



The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics

Grant Macaskill

To cite this article: Grant Macaskill (2022) The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics, Journal of Disability & Religion, 26:4, 414-438, DOI: [10.1080/23312521.2021.1881024](https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2021.1881024)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2021.1881024>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor and Francis Group, LLC



Published online: 08 Feb 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 8553



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics

Grant Macaskill

Kirby Laing Chair of New Testament Exegesis, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

ABSTRACT

Almost every church or Christian community is affected by the presence of autism, as it is now understood. Christians who consider the Bible to be the normative guide for matters of thought and practice turn to this body of Scripture as they seek to deal Christianly with this recently-labelled reality. Because the condition of autism was not known as such in the ancient world, the attempt to “think biblically” about it cannot be reduced to the exegesis of texts that obviously describe it, and this quickly exposes the limitations of the exegetical methodologies practiced within the discipline of Biblical Studies, even by faithful scholars and pastors. Christians may develop well-intentioned and creative attempts to apply biblical teaching to autism, but if these are not regulated by good interpretative and theological principles, such accounts can be inappropriate and pastorally destructive. Autism, moreover, does not stand alone, but exemplifies a range of developmental conditions not known *as such* in the ancient world, particularly those involving cognitive development.

KEYWORDS

Autism; disability; scripture

We need to develop a set of interpretative practices that will allow us to read the Bible constructively in relation to autism and other developmental disorders, so that the important work done in the cognate areas of theology and pastoral care can be rightly informed and constrained by the Bible. This paper will articulate a set of practices based on classical accounts of “the rule of faith” (*regula fidei*), but informed by contemporary scholarship on biblical interpretation (including the principles of biblical interpretation operative in Jewish thought during the Second Temple Period). These will be brought into dialogue with the hermeneutics operative in problematic approaches, highlighting how certain assumptions, not just about how the Bible is to be read but also about what the Bible is, result in distorted pastoral appropriations of Scripture.

CONTACT Grant Macaskill ✉ grant.macaskill@abdn.ac.uk 📧 Kirby Laing Chair of New Testament Exegesis, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK.

This article is adapted from Chapter 2 of Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, Community* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019). Used with permission.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor and Francis Group, LLC

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.

Psalm 119:105¹

Since moving to the University of Aberdeen in 2015, I have dedicated a significant part of my research to thinking about autism (Macaskill, 2018a, 2019b). Specifically, as the Chair of New Testament Exegesis, I have explored the question of what it means to “think biblically” about autism, recognizing that I ask this question in a distinctively Christian register, with a distinctively Christian definition of “Bible.” For Jewish thinkers, the word “Bible” designates something with different limits and contexts, operating with a different kind of authority, even if the content is substantially the same. Mature and constructive dialogue between Jewish and Christian thinkers always involves an awareness of such differences, and any hope that such dialogue will speak to the experience of disability must be shaped by this awareness. In outlining a distinctively Christian approach in this article, I do not intend to critique or to reject approaches from other traditions, but rather to affirm that each of us inhabits a particular tradition that governs our interpretative activity, and to allow the tenets of Christian interpretation particularly to inform that of the Christian community to which I belong.

Most Christians consider the Bible to function as normative Scripture, even if that normativity is conceived differently across traditions. Confronted by any issue, they will ask the question, “What does it mean to think biblically about this?” That may not be their only question, and it may not be the most decisive one to them (again, depending on the tradition to which they belong), but it will be an important part of their attempt to think “Christianly” about the issue before them. The language of “normativity” (and “normative”), as used here, is not the same as that of “normalcy” (and “normal”), which is typically viewed with concern from within the autistic community and from within other disabled communities. The word “normalcy” indicates an assumption that certain states or experiences are considered to be a standard, against which others are considered to be “abnormal” or “deficient”; this assumption grounds what we have come to speak of as “ableism.” The word “normativity,” by contrast, is associated with moral identity: it designates the role played by Scripture in shaping the character and expectations of Christian life and thought. It is a word that I use in preference to “authority” because the latter tends to conceive the mode of operation of Scripture through a particular set of authority structures or metaphors: the Bible is seen principally as the body of commandments that must be obeyed or the handbook that should be followed. Such ways of thinking about authority simply have no space for much of the content of the Bible, and prove fatal for reflection on how the Bible can shape the experience of disability, as we shall see.

In this article, I want to lay out a set of practices that I consider to be vital to the proper Christian use of Scripture in relation to questions of disability. These should not be seen as set in opposition to standard contemporary exegetical practices (which, of course, involve a huge range of methodologies), but rather as reframing them. The framework intentionally locates the significance of any given text within the context of the Bible as a whole and in relation to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This reflects the interpretative principle known as “the rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) in the early church, which developed fluidly and without much explicit articulation, but was nevertheless widely sustained (see Bokedal, 2015). The commitment to relating the exegesis of any given passage to the canon as a whole and to the person of Jesus Christ reflected an important recognition: the Bible can be *misused* in the service of ideology and our interpretations of it must be undertaken carefully and prayerfully. Most of the views that the church has come to label as heresy have been based upon “prooftexts” from which they have claimed biblical warrant. As we seek to think Christianly about autism, we may find ourselves reconsidering what it means to think Christianly at all, and how the Bible operates within this.

The account of these practices that I lay out here is drawn from some of my own recent work on Christian moral identity (Macaskill, 2019a) and on Christian intellectual humility (Macaskill, 2018b); both of which have been particularly attentive to how the Bible functions to shape the way we think. They are also influenced, though, by my involvement in discussions about the theology of disability at the University of Aberdeen. My colleagues John Swinton and Brian Brock have thought much longer and much harder than I have about disability (a word that we use out of necessity, rather than preference), and their thinking has been shaped at the most basic levels by personal experience. To work within an academic community where disability is of central concern is a privilege, and it forces one to consider many of the interpretative values that we take for granted and to ask whether they are problematic at a deep level. The principles I outline here have been shaped by this context; they are not uniquely about autism, or even disability more broadly, but about the ways that we basically conceive the task of reading Scripture. They bear on every issue that we might consider. Consequently, they may invite us to reconsider our views on a whole range of issues beyond the current one. But I offer them here because they are *absolutely* vital to a proper use of the Bible in relation to the needs of those with autism. Reflecting Christianly on autism may press us to reevaluate the basic assumptions that govern our practices, even those of exegesis. It may cause us to see that our cherished readings of Scripture are actually idolatrous or vicious.

