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Dyslexia and Reading the Bible

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ABSTRACT

Personal Bible reading is considered to be highly important in many Christian communities. This can pose significant challenges for Dyslexic Christians who often struggle to read. This article explores the under-researched topic of dyslexia and the Bible through the analysis of interviews with 15 dyslexic Christians. We consider the difficulties faced by dyslexic Christians, the unique ways in which they engage with the Bible, and the need for churches to respond to and engage with the dyslexic experience of the Bible without causing guilt and shame. This exploratory study begins necessary conversations about dyslexia, the Bible, and the Church.

KEYWORDS

Bible; church; dyslexia; inclusion; reading; theology

Introduction: “Read Your Bible, Pray every day”

Since the reformation and its strong emphasis on individual Bible reading, grounding personal faith in the (personal) reading of scripture has become essential within many (Protestant) Christian communities (Thompson, 2017, p. 145).¹ For dyslexic Christians this can pose significant challenges and create some harmful expectations of what it means to be a Christian. One example of this is the well-known children’s song, “Read Your Bible, Pray Every Day” – where the lyrics teach that if you fail to do this you will “shrink, shrink, shrink.” Furthermore, websites and blog posts that are intended to encourage can put unhelpful expectations on those who struggle to read. For example, one author writes: “You must set a daily time when you’re in God’s Word [...] We can’t live without God’s Word [...] It is essential that you read the Bible as a whole” (Chery, 2021; see also Archer, 2017 and Sarff, 2013). While it is unlikely that this author intends to harm or marginalize, statements like these within Christian communities assume that people who do not read the Bible regularly are failing or spiritually lazy, unintentionally shaming them. Saying that we cannot live without reading the Bible raises questions when someone struggles to or cannot read the Bible.

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Table 1. Overview of Participants

Fictitious Name	Interview Date	Church Movement/ Denomination	Age Range	Gender	Attended focus group (yes/no)
Rebekah	06/11/20	Evangelical	40-45	Female	No
Patrick	10/11/20	Independent Evangelical	20-25	Male	Yes
Christie	29/10/20	International Network of Churches (INC)	25-30	Female	No
Luke	27/10/20	International Presbyterian Church (IPC)	20-25	Male	No
Dan	04/11/20	Assemblies of God	25-30	Male	No
Peter	02/11/20	Independent Evangelical	55-60	Male	Yes
Cerys	04/11/20	INC	20-25	Female	Yes
Hayley	18/11/20	Anglican	60-65	Female	Yes
Chloe	11/03/21	Assemblies of God	30-35	Female	No
Jacob	18/03/21	Church of Scotland	45-50	Male	No
Beth	18/05/21	Presbyterian	20-25	Female	No
Sara	24/03/21	Anglican	55-60	Female	No
Laura	24/03/21	Church of Scotland	60-65	Female	No
Rachel	05/04/21	Baptist	20-25	Female	No
Lilly	20/05/21	Vineyard	30-35	Female	No

It has been recognized that Bible reading can be challenging for dyslexic individuals and, as a result, there have been attempts in recent years to produce dyslexia-friendly Bibles. In 2015, The Bible Society produced dyslexia-friendly versions of the gospel of Mark and the Psalms which had thicker paper, larger print, a clear font and one column of text rather than two (Neffinger, 2015). These resources may relieve the struggles of dyslexic individuals, but they do not deal with what it means to be dyslexic and to read the Bible. More needs to be explored about the unique ways in which dyslexic individuals process information and how this uniqueness can benefit the Church.

During this study, we have not been able to find academic research that focuses on dyslexia within the field of theology, other than occasional references to dyslexia (e.g. Creamer, 2009). Clearly, dyslexia is an unexplored area in the theological discourse. However, the fact that 10% of the UK population is estimated to be dyslexic (Dyslexia, 2018) and the growing recognition that neurodiversity can be a gift as much as a challenge (see for example recent works on autism and theology Macaskill, 2019; Rapley, 2021), give reason to explore dyslexia in relation to theology. Moreover, the questions raised by the pressure some blogs and magazine articles can put on dyslexic readers necessitate sustained theological reflection.

Due to the considerable lack of research within academic theology regarding dyslexia, this study seeks to begin conversations through hearing the voices of dyslexic individuals. By listening to these voices and drawing on areas of research within theology, especially relating to autism as a condition that is often seen as related to dyslexia (Armstrong, 2010), the impact of dyslexia on reading the Bible will be explored. First, we will explore several understandings of dyslexia from the perspective of other academic disciplines. We will then outline our methodology of the

qualitative research (interviews and a focus group) that underpins this article, followed by the presentation of our analysis, and then move to a theological reflection on the findings of the interviews and focus groups. This study will address unhelpful attitudes toward Bible reading and how engaging with the Bible can be re-shaped to become a more inclusive and relationship-focused act.

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is particularly challenging to define and there is yet to be a universally agreed definition; many consider that this is due to a lack of understanding regarding its cause (Lachmann, 2018). Dyslexia is generally understood as a learning difference which impacts processing information and, in turn, reading, writing, decoding, and organization (Beaton, 2004). This can lead people to struggle as they may often make mistakes when processing information (Tønnessen & Uppstad, 2015).

The legitimacy of dyslexia has at times been disputed. Some consider it to be a middle-class excuse for lack of intelligence (Beaton, 2004), and others, such as Graham Stringer, claim that it is not a condition but rather the result of inadequate education (Stringer, 2009). Although these arguments are controversial, they are not uncommon. Whilst these debates are outside the scope of this research and therefore will not be considered in depth, it is important to recognize the context in which this study is set. These conversations emphasize the negative connotations surrounding dyslexia and the ways in which it can often be related to a lack of intelligence. In this article, we offer a theological perspective that takes dyslexia seriously as a particular way of processing information which has its own challenges but also potentially is a gift to the faith community.

