

Review

Macaskill, Grant. *Autism and the Church, Bible, Theology, and Community*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press. 2019. ISBN 9781481311250

By Laurel Archer, MA, MASF

The pervasive incidence of Autism in the world should perhaps be enough for churches to formalize a loving welcome to those affected and their families, since incidence is commonly cited anywhere in the 1 in less than 100 range. That would mean that even a small church likely has one child, or adult viewing life from the spectrum. But Grant Macaskill, in *Autism and the Church*, pushes his readers further. He wants church leaders to establish a biblical and theologically sound understanding and response so that they will persevere with individuals with autism (and their families) and integrate them into the body of Christ. This is no small task. Although Macaskill's intention is to be readable and accessible to a variety of readers, this work will be challenging to parents and the lay church member. It is best suited to the pastor, student of the Bible, and well-trained lay leader. Carefully read, it is meant to be instructional and helpful.

I am the mother of two adult children severely affected by autism, non-verbal, with behaviours that have made becoming a fully integrated church family practically impossible. And while personal anecdotal commentary isn't a typical part of a book review, I found myself grateful for Macaskill's work, but also left wondering why such a careful corrective for autism and the church is necessary. These two feelings guide my review and recommendation for this book.

I am also a family life pastor in a large church and on this level, I am also grateful for the careful and informed way Macaskill approaches the subject of Autism. He informs the reader that this is a work of research, an "...exploration of issues that have not been considered in such depth before and, in many ways, represents the pursuit of an entirely new field of inquiry" (3). He takes the whole first chapter, almost one quarter of the book, to define and describe autism using up to date criteria and diagnostic information. He is well informed and able to give the reader a 'view' from various parts of the autistic spectrum. This is important because autism displays in individuals as uniquely as their fingerprints. And while Macaskill has not written a handbook for the church, he is acutely aware that application of a biblical and theological understanding of autism will not and cannot be "one size fits all." He is about laying a solid foundation: first descriptively – this is what autism is - and then hermeneutically – this is how the Bible, read properly, can help Christians.

I believe Macaskill provides chapter two, a specific hermeneutic, rather than moving on directly to a theology of autism and the church, because the world of

autism can be turbulent. This may be one reason why the church needs this corrective work. As the incidence of autism has skyrocketed in the last twenty years, children have grown into adults. Intensive therapies, chosen by parents concerned for their children, have been reviewed and dissected by the individuals who lived through those therapies, as well as by experts. Because of the diversity of functionality in individuals with autism – from non-verbal and in need of one-to-one support, to brilliant and navigating social structures in new ways, the world of autism is always trying to sort which way is up. Those who live in the world of autism from various perspectives need to be reminded or taught how to read the Bible and what the key parts are. They don't get to make that part up. Because there is a made-up 'hermeneutic' of autism – how to read the world, live in the world, understand the world...survive the world. What Macaskill provides is spiritual ballast and like the disciples on the turbulent sea, it is Jesus in the boat who provides the needed stability.

Having stabilized the thinking of his readers, in chapter 3 Macaskill moves to read specific biblical passages with concern for autism. Key in Macaskill's approach is the reminder that the church is still a work in progress. He writes: "The church cannot be assumed to constitute a safe and redemptive space for those with autism. It is the place in which the values of God's Spirit and the values of the flesh are brought into conflict, embodying a reality that continues to manifest the problems of sin" (p.73). The good news is that when the church is following Jesus, we can "work out our salvation with fear and trembling..." (Phil 2:12-13) because God is at work in it and in his people. Macaskill guides the reader to think theologically as skillfully and carefully as Amos Yong does in his more general work of theology: *The Bible, Disability, and the Church,*¹ but, refreshingly, applies it to the world of autism. Autism has often merely been added to discussions about disability and those with learning delays; it has been begging for someone to paint in some of the missing picture as Macaskill has helpfully done here.

Some of those gaps are dealt with in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 4 is as close as Macaskill gets to handbook-like suggestions to the church as he addresses more specific characteristics and expressions of autism such as sensory computing differences and navigating the complex social structures of the church. Chapter 5 should be read with caution by parents of young children as it lifts the veil on the long journey of autism and complex psychological issues involving anxiety, addictions, and suicide. Chapter 6 offers a kind of "Q and A" as Macaskill addresses issues that frequently came up during his research: salvation and a verbal confession of faith, prayer scripted and improvised, sexuality, and autistics reading Scripture.

At all levels of my experience with autism I am grateful for this book. As a mother who has frustratingly navigated the church with loved 'autistics' in tow, as a pastor practitioner who is trying to support and integrate children with autism into

programming and hoping to help those individuals and their families stay integrated in church as adults, and as a believer. As a believer because Macaskill masterfully reminds Christians how to read the Bible, and why they read the Bible. This book is an excellent corrective and reminder of what Jesus calls the members of the body of Christ to be. Whether neurotypical or neurodiverse, they are gifts to be given to each other.

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¹ Yong, Amos. *The Bible, Disability, and the Church – A New Vision of the People of God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Pub., 2011.