Reading the bible in relation to autism: the problem

The dramatic shifts in awareness about the prevalence of autism within the population—which have seen estimates move from 1 in 10,000 to anywhere from 1 in 200 to 1 in 50—demand that Christians ask, “What does it mean to think biblically?” *particularly* in relation to this condition. Yet, it is a condition that was not known or named as such in the ancient world and that is nowhere explicitly described in Scripture. We cannot, then, simply find several relevant passages and engage in exegesis, after which we pronounce, “This is what the Bible says about autism.” We need to think more carefully about how the Bible, considered the normative and sacred Scripture of the Christian tradition, should function to shape our thinking about autism. This is, in fact, a principle of understanding how biblical authority operates that extends beyond the particulars of newly identified or “hidden” disabilities² like autism to a massive range of uniquely modern issues, and bears more broadly on how the Bible is used in relation to disability studies.³ The world is full of things that were unknown to our parents, far less to the biblical authors, and one of the constant dangers that besets Christians who rightly consider the Bible to regulate their thought and life is moving to facile assumptions of how these ancient texts might speak to contemporary realities. This speaks, in turn, to the simplistic ways that we often apply texts that clearly *do* involve a particular issue to contemporary ethics: we often move *immediately* from the exegesis of this or that text to a pronouncement on the rights or wrongs of a particular practice.

For those of us who occupy traditions shaped by the principle of *sola scriptura*, this is a special risk, not because that principle is questionable, but because it has frequently come to be dislocated from the other *solas* which contextualized and controlled it in Reformed theology (see Webster, 2001, p. 10) and from the theological principles that informed and controlled the reading of Scripture through the centuries of the church prior to modernity. Evangelicals, in particular, are often unaware of the extent to which modernity has shaped their reading practices and their ways of conceiving biblical authority, and just how different their approaches to reading the Bible are from those practiced in the early church and, for that matter, in the Judaism of the New Testament period. Consequently, we find it particularly difficult to bring the Bible to bear on a problem that cannot be addressed *immediately* by the exegesis of obviously relevant passages, which is one of the reasons that while a fair bit of work has been done generally on the Bible and disability studies, studying examples of disabled characters in the Bible (e.g., Moss & Schipper, 2011), little has been done with conditions like autism, which were unknown *as such* in the ancient world.

At the root of this, I think, is a curiously defective identification of the task of exegesis in relation to the object of study, the Bible. For all our talk of the Bible as the Word of God, something that must be listened to humbly, we typically approach exegesis as if it were an exercise in “fracking”: provided we apply the right machinery with the right methodology to the text, we will be able to extract its meaning from it and then apply it to our contemporary situation. Exegesis is simply analysis, and if we do it well we will own or possess the content of the text, which is reduced to a single extractable thing. But if the Bible is identified as the living Word of God, then exegesis is just one element in a careful (and prayerful) act of listening and reflecting, one that is attentive to how the text speaks to us, as well as to what it says, and that recognizes the capacity of the Bible to speak as a living voice into our ever-changing circumstances.

Misreading the bible in relation to autism

Before outlining the practices that ought to be embodied in our interpretative activity, I will consider three examples of attempts to think biblically about autism that I consider to be fundamentally flawed. Identifying the flaws in each will allow us to think a little more maturely about how the Bible should function properly in our theology.

The first example is, on one level, fairly innocuous, but it still opens up important issues for us to reflect upon. In a 2010 article, S.K. Mathew and J.D. Pandian “diagnosed” a number of biblical characters as having what are known today as neurological or psychiatric conditions (Mathew & Pandian, 2010). Among the diagnoses proposed was one of autism: Samson was considered to be autistic, “which would precede the first known case of autism by centuries” (Mathew & Pandian, 2010, p. 164). Without needing to rehearse any of the detail that was drawn into this proposed diagnosis, the approach taken by Mathew and Pandian can be compared with the process of clinical diagnosis that would be experienced by a person with autism today. This involves lengthy interviews, both with the person considered to be autistic (if they are able to communicate) and with family members. A detailed picture of their background and development is constructed, shaped (as far as possible) by the testimony of the person themselves concerning their sensory and social experiences. In some cases, the process may take more than one day of interviews and is regulated by very detailed, carefully developed questions of agreed diagnostic value. It is simply impossible to replicate this with the limited third-person narrative detail of a biblical story contained in four short chapters of the Bible.

The approach engages the biblical story as a means to access a historical reality that lies behind the text and is obtainable through it; that is, the

principal thing the scholars in question are seeking to obtain through their reading of the text is access to the historical reality of Samson's neurotype. This neglects the real character, function, and purpose of the narrative and the discourse, which are intended to *communicate* to readers something that will shape their own lives in relation to God. This is not to question the historical veracity of the text—that is a debate for elsewhere—but to emphasize that the text is not principally intended as a vehicle for historical documentation, but rather for edification. As such, whatever historical details the text contains are rendered to us in an edifying and theological narrative that is much more concerned with the demands of serving Israel's God and the dangers of idolatry than with the neurological health of its characters. Put bluntly, the approach to the text of the book of Judges taken by Mathew and Pandian is not appropriate in relation to the character of the text.

The second example is dramatically more disturbing; I feel the need to issue a trigger warning that what follows may be upsetting. I do not include a link to the relevant websites, as I do not want to promote the source in any sense. In the course of my research, I came across a website that compared the symptoms of autism (actually, profound autism, although no such differentiation was made in the discussion itself) to the biblical accounts of demon possession. Mutism, fits, spasms, destructive behavior, *et cetera*: these were represented as significant parallels between the descriptions in the gospels of people who had demons driven from them and the behaviors seen in autistic children. The conclusion reached was that what is seen as an epidemic of autism today is actually evidence of demon possession. The correct way to treat this, therefore, is with prayers for deliverance or exorcism. As disturbing as this claim was in itself, it was overshadowed by the comments that readers had posted to the website about their own experience as parents. They affirmed the conclusion that identified autism with demon possession and, in many cases, spoke about their own experience of praying (unsuccessfully) for their own children to be delivered from the demons that possessed them.