Dyslexia can lead to difficulties, yet the authors of *The Dyslexic Advantage* promote the idea that people with dyslexia succeed “*not in spite* of their dyslexic processing differences, but *because* of them” (Eide & Eide, 2011, p. 4, emphasis original). These authors discuss the positive outcomes of dyslexia, including creative problem solving, “finding unusual connections” between different ideas and how these are not hinderances but strengths (Eide & Eide, 2011, p. 4). Additionally, there are some resources online which promote the positive impacts of dyslexia within faith communities. Alice Ievans, for example, writes that dyslexia can be a blessing as it helps others to understand the Bible differently (Ievans, 2020). Therefore, the impact of dyslexia is often considered to be just as much a strength as a difficulty.

As a consequence of different understandings of dyslexia, there is debate over which terminology is preferred. The UK National Health

Service, for example, refers to it as a learning difficulty with strong emphasis on it being a problem, but not something which affects intelligence (Dyslexia, 2018). Others categorize it as a disability (Pennington & Bishop, 2009). The term “difference” is often chosen to move away from seeing dyslexia as a mere disadvantage, to prevent the undervaluation of dyslexic individuals, and to highlight that dyslexia has positive aspects (Miles, 2008). Therefore, we will refer to dyslexia as a learning difference rather than a disability or difficulty. Furthermore, the first author is dyslexic, and prefers the language of difference for said reasons.

Having reviewed several understandings of dyslexia as well as having highlighted some challenges and positives of dyslexia in reading and processing, we will now listen to the voices of fifteen dyslexic Christians and explore what is important to them when it comes to their dyslexia in relation to Bible reading and the Christian community.

Methodology

In order to explore the impact of dyslexia on engaging with the Bible, we sought accounts from dyslexic individuals through semi-structured interviews. The interviews had two primary purposes. Firstly, to explore both the challenges faced and the positives that come as a result of dyslexia and secondly, to explore the expectations on the participant by themselves and their churches to regularly read the Bible.

The research began as an undergraduate dissertation project which was continued in order to expand the database. This was done through additional interviews, further analysis of the data, and further considerations regarding the theological reflections raised by the study.

The research involved three parts. The first was interviewing 8 participants with dyslexia. The second was a focus group involving participants from the interviews. The third was interviewing a further 7 participants in order to reach saturation of data. At the third part, the interview questions were adapted in light of responses to the first set of interviews and focus group, whilst mostly covering the same content to ensure continuity in the sample. For example, the seven last interviews included questions that directly addressed the issue of pressure to read the Bible. In total, 15 participants were interviewed. The participants were found by the snowball method, (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) as well as through personal contacts.

Interviews took place over phone and video calls in order to comply with the government restrictions on physical contact due to COVID-19. The semi-structured format of the interviews encouraged a conversational

discussion (Mason, 2002). This way, the interviews were shaped around each individual and engaged with what they shared. The interviews consisted of two parts, the first set of questions were about the participant's wider experience of dyslexia, church, and reading the Bible. The second set of questions explored how the participant reads the Bible, as well as the potential guilt and pressure surrounding dyslexia and the Bible.

NVivo was used for the thematic analysis and coding of each interview. Both authors listened closely to the interviews. The first author did the first round of analysis, using NVivo. Interviews were analyzed individually before being compared with one another (Flick, 2009). Since dyslexia is understood and experienced in different ways, beginning with individual analysis meant that each participant's experience was carefully considered. Following this, all interviews were analyzed together within each code and wider theme. After that, the authors discussed coding and interpretation and amended these where necessary.

The second part of the research was a focus group. Again, due to the government restrictions, this took place using video-conferencing software. The purpose of the focus group was to identify and encourage people to consider if someone else's experience related to their own in ways they may not have considered before, and thus develop the discussions that began to form during the interviews (Hennink & Leavy, 2014). Furthermore, in a short amount of time, focus groups can produce a wide range of insights (Hennink & Leavy, 2014). All participants from the first set of interviews were given the option to attend; four of them did. The group was led by the first author with the second author present. Whilst there was a relatively low number of participants, the conversations gave further insight into the topic of dyslexia and Bible reading.

In all cases, for both the interviews and the focus group, participants were asked to consent to be interviewed, recorded, and for anonymized data to be used in publications. All participants were above 18 years old and did not require consent from parents or caregivers. In every case, the participant was recommended to discuss the project and consent form with someone that they trusted. Participants were welcomed to invite a trusted person to the interview. In this article, participants are anonymized by using fictional names. Ethical approval has been gained for this project from the College of Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics and Governance Committee at the University of Aberdeen.

Main themes

The main themes which emerged from the analysis of the interviews and focus group are 'Processing and Interpreting,' 'Community,' 'Pressure,

Shame, and Guilt,' and 'Theological Views of the Bible.' We will now discuss these themes in turn.

Theme 1: Processing and interpreting

This theme relates to areas in which dyslexia is apparent, particularly when it comes to reading the Bible. Within this theme there are two sub themes: 'Hearing and Seeing' and 'Focus and Creative Engagement.' Under the first we observe the systems and aids that participants have developed. Under 'Focus and Creative Engagement' we discuss the participants' experience of reading the Bible, how they think about the Bible, and alternative ways in which they engage with the Bible that do not always involve written text.

