AUTISM, HUMANITY AND PERSONHOOD: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

..............................................................

Jennifer Anne Cox
Abstract

Theological anthropology is charged with providing an understanding of the human. But theological anthropology can exclude people who are cognitively impaired because it has historically upheld reason as the image of God. Recent theology of intellectual disability has bypassed this difficulty by emphasising relationality as the image of God. This approach, however, has the unfortunate consequence that it excludes people with severe low-functioning autism, who do not relate to others as persons but as objects. This thesis aims to articulate a theological anthropology which is inclusive of people with severe autism.

Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder, the main characteristic of which is difficulty in social interaction. An examination of the Genesis creation story reveals both that God is relational and that human beings were created to live in relationship with God and other humans. This raises the theological question of how we may understand people with severe autism as human persons. Through an investigation of the significance of the incarnation I argue that the best basis for an inclusive anthropology, not dependent on any characteristic or ability, is the vicarious humanity of Christ. This is because Jesus Christ is the only human being who is without sin and the only true image of God. He is therefore able to gift others with both humanity and personhood. The work of the incarnation is completed by the atonement and resurrection. The work of the cross overcomes death and provides the basis for the eschatological healing of autism. This healing is actualised in the resurrection of the dead, when all that was proleptically true of the humanity of autistics will be fully realised. My christological, inclusive theological anthropology provides a strong basis for upholding the dignity and value of all people with severe autism.
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Introduction

The Issue

Autism is a disability which is increasingly discussed in the Australian media.\(^1\) It is no longer a condition which no one has ever heard of. Instead it has become almost a ‘flavour of the month’ disability. Current estimates of the prevalence of the condition vary greatly, but in March 2014 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that autism spectrum disorder affects 1 in 68 eight-year-old children in the United States.\(^2\) The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that, as of 2102, 0.5% of Australians have autism.\(^3\) The degree of impairment varies a great deal, but most certainly many people are severely affected by the disorder.

The existence of severe autism poses a challenge to theological anthropology. The juxtaposition of two things will illuminate the difficulty. On the one hand theological anthropology must uphold the nature of human being as relational, as Christoph Schwöbel observes.

Contemporary anthropological reflection is represented in a wide variety of forms. However diverse the different approaches may seem at first sight, there nevertheless seems to be a basic common element in most forms of

\(^1\) A quick search of *The West Australian* newspaper reveals dozens, even hundreds, of articles related to autism over the years 2011-2014.


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anthropological thought and research. It consists in the understanding of human being as relational being.⁴

In other words, to be a human being is to be a relational being. Yet on the other hand we see the reality of autism, wherein people who are severely low-functioning seem not to regard others as persons but as objects. Michael Blastland, father of a low-functioning autistic boy, writes of his son’s life. His book is entitled *Joe: The Only Boy in the World*. Blastland explains why.

I call him the only boy in the world because this is quite likely how it seems to him, living as he does without many of the commonplace nuts and bolts of ordinary human perception and understanding, in the absence of which he can never know even the elementary facts that he has kin and kind. That is, I think that is how it seems to him, because much is speculation, even among the experts, and Joe is in no position to put us right.⁵

Is [Joe], in his own mind, the point of it all, with all his internal reflections, thoughts, motives just about all the thoughts and reflections there are? If so, though he would never stop to reflect on that fact, he would be the only boy in the world.⁶

If it is true that to be human is to be relational and if some autistic individuals do not engage in reciprocal relationships, then can we conclude that people with severe autism are not human beings? Can we conclude otherwise? This is the dilemma with which I began my exploration of autism and theological anthropology. And it is a dilemma because parents of low-functioning autistic children do not want to dismiss

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⁶ Ibid., 106.
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their children as not human. Theologians do not want to deny that humans are made to be relational beings. I do not want to exclude a subset of those who are born to human parents as non-human and I do not want to abandon the biblical truths that God is a relational God and he created human beings in his image, which makes human beings relational as well. This is the issue which I am addressing in this thesis. The goal is to provide a theological anthropology which is inclusive of people with severe autism.

Upholding the humanity of people with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities is truly the purview of theology rather than medicine or psychology. A great deal of medical and psychological research has been devoted to understanding autism. The psychological and medical literature is extensive, and far too large to list. Medicine has made advances in understanding the aetiology of autism. Psychology may provide assistance to help autists and their families cope with the condition. However, medicine and psychology are not the right disciplines to answer the question of whether severely low-functioning autistics are human persons. These fields are not able to deal with questions of meaning, value and destiny. Historically, philosophy has dismissed persons with cognitive disabilities as not human. Because reason and cognition have been so central to traditional philosophical accounts of the human, cognitive disability provides a serious challenge to recent philosophers.7 Another quote from Blastland provides the case for the inadequacy of traditional philosophy in this arena.

What we see when peering into [Joe’s] mental machinery is a child possibly lacking almost all the philosopher’s traditional definitions of what it is to be human. There is a list which varies a little but usually includes a high degree of

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self-awareness, sophisticated culture, rich use of technology or tool making, a sense of our own history, structured language, an advanced ability to reason, complex moralities, the ability to think in abstraction or metaphor, and so on. I know the academic distinctions, I’ve read arguments from philosophy, neuroscience and elsewhere about what makes our species unique, or not. If I follow these distinctions, if I accept their logic, I’m forced to a rueful conclusion: Joe, my son, doesn’t qualify. If they are right about the attributes essential to being human, then I must face that chilling verdict. It is an outrageous question for a father to address, whether his child is one of us.

Theology is able to provide a basis for the humanity of people like Joe, people who fail the test of being human by traditional philosophical definitions and possibly even by expectations of the nature of humanity generated by the biblical creation accounts. The problem is real, but we must not despair because the Christian gospel is a radically inclusive one. The apostle Paul wrote of this radical inclusion in Gal 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” My theological anthropology has assumed from the start the inclusive nature of the gospel. This thesis has explicated this inclusiveness to provide room for people with severe autism as well.

This thesis articulates a theological anthropology inclusive of low-functioning autistic people and is therefore theology of disability. Therefore a word about theology of disability is needed. In disability literature it is customary for the author to state her qualifications to write about disability. There is an expectation that anyone who writes about disability will preferably have a disability or at least be the parent or partner of

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someone with a disability.\textsuperscript{9} The catch-cry “nothing about us without us” is important to many people with disabilities, because for too long people with disabilities have been ignored and dictated to about their lives. I do not have sufficient qualification according to these criteria to write about severe autism. Although I have a daughter with autism, she is intelligent and high-functioning. There are, however, reasons why I believe it is appropriate to write about autism without being a low-functioning autistic myself or the parent of one. Because of the nature of low-functioning autism it is unlikely that a person who is a severely low-functioning autistic would be able to consider the matter I am discussing. Although it might be preferable to have the qualification of being the parent of a low-functioning autistic child, I believe that the time-consuming nature of caring for that child may well have prevented me from writing anything. Stanley Hauerwas once remarked: “I have noticed that those that have retarded children and work with the retarded are often so busy doing, they have little time to reflect on why, how, or what they are doing.”\textsuperscript{10} Therefore, in the spirit of Hauerwas I believe that it is acceptable to write this on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves and on behalf of parents who have not the time to write.