Multiple comments could be made in response to this, some of which will be reprised in the positive proposals outlined below. For one thing, stories of demonic possession within the Bible are actually relatively uncommon and are particularly clustered within the Synoptic Gospels and Acts. There are a few stories outside these, but not many. That has some bearing on the proportional significance of the demonic within the Bible and relates to one of the proposals below, namely that we need to allow biblical proportions to play some role in our biblical interpretation, to respect the shape of the Bible as a whole. Second, the association of a demonic presence with a non-verbal (mute) person is really confined to

two stories (Matt. 9:32–3/Luke 11:14, Matt. 12:22); only by conflating these stories with others involving demons and violence (Matt. 8:28–33) can one construct something that shares superficial characteristics with autism. Third, “mutism” or “non-verbalism” is more commonly represented simply as a physical disability, listed alongside lameness and blindness as people come to Jesus for healing (about which we will say more below), as in Matthew 15:30–31. The final point, though, is perhaps the most important. The problem with this approach is that it does not take seriously the need to understand what we are bringing *back* to the Bible to be understood in its light. It ignores the evidence that autism is associated with genetic factors and with demonstrably different neurological features; it does not take seriously that these are necessarily part of what the condition is and involves. Those who contributed to the website mentioned above might accuse me of putting modern science “before” the Bible, but it is actually a basic principle of biblical truthfulness that we expect to see a coherence between the physical world that science investigates and the world as it is rendered to us in Scripture. The two involve different identifications and therefore different principles of investigation,⁴ and cannot be collapsed into each other, but we expect to see some kind of coherence, which means we cannot ignore the physical dimension of autism (genetics, neurology, *et cetera*) by labeling it as demon possession. I will say more below on how we negotiate the technological present in relation to the pre-technological past, but at this point the main problem with this approach can be expressed in these terms: its advocates do not take seriously the evidence for the physical causal factors known to be associated with autism.⁵

The third problematic use of the Bible is more subtle, although it may be nearly as disturbing as the one just considered. For some, autism is a problem to be “healed,” a view that takes its warrant from the various stories of healing that we find in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament and most extensively within the context of the gospels and Acts. In some cases, this can be married to what is sometimes referred to as a “health and prosperity” understanding of the gospel, where those who have true faith in God enjoy a flood of blessings that ought typically to include the healing of illnesses and the provision of material prosperity. Sometimes, this is traced to a view of sickness and suffering that link them very closely to the problem of sin: where sin is properly dealt with, healing and prosperity should follow. For reasons that I will outline below, this approach should be seen as highly problematic. In other cases, though, the view of where healing and blessing fit into the Christian experience may be less sweeping and less thoroughly problematic; they may be affirmed as things that often, but not always, accompany God’s life-giving presence, to be prayed for and hoped for, but not considered to be routine.

Any reflection on this must affirm that the Bible includes stories of healing, sometimes involving people who are disabled in some sense. It must also recognize that some of those healings appear to have a programmatic significance, representing the decisive change that has taken place with the coming of Jesus and closely linked to the realization of his work of deliverance from sin. In Matthew 11, for example, Jesus responds to John's question about whether he is indeed the Messiah in part by referring to his work of healing:

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Matt. 11:2-6)

The references to those who are healed are generally understood to evoke the expectations of the prophet Isaiah about the figure of the Servant, so that their function is not to indicate that healing will now be the new normal, but rather to demonstrate that Jesus is, indeed, the Messianic Servant. This is in line with other parts of Matthew that similarly link the revelation of the Davidic king with particular acts of healing (Novakovic, 2003). Nevertheless, the healings are described as real events, and we should take this seriously. We must also acknowledge that there are points in the Bible, notably in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 51:8), where the language of sickness and affliction is used by people who are burdened by a sense of their own sin, and who identify their suffering as some kind of divine chastening.

These observations mean that we cannot ignore the *apparent* biblical warrant for the view that autism, like any other disabling condition, might be (or even "should be") healed. But the same can be said of every view that, through the centuries, the church has come to consider wrong or even heretical: all can point to particular Scriptural texts for warrant. The proper response to these must always be to highlight that other parts of the canon of Scripture contain important corrective or balancing truths that must be brought to bear on such assertions. In relation to healing in general, stories of healing, as with those concerning exorcism, are particularly clustered within the gospels and Acts where they continue to have exceptional significance. The miracles of Jesus continue to be "miraculous" and not commonplace; they are exceptional interventions, rather than the norm. The same is true of the miracles in Acts: only a small number of healings stories are recounted, which must be considered *exceptionally significant*. James, certainly, speaks of the prayer offered in faith that will make the sick person well (5:15), and does so in a way that suggests he is speaking about regular practices of prayer, but his words need to be read

alongside the passages in Paul's writings that speak of suffering and sickness as things that continue to be present in the life of the believer and that are vital to our manifestation of divine grace:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor. 4:7–10)

This leads toward one of the core principles that must inform the use of Scripture, which simply recognizes that any given text or passage needs to be considered within the wider context of the Bible as a whole. One of the most basic problems in contemporary Christian uses of Scripture is a tendency to move immediately from the exegesis of an isolated text (or even a small set of texts) to making a moral or theological claim that is asserted as “biblical.” This problem becomes visible quickly when we seek to deal with an issue like autism, but it actually affects our moral and theological reasoning much more broadly. As we will see below, such an approach fails to show proper respect or reverence to the character of Scripture as a complex work of divine communication.

One further point can be made on the topic of healing and on the use of Scripture in relation to it. As readers, we need to be sensitive to the ways in which our basic assumptions are colored by the social and intellectual context of late modernity, and we need to allow Scripture to challenge those assumptions. One of the subtle issues that we face concerns our perception of what it means to be healthy and whole. Within the modern context—in which we have come to cherish the idea of the self-contained, self-reliant, autonomous individual (see MacIntyre, 1981, p. 228; Taylor, 1989)—we tend to think of health and well-being in individualist terms, assuming that the healthy individual is one who needs no care and who can live a productive and constructive life. We may even map the need for care and support onto a theology in which the image of God has been compromised and damaged by sin.

Without necessarily dismissing this view, we need to be open to the possibility that we are refracting the biblical material through a distinctively modern account of human being, which neglects the possibility that one can live a joyful life of flourishing while being entirely dependent on the caregiving of others.⁶ Often this accompanies a particular conception of the image of God (*imago Dei*), one that links it to the possession and manifestation of certain properties or capacities by the individual. Such an understanding can be traced back into pre-modern theology, but becomes radically more dominant in the modern era, in the wake of the Enlightenment and the influence of humanism. At this stage, I am not

seeking to offer an alternative way of thinking about the *imago Dei*, but simply to alert the reader to the possibility that they may be working with a set of very modern assumptions about what it means to be a flourishing human being, and may think of healing (and, for that matter, our ultimately destined condition) in ways that are shaped by this.