Hearing and seeing

Christie, Dan, Patrick, Sara, Rebekah, Beth, and Jacob shared that they re-read Bible passages multiple times in order to understand what is being said. Re-reading texts is time-consuming, they said, but it is a positive aspect of dyslexia. In Rebekah's words: "I spend a longer time reading the Word of God, so in a way that's also positive." Furthermore, some linked this directly with their spirituality. Dan shared that when he reads over a passage multiple times it becomes ingrained in his mind and this is important to his spirituality as he can remember what he has read throughout his day. For some participants, re-reading is a positive aspect of their dyslexia because they are aware that they do not always understand a text the first time and therefore, consciously make sure they grasp what is being said. In turn, some feel that their relationship with God is enhanced through spending more time reading scripture.

Some participants read out loud in order to process what they read from the Bible. For some, when they read they misunderstand some words and the passage does not make sense; reading out loud can help them to process what is being said. Reading out loud had deeply spiritual implications for Dan, who shared that when he is reading, he is not only speaking words but declaring them over his life. He gave the example of Psalm 93:

when I speak out this word is declared and this like I'm saying God you are majestic, you are incredible, you are so amazing. So, I guess by reading that is probably like, yeah it's quite a good thing to do and, it makes, it helps me to remind myself of it as well.

Dyslexia has provoked Dan to find ways of engaging with, and understanding the Bible, positively impacting his spirituality as he is reminded of his faith and who God is. For Hayley, as well as helping her to retain

information, reading out loud helps her to better understand and process passages. She shared that she learned to read in the same way as she speaks, meaning that she will read in her head with expression and place emphasis on certain words as she would if she was to read out loud. Through this, the words become clearer and she can understand what she is reading. Personal reading is often assumed to be something that happens internally. However, these participants highlight that the standard way of reading and processing text is not always the most helpful. Reading out loud can both be helpful for individuals who struggle with reading but can also be beneficial to a person's spirituality.

Similarly, hearing the Bible instead of (or as well as) reading it was preferred by some participants. Hayley, Sara, Peter, Rachel, Rebekah and Laura find that it can be helpful to listen to the Bible, either from another person or online audio. Rachel shared that "it can be a lot less stressful" when someone else reads and she can follow along. She, and other participants, also find that listening to the Bible can fill the words with life. This highlights that processing words in alternative ways to just reading can be beneficial and illuminate the text. Listening to Bible reading is not helpful for everyone, though, as some find it hard to concentrate when listening to Bible reading. Moreover, Jacob said that while listening to the Bible may be helpful for some, he believes it is important to "work through [his] weakness" and so avoids using audio. Therefore, the extent to which listening to the Bible being read is helpful for dyslexic individuals varies, but it is clearly beneficial to some.

Focus and creative engagement

A lack of concentration significantly lead to many participants struggling to read the Bible. Beth shared that she often does not find the Bible "engaging" and so will struggle to keep focusing on the text. Sara shared that while she has high intelligence, she gets tired easily when she reads because her brain is working hard to process the information on the page. As is mentioned above, for some, reading out loud or listening to the Bible can help with concentration and likely causes a need for taking longer to read.

Some participants raised that their dyslexia often makes them think differently to other people. Some participants identified that they are likely to visualize information, for example, seeing pictures when they read or discuss the Bible, and others find they process information more literally than other people do. Many identified with aspects of both. Patrick, for example, shared that he can misunderstand the tone and meaning of passages when they are written poetically. However, he mentioned a positive side to this. For example, during a Bible study, a question involving a double negative "made perfect sense" to him but others were confused

by it. Others, such as Peter and Sara, shared similar experiences during Bible studies. These participants present alternative ways in which dyslexic individuals often think and process information. As Hayley shared: “I would never not want to be dyslexic because it makes me see the world differently and therefore, my reading of the Bible differently.” Dyslexia enables individuals to approach ideas and reading in alternative ways. Both these creative and literal ways of approaching and processing the Biblical text were overall viewed as essentially positive aspects of dyslexia.

During the focus group, participants were asked whether or not they have alternative ways in which they experience the Bible. Music, art, listening, and exploring different versions of the Bible were the main ones which participants discussed. Peter finds that music can also evoke emotion in him when he listens to certain religious composers, such as Händel and Stainer. The role of music for Patrick is that it can transform how poetic language sounds in his head. He often misunderstands the meaning behind passages in the Bible which are more poetic and metaphorical. When he listens to texts such as the Psalms put to music they are easier for him to interpret and understand. Hayley, when she was younger, would write songs which related to what she was reading. For Hayley this tied in with the use of art to understand passages as it is a way of processing that is not a struggle for her. Art, music, and poetry were all examples, given by participants, of alternative ways of engaging with the Bible where words are not the focus. Using creative approaches to process text allows for deep engagement with the Bible and God in a way that does not cause difficulty or struggles.

Lilly found alternative ways of engaging with the Bible particularly important and believes that churches should be more aware and encouraging of this. She shared that reading the Bible does not need to mean sitting and reading but could involve art or walking and listening to the Bible. As discussed previously, Lilly views the Bible as important but thinks it needs to be engaged with in different ways that are more accessible and enjoyable for individuals who function in different ways.

To sum up the first theme, the participants of this study highlight the various ways in which dyslexic individuals read and process text. This is often through re-reading, reading out loud, and hearing passages read by others. Although these are often systems and aids developed from challenges that come as a result of dyslexia, many participants spoke positively about them. They were often considered to be positive as they help the participants to engage with the Bible and their own spirituality. Some participants find that the Bible can be challenging to read due to their dyslexia, however, they find that their dyslexia can lead them to experience spirituality in different ways to others. It was raised that alternative ways of engaging with the Bible would be helpful, particularly if it does not involve reading.

Theme 2: Community

This theme considers how dyslexia is experienced and dealt with by those within the Christian community. The conversations within the interviews and focus group revolved especially around Bible studies, highlighting ways in which Bible studies can be positive but also challenging for dyslexic individuals. A second important issue that participants mentioned was the importance of encouraging Bible reading.

