biases in healthcare, potential discrimination, and the costs associated with pursuing a diagnosis, many people choose not to pursue a diagnosis. Many others may be on a waitlist for a

¹⁴⁰ Robert McCrossin, “Finding the True Number of Females with Autistic Spectrum Disorder by Estimating the Biases in Initial Recognition and Clinical Diagnosis,” *Children* 9, no. 2 (February 17, 2022): 272, <https://doi.org/10.3390/children9020272>.

¹⁴¹ Bustion, “Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention,” 671-672.

¹⁴² Botha et al., “‘Autism Is Me’: An Investigation of How Autistic Individuals Make Sense of Autism and Stigma,” 439.

diagnostic appointment or saving money for a diagnosis. Self-diagnosis is affirmed in both the academic and social circles of the autistic community and should be accommodated the same as diagnosed autism.¹⁴³ To ensure that self-diagnosed individuals are accommodated, the church can make any accommodations intended for autistic believers, such as earplugs, sensory rooms, and quiet broadcast rooms, available for anyone who may need them, regardless of diagnostic status. Additionally, when engaging with any church member, members should celebrate differences rather than treating them as sinful, even when there is no known diagnosis. Any child who asks challenging questions should be treated with love, and no church member should feel inferior because they do not have intense emotional experiences during worship.

Second, members should strive to be inclusive of all members of the church body, making efforts to include everyone who does not naturally gravitate to the center of church social life. Third, the church must respect boundaries set by members of the body, even when no explanation is given, as long as that request is within reason. For example, if a member of a small group requests that nobody chew gum while the group meets, the group should honor that request. Finally, one must never assume that because someone is not visibly struggling, they are not struggling at all. Autistic individuals can often hide the fact that they are struggling, even in extreme emotional distress. If an individual asks for accommodation, it is important to give it to them, even if they do not seem to be in distress.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the church must address autism, as autistic people are a necessary part of the body of Christ, and providing accommodation for autistic members of the body will allow

¹⁴³ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community*, 15.

them to flourish within the church and use their unique autistic gifts to build up the body. The aims of this thesis were twofold: to establish a biblical and practical foundation for why autism should be accommodated within the church and to provide an overview of different strategies the church can use to accommodate autistic believers. The first goal of this thesis was accomplished by promoting a correct view of autism and establishing the theological and practical reasons why autistic believers should be accommodated in the church. There are many ways the church has viewed autism historically, but the correct view is as a neurotype that should be accommodated and accepted in the church. Autistic people are made in the image of God and are in need of His grace and His people. The church, as a body with many different parts, needs autistic believers to function within their unique gifts. There are many different benefits to having autistic church members, the chief among them being the fact that autistic people can upend the idolatrous practices of the church. The second goal of this thesis was accomplished by providing guiding principles for accommodation as well as an overview of accommodation strategies to help churches begin creating an accessible and friendly environment for autistic believers. Principles such as genuine Christian community and loving accommodation can help guide believers and churches in creating a friendly church environment for autistic individuals. The church body is to sacrifice their Christian freedom for the good of their brothers, as commanded by Paul. This includes making sacrifices to create a friendly church environment for autistic individuals. There are many barriers autistic believers face when going to church, but this thesis provided various practical solutions to eliminate or reduce their effects through practical accommodation. Overall, through acceptance and accommodation, the church can create a healthy environment for those of all neurotypes, creating a diverse environment that brings glory to God.

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