The problems with both of these approaches—the identification of autism as demonic and the expectation that it should be healed—are complex, but generally emerge from a tendency to read certain biblical passages without due consideration for the teaching of the wider Bible and its proportions, rather than misreading the passages in themselves. The following principles will, I hope, provide helpful correctives to this.

Practice 1. We read the bible in a way that is governed by the person and story of Jesus Christ

To read the Bible “Christianly” means to read all of the Bible in a way that is informed and governed by the identity of Jesus Christ, “the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but now been revealed to his saints” (Colossians 1:26). He is the Word that became flesh (John 1:14), and John’s identification of him in such terms is suggestive of the fact that the meaning of Scripture must always be approached through his particular embodiment of it; for, as John continues, “no-one has ever seen God; it is God the Only Begotten, who is in the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18, my translation).

This should be fairly uncontroversial to any Christian reader, but its importance can be attenuated by ways of conceiving “Christ-centeredness” that fall short of the way it is rendered in the New Testament. It is not simply that Jesus is the great exemplar of Christian morality, whose behavior is to be emulated and whose lead is to be followed; neither is it simply the case that Jesus is now identified as the God to whom obedience is rendered. In the first, Christ-centeredness is a matter of imitation (exemplified in the “What would Jesus do?” slogan), while in the second it is a matter of worshipful obedience to the king. Both of these are good and important elements of Christ-centeredness, but taken by themselves they fall short of the way that the New Testament writers speak of Christ, not just as one by whom obedience is modeled, or to whom it is rendered, but as the one *in* whom salvation and goodness are constituted and apart from whom do not exist. This language is ubiquitous in Paul’s writing, but is found widely throughout the New Testament. The words of Jesus reported in John’s Gospel communicate the significance of the incorporative grammar most effectively: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Importantly, at several points in the New Testament, this kind of language is used both of salvation and of creation, or even of God's providential care for the cosmos. In Colossians 1:15–20, for example, Paul⁷ writes:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:15–20)

Here, it is not only salvation that is “in Christ,” as it is often represented in Paul's writings, but everything in creation, from before time and into eternity. They are not, of course, all “in” him in the same way (Macaskill, 2018c), but the text is particularly concerned to highlight the corresponding senses in which creation, providence, and redemption are constituted in and through the person of Jesus Christ. When the text goes on to speak of him as the mystery that had been hidden through the ages, but that has now been revealed (1:26), this is more than just a reference to the importance of the events narrated in the gospel as part of God's unfolding plan of redemption: it is, instead, an articulation of the new perception that the entirety of God's dealings with the cosmos throughout its existence has been done “in Christ.” The reading of any text of the Old Testament, then, must now be conditioned for the Christian by the knowledge of who Jesus Christ is.

This is illustrated by what we see in the opening of John's Gospel, where Jesus (represented as “the Word”) is described as the one who made all things and in whom the light that gives life to all things exists: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:3–4). This is often read as if John is simply using creation imagery to render the identity of Jesus; he is doing this, but he is also re-telling the story of creation in Christological terms. The imagery in John 1 draws upon both the account of Genesis 1 and the description of Wisdom in Proverbs 8, but the force of the appropriation is to recast both creation and the enjoyment of God's life-giving presence as inseparable from the person of Jesus Christ. When, later in the gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5), he is not speaking principally as moral exemplar, but as the source of goodness itself.

Grappling with this involves some reflection on notions of “participation.” If these passages are taken seriously, then all goodness

involves some kind of participation in the life of God through Jesus Christ, even if we necessarily distinguish the kind of participation that is experienced by the believer from the kind that might be embodied by any person or creature that does or enjoys good. This was one of the key themes in the writings of the early church Fathers, who recognized that all goodness is derived from the presence of Jesus Christ, but were also concerned to affirm the special kind of participation that is involved in salvation and that is enjoyed by those who believe and partake of the sacraments (see Macaskill, 2013, pp. 42–76; Russell, 2004, *in toto*).

This is important because it presses back on a way of reading the Bible that reduces the gospel to a “fix” for the problem of sin, a correction of the damage introduced by the Fall. Instead, it demands that we read all of the Bible as “evangelically conditioned” and oriented toward a particular kind of flourishing, when God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28) and will bring each creature to its *telos*.

I do not have space to discuss the matter properly here, but this has significant implications for how we think about the concept of the *imago Dei* in relation to disability. Briefly, I have suggested elsewhere that to think “Christianly” about the *imago Dei* of Genesis 1:26–27 entails understanding the image as constituted by Christ himself (as in 2 Cor. 4:4 and Col. 1:15); human image-bearing is always participatory, as we who are made “according” to the image share, by an always-imperfect correspondence of natures, in that reality. This moves us away from seeing the image as something broken by the fall and repaired in salvation, which often goes hand-in-hand with a view that disability will necessarily be healed, toward seeing the *imago dei* in a particular set of relational terms that do not rest upon capacity or competence.

Practice 2: We read the bible as a generically complex whole

The Bible, considered as Holy Scripture, is normative for the thought and life of the Christian church, but it exercises this normativity as a generically diverse collection or even as a library. To say this is simply a matter of observing and acknowledging that our sacred scriptures contain poems, proverbs, stories, songs, sayings, prophecies, letters and—in a rather small proportion, it must be said—some commandments. Certain parts of the collection may have a particular programmatic significance for other parts (the gospel narratives, most obviously, or the Law), but one of the problems that needs to be challenged is the tendency to think of “biblical authority” in a way that is reduced to one or two of the genres. The point has been made by David Kelsey (Kelsey, 1975, 2009) and reiterated by

Kevin Vanhoozer (Vanhoozer, 2002, pp. 125–58), and it is worth pausing to reflect on the observations that they have made.

When we think of “biblical authority,” we tend to allow one or two particular concepts to govern our ways of thinking, most obviously that of the commandment that should be obeyed or of the reliable account of salvation history within which we understand ourselves. Importantly, those concepts tend to be accompanied by a particular governing metaphor about God’s relationship to us: he is seen as the legislator (or king) who, through the biblical salvation history, creates the world and then brings it back into order when sin makes it go wrong by the breaking of his commandments. This feeds into our understanding of gospel and atonement, which are principally conceived in terms of a kind of debt collection for our failure to keep the commandments. The result of this is that we often think of the Bible as a “manual for life,” and think of its authority in ways that reflect this, while reducing salvation to the notion that commandment-breakers are delivered from the punishment that they deserve.