Bible studies

The experience that participants have of group Bible studies varied greatly. For some, although Bible studies can at times be challenging, they enjoy engaging with the Bible in a group context, while others prefer to read the Bible on their own. For example, Laura finds that she can “switch off” when she reads the Bible alone whereas in Bible study groups, she can speak through things and learn from others. Luke and Sara find Bible studies to be enjoyable as when they read the Bible with other people it is easier to think through what passages mean. However, Luke added that this can also cause him to “sit back and listen” when other people are moving quickly as he will not always go at the same speed. Therefore, reading in community with others during Bible studies can both be beneficial and challenging for some dyslexic individuals. While it can be helpful to talk through things with others, it can also lead to exclusion.

Others shared that they do not enjoy Bible studies but prefer reading the Bible on their own. The reasons for this all relate to the idea of freedom rather than structure. Cerys loves “hopping about different verses” and translations which is not so possible when she reads with others. Similarly, Patrick finds that questions in Bible studies are too restrictive. He shared that they often focus on multiple individual parts of a passage, whereas he would prefer to look at it as a whole. For Rebekah, reading the Bible takes time and so when she reads with others she is conscious that it takes her longer. However, if she feels “safe” she will ask people to go slower. For these participants, Bible studies can often be problematic as they do not provide space for the way they think and read. Thus, they may risk excluding people. Furthermore, they can be too structured and restrictive for the way in which some participants process and approach the Bible.

Telling others about their dyslexia during Bible studies was done by some participants and not by others. Beth found it helpful during a Bible study where the leader was aware of her dyslexia and so could phrase things in a way that were more suitable for her. Beth shared that while she is very open about her dyslexia, others are not. She feels it would be

helpful if people in church were more aware that dyslexia can make aspects of church and Bible reading challenging for some people. Unlike Beth, Rachel and Rebekah will only share their dyslexia with people who they are comfortable with. Hayley also highlighted that people do not always recognize the extent of the difficulties faced by dyslexic people. Regardless of people's comfortability with sharing this, according to Beth churches should be more aware of how challenging Bible reading can be for dyslexic people. If someone presents as though they are coping and thriving, that does not mean that they are not struggling.

During the interviews, some participants raised practical steps that can be taken within Christian communities to help dyslexic individuals. One way to prevent some of the problems in Bible studies that were mentioned is through avoiding putting pressure on people to read; being asked to read a Bible passage during group studies within church communities was raised as unhelpful by multiple participants. It was raised as something that can cause embarrassment and anxiety as often dyslexic individuals mix up words. Beth shared that anxiety over having to read out loud in her youth group stopped her attending for a while. We should note here that participants also mentioned practical ways of supporting dyslexic individuals beyond Bible studies. These involved things such as projecting song lyrics and Bible verses onto screens during a service. Additionally, Beth thinks it would be helpful if churches provided an overview of the sermon content so that she could follow what was said without zoning out or getting confused. Therefore, there are simple ways in which churches might be more inclusive and cater to people's needs.

Encouraging bible reading

Encouragement to read the Bible is significant for those interviewed. An interesting point that arose from the interviews and focus group is that encouragement can both be helpful and unhelpful. When asked during the focus group whether or not the churches they attend encourage Bible reading, the majority answered yes, and most found that helpful. Patrick and Cerys felt that their churches saw it as important to engage spiritually through other vehicles, such as worship through music, but ultimately Bible reading should take priority. When prompted, these participants said this is a view that they also hold themselves. The conclusion of this discussion was that, for most participants involved, it is important to read the Bible even when individuals do not feel that they want to or that another way of engaging spiritually is easier. They felt that dyslexia should not be used as an excuse not to read the Bible. Therefore, it is evidently important to these participants that churches encourage Bible reading, however, this needs to be done in a way that is appropriate for dyslexic

individuals. For example, Christie shared that people in her church will send encouraging Bible verses and Peter's church pairs people up to read the Bible together daily. Both Christie and Peter perceived these as positive ways in which their churches encourage reading the Bible.

Nevertheless, not all encouragement to read the Bible was received positively. Luke and Patrick raised that, during a sermon, they will often be encouraged to read and think about something in their own time. Patrick said that he would rather receive more Bible teaching from the sermon than do, what he referred to as, "homework." At the same time, Patrick shared that some communities that he is in do not encourage him in his Bible reading enough. He likened this to the assumption that everyone does read the Bible regularly. He shared the following:

All the people who I've told I find it quite difficult to read the Bible, like it almost catches them by surprise almost always, you know, they can like say they understand but they can't really em so it could be good if people could like help you understand ideas or like encourage you to study other books in the Bible that maybe they could recommend, like recommend things that would help, or things like that.

Patrick feels a need for people to encourage and help him, however, he is not receiving this in ways that are helpful for him. Lilly highlighted that when people encourage each other and the church community has a shared understanding of the importance of the Bible, it can be helpful for dyslexic individuals when encouragement is given in a way that is constructive. She does think encouragement can be damaging when it is experienced as judgment but she has never experienced this personally. However, it must be noted that it can be unhelpful and cause people more stress than help.

To sum up this second theme, the way in which Christian communities approach reading the Bible together and encourage Bible reading can present challenges for dyslexic individuals. Some participants do enjoy aspects of Bible studies; however, many issues were raised as they are often excluding of those who think in different ways. Furthermore, the importance of helpful encouragement within Christian communities to read the Bible was raised.

