

Reviews



Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), pp. x + 236, ISBN: 978-1481311250. £37.00

Autism is so prevalent in society that, as Grant Macaskill points out, ‘almost every Christian community will experience its effects in some way, whether through members who are autistic or have autistic children or through interaction with the wider society within which the church is located’ (p. 1). While this book is an academic work, and self-consciously ‘research’, Macaskill has sought to keep it as accessible as possible for the many people who will find it relevant. Because of this, the work not only breaks important ground in the discussion of autism and the Church, but also is highly readable.

The book contains an Introduction, six chapters, and a Conclusion. In his Introduction, Macaskill points out the need for work on this topic and his procedures for studying it. In his method, rather than searching for possible cases of autism in biblical history (which he notes is unreliable given the paucity of information), he looks for principles that may shape our approach to autism in the biblical text. With regards to language use (often a contentious topic), he states that he uses both ‘autistic people’ and ‘persons with autism’ as there is division in the community over which phrasing is best and he wanted to represent that in the language he used.

In Chapter 1, “Real Autism: Characteristics and Explanations”, Macaskill begins by giving the historical background to the developmental condition before moving on to current understandings of autism as a spectrum and specifying some characteristics of autism (bearing in mind that there is wide variability in individual expression). He then looks at whether autism should be classed as a disability (it is useful in some respects, but less helpful in others). As a digression, Macaskill briefly looks at autism in the Church, pointing out some obvious potential problems (such as overly loud sounds or perfumes). He finishes the chapter with theories and explanations for autism (including a comment on the fraudulent research that suggested a link between vaccines and autism). This chapter provides a good overview of the current understanding of



autism and will help to give some early guidance into the issues that may arise for autistic individuals in a church environment.

In Chapter 2, “Autism and the Bible: The Challenge of Reading Responsibly”, he details his own approach to reading the Bible in relation to autism. As he points out, there are no individual passages that directly discuss autism as it ‘was not known or named as such in the ancient world and is nowhere explicitly described in Scripture’ (p. 43). Before getting to a discussion of his own principles, he discusses three main ways of misreading the Bible in relation to autism. He then outlines his six principles: 1) read in a way governed by the person and story of Jesus; 2) read the Bible as a complex whole; 3) respect the historical particularities; 4) read within the communion of the Church; 5) read humbly as a fallible community; and 6) read with the Spirit who illumines. These principles appear well balanced and fit for his purpose, they respect an evangelical understanding of Scripture, the role of the Spirit, and the need to respect other previous and present interpreters.

Chapter 3, “Autism and the Body of Christ: Incarnation for the Church”, draws heavily on the principle of reading in relation to Jesus. This chapter deals with how social value is ascribed and how the Church often conforms more to a fallen human way of ascribing value (to those who are socially impressive in some way) than to the way we are called to value people. He examines topics such as how Jesus cared for the unimpressive and outcasts, the image of God, the idea of the Church as the body of Christ, and the relationship between flesh and Spirit. In doing so he demonstrates how problematic it is that autistic people often are marginalised due to often having a lack of ability to carry out some of the standard practices that are considered appropriate for ‘insiders’ (e.g., sharing jargon, using eye contact in an expected way). This chapter challenges us to be ready to see where our religious values are actually at odds with the gospel and represent the flesh more than the Spirit.

Chapter 4, “Autism in the Church: A Sensory Space for All God’s People”, begins with highlighting the potential issues of sensory stimuli in a church environment for persons with autism. These sensory difficulties can often lead to marginalisation by limiting the ability of autistic people to participate in the Church. Significantly, Macaskill notes, that ‘If the “furniture” of that environment were prescribed by God, then perhaps this would be *their* problem [the autistic person’s], rather than anyone else’s’ (p. 126). In the chapter, Macaskill demonstrates again the equal value

before God of persons with autism and their place in the body of Christ. He also discusses the concept of the weak versus the strong in Romans – being careful not to apply it directly due to it being about a different topic in its original context, but rather considering the principles in play and how they apply. This leads to a well-made proposal that those who are ‘normal’, and so comparable to the strong, may need to practice forgoing some things they would otherwise like (e.g. perfume) as an act of love for the sake of their brother or sister in Christ.

In Chapter 5, “The Dark Side of Autism: Anxiety, Depression, and Addiction”, Macaskill highlights some issues commonly associated with autism. He focuses on the three noted in the chapter subtitle. While they are by no means unique to autism, ‘they present in distinctive ways for those with the condition and generate particular personal and pastoral challenges’ (p. 129). This chapter has a specific focus on the weakness of the flesh and what that means for us. It will be valuable to those seeking to care for people with autism and for autistic persons themselves. In fact, because Macaskill’s work is based on biblical principles that underlie the issues, the discussion is also relevant more widely than for those with autism.