This concept of authority, however, struggles to accommodate many of the genres of Scripture and the way that they operate. It is not easy to apply it to the mode of normativity exercised by the book of Proverbs, as it rattles off saying after saying that are informed by the kind of wisdom that comes from long observation of the world, from lessons learned by watching ants work and vicious people plot. Neither does it easily accommodate the normativity of a psalm, or even, for that matter, of a short story that does not obviously or significantly move forward the grand scheme of salvation history. It may not deal meaningfully the storied character of the Gospels and Acts, the way that they shape our thinking *as narratives*,⁸ and may squeeze their material into an account of “the gospel” or “salvation-history” that is actually abstracted from much of the detail.

We need to recognize that Scripture *norms* and *regulates* our life and thought as a wild and unruly collection of works (Macaskill, 2018b, pp. 207–38). This involves a certain humility, a recognition that we will never master or own it, but will instead subject ourselves to its abrasion by reading it and allowing its wordplay to affect us as readers. And, as with all literature, it does this by engaging us holistically, by shaping our affections and sympathies as much as our propositional beliefs. As a library, it shapes us.⁹

Once this is recognized, it prevents us from approaching Scriptural authority as something that can be reduced to proof-texts for a particular position. All texts need to be evaluated within the context of the collection as a whole, which involves thinking about how other generic parts of the Bible might inform, correct, or nuance what is suggested by the text in front of us. If this sounds worryingly open and unresolved, it should; we

should be unnerved by our reading of Scripture. Our assumptions should be challenged by it. There are certainly truths that can be seen as necessary to Christian faith, but even these have generally been distilled into doctrines that take seriously the whole of Scripture; there are no proof-texts for the Trinity, but trinitarianism is the correct doctrinal formulation of what the Bible, *as a whole*, teaches us about God. To return to a point that I made in the introduction, a model of biblical interpretation that looks like fracking will find proof-texts, from which the position taken can be extracted; a model that looks like prayerful listening will seek more carefully to discern and to respond to the complexities and nuances of the Word.

In relation to our discussion of autism, the point is vital, and it takes us back to the misuses of Scripture discussed above. These focus on a particular set of texts that speak about demonic realities or healings, but do not frame these in relation to the biblical texts that represent sickness or weakness as conditions in which grace can truly flourish, as necessary elements of our participation in the witness of Jesus Christ. Instead, this principle directs us toward a reflection on broader principles that can be traced across the genres of Scripture and that emerge in the complex moral account reflected in the Old Testament, both in the Law and in the Wisdom writings. These have a scope and a level of practical detail that is not seen in the New Testament, but that is arguably assumed by the various writers. The Law regulates religious life and the festal calendar, but it also regulates agricultural and architectural principles; it bears on worship, but it also bears on social justice and wealth distribution. It bears on the way that a society values its members, both human and animal, especially those who are vulnerable. This is the kind of detailed picture in which we can begin to think about autism and Christian community.

I must note a key point before closing this section. Within much contemporary evangelicalism, the classical concept of canon and its unity has effectively been replaced by that of salvation history. The unifying principle of canon is identified in the overarching story that is detected behind the text, which leads from Genesis to Revelation. The different composite books of the Bible are lined up in relation to this story, and that ordering affects the way that they are read in relation to each other. The implications of this for disability studies may not be immediately obvious, but it means that texts are read in a rather linear fashion, often with a stringent interpretative principle that texts can only be interpreted in the light of earlier writings, as we seek to identify their singular meaning. We may see “typological” elements at work in some texts, bearing meaning beyond the insight of the author, but these are always understood within the narrative that moves forward to its fulfillment in the eschaton. To read “one text in

the light of another” or “to set a text within the canonical whole” is really to place it somewhere on this unfolding storyline, and to read it accordingly.

The truly canonical readings of the early church, though, were much more fluid about how the elements could be aligned, something true also of Jewish interpretative strategies. When we see textual combinations in the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, they are often governed much more by the sharing of vocabulary in otherwise discrete writings than by questions of how they are to be aligned according to a unifying narrative (see, e.g., Brooke, 1985). This same reading practice can be seen in the New Testament; in those passages, for example, that seem to link multiple Scriptures that use the word “stone” to the representation of Jesus (e.g., 1 Peter 2:4–10). The early Church fathers, meanwhile, are often dismissed by modern evangelical readers as bad exegetes, because they read Old Testament texts Christologically or pneumatologically, as if they are projecting later New Testament thought back onto texts that do not really contain such ideas. In truth, however, their interpretations are canonical: they recognize that what is revealed in the New Testament now shapes how they must read the elements of the Old. This allows for a more sophisticated practice of “figuration” to emerge, what Richard Hays describes as “reading backwards” (Hays, 2014). Here, the significance of the gospel and the resonances that can be identified between figures allows texts to mutually inform one another, as they are read together. This does not neglect or efface the distinctions between the testaments, or the truth of the historically developing work of God, but it recognizes that to identify the whole of Scripture as belonging to the “canon” means that we must read Genesis or Leviticus as “Christianly” as we must read Romans. This takes us back to the key points noted in our first principle, where creation, providence, and salvation are all now re-contextualized by the mystery that has been revealed in Christ. This may have all kinds of significance for disability studies, which are often heavily dominated by particular accounts of the biblical narrative.

Practice 3: We respect the historical particularities of the bible

This third principle is worded with special care. Most biblical scholars recognize the importance of engaging with the biblical texts as historical documents, so that some engagement with their historical context or background is necessary to their interpretation. To a significant extent, however, this part of the biblical scholarly task has come to dominate the conception of the task as a whole, so that the majority of serious biblical scholars now effectively work as historians rather than theologians. This is

one of the reasons that so little has been done to address the question of how we should think biblically about disabilities that are not encountered in ancient biblical texts: if biblical scholars cannot find historical data in the text or its background that correspond to a contemporary topic, they will have nothing to say to it. In relation to autism, the only way we can escape this is by recovering a properly theological vision for the task. Reading the Bible properly summons us to speak rightly of God, and speaking rightly of God forces us to speak differently about everything else.

But it remains the case that the biblical texts are historically particular and took their form through the organic¹⁰ agency of historically located persons, even if these persons were inspired by the Spirit to communicative acts that continue to speak throughout the ages. It is necessary to acknowledge this in our attempts to read the Bible, and to remind ourselves constantly that we read the texts as cultural foreigners to the worlds in which they were written (Malina, 2001, pp. 1–6). The danger that attends us always is that we see something in the text that is not there (or, conversely, that we fail to see something that *is* there). If we read the Bible carefully, sensitive to this, then the world of the text can reach forward to ours, absorbing and reshaping it, investing it with fresh value. If we read it carelessly, we will absorb the world of the text into ours, smothering its radical qualities with our conventional ones.