Theme 3: Pressure, shame, and guilt

The flip side of encouragement to read the Bible, as discussed above, is that within Christian communities there can often be a pressure to read the Bible regularly that leads to people feeling guilt and shame. This section describes ways in which the participants of this study may feel a certain level of pressure from others, or themselves, to read the Bible regularly, and the possible guilt and shame as a result.

During the focus group, there was discussion surrounding guilt from not reading the Bible. This discussion led us to incorporate this question into later interviews. Most participants expressed that they felt some sort of guilt if they do not read the Bible. For some the guilt came from their own idea of what they should be doing, and for others, their guilt is a result of comparison with others. Some participants feel guilty when they do not read the Bible because they are prioritizing other things. However, rather than guilt, Peter felt that, “we should be disappointed that we haven’t spent time with God.” Sara also said she felt “disappointed” because she would like to read the Bible but it can be a struggle. Hayley, on the other hand, did not believe that guilt should be felt when the Bible is not read regularly. She said: “I think that the most fundamental thing is my relationship with my Lord. Now, my Lord is revealed in many ways, through Scripture, but not only.” Therefore, she does not feel she should feel shame or disappointment when she does not spend time reading the Bible. Although some shared that they do not believe people should feel guilty for not reading the Bible, the feeling of disappointment raises the question of the extent to which pressure is put upon people to read the Bible, and the theological and communal dynamics that contribute to the felt pressure.

Underlying the question of guilt and shame is the theological idea of being created by God as dyslexic, as was mentioned by some participants. Dan emphasized that God made him dyslexic and it was not a mistake, therefore, he should not let it restrict what he can do. As was mentioned previously, some participants felt that taking longer to read can be a positive thing. Dan shared the following:

Being dyslexic, it just meant I just had to try harder. I just have to work a bit, a little bit harder and spend more time doing my reading [...] not to use it as an excuse. I guess also just that reading the Word, just means I have to spend more time with God.

For participants such as Dan, dyslexia is not a bad thing because more effort needs to be given to reading the Bible. Sara, on the other hand, felt differently. She shared that “it’s like giving you one leg, and then getting onto you because you’re wobbling.” Sara believes that because God made her dyslexic, God would not expect her to do something that she cannot do. Sara does not think it is right to pressurize herself to spend time with God. The contrast between Dan and Sara raises the issue of whether or not a dyslexic person should feel pressure to read the Bible even when it is a challenge. Furthermore, while Dan does not consider spending longer to read as a negative thing, it is possible that that is a result of feelings of pressure and guilt surrounding the culture of Bible reading.

Furthermore, there are certain ideals that have been developed within the Christian community that may cause discouragement and pressure for

dyslexic individuals. During the focus group, it was discussed that Christians often place emphasis on having a vast knowledge of the Bible and it is not so easy for dyslexic people to build this up as it can take longer to process information. Patrick gave the example of the widely utilized resource “Bible in a Year” which encourages a person to read as the title suggests. Patrick, Peter, Jacob, and Beth all expressed that this type of ideal for a Christian to read the Bible from cover to cover can be challenging and overwhelming for dyslexic individuals because there is too much to process in just one day. As Peter said, it is often “counterintuitive” rather than beneficial. Patrick, Peter, and Beth have attempted to do this but have never completed it. For many participants, studies such as this can be a positive thing. Chloe found that when her church did a Bible plan similar to “Bible in a Year” it was a positive experience for her. She found that although it was large passages of text and she mostly skimmed it, doing this Bible plan got her into a habit of reading. However, at least for some, certain ideals create pressure to read the Bible, which turns Bible reading into a task rather than a means of engaging with God. As Patrick expressed, this may prevent people from growing in their faith.

In sum, a certain level of pressure put on individuals to read the Bible by the communities that they are in is apparent. The perception of this pressure is viewed as positive by some as they feel it is important to read the Bible and they should feel disappointed if they do not do this. However, for others the pressure can be negative when certain ideals are encouraged which are unachievable by many people.

Theme 4: Theological views of the Bible

The theological views of the Bible with which individuals approach the Bible informs the way that they will engage with it. There were no questions that explicitly sought to discuss this theme, however, it was a conversation that re-occurred throughout the interviews and was clearly of importance to the participants.

For many participants, one of the primary functions of the Bible is to be a guide and source for life. Some referred to the Bible as a guide in terms of revealing wisdom in difficult situations. For example, Laura compared the Bible to an “instruction manual.” Others, such as Rebekah and Dan, felt that the Bible is the source of life, which as such has a guiding function. Rebekah shared as follows:

for me, [the Bible] is just em, the foundation of life, and walking, going through this earthly life with God [...] God has spoken to us through the Bible. It's his guidance, everything is revealed in there. So that's where our support and everything is going to be there for us if we need to access it.

Rebekah's view of the Bible is a guide to going through life. To her it is a "foundation" that shows her how she should live. Dan shared similar as well as highlighting that the Bible shifts a person's focus away from distractions and toward the purpose of life. While not every participant explicitly shared this view, many others suggested similar thoughts. Therefore, a primary reason for many participants' engagement with the Bible is to seek guidance for life.

The Bible was also viewed by many as the primary way that God communicates with humans, and therefore a way in which a relationship with God can be cultivated as it is the source of spirituality that God uses most. At what point the communication happens also influences how Scripture is approached. Lilly believes that the communication happens on the "receiving end." Others such as Cerys felt that the Bible was, in her words, "the living, breathing Word of God." Therefore, while most participants saw the Bible as a way of communicating with God, for some the communication is caused by the text in its own divine authority and for others it is caused by the Holy Spirit using a text that is not supernatural in its own right.²

Some participants strongly believe that reading the Bible is not just important to their faith but essential to Christianity as a whole. For example, Christie views the Bible as a guide to the extent that she shared the following: "reading the Bible is like a very core Christian value I would say." Others such as Dan were not so explicit but the way they spoke suggested similar. Still others, such as Laura, believe that the Bible is essential for churches to be guided by but did not as strongly imply that it was essential to the Christian faith. For others such as Hayley, the Bible is an aspect of faith but not the main, or certainly not the only, part.