The Literature

There is to date very little written about autism from a theological perspective. It is my intention to add to that slim quantity. Before discussing my approach in this thesis I will situate myself within the existing literature. Deeper interaction and critique of the literature is included throughout the thesis and therefore not found in this

\textsuperscript{10} Hauerwas made this statement in a speech given to the 1977 annual dinner of the Council for the Retarded. (Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church} (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 211.)
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summary. Since this thesis falls within the genre of disability theology I make mention of one of the most significant examples of disability theology, Nancy Eiesland’s work *The Disabled God.*

Eiesland sets out to construct a liberatory theology of disability that takes into account the ordinary lived experiences of people with disabilities. Her goal is both political action and resymbolization of the Christian theological tradition. She begins with the experiences of two women with disabilities in order to show that people with disabilities are not ‘overcomers,’ but rather live ordinary lives. Eiesland adopts the minority model as the basis for her liberatory theology in order to provide a vehicle for addressing injustice, stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities. Political action is necessary but insufficient; new symbols are needed to change the thinking of both people with disabilities and temporarily able-bodied people. The Bible and Christian theology have been problematic, since people with disabilities have been portrayed as having a special relationship with God, either very bad or very good. To change this situation Eiesland proposes a new symbol – Jesus Christ the disabled God, risen with the wounds of crucifixion in his hands, feet and side. It is this broken body which we partake of in the Eucharist. Thus the Eucharist must become a bodily practice of inclusion for people with disabilities. I will interact with Eiesland in chapter 5, which discusses the resurrection.

Eiesland is influential but her theology is directed towards people with physical disabilities. I want to consider literature which addresses cognitive disability, most particularly autism. The primary literature about autism is medical and psychological. A great deal has been written by the medical and psychological community over the seven decades since autism was labelled as a psychological disorder. This literature is not my main concern in this thesis. However, I will make mention of some of it in

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chapter 1, the chapter which describes the core characteristics of autism. Although this kind of literature is greatest in volume several other genres of literature about autism exist.

The second kind of literature about autism is biographical. This literature is of great value to anyone who wants to understand the autistic experience. In this thesis I will make use of two kinds of biographical material. The first is the autistic autobiography. Some high-functioning individuals with autism have written about their own experience of being autistic. This kind of insight is invaluable. Examples of this kind of literature include books by Australian Donna Williams,\(^\text{12}\) who has authored two autobiographical works *Nobody Nowhere*\(^\text{13}\) and *Somebody Somewhere*,\(^\text{14}\) and the autobiography of a Swedish woman Gunilla Gerland titled *A Real Person: Life on the Outside*\(^\text{15}\). The other kind of autistic biography is written by parents of autistic children. Examples of these abound. The one which I have made most use of has already been mentioned, namely, *Joe: The Only Boy in the World*,\(^\text{16}\) written by Joe’s father. Joe cannot write his own story because he is a low-functioning autistic child. The biographical literature is mainly used in chapter 1, where I describe the nature of autism.

The biographical material is important to understanding the autistic experience, but my thesis seeks to provide a *theological* anthropology. It is therefore desirable to interact with theological material on autism. This, however, is in short supply. Although there is some Christian literature about autism it is generally neither


\(^{14}\) *Somebody Somewhere* (London: Doubleday, 1994).


\(^{16}\) Blastland, *Joe: The Only Boy in the World*. 
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There is some biographical-devotional material written by Christian parents about parenting a child with autism such as *Autism’s Hidden Blessings: Discovering God’s Promises for Autistic Children and Their Families* by Kelly Langston. Some pastoral resources exist for helping people with autism in churches, for example, Barbara J. Newman’s *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Other books which border on the theological like *Autism and the God Connection* by William Stillman are more akin to new-age mysticism and parapsychology than Christian theology.

There is a real dearth of academic discussions about autism from a theological perspective. One recent academic monograph addresses autism and spirituality. Olga Bogdashina is an autism researcher and parent of an autistic individual. *Autism and Spirituality: Psyche, Self and Spirit in People on the Autism Spectrum* claims that all people have potential for spirituality, but some, like people with autism, are more spiritually aware. Bogdashina does not attempt to write theologically about autism or even suggest anything particularly Christian about her approach. This book is one of the few scholarly monographs on autism, yet it does not address matters of interest to this thesis.

Also discussing spirituality, but closer to the issues which I want to address, is a book by Abe Isanon, *Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum: Of Falling Sparrows.* Isanon has spent many years working as a carer for people with severe autism. He sets out to write a spirituality of autism-related conditions. His spirituality is a “liberatory spirituality of autism” aimed at being useful for both carers and low-functioning autistics. He develops this by exploring the problems associated with autism and then looking at the religious experiences of three autistic people. What makes Isanon’s spirituality “liberatory” is “the preferential option for the poor,” because he claims that this was the spirituality of Jesus. Low-functioning autistic people have limited capacity for self-reflection and self-expression. So a “liberatory spirituality of autism” depends on those who care entering into compassionate caring relationships with autistic individuals and expressing love through silence, touch and daily care-giving. Unlike Bogdashina, Isanon purports to be developing a Christian spirituality of autism. For this reason, Isanon’s work is something which in some respects intersects with my discussion, particularly because he sees autistics as valuable and capable of spirituality.

There are several journal articles which comment theologically about autism from a specifically Christian perspective. “Is a Sense of Self Essential to Spirituality?” by James Gordon asks a number of important questions about autism and spirituality. The proposal which Gordon puts forward is a kind of ‘community kenosis,’ in which the community humbles itself to stoop down to the person with autism to enable that person to be included into the community. “Blessing or Curse? Autism and the Rise of the Internet” by Ian Kenway discusses the move toward

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online communication by people with autism and those with Asperger’s syndrome. Although people with autism spectrum disorder find that the lack of physical interaction can make communication less stressful and draining, Christianity is a religion of embodiment and people with autism should not devalue the body. A third article “Do the Autistic Have a Prayer?” by Paul Dearey argues that the clinical definition of speech should be broadened and this broadening of language might be applied to prayer. John Swinton has contributed to the theological discussion about autism in his article “Reflections on Autistic Love: What Does Love Look Like?” Swinton argues that love can be expressed in diverse ways and we can understand love better by exploring the way in which people with autism express love. Brian Brock has also reflected theologically on autism from the perspective of someone who cares for an autistic child. In “Autism, Care, and Christian Hope,” Brock contends that biblical eschatology is not oriented towards providing anthropological definitions, but rather emphasises the meaningfulness of what we do in the present as people who love others and value their otherness. These articles make some contribution to a theological consideration of autism, but a larger systematic approach is needed. This is part of what my thesis is intended to do.

The most significant, and possibly the only, monograph written on autism from a theological perspective is Disabled Church, Disabled Society by John Gillibrand. Gillibrand is an Anglican priest with a severely autistic teenage son. He identifies his theological leanings as “a more liberal form of Anglican catholicism”. His formal

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24 Paul Dearey, "Do the Autistic Have a Prayer?,” ibid., no. 1.
27 John Gillibrand, Disabled Church, Disabled Society: The Implications of Autism for Philosophy, Theology and Politics (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2010).
28 Ibid., 16.
academic training is in the fields of history, theology and philosophy. Therefore, he approaches the discussion of making sense of his son’s autism from both a theological and philosophical perspective, giving equal weight to both theology and philosophy. Since Gillibrand is interested in the physical aspects of caring for autistic people, his book also addresses the issues of autism with a view to seeing political and social change. Gillibrand hopes to raise awareness of autism within the Christian community.

Gillibrand’s son Adam is at the very low end of the autism spectrum and has very little language. He has severe sleep disturbances and has never been toilet trained. Caring for Adam became so difficult for Gillibrand’s family that Adam is now in a residential school full time. Gillibrand writes not only about his son but about the way in which people have responded to his autism. The experience of caring and trying to get help for Adam, the insufficiency of respite care and lack of general support from Church and society has left Gillibrand seriously traumatized. He has PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). He is angry: angry with the world, with God, with the Church and with the political world.

Gillibrand’s book involves, then, a journey of working through the theological, philosophical and political issues which are brought up by the presence of Adam’s autism. He begins with trying to make sense of the ‘Why?’ question. For Gillibrand autism is not evil or the result of the fall. The journey of caring has been one of meaninglessness, an ambiguous experience of God being both present and absent. He has never prayed for his son’s healing. Instead he has adopted silence as a means of connecting with both his son and with God. God cannot be understood by Adam or by anyone else. Gillibrand also deliberates about autistic identity. Some have postulated that severely autistic people have no sense of self. Modern philosophy has postulated
Introduction

the death of the individual subject, the death of the author and the death of meaning in
the text. Gillibrand suggests that autism can bring us to an apophatic anthropology, a
way of understanding humanity by looking at what humanity is not.