An example of this is found in the issue of gender roles. In the modern west, we live in a world that has dramatically reordered the respective status of males and females. Many Christians, of course, consider this to be a rejection of biblical gender roles and rail against it. That very reaction, though, often reflects a lack of recognition of just how radical the cultural shift that has taken place within the New Testament Christian community is, and how far it has already gone toward reordering perceptions of the value and role of women. Many Christians today will understand the Bible to reflect their own ecclesial situation, in which men and women play different roles and functionally have different value; they will point to texts in the New Testament that seem to reflect this complementarian structure.¹¹ They will generally, though, not recognize the historical sociological significance attached to the fact that a church meets in the home of a woman—which would assign her a position of leadership and oversight—or the fact that Paul directs his commendations and greetings, in the first place, to named women within the church in Rome, which departs spectacularly from the conventions of the day. Those familiar with the culture of the day, and the way it ascribed honor and status according to gender, are right to see something quite subversive in Romans 16:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in

whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. (Rom. 16:1–6)

The reason for citing this passage is simply that its shocking force is only appreciated if the reader knows something about the cultural conventions of the day and the sociological force of its departures from these. To describe Phoebe as a benefactor (or “patron”) is to label her as a person of power, to ascribe honor and authority to her. To describe the church as meeting in the house of Prisca *and* Aquila is to assign ownership of the house to both of them, a fundamentally anti-patriarchal move. In my own work on how the biblical material might bear on autism, the cultural subversiveness of the text, understood within its historical context, is an important element, particularly in my reading of 1 Corinthians (see, e.g., Macaskill, 2018a).

Having said this, an important corollary of respecting the historical particularity of the text is that we recognize the extent to which the authors might have thought about disability or impairments in ways that we find difficult or even unacceptable. We need to accept that the Bible is full of stories that reflect the social stigmatizing of persons with disabilities of various kinds (see Olyan, 2008), and that the authors may have regarded these in ways that were woven into their culture. We should not try to minimize or downplay the significance of such elements, but we should also recognize that they reflect the organic inspiration of Scripture and the involvement of human writers whose own contributions are transformed by the canonical context into which they are assembled. Again, the recognition that we read the whole canon in the light of what has been disclosed in the person of Jesus Christ is absolutely pivotal to the right handling of such observations: now that we know this truth, we cannot consider any of the parts of the Bible apart from it. It is a transformational context.

Practice 4: We read the bible within the communion of the church

There is an irreducibly social dimension to the life governed by Scriptural authority. Scripture is directed toward reading communities who engage with the material in the context of communal practice and life. In fact, for most believers until relatively recently (and still for many outside of the developed world), the only way that Scripture could be encountered was socially, because most Christians were illiterate and were therefore reliant

on others to read it to (or with) them. Some may have been fortunate to have had literate parents, but most would encounter scripture primarily in the context of worship, where it was read within the performance of praise and sacrament.

In the context of the developed West and global North, where literacy rates are high and where (as we have already noted) a certain individualism is basically assumed, this social dimension can be undervalued or neglected. Reading and listening to the Bible can be “privatized” into something that the individual does within their personal walk of faith, even if they associate themselves with a church community. *I* ask what moral burden the text lays on *me*, rather than on *us*, and the social or corporate dimension of the church follows this, as an obligation that devolves first upon me. *I* align myself with a particular church community, because it holds views to which *I* subscribe. Even the notion of church unity becomes a function of the collective agreement of a group of individuals to a set of beliefs or practices; it is defined in voluntarist terms.

Ironically, our personal reading can actually be very heavily conditioned by the way the Bible is understood within our community. Without realizing it, we are often governed by the dynamics of social identity, adopting interpretations that position us as insiders within a group, and rejecting ones that position us as outsiders. The various individual “helps” and tools that are used in discipleship—daily Bible reading notes, or Bible study guidelines—contribute to this, however well-intended they may be. They reinforce the conviction that, as an evangelical, for example, I ought to read this verse in a particular way. Where the need to read the Bible within the communion of the saints is acknowledged, such influence can be negotiated properly. But when we work with a basic model that each of us reads the Bible independently, such influences become dangerous: we *assume* that a particular reading is “just what the Bible says,” without recognizing and reflecting upon the extent to which we have received our interpretation from our subcultures.

Both Testaments have, as the addressees of the divine word, communities of faith. While, at points, particular messages may have come to particular figures, these were for the building up (and sometimes the tearing down) of the community, whether Israel, Judah, or the Church. God’s covenant with Israel may, at points, focus on an individual like David, but it is still a covenant with the nation, and his word to that people is covenantal in character. The church is the body of Christ, and its status as a community is a function of the union of each believer to Christ and thereby to every other member. None of this is intended to minimize personal responsibility or the place of personal reading of Scripture, but rather to say that each individual who reads Scripture as the word of God is already identified corporately as part of the communion of saints.

This matters because autism is a reality that is necessarily owned and faced by the community, not just by autistic people themselves or their caregivers. The starting point for considering autism, as it affects persons within the church, is that it is already a reality within the body of Christ, and that the proper response to it must be made by the body. To weave this principle back into our first one: we approach autism as something that has been united to Christ and his body. Such an acknowledgement immediately highlights the problem of those who have been asked to leave churches because of difficult behaviors and underpins the kind of attitudes that should be expected within the church. This is true not only of autism, but of disability in a broad sense. Our approaches to disability are often compounded by the extent to which our thinking is affected by the individualism that is so dominant in modernity, which is not simply a matter of emphasizing the rights of the individual over their responsibility to the group, but of conceiving persons as self-constituted things, whose value resides in their own capacities.

Practice 5: We read the bible humbly as a fallible community

It is important to our framing of the communal dimension of reading the Bible that the Scriptures we read are often directed against their readers. It is a conspicuous detail of the texts that they represent their addressees as in dire need of correction. This is true throughout the Old Testament and continues to be true in the New Testament. It is sobering that such criticisms and castigations are directed toward people who are nevertheless affirmed as being in Christ and filled with the Spirit. To speak of the Bible being read by the communion of saints, or the body of the church, does not make Scripture something that is owned by the church, but rather something that speaks prophetically within it.

This is important, because it prevents us from assuming that the church will automatically be a morally good, and therefore safe, environment for persons with autism or their families. Quite the opposite: we should assume that the church will be the battleground of good and evil and that those who come into the church can expect to see both lovely and ugly values at work.