The upshot of this discussion is that the importance that individuals place on the Bible determines how they engage with it. All participants believe that the Bible is an important part of spirituality and engaging with God. For many, this involves regular – if possible, daily – Bible reading. For example, Luke said: "it is incredibly important to be like in your Bible as much as you can realistically." Sara, Lilly, and Hayley, however, hold the view that although reading the Bible is important and can enrich an individual's relationship with God, it is not essential to daily Christian life. Lilly does not think a Christian can "do without scripture" but it should be balanced with other things that come more naturally.

Theological and practical reflection

Having presented the analysis of the views of fifteen dyslexic Christians on Bible reading, we now turn to a theological discussion of that analysis, including some practical suggestions. Four issues in particular have

surfaced that require further discussion: the pressure to read the Bible, the role of the community, moving from reading the Bible to engaging God, and the place of Bible studies. To our knowledge, this is the first substantial theological article on dyslexia, hence it was not possible to dialogue with specific literature in this area. Therefore, we have looked especially at literature on theology and autism as a close dialogue partner. We recognize that autism and dyslexia are different areas of research, however, this study will draw on autism studies within theology because of its similarities to dyslexia in terms of it being another form of, what is often called, neurodiversity (Armstrong, 2010). Furthermore, studies into disability and autism can begin conversations about dyslexia as they highlight the importance of hearing the voices of those who are outside of what is considered to be ‘normal.’

Pressure and the Bible

One theme that was woven throughout the interviews is the views of the participants on the Bible. What they believe the Bible is and how it should be used impacts the way they evaluate their engagement with the Bible. Many participants appeared to have a ‘high’ view of the Bible, as indeed the inerrant word of God, meaning that scripture is accurate and trustworthy (Erickson, 1985). The influential theologian Millard Erickson highlights that a belief in the doctrine of inerrancy can range from absolute inerrancy where the Bible is fully true and accurate, to the belief that the Bible is inerrant in the sense that it “accomplishes its purpose” but is not to be used as factual (Erickson, 1985, pp. 222–223). Another view is to put less emphasis on the idea that the Bible is fully accurate and trustworthy in every historical detail, but does contain all that is needed for salvation (Erickson, 1985). Some participants would be closer to this latter view. Views and doctrines of scripture are important to this conversation as they influence what individual Christians think they should believe about the Bible and how to engage with it.

Doctrines which view the Bible as completely truthful and accurate risk placing an emphasis on *reading* the Bible that, ironically, can obscure *engaging* with God. In our sample, this was often correlated with seeing the Bible as a guide for life. In treating the Bible as a guide that has a black-and-white answer to all questions in life, the artistic witness to who God is becomes somewhat silenced (see Brueggemann, 2009). This view is often linked to a focus on individual Bible reading, rather than seeing the Bible as a “library of books” (Macaskill, 2019, p. 58) that has its proper place and reading in community. It was clear from the interviews, even if the interviewees were

not asked to express their views of the Bible in terms of inerrancy, authority, or revelation, that this would apply to many of them. While this discussion does not intend to disregard the views of these participants, it is important to explore how certain treatments of the Bible can make engagement with God focus on a human act (reading) rather than relationship.

Furthermore, viewing the Bible as a text where each word is dictated by God risks placing a great amount of value on words. But what if you cannot read the words, or mix them up, or take an unhelpfully long time to process them? The pressure is on. Furthermore, in some of our participants' churches this view of the Bible resulted in what we may call the "glorification of Bible knowledge," which potentially leads to feelings of guilt. An example of this is when churches encourage people to sign up to "Bible in a year" programs. When a person falls behind others or does not complete "tasks" such as reading the "Bible in a year," they may feel as though they have failed. Something which is intended to be encouraging and enriching to faith thus becomes discouraging. This is true for dyslexic and non-dyslexic individuals alike, but it may be clear that for someone who struggles with reading because of their dyslexia, the pressure is much higher, as well as the "risk" of "failing the task." Views of scripture must be carefully implemented and addressed within churches in order that the Bible's primary purpose remains as a vehicle for engaging with God rather than a source of achievement.

The gift of dyslexia to the Body of Christ

Dyslexia itself is not a problem that needs to be solved as it brings alternative experiences to the Church. Dyslexia is perceived by most participants of this study to be positive within their lives. It causes them to think in unique and creative ways and, as Hayley expresses, she would not want dyslexia to be removed from her life. For dyslexic individuals, what is perceived as weakness and struggle can often lead them to flourish through embracing the way they experience the world (Eide & Eide, 2011). This aligns with the need to re-valuate of what is deemed "strong" and "weak" and therefore "normal/acceptable" and "abnormal/unacceptable" by societies, as advocated by many in the field of Disability Theology (see for example: Reynolds, 2008; Young, 2011). Nevertheless, there are evidently aspects of church, and reading the Bible, that can be challenging. Some of these are direct results of dyslexia and some result from a lack of awareness on the part of churches. Dyslexia introduces a different way of thinking and processing information into conversations about the Bible and church. This "unusual balance of skills" (Miles, 1993) is important to recognize

within the Christian community. Rather than giving attention to only the struggles faced by dyslexic individuals, Christian communities may find that the way in which others think can be a gift to the way in which they approach the Bible.