Gillibrand attempts to go beyond sacred and secular. Accordingly, he believes
that theology alone is not enough to meet his psychological and intellectual needs, so
he turns to philosophy to provide a basis for his theological reflections about autism.
He engages with 20th century philosophy because it can be understood without
reference to theology. Both philosophy and theology are geared toward people who
use language. So he contends that philosophy of language should be reconstructed in
view of linguistic disability. Because scripture uses words this presents difficulties for
people with autism. Hence the way in which Gillibrand sees scripture has changed
with his son’s autism. Liturgy is also language-based. Gillibrand did not want to deny
his son the rites of the Church, but Adam could not consent to these rites or affirm
faith. In each element of the liturgy Adam’s autism means that Adam would be unable
to grasp its meaning.

Lastly, Gillibrand enters into a discussion of the political arena, particularly a
discussion of the responsibility of the State toward people with intellectual impairments
and those with autism. He desires to form a political theology. The present British
social system, which Gillibrand must deal with, has many deficiencies. Healthcare for
people with intellectual disabilities is plagued with problems. Social care has become a
matter of eligible needs instead of care for persons. For parents there is a constant
battle to get the care and education they need for their children. The question
Gillibrand poses is, how do we get justice? He believes that Christians should enter
into the political process and his approach is that of liberation theology. He concludes
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that the present social system is broken and needs to be replaced. “[O]ur starting point has to be the recognition and acceptance of ourselves as a fundamentally disabled society.”

Society is disabled, but so too is the Church. It cannot be the agent of change that we expect it to be. The themes in this book might be summed up by Gillibrand’s final line: “The fundamental error is to treat difference as affliction, and to treat those who are different as ‘them’ rather than ‘us’. In them, it is us that we all see.” In the epilogue Gillibrand writes an imaginary letter to his son about the book, knowing that his son is unable to understand. He writes: “It is not a book about you, it is a book for you.” It is in the incomprehensible nature of autism that we are brought face to face with meaning.

A second important monograph which intersects in some ways with my thesis topic is written by Thomas Reynolds. Reynolds does not specifically write about autism in Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality. However, Reynolds has written this book as a means of advocacy for his own son, who has multiple disabilities including Asperger’s syndrome. He sets out to “reflect theologically on how Christians might think differently about disability and act differently toward people with disabilities.” This is not personal narrative but rather a theological discussion. It draws on sociology, philosophy and theology in concert with disability literature in order to challenge those who are not disabled to change their thinking and to transform structures which are disabling in both society and Church.

29 Ibid., 186.
30 Ibid., 190.
32 Ibid., 14.
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Human vulnerability is central to Reynolds’ argument, because vulnerability is common to all humanity and it fosters interdependence. There is no real line between ability and disability, because every person is dependent and vulnerable. Rather, the way in which disability is perceived is dependent on society’s construction of normal and abnormal. Thus disability becomes stigmatised because it is a threat to the social fabric. Disability is also stigmatised by Christian language or through certain theological views of disability. Reynolds seeks to help non-disabled people to recognise their role in creating disabling environments.

There are fundamental problems with the social paradigm of Western society. People are afraid of anything which is not ‘normal,’ yet almost no one qualifies as ‘normal’. Citizens are expected to be rational, autonomous and productive. This expectation disenfranchises people with disabilities. Therefore, Reynolds proposes a new anthropology which “involves a dramatic metaphorical reversal” and a turn towards privileging disability. Disability is now the way through which we can understand humanity, because every person needs every other person. We must experience personhood in community, developing identity and meaning through relationships. Interdependence is the road to personhood. We must open ourselves up to the other in love and vulnerability without conditions.

In the second half of the book Reynolds attempts to re-view the biblical narrative in a way which he believes is friendlier to disability than a conventional understanding of the Bible. God is vulnerable and available to creation. Reynolds’ theology of creation aims to provide a positive explanation of disability which is “neither a blemish in God’s creation nor something God deliberately creates to punish.

33 Ibid., 104.
to illustrate a point, or to work blessings through.” God is not immediately responsible for disability, but disability is the result of creation’s potential for novelty and difference. Disability is not tragic but only made so by the cult of normalcy. Disability has often been interpreted as a distortion of the image of God. But Reynolds argues that the image of God is about creativity, relationship and availability. Therefore, disability does not make a person an incomplete human being; it is simply a matter of being finite and contingent. Redemption returns humanity to centring on God’s welcome. Jesus transformed the criteria for human value, basing it on God’s unconditional acceptance. Since Jesus entered transcendent life with an impaired body, people with disabilities do not assimilate into normalcy in the life to come.

The final chapter concludes that love is the purpose of all relationships and the path to human wholeness. Wholeness involves vulnerability and interdependence. These are found in the kingdom of God, which is radically inclusive. Jesus proclaimed a kingdom which is a realm of relationships and love. The mission of Jesus brought about wholeness through inclusion and welcome. “Far from something to be cured and gotten rid of disability is a locus of divine relational power.” It is necessary for the whole Church to work together to express the image of God, and therefore people with disabilities must not be excluded from full participation. Hospitality is a way to inclusion. Hospitality enables diversity and dispels the fear of the stranger. It involves being vulnerable, welcoming and practicing advocacy.

The paucity of theology about autism means that it has been necessary to interact with some other disability literature. The literature which is closest to the topic I am exploring is that which addresses intellectual disability. Some significant recent

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34 Ibid., 146.
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Theologies of intellectual disability are discussed below. All three consider ways of providing theological anthropologies which are inclusive of people with intellectual disabilities. In this regard they intersect with my question.

Molly Haslam addresses the humanity of profoundly intellectually disabled persons in *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*. Her concern is that there is a scarcity of theology concerned with intellectual disability and that the theology which exists relies too much on intellectual ability. This, Haslam claims, is the result of persistent features of Western theology. Haslam critiques both the concepts of human being as intentional agent (Kaufman) and human being as language user (Lindbeck). Both of these exclude people with profound intellectual disabilities. Haslam outlines a different understanding of human being, that of mutual responsiveness, which she believes will include as many people as possible. This is done in concert with Martin Buber’s philosophy of I-Thou relationships. Since people with profound intellectual disabilities are able to respond to others they can be understood as participating in the image of God.

Another significant work addressing intellectual disability is *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology and Ethics* by Hans Reinders. Reinders argues that people with intellectual disabilities are not different to other people. His argument is aimed toward encouraging people to befriend intellectually disabled people. People with profound intellectual disabilities cannot be given dignity if we continue to assume that humanity is only applicable to those with the capacity for agency. The book is divided into three sections: Profound Disability,  

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Theology and Ethics. In section one Reinders introduces Kelly, a woman who is micro-encephalic and can do none of the things by which we normally define human being. The discussion centres on the issues surrounding questions about Kelly’s humanity. The disability rights approach does not fit well with persons with intellectual disabilities because of its emphasis on self-advocacy. The tradition of Catholic moral theology of human being also has problems, particularly in regard to the incapacity of intellectually disabled persons to reach human *telos*. We must redefine the ultimate good for human being in order to avoid saying that having an intellectual disability makes life not worth living. According to Reinders this ultimate good is belonging.