To press this further, it also means that we should expect our experience of autism to expose some of those values, and to incur an obligation that we reconsider them. An important element of this involves the recognition that much of what is represented as vicious within the people of God in the Bible—what is linked to the constitutional corruption of their “flesh”—involves religious thought and practice. Throughout the Bible, the people of God (and not just those *outside* that people) are castigated for thinking

wrongly about God and how they should act. This criticism is leveled as sharply at Spirit-filled people in the New Testament church as it is at those living under the old covenant; it is leveled at those who think the performance of evangelical identity necessarily involves doing a certain set of things as much as it is leveled at those who make a golden calf or sleep with prostitutes. In the case of Paul's writings, what is most striking is that he sees the problem as running so deep that those who need to be castigated are convinced within themselves that they are being faithful.

Crucially, such criticisms are leveled at people who possess the Word of God and define themselves by their commitment to it. That comment may shock some readers, but it is important to recognize the truth behind it. The Pharisees, for example, were basically a renewal movement: they read their Bibles literally and called for their fellow Jews to renew their commitments to the divine commandments, to live in purity, to stand out from the wider immorality and impurity of the world—all so that they would see blessing restored to the people of God. But, in Jesus words, they were “sons of Hell” (Matt. 23:15); their purity was that of a whitewashed tomb.

Many of the things we consider to be good or necessary expressions of Christian thought and practice are actually products of our evangelical culture. In some cases, these may not be problematic until they are elevated into the position of idols, functioning as surrogates for the real presence of God, which disturbs and disrupts even as it enriches. As with all such surrogates, they are incapable of genuinely generating love and life and end up enslaving us to violence. They will never meet the distinctive needs of those affected by autism any more than they will meet our own needs truly; but the presence of those with autism may call attention to their emptiness and awfulness. Provided, that is, we are humble enough to exercise repentance (Macaskill, 2018b, pp. 207–238).

Where churches have asked families affected by autism not to attend, because their behavior compromises the performance of the worship service, something is functioning as an idol. Where Christians undervalue others because they do not fit a certain expectation of how a believer will look and sound, something is functioning as an idol.

Practice 6: We read the bible with the spirit who illumines

If we are so sinful, even when we hold the Word of God, how can we ever be led to truth? The answer for the New Testament writers, developed most fully (though not exclusively) by John and by Paul, is that the Holy Spirit dwells within us. He unites us to Jesus Christ, who is made actually present within us and whose mind we come to have (1 Cor. 2:14).

This effect of the Spirit is not represented as an instantaneous transformation that definitively eradicates sin within the church or individual Christian. Rather, we are transformed by the renewing of our mind (Rom 12:2) as the Spirit wars with our flesh (Gal. 5:16–17). This is why, as I have noted above, the church must be seen as the battleground, and we must expect to encounter sin within it, even at the level of its structures.

Reading “Spiritually” most obviously entails reading prayerfully, but in a way that acknowledges particularly our need for illumination, and our instinctive preference to remain in darkness. It is striking that one of the lengthiest expositions of the Spirit’s ministry in the New Testament—Romans 8—centers on the experience of prayer by those who are beset by the world and continue to live within the limits of their sinful flesh. It is structurally important that this account is preceded by the description in Romans 7 of Paul’s struggling with the continuing presence of sin in his life.¹² The representation of prayer in Romans 8 does not suggest that the believer’s life is one of easy triumph and success, but one of struggle and weakness. When that prayerfulness is brought to the reading of Scripture, it is powerfully liberating.

Reading Spiritually also means reading in community. Just as we can privatize our relationship with the Bible, so we can think of the Spirit as something that illuminates us individually. Consistently, though, the Spirit is represented as someone who indwells us collectively, even if that collective residing necessarily devolves to the level of the individual. His collective indwelling of us generates the unity of the church: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).

The giving of the Spirit to each of us, moreover, is represented as being for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). This imagery is used in the context of the depiction of the church as the body of Christ, and points to the idea that the Spirit’s ministry of edification is realized through the interaction of the various members, just as the flourishing of a body is realized through its parts working well together. Dynamically, this involves the kind of exchange that is represented in Colossians 3:16, interestingly, also rendered in terms of indwelling. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”

This verse also leads us to the last point, which closes the loop with the first of our practices. The word is identified with Christ, with the language of singing psalms suggestive of the fact that the Old Testament continues to be prominently in view. And this word dwells within the body of Christ: the Spirit’s indwelling work does not re-identify the body in a way that is separable from the identity of Christ, but rather realizes its identification with

him. What this verse calls us to is a thoroughgoing expression of Christian identity: living in the body of Christ and allowing his voice to speak richly among us, as we speak to each other (sometimes correctively) about what is written in the whole of his word, in Old and New Testaments.

The point is an important one because, as with the other distortions we have noted, we can consider the Spirit-filled community to be a place of victory and triumph. We can think about the Spirit in terms that are primarily about power. But he is “the Spirit of the Son” (Gal. 4:6),¹³ and we should expect him to manifest the Son’s identity in ways that are consistent with the gospel story itself. We should expect him to be present in the kind of victory over sin that is cruciform (cf. Gorman, 2001), that looks weak and fragile and unimpressive. This is precisely how Paul describes the life of the church in 2 Corinthians 4, where he describes us as having “treasure in jars of clay.” It is not simply that these bodies are ugly shells for the indwelling glorious Spirit, but they are vessels that continue to carry the death of Jesus within their own constitution, as a necessary part of their participation in his life (1 Cor. 4:10). Within a community marked by that kind of spirituality, the needs of those with autism, and the blessings that they can bring with their presence, can be met and realized.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to establish an interpretive framework in which we can read the Bible constructively with the purpose of “thinking biblically” about autism in particularly Christian terms. The practices that I have laid out are not specific to an autism-oriented reading of the Bible, but bear on all interpretation of Scripture. To a significant extent, they simply reflect the “rule of faith” that governed the interpretive practices of the early church. The distinctive challenges posed by autism, however, bring the need for such principles to be observed into the foreground. If these principles are not observed or recognized, any attempt to read the Bible in relation to autism will be unsuccessful, or even counter-productive.

The reassertion of the principles in relation to autism highlights that a serious effort to think properly about autism brings with it a body of further blessings for the church. If we learn to think better about autism, we will learn to think better about everything else, too. And, as I have explored in my publications on autism, that is something that may involve an affirmation of cognitive and social differences.