Macaskill, in his discussion of the body of Christ metaphor in 1 Cor 12, observes that each part of the body is a gift and not one part is a problem (Macaskill, 2018). Macaskill highlights autistic members of the body who, generally speaking, are often viewed as less valuable within Christian communities. It is unlikely, in general, that dyslexic individuals face the same level of devaluation that autistic individuals often do; however, Macaskill's discussion can be applied to others who may be seen as outside of what is considered to be the norm. When the voices of those who are considered "different" are omitted from the church (and academic theology), this results, in the words of John Swinton, in "a profound loss for the Church." Speaking about people living with disabilities, Swinton argues that "Without [their] hermeneutical voice, the revelation that God desires to impart to us remains lacking" (Swinton, 2018, p. vii). Instead, these voices should be valued as they are part of the body and bring a unique way of experiencing God that without which, the community would be lacking. Some of the participants of this study said that there needs to be a greater appreciation of difference, and understanding of the struggles, faced by dyslexic individuals. As Hayley highlighted, these difficulties often go unnoticed because dyslexic individuals are often able to adapt to social norms. However, in the image of the body of Christ, this is like the hand pretending to be a foot because of the felt risk that otherwise the foot will say "I don't need you." The apostle Paul is clear though: there should not be an expectation to adapt and conform in that way within the body of Christ. The Christian community should be a place where everyone is valued and welcomed because each person is a gift to the body of Christ (Brock, 2019, pp. 201–224; Reynolds, 2008).

From reading to engaging

Most participants have put some kind of strategy in place to help them read the Bible. Everatt et al. write that often a feature of dyslexia is increased creativity and innovative thinking due to the need for strategies to overcome struggles (Everatt et al., 1999). These strategies for the participants of this study include re-reading, reading out, loud talking through what they read, or reading like they talk. For most participants, the strategies that they have developed were considered to be positive as they result in spending more time reading the Bible and, in turn, with God – the struggle becomes an enactment of faith.

Even though no participant explicitly said this, those who struggle to read the Bible and yet spend a long time reading it are likely doing so because they believe individual Bible reading is central to the Christian faith. This is an example of how a “high” view of scripture can lead to pressure and shame and neglect to consider the value of other ways of experiencing the Bible, spirituality, and God. It highlights the potential pressure that individuals face more emphasis is given to reading the Bible than using it as a vehicle for engaging God. Regardless of scriptural doctrine, engaging God should be the focus.

The church needs to be more inclusive of dyslexic people in the ways it encourages engaging with the Bible. The theological key to this is shifting the focus away from words and toward relationship with God; this allows the Bible to be used in a way that does not put pressure upon dyslexic individuals. One participant, Lilly, provided a way in which this may be done. Lilly’s theology of the Bible places divine revelation and illumination at the receiving end, that is, in the reading process, rather than in or behind the text itself. She still holds the Bible as important but her doctrinal position makes space for those who struggle. To frame this position differently: God became flesh – not words. God is encountered in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to which the Scriptures bear witness, and who we encounter through engaging with the Bible, but God is not confined to the words of Scripture. By distinguishing God from the words, the Bible becomes accessible for dyslexic individuals, both for those who love to read and those who struggle.

A shift in focus from words to engagement involves listening to dyslexic individuals so that the way in which the Bible is approached does not simply *include* people who are outside of the norm but allows dyslexic individuals to *thrive* through utilizing the way that they think and learn.³ Patrick, in his interview, reflected upon the possibility that for dyslexic individuals, more abstract and creative ways of experiencing the Bible and spirituality are important as they do not require so much of a struggle as reading the Bible often does. Rather than struggling through reading, alternative ways of experiencing the Bible and spirituality may be liberating when reading words is not the primary focus.

A few practical examples demonstrate the point. Karenne Hills et. al. write that spirituality may be manifest in abstract concepts such as rhythm or touch, and expressed through metaphor and symbolism (Hills et al., 2019). Although Hills et. al. write in the context of non-verbal autism, the point remains that spirituality and the Bible may be experienced in ways other than reading. Another example is the use of art. Richard Sullivan demonstrates how art was commissioned by religiously powerful figures for much of church history, in order to communicate the “sacred word” to a largely illiterate society (Sullivan, 1989, pp. 114–115).

Furthermore, Christoph Schwöbel discusses the idea that listening to music, with and without words, can lead a person closer to God (Schwöbel, 2020). He writes that Luther considered faith and communication with God to exist within emotion. Music has the ability to transform the heart and thus, God can transform the heart of individuals through music (Schwöbel, 2020). Indeed, within the Bible itself there is no such thing as a focus on daily, individual Bible reading, but alternative ways of experiencing God are encouraged, in particular singing and making music (e.g. 1 Col. 3:16 and the Psalms).

In sum, when God is at the center of faith, creative ways of engaging with the Bible and spirituality can be seen with as just as much value and even authority as the *reading* of the text. Their use may be liberating and enrich engagement with God in a way that a text cannot always do.

Bible studies

Placing more focus upon corporate Bible engagement rather than individual reading is possibly liberating for individuals while still valuing and listening to scripture. The damaging webpages addressed above which talk of individual Bible reading as a necessity (Archer, 2017; Sarff, 2013) appear to, likely unintentionally, create a culture where individual reading is supplemented by corporate reading rather than the reverse. However, the Bible books were written to be read in the community, and the church today would do well to keep this corporate nature of the Bible in view. Bible study groups are an area of corporate worship to do so, and can also be explored to address ways in which dyslexic individuals, and the wider community, may thrive.

A few comments about Bible studies are in place. For many participants, reading the Bible with others was usually more enjoyable. The times when it became difficult was when participants felt excluded or unable to process information in the way that others did. While it might not be possible to tailor Bible study groups to suit every individual involved, the participants' experiences emphasize that they could, and perhaps should, be a place where people do not feel like they need to work at a certain pace or in a particular way. The struggles faced by the participants during Bible studies were, to varying extents, imposed on them by others and the normalized way in which reading the Bible communally is done.

