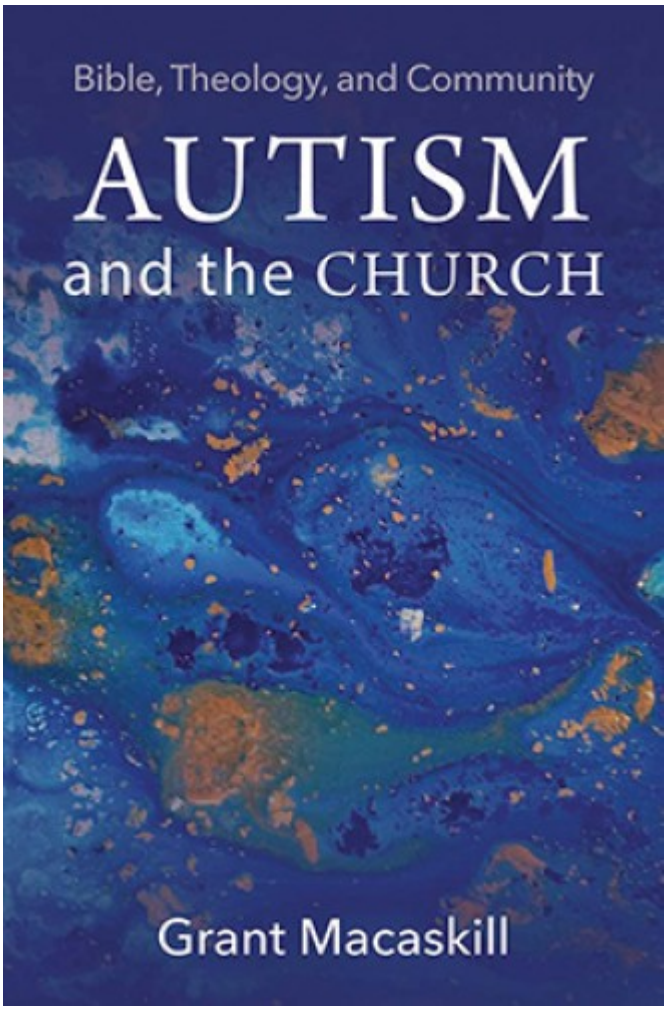
Thinking better about autism

Grant Macaskill’s reflection on neurodiversity becomes a stimulus to renewal of faith.

by Samuel Wells in the January 13, 2021 issue

In Review



Autism and the Church

Bible, Theology, and Community

By Grant Macaskill
Baylor University Press
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Grant Macaskill is well aware that whatever you say about autism, the tone of voice in which you say it matters more. He articulates many judicious, careful, and helpful things in this lucid, learned, and wide-ranging volume. What matters more is the gentle, kind, but assertive voice in which he offers them.

The first challenge is to recognize the bewildering breadth of the condition and yet to identify some specific things to talk about. Macaskill charts a spectrum from those who need lifelong care to those who, in previous generations, would never have been diagnosed with autism in the first place. He understands the tyranny of the normal but extends that problematic sense of normalcy to neurodiversity itself. He speaks of challenges for people with autism: nonverbal communication and cues, subtle uses of language such as irony, the appetite for control (often through routine and system), and a tendency to be overwhelmed by sensory impressions, sometimes resulting in meltdowns.

Typical of Macaskill's grace is the way he explores the question of whether autism is a disability. Neurodiversity and disability, it transpires, don't have to be mutually exclusive categories. In some cases, *difference* is a better description than *disability*. For example, the capacity to detect, analyze, and construct systems is an asset to everyone. But simply talking up the positives can sometimes inhibit access to help and deny the experience of caregivers. It's never simple or one-dimensional. In what could be a summary of the book, Macaskill asserts, "If we learn to think better about autism, we will learn to think better about everything else, too."

The irony of such a nuanced book about autism and the church is that the most rewarding parts aren't particularly about either autism or the church. In talking about 1 Corinthians 12, Macaskill makes a vital point that it's not just about finding unexpected gifts in others:

> the value of members is not grounded in their perceived social capital, but rather on the fact that they have been chosen by God, given to the body, and gifted with the Holy Spirit, even in ways that are unremarkable. Their presence is a cause for celebration, and their suffering a cause for collective concern.

More explicitly, he points out later in the book that “we need to be careful not to make the capacity to contribute productively to society the basis for ascribed worth.”

Meanwhile, in a telling critique of the language of inclusion, Macaskill contrasts a policy of inclusion, by which a leader redraws the map of membership, with a sense of belonging, which is about one’s own identification with a group, whether conferred or not. One can belong to a group even when one exhibits behaviors or bears characteristics the leaders don’t like. Belonging transcends such judgments.

What gives the book real authority is Macaskill’s deft ability to speak of the “dark side” of autism honestly and straightforwardly, without losing sympathy with his central purpose of putting the notion of neurodiversity as a gift firmly on the church’s agenda. He notes the fivefold higher suicide rate among adults with autism; he also reflects on the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and addiction.

Considering human identity in the light of this reality, Macaskill goes well beyond the themes of autism and church. In doing so, he includes some luminous passages about what happens when we find forgiveness in Christ, which means our grounds of life and hope lie entirely outside of our own efforts and shortcomings:

> I am an addict, and it is important I face up to that reality, but something more basic defines who I am and forms the basis of my inclusion in God’s kingdom. I am darkened by depression to the point where I see no hope of eternal life, but the certainty of that life is not compromised by the limits of my mental state. I am anxious, but my limited capacity to trust unfailingly that the situation is in God’s hands does not cause him to drop the world with a shrug.

As often in these pages, reflection on autism becomes a stimulus to renewal of faith and theology more generally.

My favorite part is where Macaskill best employs his skill as a New Testament exegete alongside his experience of and research into neurodiversity. In discussing nonverbal autism, he refers brilliantly to the unborn John the Baptist leaping in his mother’s womb, responding to the manifestation of God’s grace “in the only way he can, by kicking his little heart out.” He goes on to interpret Romans 8:26 as Paul’s recognition of the way the Holy Spirit intercedes for the nonverbal with groans that

words cannot express. The “weak” share in the mind of God for Paul; for Macaskill, this may happen in the experience of meltdown.

Meanwhile, permitting himself some direct criticism, Macaskill points out that words for *gossip* and *slander* occur 40 times in the New Testament, and *greed* 20 times. The tendency of the censorious to focus instead on supposed negative characteristics in neurodiverse people is not borne out by the weight of scripture.

I’d like one thing in this book to be different and another thing to be further explored. As for the part that wearied me a little, it’s the regular reference to the more conservative wing of the church, and the repeated citing of its culture—of the trophy preacher, for example, and the dynamic worship leader. These are mentioned too often simply for the sale of the argument.

More substantially, for my money Macaskill gives too much space and therefore legitimacy to very conservative readings of the Bible—so much as to imply that such are a template the rest of the church has to define itself in relation to. I’d love for him to write an equally lucid book divesting thin notions of scriptural authority of their power and replacing them with his own compelling vision, rather than take up space doing so in this book.

What I’d like more of is a truly theological searching into the ways in which God may be neurodiverse. It’s a speculative area that’s not really in the style of the book. But if Macaskill’s central argument is that autism is a gift, surely we need to extend that argument from exegesis and ethics to theology proper. He’s done a great job dismantling the tyranny of the normal; I’d love to see him take the next step and reassess the ways that normal is projected onto God.