At the same time, if we affirm the place of those with autism in the church that is addressed by Scripture, then we also identify them as addressees. This is not an insignificant observation, for it acknowledges that the expectation of repentance and change bears upon those with autism, even

as it bears on others. It is all too easy to use a diagnosis of autism as an excuse to inhabit particular patterns of behavior, as a justification for actions that are hurtful to others.

As noted at the beginning of the article, the practices outlined here are particular to Christian interpretation, even if the New Testament writers themselves were formed by the interpretative contexts of ancient Judaism. In time, I hope that we will see constructive dialogue between Jewish and Christian thinkers in relation to the experience of autism and to other forms of disability. The value of such dialogue, though, is not just in identifying common ground through shared biblical material; it is also, and perhaps much more, about appreciating and learning from the differences of interpretation that emerge from the distinct practices that shape each tradition and the various families that exist within it.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are taken from the NRSV.
2. This term is increasingly used of autism, as a label that acknowledges the barriers to immediate identification of the needs of those with conditions that do not present obvious physical features.
3. For the sake of transparency, I need to add a comment here concerning autism as a disability. Many within the autism communities are sensitive to its labelling as a disability, preferring to speak of it as a condition, or as a particular “neurotype.” I am sympathetic to this, and tend to be wary of describing autism as a disability, but it is important to recognize that these sensitivities themselves often reflect a particular cross-section of what is commonly described as the autism spectrum. For those who are profoundly affected by autism, perhaps to the point of needing lifelong care, the label “disability” can be both appropriate and useful, opening pathways to support for those affected. Here, as elsewhere, the recognition that autism presents as a multi-dimensional spectrum is vital to how we use language to describe it.
4. T.F. Torrance (Torrance, 1969), makes the point in relation to theology that the mode of scientific investigation must be determined by nature of the object of study, a principle that prohibits the simple transfer of scientific methodologies to the study of God. This point can be applied to Scripture, too, although with the important caveat that Scripture participates in the creaturely world of things in history.
5. As a contrastive example of how the biblical material can be read in relation to issues of mental health, see Stuckenbruck (2013).
6. This is a key principle in Swinton (2012).
7. The authorship of Colossians is a matter of debate among scholars. For an overview, see Foster (2016). My own view is that Pauline authorship makes best sense of the presence of Jewish mystical tropes and language in the text. These are discussed by Rowland and Morray Jones (2009).
8. By this, I mean that it is not just the story that is important, but the way the story is told.
9. The designation of the Bible as a library is widely found through the traditions of the Church. It is an important and suggestive image of the diverse modes of biblical authority.

10. This word is particularly associated with the Reformed tradition, but what it labels is broadly recognized: the Bible is the Word of God, but its composition involves the agency of real, historically located human beings.
11. Most obviously, the guidance to wives and husbands in Ephesians 5:21–33. The translation of this passage is not as straightforward as often assumed, since the imperative “submit” is not found in 5:21 in the earliest manuscripts nor in the earliest Patristic quotations of the verse. Neither is there a finite form of the verb “submit” applied to wives in verse 24. In both cases, where these early manuscripts are concerned, the language of submission must be carried forward from the participle in verse 20, “submitting to one another.” That participle is masculine plural in form, and must therefore be understood to designate the group as a whole.
12. The relationship between Romans 7 and the chapters that flank it, particularly in terms of the assumed identity of the writer, has been the subject of much debate in scholarship. The core question concerns whether Paul writes as a Christian struggling with sin, or whether he here writes from the standpoint of his pre-Christian life. See my discussion in Macaskill (2019a).
13. Properly, he is the Spirit of “his” Son, which takes the identification further into the inner relations of the Trinity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Bokedal, T. (2015). The early rule of faith pattern as emergent biblical theology. *Theofilos*, 7, 57–75. https://theofilos.no/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2e_Academia_Bokedal_The-Early-Rule-of-Faith-Pattern-as-Emergent-Biblical-Theology.pdf
- Brooke, G. (1985). *Exegesis at Qumran: 4QFlorilegium in its Jewish Context*. JSOT Press.
- Foster, P. (2016). *Colossians. Blacks New Testament commentaries*. Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474217576>
- Gorman, M. (2001). *Cruciformity*. Eerdmans.
- Hays, R. (2014). *Reading backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel*. Baylor University Press.
- Kelsey, D. (1975). *The uses of Scripture in recent theology*. Fortress Press.
- Kelsey, D. (2009). *Eccentric existence: A theological anthropology*. Westminster John Knox.
- Macaskill, G. (2013). *Union with Christ in the New Testament*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199684298.001.0001>
- Macaskill, G. (2018a). Autism spectrum disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary reflections. *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 22(1), 15–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2017.1373613>
- Macaskill, G. (2018b). *The New Testament and intellectual humility*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198799856.001.0001>
- Macaskill, G. (2018c). Union(s) with Christ: Colossians 1:15. *Ex Auditu*, 33(20), 92–107.
- Macaskill, G. (2019a). *Living in union with Christ: Paul’s Gospel and Christian moral identity*. Baker Academic.
- Macaskill, G. (2019b). *Autism and the church: Bible, theology, community*. Baylor University Press.

- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Malina, B. J. (2001). *The New Testament world. Insights from cultural anthropology* (3rd ed.). Westminster John Knox.
- Mathew, S. K., & Pandian, J. D. (2010). Newer insights to the neurological diseases among biblical characters of old testament. *Annals of Indian Academy of Neurology*, 13(3), 164–166. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-2327.70873>
- Moss, C., & Schipper, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Disability studies and biblical literature*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137001207>
- Novakovic, L. (2003). *Messiah: Healer of the Sick*. Mohr Siebeck. <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-157156-5>
- Olyan, S. (2008). *Disability in the Hebrew bible: Interpreting mental and physical differences*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511499036>
- Rowland, C., & Morray-Jones, C. (2009). *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004175327.i-688>
- Russell, N. (2004). *The doctrine of deification in the Greek patristic tradition*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199205974.001.0001>
- Stuckenbruck, L. (2013). The human being and demonic invasion. In C. Cook (Ed.), *Spirituality, theology, and mental health: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 94–119). SCM Press.
- Swinton, J. (2012). From inclusion to belonging: A practical theology of community, disability and humanness. *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 16(2), 172–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2012.676243>
- Taylor, C. (1989). *The sources of the self*. Harvard University Press.
- Torrance, T. F. (1969). *Theological science*. Oxford University Press.
- Vanhoozer, K. (2002). *First theology*. IVP Academic.
- Webster, J. B. (2001). *Word and church: Essays in Christian dogmatics*. T&T Clark.