Part two addresses theology of disability. Here Reinders is looking for a helpful theology for grounding the humanity of Kelly, and he considers various theologies of disability. Nancy Eiesland posits a liberation theology of disability based on the minority model, but she fails to provide a theological space to overcome the division between able-bodied and disabled. Jennie Weiss Block concentrates on issues of access for people with disabilities. Reinders believes that people with intellectual disabilities need access to our lives through friendship. Stanley Hauerwas thinks of the lives of intellectually disabled people as demonstrating the vulnerability of every human. But this approach has limitations in that it relies on a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. David Pailin’s argument is that human worth is dependent on the love of God. This has value but lacks a trinitarian understanding of God. Moving on from these theologies, Reinders laments that the doctrine of humanity as the image of God has been dominated by the idea that the image involves some human faculty. Therefore, “If Kelly’s humanity is to be securely affirmed at all it must be affirmed on
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the grounds of who God is and what God does.” Reinders seeks to ground humanity in a trinitarian concept of divine and human being. It is the theology of John Zizioulas, who believes that personhood is a gift of participation in human telos, which is most helpful in Reinders’ project.

The final section discusses the ethical implications of being profoundly disabled using the theology discussed above. The theological position which Reinders affirms is that “our humanity is extrinsically grounded, both with regard to origin and final end.” The love of God and his faithfulness must be primary to our humanity. One strand of Catholic theology speaks of virtues as a means to fullness of life. However, this necessarily excludes people with profound disabilities. Instead of discussing our friendship with God we should concentrate on God’s friendship with us, because grace does not depend on any capacity for growth. Christian response to disability is not about what the person with the disability does or does not do. It is based on friendship with God. Being friends with other people is necessary in order to understand friendship with God. Finally, Reinders encourages the reader to enter into friendships with people who are intellectually disabled because it will be mutually beneficial.

A third book of relevance to my discussion is Amos Yong’s monograph Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity. Yong was motivated to write because he has a younger brother with Down syndrome. The book is divided into three sections. Section one addresses epistemology and methodology. Yong works out of something that he calls the “pneumatological imagination,” which he bases on the events of the day of Pentecost, when the apostles spoke in many

38 Ibid., 246.
39 Ibid., 282.
40 Amos Yong, Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).
languages through the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the Holy Spirit speaks through many different voices such as economic, political, medical and biogenic understandings of disability. As a consequence Yong’s theology of disability is a “performative theology” “that informs, shapes, and guides the practices of the church”.41 What follows is a biblical and theological survey of the way in which disability has been understood. In Yong’s view biblical and theological understandings of disability have frequently been negative and oppressive to persons with disabilities. He challenges the widely held theological views of disability and proposes a theological viewpoint informed by the voices of people with intellectual disability and a pneumatological vision.

Section two discusses Down syndrome in relation to a scientific worldview dominated by a medical model of disability, adopting both medical and social perspectives. Yong provides a brief history of the treatment of persons with intellectual disabilities since the 19th century as a prelude to discussing the ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of Down syndrome in the present. No cure exists and abortion is a common means of ‘prevention’. Yet Yong argues that people with Down syndrome enrich the lives of others. Rather than being a medical ‘problem,’ Down syndrome also has social and even spiritual dimensions. He concludes that to understand intellectual disability we benefit from using biomedical and social models. This section also seeks to broaden the way in which disability is interpreted by drawing on different religious viewpoints as well as feminist perspectives, post-colonial theory and insights from world cultures.

The third section, which is approximately half the book, seeks to “reimagine theology” in concert with disability perspectives. The aim is to revitalise and revamp

41 Ibid., 13.
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Christian theology and practice by bringing these into contact with disability issues. Yong “reimagines” seven traditional doctrines: creation, providence, the fall, theological anthropology, ecclesiology, soteriology, and eschatology. This is done with an awareness of the interactions with science, religious perspectives and disability perspectives explored earlier in the book. Yong’s “pneumatological imagination” is also formative in his thinking. This reimagining is done with the intention of shaping Christian praxis.

His focus throughout the reimagining of doctrines is on relationship. The Trinity is relational and the image of God is relational. Yong seeks to formulate an anthropology of inter-relationality which is emergentist. Emergentism recognises that human consciousness cannot be reduced to brain states and therefore human being includes the body without being reducible to it. His ecclesiology is one of inclusion. Ecclesiology should emphasise the Spirit’s eschatological presence and actions. The Spirit works in people with disabilities so that they become ministers to others. The Church’s identity is formed by the presence of the weak. Salvation is also seen in relational terms. Human beings are embodied social creatures and people with intellectual disabilities can experience salvation through relationships. Salvation is centred on reconciled relationships and extends beyond the Church to the transformation of economic and political spheres. Finally, Yong looks at the resurrection. Yong’s eschatology is a dynamic one which encompasses the idea of eternal transformation of the person. In this way persons with Down syndrome will not lose their identities in eternity, because for Yong identity is inescapably tied to the experience of disability.
My Approach

I am not the first person to argue in favour of the humanity of people with cognitive and developmental disabilities. Gillibrand, Haslam, Reynolds, Reinders and Yong have all sought, in different ways, to uphold the humanness of people with severe and profound disabilities. As this is a project which is vital if people with cognitive disabilities are to receive respect, love and dignity, both within the Church and the wider society, these contributions are important. However, much more can be said. More importantly, much more can be said christologically than has been said. Gillibrand gives a lot of weight to philosophy in his consideration of autism. Haslam’s argument relies on the philosophy of Martin Buber. Reynolds, Reinders and Yong all present a theological argument, in which Jesus is by no means irrelevant. However, none of these people have argued for the humanity of people with intellectual disabilities directly on the basis of christology. It is my conviction that the humanity of Christ is the best basis for the humanity of people with cognitive and developmental disabilities. This is the core claim of my thesis.

There are different ways in which contemporary theologians address disability. Some interact with social theory and others draw on church tradition. The approach I am taking is to appropriate particular strands of the church tradition. I am writing disability theology from an evangelical stance. As an evangelical I have taken a high view of the Bible as the written word of God. My understanding of theology is one which is generally, although not exclusively, Reformed, and the thinkers I have drawn on are, in the main, either Reformers, Reformed theologians or others who have followed in the footsteps of the 16th century magisterial Reformation, with the addition

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of some patristic and Eastern Orthodox theology. With this theological purview, I believe that any theology must take seriously the fact that humanity exists in a state of sin and is in dire need of redemption. Thus whatever we say theologically must assume our need of divine grace. For this reason the absolute centre of theology must be the person of Jesus Christ. Two quotations from John Calvin serve to exemplify my position in regard to Christ as the theological centre.

In Institutes, writing of Christ as redeemer, Calvin comments that we must not turn away from Christ even to the smallest extent, because to do so would result in being deprived of grace. He observes:

Bernard’s admonition is worth remembering: ‘The name of Jesus is not only light but also food; it is also oil, without which all food of the soul is dry; it is salt, without whose seasoning whatever is set before us is insipid; finally, it is honey in the mouth, melody in the ear, rejoicing in the heart, and at the same time medicine. Every discourse in which his name is not spoken is without savour.’

And a little later Calvin writes:

We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ (Acts 4:12). We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else. ... In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other. Some men, not content with him alone, are borne hither and thither from one hope to another; even if they concern themselves chiefly with him, they nevertheless stray from the right way in turning some part of their thinking in another direction.

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43 Bernard of Clairaux, Sermons on the Song of Songs. xv.6 (cited by John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: SCM, 1960 [1559]). II.xvi.1)
44 Institutes. II.xvi.19
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Christian theology is *Christian* theology because it is a way of understanding God and the world through the person of Christ. The way in which we come to know Christ is through the pages of the Bible and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Theology which is not focused on Christ cannot be rightly called *Christian* theology. It may be theology in that it speaks about God or a god. However, it can only be *Christian* because of Christ. As John Macquarrie so succinctly and truly observes, “Christianity, as the name implies, has Jesus Christ at its very centre.”