One issue with Bible studies is the way in which they give space for a culture of idealizing individuals who have a vast Bible knowledge or read their Bibles every day. This can easily result in dyslexic people (and others) feeling inadequate and being silenced within group settings. However,

cultures that idealize Bible reading and memorizing risk replacing knowledge of God, which comes from living *coram Deo*, with knowledge of the Bible. One does not need to exclude the other, of course, but the point is that the unhealthy culture of idealization is detrimental to dyslexic individuals, and indeed to the whole church.

There are two ways in which these issues might begin to be resolved. Firstly, Bible studies should be places where people feel safe and comfortable. The purpose of Bible studies is to explore the Bible and grow in knowledge of God in community with others, and thus to live to God's glory. Therefore, for Bible studies to attain their purpose of increasing the knowledge of God in believers through fellowship, they should ensure that each individual is included. As Rebekah shared, when she is comfortable with people, she feels she can be open about being dyslexic and ask people to slow down when they read. Furthermore, when people feel comfortable, they are able to contribute through their unique approaches and understandings. Through creating a safe space, each person, both dyslexic and not, might grow in their relationship with God – which may be said to be the purpose of Bible studies.

Secondly, it was raised by some participants that Bible studies can be unnatural environments for people who think in different ways, or struggle with reading. As we have seen above, reading may be difficult for dyslexic persons in various ways, whether it be an issue of mixing up words or needing more time to process than others. For several participants, this leads to feelings of shame. Furthermore, a typical way of doing Bible studies is to read a passage and ask specific questions. Engaging with the Bible in ways that focus less on specific questions can be helpful for both dyslexic and non-dyslexic people. Churches may need to re-work how they approach corporate engagement with the Bible. Patrick and Lilly in particular suggest ways that this could be done, for example including less restrictive questions, incorporating activities such as walking, or using creativity. Perhaps sacred art could be used as a focus rather than text, or the text could be presented in more abstract forms such as art. This is not to say that traditional Bible studies do not have a place (and some participants in this study did enjoy them), however, there is space to explore alternative ways of engaging with the Bible.

Reworking the ways in which the Bible is engaged with corporately invites each part of the Body of Christ to bring their experience to the table and in turn, provide a breath of ways of engaging with the Bible, thus enriching the Church. For some it may involve creative outlets, meditation, or visual aids and for others it may involve reading and studying written words. People should be encouraged, not pressured, to engage the Bible in a way that makes sense to and suits them. Regardless of how people engage with the Bible, it is important that no one way is viewed as more valuable or

capable of glorifying God. When a person uses the ways in which God has made them differently, not in order to struggle through or become “normal,” engaging with the Bible becomes an act of worship.

Conclusion

The participants in this study highlight that the impact of dyslexia on reading the Bible is significant and must be addressed both within theology and faith communities. While not without difficulties, the participants show that dyslexia brings with it unique ways of thinking and engaging with the Bible and spirituality. As Macaskill highlights, each part of the body of Christ is a gift to the community (Macaskill, 2018). Therefore, dyslexia should not be considered as a problem to be fixed, in the first place, but dyslexic ways of engaging with the Bible should be received as a gift to the community, and dyslexic believers as people who need to be heard. Through hearing their voices, the wider Christian community may learn more about engaging with the Bible and spirituality.

However, as is clear from this study, the way in which churches and Christian communities approach reading the Bible can be damaging for those who struggle to read. When communities emphasize the role of a written text, some dyslexic individuals experience shame and guilt because they cannot always engage in the same way that others can. This study has identified the dangers that some doctrines of scripture risk coming into and the potential benefit of prioritizing corporate Bible engagement over individual Bible reading. This may lead to the utilization of other vehicles of engaging with the spirituality and/or the Bible including music or art. Rather than creating a culture of expectations which cause pressure, churches should foster hospitable communities where difference is valued. This can involve re-thinking how Bible studies are carried out, cultivating genuine openness and honesty, and finding simple ways to make the Bible more accessible.

This study is exploratory and highlights the need for conversations to be had about dyslexia, the Bible, and the Church. Further research might involve deeper study into the act of worship through Bible reading, and whether something is truly worship if it causes shame and pressure. Another area of further research is the correlation between certain doctrines of Scripture and the importance that communities and individuals place on Bible reading. The participants in this research were all from Protestant communities and so, it would be worthwhile to address the doctrines and practices of Catholic communities regarding the Bible. Furthermore, we have hinted at the potential for studying dyslexia and Bible reading in relation to theories of reading, understanding, and meaning-making, for example as developed by Ricoeur. Finally, the Bible is only one text that is used in the Christian community; it would be

worthwhile to explore dyslexia in relation to other texts, such as those used in the liturgy. Ultimately, our study has shown the need to develop a theology of dyslexia. This article has pointed to some themes that need to be included in such a theology, on the ground of the experience of dyslexic people and the theological reflection we have offered.

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Notes

1. We would like to express our gratitude to J Thomas Hewitt, Joanna Leidenhag, and Bridget Nichols for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article.
2. Lilly's understanding of the Bible suggests the potential to consider dyslexic Biblical interpretation in relation to Paul Ricoeur's idea of the metaphorical world which exists in front of a text (Ricoeur, 1974). This metaphorical world has the potential to liberate dyslexic individuals as interpretation is done to an extent within one's imagination. Thus, dyslexic individuals may bring a further layer of interpretation which can bring insight into spirituality and the life of the Church.
3. For a critique of the concept of inclusion, see Swinton, 2012.

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