Chapter 6, “Autism and Christian Practices: The Challenge of Pastoral Care”, includes a few topics of importance that were not discussed elsewhere. The topics covered include: profound autism; sexuality; and ‘autism reads the Bible’. The section on profound autism deals well with nonverbal autism and the possibility of salvation (where persons are unable to confess with their lips that Jesus is Lord). It also has some useful discussion of prayer and ways that autistic people may be encouraged and aided to pray – because improvisational prayer can be a real struggle for them to learn and this should not prevent prayer. In the section on sexuality, he highlights how sexual identity is a common issue for persons with autism and that holding a particular view on sexuality is not necessary for our Christian unity (which is in Christ). Macaskill seeks to demonstrate that the issue is more complex than may be immediately assumed by those holding traditional views (some who hold non-traditional views of sexuality do so while holding a high view of Scripture) and needs to be discussed with charity. Some of us may feel like this issue has been adequately analysed and concluded. However, it is important from a pastoral perspective that those caring for people struggling with sexuality acknowledge the issues in interpretation. The last section encourages

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people to appreciate the distinctive viewpoint of autistic readers of the Bible and acknowledge that there may be valuable readings to be found just there.

In his conclusion, “Toward a Theology of Autism”, Macaskill does not go back over the main points of the book, but rather makes ‘some synthetic observations that draw together a few of the strands that run through the book’ (p. 191). The main strands he discusses are: a theology of weakness and gift; providence, creation, and new creation; the community; leadership; and Christian identity. This all makes for a valuable concluding chapter.

If you want a how-to manual for caring for people with autism in the Church, this is not what you will find in this book. In fact, one might question whether it is possible to have such a manual given the array of differences experienced by autistic persons (although a book with practical case studies may be profitable). Rather, this book looks at biblical principles for approaching the topic of autism in the Church. In doing this, Macaskill has gifted the Church with something truly valuable. One might not agree with all the minutiae, but this work draws attention to a serious issue for Christian practice and love.

I found this work to have excellent balance. Macaskill acknowledges both visible positives that people with autism can contribute and unique challenges. In addition, he points out that valuing people based on what they can contribute is actually a worldly way of attributing value. We are all of equal value, even if no one can point to some way we have contributed. On this topic, he also points out that autistic persons, like all humans, require the transforming work of God, who cannot deny the need for the Spirit to bring about internal change.

I admit to occasionally feeling a little lost about how what I was reading related to the main points that were presented for consideration: like I was reading miscellany related to the topic rather than being led through the topic. But this is a very minor criticism. After reading each chapter, the relationships between the issues raised were quite clear to me.

I would highly recommend this work. It will be valuably read by academics as well as non-academics. While some may struggle to digest some of the information, it is highly accessible and, for an academic work, a very easy read. It contains much of value for the Church to consider and to be challenged by: where our human traditions create barriers to

involvement, we need to be ready to be humble, flexible, and change where necessary.

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Fern Brady, *Strong Female Character* (London: Brazen, 2023), pp. 288, ISBN 978-1914240447. £16.99

‘You can’t be autistic,’ a psychiatrist told Fern Brady when she was 16 years old. ‘You’re making eye contact. And you have a boyfriend. So, no, you don’t fit the criteria’ (p. 16).

It was only many years later when Brady, who was finally diagnosed with autism in 2021 at the age of 34, started looking into the research herself that she discovered ‘the criteria’ was based on work done in the 1930s by psychiatrist Hans Asperger into autistic young males: ‘Funnily enough,’ she writes, ‘none of them had boyfriends because they were eight-year-old boys in pre-war Vienna’ (p. 16).

This sort of bleakly funny punchline is a hallmark of *Strong Female Character*, Brady’s debut memoir. A successful stand-up comedian whose TV appearances include *Have I Got News For You*, *Taskmaster*, and *Live at the Apollo*, Brady is that rare thing: a high profile openly autistic woman with a platform, and a strong story to tell.

And boy does she tell it. Brady pulls no punches whether she’s dissecting her ‘terrible Catholic childhood’ (from the blurb) in West Lothian, or describing herself thumping the walls of her flat in an attempt to cope with her feelings. Her prose is stark, straightforward and at times hilarious, as her painfully honest account of her struggle to receive a diagnosis takes her from behind the doors of a Scottish psychiatric unit to the London stage, via the University of Edinburgh, a brief spell as a stripper and a period of homelessness.

Strong Female Character has clearly struck a nerve. Published in February of this year it swiftly made the *Sunday Times* bestseller list and the top ten of audiobooks on Audible (Brady reads the book herself), and