I have sought to centre my theology of autism on the person and work of Christ rather than on the characteristics and experience of autism. The work begins with a description of autism for the purpose of clarifying what autism is and the issues which I am going to discuss. However, I have not taken a disability perspective in my theological discussion. I believe that putting disability at the centre, even in writing theology of disability, is to stray away from Christ to some degree, either small or great, and thus to be deprived of the grace which he gives. I do not think that wisdom about the world can be derived from the character and experience of disability without viewing these through the lens of Christ. Even more importantly we cannot derive an understanding of Jesus by viewing him through the lens of disability.

I began with the fundamental conviction that the way in which God views humanity and deals with people is through the lens of grace. For this reason I anticipated from the start that the person and work of Christ would be a sufficient basis for affirming the humanity of people with severe autism. Since some people have genuinely questioned the humanness and personhood of people with low-functioning autism, I believe it is important to carefully spell out how the humanity of Christ is the basis for the humanity of each one. Systematic theology is helpful in addressing the

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question, because it can take account of diverse theological themes and meld them together to provide a positive affirmation of people with even the most severe cognitive and developmental disabilities. This positive affirmation is the goal of the thesis.

Therefore, this thesis is written as systematic theology. It does not address pastoral theology, and for this reason I have not interacted extensively with authors who deal with pastoral matters. I have concentrated on theology rather than on the experience of autism. The way in which the thesis is structured, with the exception of chapter 1, is based around significant aspects of salvation history. Chapter 1 provides an overview of autism and the autistic experience. The theological discussion which follows in chapters 2 through 6 is divided into chapters on creation, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Summary of the Thesis

Chapter 1 introduces autism to the non-psychologist reader. The purpose of this chapter is to set the scene for the thesis by providing a basic understanding of the core characteristics of autism according to the psychological literature. This chapter also provides some biographical descriptions of autism, one by an autistic woman and one by the father of an autistic boy. These more personal descriptions help the reader ‘get into the head’ of someone with autism as far as this is possible without having autism for oneself. These descriptions lead towards asking the question which this thesis aims to answer, are people with severe autism really human beings? The next chapter deepens the scope of the issues.

Chapter 2 begins the theological discussion by focussing on the story of creation as told in Gen 1-3. It considers the nature of God and the nature of the first
human beings. This chapter is not intended to discuss every possible characteristic of God or of humanity, but only those which pertain to the characteristics of autism as discussed in chapter 1. In this chapter I argue that neither God nor the first humans have autism. Importantly, God exists as a triune communion of persons. Human beings are created in the image of a relational God. It is this fact which raises two important theological questions. First, if the first humans did not have autism, why is autism now in the world? I argue that the presence of autism in the world is one effect of the fall. This attribution of autism to sin is essential because it foreshadows later chapters, particularly the resurrection, when I will discuss the complete healing of autism as the result of the work of Christ. The second question raised is the central question of my thesis. If human beings are created in the image of a relational God, then are people with severe autism genuinely human persons?

Chapter 3 is the core chapter in the thesis. The aim is to articulate a theological anthropology based on the gospel and which is therefore inclusive of people with severe autism. This anthropology does not rely on an intrinsic characteristic of the individual to make him or her a human person. The first two chapters demonstrated that relying on the intrinsic characteristics of severely autistic individuals is problematic. People with autism have different difficulties than people with intellectual disabilities who are not on the autism spectrum. Therefore, there is a problem with the anthropologies designed to bypass the rational aspect of human nature when these are applied people with severe autism. This is because these anthropologies rely on the capacity to relate to other people, something which is lacking in many severely low-functioning autists. The approach I have adopted relies instead on an extrinsic approach to theological anthropology. On the assumption that there is only one genuinely human person – Jesus Christ – it is necessary for everyone to find his or
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her humanity and personhood by participation in the humanity and personhood of Christ.

The core of my argument in this chapter is that every human individual is a human person, not because of some characteristic which qualifies her or him as human, but because human personhood is received from another. The one who gifts us all with humanity and personhood is Jesus Christ. So chapter 3 explores what several theologians have said about the incarnation and considers the effect of the incarnation on human personhood for people with severe autism. Karl Barth declares that the only true human being is Jesus Christ. He alone is a human being uncorrupted by sin. Stanley Grenz testifies that Jesus Christ is the only human being who can be said to be the true image of God. He is thereby the firstfruits of a new humanity which is being transformed into the image of God so that human beings can fulfil the destiny which was always intended by God. That Jesus alone is normative human being shows the greatness of humanity. But it also raises the question of how every other individual can be considered human because they cannot attain to the standard set by Jesus. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to discussing my response to this dilemma.

I dialogue with three theologians who offer views of the incarnation which are helpful in overcoming the apparent difficulty of Jesus’ perfection as a human being. The first is 2nd century theologian Irenaeus, whose theological conception of recapitulation is focused on what Jesus has done on behalf of humanity, rather than on Jesus as example. Irenaeus understands the incarnation to involve the Son of God taking on human form and ‘recapitulating’ or summing up the whole of human existence. In taking on human existence in continuity with the humanity of Adam, Jesus Christ lived a genuine human life in a way which Adam failed to do. He
therefore transformed the humanity of Adam and did this on behalf of every other human. This conception of human existence is an eschatological one, which means that human existence must be understood from its end point rather than its present state. Recapitulation provides a basis for perceiving people with severe autism as human beings, because their humanity has been transformed by the humanity of Christ, and will attain its destiny through him.

The second theologian who will contribute to my inclusive theological anthropology is James Torrance. J.B. Torrance emphasises the vicarious humanity of Christ. In worship it is the high priesthood of Christ which enables believers to bring true worship to the Father. This is because Jesus Christ not only represents God to humanity but he represents humanity to God. As the perfect representative human being, Jesus has offered the perfect human response of lived worship to God on behalf of all people. Because his vicarious humanity is not only applicable to worship, but to every aspect of human existence, Christ is both representative and substitute for every autistic individual. Therefore, a particular set of characteristics or abilities is not necessary in order to be a human being acceptable to God. No matter how severe the lack of ability to relate to other people, this cannot disqualify someone from being human. It is the vicarious humanity of Christ rather than ability which is important in affirming humanness.

The final part of chapter 3 is devoted to the matter of personhood. Here I outline the theology of Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas on personhood. Zizioulas argues that the concept of personhood derives from the deliberations of the early Church Fathers over how to describe the nature of the Trinity. God exists as a communion of persons. Human beings are persons when they live as the image of God.
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Personhood thereby intrinsically involves living in relationship with other persons. But it is here that the difficulty for autistic individuals becomes apparent. Severely autistic individuals do not relate to other people as persons but as objects. The way in which I respond to this difficulty is through the theology of T.F. Torrance, who conceives of Jesus Christ as “the humanizing Man and the personalizing Person”. Torrance explains that the incarnation means, among other things, that in Christ humanity and deity are united together. Christ is both the Creator of humanity and perfect human being. This makes the humanity of Christ the basis for the humanity of every human. In addition, since Jesus Christ is both divine person and a human, he is personalizing person. His personhood is the basis for the personhood of human beings, since humans cannot be other than personalized persons. In effect, both humanity and personhood are gifts from Christ. Therefore, ability or inability is utterly irrelevant to human personhood.

These three theologies of the incarnation provide a strong basis for a theological anthropology which is not in any way dependent on a characteristic or quality of the individual. Even ability or inability in relationships is not important in the determination of whether someone is a human person. Therefore, this anthropology can offer a way of underpinning the humanity and personhood of even the most severely disabled people, in particular those who are on the low-functioning end of the autism spectrum.

Chapter 4 provides the necessary prelude to my discussion of the resurrection in chapter 5 by discussing the atonement and autism. The work of Christ in the incarnation cannot be complete without his death on the cross. Chapter 4 is intended to do two things. It explains how the death of Christ overcomes sin and death. Since the existence of sin and the inevitability of death in this fallen world are the real reason for
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the presence of autism in the world, it is necessary for these to be overcome in order for autism to be healed in the eschaton. In the second half of the chapter I interact with Jürgen Moltmann’s theology in *The Crucified God* to argue that Jesus’ experience of aloneness, loneliness and forsakenness in his passion has enabled God to understand the experience of being cut off from other persons. The upshot of this chapter is that the work has been done which allows for the healing of autism and the complete transformation of people with autism in the resurrection of the dead. In the present, as autistics await the resurrection, it is clear that God is truly empathetic to a major part of the autistic experience.

Chapter 5 is the culmination of the argument, because it addresses the eschatological destiny of people with autism. The resurrection of the dead and how this pertains to people with disabilities is one of the issues currently being explored by many writers of theology of disability. My view of the resurrection of the dead is in keeping with a more traditional understanding of the doctrine. In this chapter I argue against the understanding of the resurrection put forward by two significant writers of disability theology – Nancy Eiesland and Amos Yong. The majority of chapter 5 is devoted to outlining and critiquing Eiesland’s ideas about the resurrection of the dead for people with physical disabilities and Yong’s ideas about the resurrection of those with Down syndrome. I contend that both Eiesland and Yong have given too much weight to a disability understanding of the resurrection. Rather than adopting either of these views, I argue for the complete transformation of people with severe autism in the resurrection of the righteous. All that is proleptically true of autistic people, because of the work of the incarnation, is brought to full realisation in the resurrection of the dead.
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The final chapter is necessary because throughout the thesis my argument has presupposed that full humanity is neither dependent on ability nor hindered by inability, but is achieved by union with Christ. If an individual with severe autism is to attain to full humanity, then that individual must be united to Christ by faith. Chapter 6, then, is included in order to argue that it is possible for someone with a severe cognitive and developmental disability to have faith in Christ. The argument in chapter 6 is based on an evaluation of three major understandings of infant salvation. I chose this method because autism and intellectual disability are not found in the Bible but infants certainly are. The clearest biblical example of an infant who has faith in Christ is the unborn John the Baptist. He knew the presence of Christ from the womb because of the work of the Spirit. In a similar way people with or without intellectual and developmental disabilities are brought to faith in Christ through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

Now that I have outlined the argument of the thesis, I can begin to explore the issues in depth and explicate my inclusive, christological theological anthropology.
Chapter 1 ‘Autism’

Introduction

In the novel The Chrysalids by John Wyndham, the world has experienced a catastrophic event that has left much of the planet uninhabitable. Birth defects are very common and crops do not breed true much of the time. The mutated crops and animals are destroyed by fire. Those who appear to be human but fall outside the definition of the true image are banished. The true image is drummed into the mind of the narrator even as he reads the plaque on the wall of his home: “ONLY THE IMAGE OF GOD IS MAN. BLESSED IS THE NORM. … THE DEVIL IS THE FATHER OF DEVIATION.” There is a detailed list of what constitutes the norm for a human being. The narrator recalls fearfully:

The definition of man recited itself in my head: ‘…and each leg shall be joined twice and have one foot, and each foot five toes, and each toe shall end with a flat nail…’ And so on, until finally: ‘And any creature that shall seem to be human, but is not formed thus is not human. It is neither man nor woman. It is a blasphemy against the true Image of God, and hateful in the sight of God.’

As the novel progresses it becomes clear that the narrator of the story has a mutation of his own, albeit an invisible one. He and several others have the ability to communicate telepathically over long distances. Although they look human they know that being different will result in their expulsions or even their deaths.

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48 Ibid., 13.
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Of course this is fiction, but like all good fiction it reflects enough of the real-life attitudes of people to raise several questions about what makes someone human. For us it raises the question of what is the image of God. For when people are not seen as the image of God, and therefore assumed to be not truly human, they are not treated with love and dignity. Autism, like the abilities of the narrator of *The Chrysalids*, is considered to be an invisible disability,\(^49\) because the body is unremarkable but the mind is affected in ways which people cannot generally understand. The existence of this invisible disability causes many to question the humanity of people who are autistic.

Those who are autistic, live with an autistic person, or care for an autistic person, will already understand the nature of autism. But for those who are unfamiliar with the condition, this chapter is intended to provide an introduction to autism. I will begin with a brief history of the ‘discovery’ of autism by two psychologists in different continents. Then the core features of autism are outlined. These are known as the triad of impairments – impaired social skills, impaired reciprocal communication and repetitive or restricted interests and behaviours. Next, different perceptions of autism are discussed and the different terminology used to describe people with autism which is consequent to those different perceptions. Since psychological discussions are rather cold descriptions of the condition it is helpful to have a more personal perspective. To gain some insight into what it is like to have autism, there is a section of autobiographical material written by an autistic Swedish woman, and then a section of biographical material written by the father of a boy with severe autism. Finally, the closing section of the chapter presents some theological questions which have arisen through this discussion. These questions revolve around what it means to be human.

The ‘Discovery’ of Autism

Autism has existed for a very long time. Historical reports suggest that autism is a condition which has been present throughout human history.\(^{50}\) However, the history of the label ‘autism’ for the set of behaviours we associate with the term is very short. ‘Autism’ was first used by Eugen Bleuler in 1908 to describe the withdrawn behaviour of schizophrenic patients. Bleuler’s patients spurned social interaction and withdrew into their own world.\(^{51}\) Early in the 1940’s two men, working independently and in different countries, both used the word ‘autism’ to describe a childhood syndrome. Leo Kanner, working in the United States, published his study of eleven children with what he described as “infantile autism”. It is Kanner who is attributed with the first designation of autism as a syndrome. The following year in Austria, Hans Asperger described children with a similar set of symptoms. Following this ‘discovery,’ cases of autism were found at all major psychiatric facilities.\(^{52}\)

Kanner considered eleven children all under the age of eleven years, eight boys and three girls. He concludes from his case studies:

> These characteristics form a unique ‘syndrome,’ not heretofore reported, which seems to be rare enough, yet is probably more frequent than is indicated by the paucity of observed cases. … The outstanding ‘pathognomonic,’ fundamental disorder is the children’s *inability to relate themselves* in the ordinary way to people and situations from the beginning of life. … There is from the start an

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extreme autistic aloneness that, whenever possible, disregards, ignores, shuts out anything that comes to the child from the outside.\textsuperscript{53}

Autistic aloneness is evident in the description Kanner gives of the common features of the children he studied. For those who spoke (three were mute), language was not used to convey meaning but largely consisted in memorised lists and songs, with parroted words and sentences. Every child desired above all else to be left undisturbed.\textsuperscript{54} “Everything that is brought to the child from the outside, everything that changes his external or even internal environment, represents a dreaded intrusion.”\textsuperscript{55} Food, loud noises and moving objects were all considered to be intrusive upon the children’s aloneness.\textsuperscript{56} The children all had “an anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness”.\textsuperscript{57} Furniture and objects in the house could not be moved, and routines, including spoken requests, had to remain rigidly the same. The children had relationships with objects but not with people. Objects remain the same and cannot impinge upon the child’s desire for aloneness. People were largely ignored by the children in favour of attending to objects. The children seemed oblivious to the presence or absence of their parents.\textsuperscript{58} “If dealing with another person becomes inevitable, then a temporary relationship is formed with the person’s hand or foot as a definitely detached object, but not with the person himself.”\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 243-44.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 244.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 244-45.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 245. Italics original.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 245-47.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 249.
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The situation changed as the children grew older.\(^6^0\) They had more contact with people and became more communicative, but people were still only tolerated. Kanner observes:

> [P]eople are included in the child’s world to the extent to which they satisfy his needs, answer his obsessive questions, teach him how to read and to do things. … though people are still regarded as nuisances, their questions are answered and their commands are obeyed reluctantly, with the implication that it would be best to get these interferences over with, the sooner to be able to return to the still much desired aloneness.\(^6^1\)

Not long after Kanner wrote about autism, Asperger wrote in 1944 that he had studied several children who had a “fundamental disturbance” which “results in severe and characteristic difficulties of social integration. In many cases the social problems are so profound that they overshadow everything else.”\(^6^2\) This he chose to call ‘autism,’ a disorder which he describes this way:

> Human beings normally live in constant interaction with their environment, and react to it continually. However, ‘autists’ have severely disturbed and considerably limited interaction. The autist is only himself (cf. the Greek word \textit{autos}) and is not an active member of a greater organism which he is influenced by and which he influences constantly.\(^6^3\)

Asperger stresses that the children did not develop autism, but began life that way, and the disorder affected every aspect of their personality. Autism persists over time; while there are changes as the children grow older, the core symptoms are

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\(^6^0\) When Kanner first wrote about them the children were between nine and eleven years old.

\(^6^1\) Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," 249-50.


\(^6^3\) Ibid., 38.
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constantly present. It is in relationships with other persons that the disorder is most clearly seen. This is especially so within the family of the autistic child; parents of autistic children are emotionally wounded by their children’s behaviour. It is common for these children to be described as living among others as strangers, or as being oblivious to surrounding activity. Asperger observes that autistic children displayed extremely narcissistic behaviour, being uninterested in restriction or the desires of others.64

Asperger agrees with Kanner in regard to the core features of the syndrome: “poverty of social interaction and the failure of communication,” “stereotypic behaviour, isolated special interests, outstanding skills and resistance to change”.65 An English study published in 1979 concludes that these features identified by Asperger and Kanner are indeed the core features of autism. These features have become known as the triad of impairments or Wing’s triad. The triad of impairments are generally defined as impaired social development, impaired language and communication, and rigidity of thought and behaviour. The English study established that difficulty in engaging in reciprocal relationships is the key characteristic of autism. If a person has deficits in social skills then that person will also have deficits in communication and will exhibit rigid behaviour.66 Difficulty with relationships is something which holds the most significance for the theological project which I will undertake. But before discussing the theological issues I must go into more detail about the nature of autism as it is presently understood.

64 Ibid., 39, 67, 77-78, 81.
The Core Features of Autism

Impaired Social Skills

Kanner’s designation, “extreme autistic aloneness,” is the core deficit of autism. It is social dysfunction which most clearly defines the autistic condition. The symptoms and behaviours associated with social impairment change over time and vary with the degree of intellectual impairment. However, the fact of social impairment itself is a constant throughout the life of a person with autism. One way the social impairment of autism can be described is as a lack of empathy. People with autism are unresponsive to other people’s suffering; they do not give or receive comfort. Empathy involves the skill of knowing what the other person is thinking or feeling, even when this differs from your own thoughts or feelings. This skill is difficult for even the most high-functioning person with autism.\(^6^7\)

Children with autism are often unable to establish and maintain relationships with their age peers. This difficulty becomes more obvious as children grow older. Many children with autism tend to be on the periphery of groups of children, without desiring or being able to join in. If they do interact with others it is often in inappropriate ways, such as a child trying to make friends by talking about his special interest endlessly, when it is evident (at least to others) that no one is interested. The normal two-way interaction of social conduct – asking questions about friends, taking turns, paying attention to the other person – must be explained to people with autism. But, while many people with autism do not appear interested in social interaction, many

high-functioning people do desire social interaction, but experience intense difficulty in initiating and maintaining such relationships.\textsuperscript{68}

One way of understanding this difficulty with social interaction is through what is called theory of mind (ToM). Theory of mind is the instinctive knowledge of what another person is likely to be thinking or feeling based on an understanding that other people have similar thoughts and feelings to the individual who ‘mind reads’. This is the way neurotypical, that is, not autistic, individuals function successfully in social interaction.\textsuperscript{69} Simon Baron-Cohen has described what he calls mindblindness as a way of understanding what people with autism experience. Most neurotypical people are aware of mental states, and can therefore attribute thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, desires and intentions to other people as an explanation of their behaviour. People with autism are mindblind to varying degrees; they are unable to ‘read minds’ as others do every day.\textsuperscript{70}

Of course, not all people with autism are alike in their awareness of other people and their capacity to ‘read minds’. A great range of ability in this area exists amongst people on the autism spectrum.\textsuperscript{71} It appears that people with autism, who lack the faculties which others use intuitively, must use cognitive processes to make sense of emotional stimuli. Temple Grandin a successful, intelligent woman with autism has written about her own difficulties due to her autism: “I had to think about every social interaction … a scientist trying to figure out the ways of the natives.”\textsuperscript{72} Yet even high-

\textsuperscript{71} Cashin and Barker, "The Triad of Impairment in Autism Revisited," 190.
\textsuperscript{72} Temple Grandin, \textit{Thinking in Pictures} (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993), 133. (Quoted in Molly Losh and Lisa Capps, "Understanding of Emotional Experience in Autism: Insight from the Personal
functioning autistic people find it difficult to understand and interpret the emotional interactions which are the foundations of social relationships.\textsuperscript{73}

In extreme cases self-awareness appears to be lacking. Uta Frith contends that if it is difficult for children with autism to develop a theory of mind then it may also be difficult for them to be self-aware. Self-awareness comes about by reflecting on mental states. But if people with autism cannot understand mental states, it follows that they lack self-awareness. An intellectually mature human being who lacked self-awareness “would be totally on their own but unable to keep company even with themselves.” Being with other people would not be better that being with things. Frith avers, “The ability to make sense of other people is also the ability to make sense of oneself.”\textsuperscript{74}

Theory of mind is considered to be a well established theory in psychology. However, there are several people who have offered critiques to the standard formulation of the theory. One problem with the theory involves issues with experimental design and conclusions. Another major problem is that ToM cannot account for many everyday relational interactions between humans, such as misunderstandings between friends, broken relationships and unwarranted prejudices against others. It ascribes too much cognitive processing to the realms of relationships. A deficit in ToM is a limited explanation of autism, since ToM does not properly account for the experience of neurotypical people.\textsuperscript{75}

Alternatives to ToM have been proposed by philosophers. Ian Hacking does not see ToM as the cause of autistic individuals’ problems with socialisation. Rather,

\textsuperscript{74} Frith, \textit{Autism: Exploring the Enigma}, 169.
\textsuperscript{75} Michael Plastow, "'Theory of Mind' II: Difficulties and Critiques," \textit{Australasian Psychiatry} 20, no. 4 (2012).
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he suggests that it is a combination of two things. Autistic people do not “internaliz[e] social relationships to form concepts of the mental. Autistic people are also ‘non-Kohlerian’ in that they do not readily see, right off, what other people are doing.”

Victoria McGeer extends the work of Hacking and suggests another option called “form of life”. She describes learning about friendship as analogous to learning to play chess. Both have rules and both involve a process of learning. Friendship is learned in social environments and friends share in a “form of life”. Nonetheless, whatever the explanation may be, real differences exist between autists and neurotypicals.

**Impaired Reciprocal Communication**

Impaired social skills are the core issue in autism, but autism is also characterised by impaired communication skills. This does not necessarily mean that people with autism cannot use language at all, although some do not. Estimates of mutism among people with autism range from 18% to 61%, depending on how autism is defined by the study. Some autistic children who speak have a very small range of words. Some people only speak to certain people or in certain situations. Those who are mute are also more likely to be low-functioning in other areas apart from language, such as behavioural range. For those autistics who use some language, it is not language per se that is the problem, but the way in which it is used. People with autism, regardless of their level of language usage, will always have lower than normal skills in using language for the purpose of communication. Frith posits that for autistic children, delays in acquiring language may be due to a lack of desire to communicate.

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More than 75% of autistic children who speak echo back what was said by others. This is called echolalia. The more a child echoes the less spontaneous language is evident.³⁹

Another unusual feature of the language of autistic children is labelled by Kanner, somewhat misleadingly, as ‘metaphorical language’. An example of this is the case of Paul.

An autistic boy, Paul, was two years old when his mother used to recite to him the nursery rhyme ‘Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater’. One day, while she was doing this, she was working in the kitchen and suddenly dropped a saucepan. Paul, from that day on, chanted ‘Peter eater’ whenever he saw anything resembling a saucepan.⁸⁰

The problem is that this use of language is idiosyncratic, based on situations and associations which do not refer to experiences which both the speaker and listener share. It lacks any relevance to social exchange.⁸¹

The possession of a means of communication, be it language or sign, does not necessarily imply that the person with autism will be able to use it for communication or for thinking or learning.⁸² The use of language is integrally connected to thought processes, emotional learning and social understanding. Each of these is impaired in people with autism. Indeed, communication involves understanding the attitudes and intentions of others, something which is strongly connected to social understanding.⁸³

Even for those autistic people who speak fluently, maintaining conversation is not

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⁸⁰ Ibid., 125.
⁸¹ Ibid.
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simple, because it is easier for people with autism to speak about their own narrow, obsessive interests than to converse about the interests of others.  

But using language for communication is not the only communication problem in autism. Autistic people have difficulty interpreting body language, facial expression, pointing, gesture and personal space.  

Eye contact is vital in social relationships, but normal eye contact is missing in children with autism. Instead of meeting the gaze of the other person, the autistic child may look ‘through’ or beyond the other person.  

Alternatively, autistic adults may look at different parts of the face. Some high-functioning people with autism recount that sustained eye contact is painful for them. This may result in missing social cues.  

Marian Sigman and Lisa Capps conclude that it is not that autistic people do not try to communicate; they sometimes even use language in appropriate ways. Nonetheless, difficulties with sharing emotions, mindset and cultural assumptions hinder those attempts at communication.

Repetitive or Restricted Interests and Behaviours

The third key characteristic of autism is restricted or repetitive behaviours and interests. As Kanner observes, children with autism have “an anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness”.  

Children with autism are very resistant to change, often having severe tantrums or engaging in self-harm if their routines are interrupted or disrupted at all.  

Unexpected change is extremely stressful for people with autism, although some cope successfully with change if given support. Therefore,
routines are followed in an ordered and even formalised fashion.\textsuperscript{91} Routines for the autist may be very complex, involving patterns of thought and behaviour plus particular structures which cannot vary.\textsuperscript{92} These routines may take the form of always taking the same route to school, having food arranged on the plate in a certain way, keeping the same daily schedule, obsessive rituals, or strict adherence to rules.\textsuperscript{93}

Many people with autism engage in repetitive movements such as hand-flapping, patting, hand-wringing, watching objects spin, smelling objects or licking them, rocking back and forth, physical and verbal tics, and self-injurious behaviours like head-banging and arm-biting. These are known as stereotypies.\textsuperscript{94} These behaviours function as self-stimulatory, colloquially known as ‘stimming’. Some think that these function as a way of calming people with autism when they are stressed or overstimulated by their environment.\textsuperscript{95} Autistic people who are intellectually impaired can continue with hand-flapping, rocking and the like into adulthood. For others stereotypies are usually replaced by obsessions by about age four.\textsuperscript{96} Obsessions and special interests are a common feature of autism spectrum disorder. These are part of the lives of older children or adults with autism.\textsuperscript{97} Interests are narrow and unusual, for example, obsessive interest in clocks and watches, collecting unusual objects, or being interested in objects only for the purpose of dismantling and reassembling them.\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{91} Cashin and Barker, "The Triad of Impairment in Autism Revisited," 190.
\textsuperscript{93} Bernier and Gerdts, \textit{Autism Spectrum Disorders}, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{94} Coleman, "Other Neurological Signs and Symptoms in Autism," 107.
\textsuperscript{95} Bernier and Gerdts, \textit{Autism Spectrum Disorders}, 11.
\textsuperscript{96} Cashin and Barker, "The Triad of Impairment in Autism Revisited," 190.
\textsuperscript{97} Bernier and Gerdts, \textit{Autism Spectrum Disorders}, 10.
\textsuperscript{98} Wolfberg, \textit{Play and Imagination in Children with Autism} 22.
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Obsessions and special interests can have positive value in later life when they can serve as a basis for a career.\(^99\)

**Autism over the Lifetime**

The triad of impairments needs to be considered as a life-long experience. Autism is not only a disorder of childhood, but it persists throughout life, impacting on the person in many areas of his or her life. Over time the symptoms of autism change, looking very different in adulthood than in childhood.\(^{100}\) Many people with autism develop strategies for coping with social situations in order to compensate for their difficulties, but autism involves a continuing battle with these limitations. As autistic people get older the extreme aloofness that many displayed as children is frequently replaced by a desire for social contact. However, this desire is not accompanied by the ability to understand social cues. This results in restricted friendships and often an acute awareness of the limitations of the individual’s social abilities.\(^{101}\)

Autism affects adults in terms of their education and participation in the work force. In Australia in 2012 the rate of post-secondary qualifications amongst people with autism was considerably lower than for both the rest of the Australian population and the population of people with other disabilities.\(^{102}\) Again in 2012, only 42% of people with autism participated in the Australian workforce, compared to 53% of people with disabilities and an 83% participation rate for people without disabilities. The result is a lack of economic security for people with autism as well as less

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\(^{101}\) Sigman and Capps, *Children with Autism*, 10, 126-27.

opportunity for social participation provided by the workplace. As employment makes a positive contribution to a person’s mental health and sense of identity, people with autism may find increased problems in these areas. These statistics may explain reported depression and risk of suicide amongst people with autism.

A large percentage (73% in 2012) of people with autism in Australia said that they needed help with mobility, communication, or self-care. Communication is the most significant difficulty for people with autism, 58% (in 2012) reporting that they could not be understood by other people nor understand others to varying degrees. Many (51%) required assistance or supervision with mobility. These statistics show that there are significant challenges for many adults with autism, both in general living and in education and employment.

Autism affects the whole of a person’s life and many aspects of his or her existence, but the experience of autism varies considerably from person to person. Autism is now generally considered to be a spectrum disorder. This means that the symptoms of autism can range from severe to mild. People whose symptoms are severe, like the children originally identified by Kanner, are said to have ‘typical autistic disorder’ or ‘typical autism’. Another way of referring to people on the spectrum who are most affected is ‘low-functioning’. This group comprises the majority (between 70% and 90%) of people on the spectrum. In general people with low-functioning autism are intellectually impaired and do not speak. ‘High-

functioning’ individuals on the spectrum can speak, have less severe impairments, and have either normal or above normal intelligence.\textsuperscript{107} Asperger’s syndrome is included on the autism spectrum and is in many ways similar to ‘high-functioning autistic disorder’ or ‘high-functioning Kanner’s autism’.\textsuperscript{108} Regardless of where a person is on the spectrum the three core deficits will be present.\textsuperscript{109}

Up to this point, I have discussed the core characteristics of autism spectrum disorder: difficulties with social interaction, difficulties with communication, and restricted interests and repetitive behaviours. The most significant characteristic of autism is the difficulty in relating to other people. If the impairment in social interaction is present then there will also be difficulties with communication and the desire for sameness. Autistic aloneness includes difficulty interacting with other people, trouble understanding and predicting the thoughts and action of others, and sometimes a lack of self-awareness. People with autism have impaired communication. Many autists are mute and those who use language do not necessarily use this for communication. Autistic people also have difficulty interpreting body language and making eye contact with others. Autism is also characterised by resistance to change and repetitive behaviours. Many people with autism engage in stereotypies like hand flapping. It is also common for autists to obsess over one particular object or type of object. Autism is a developmental disorder, so it is present throughout a person’s life. The symptoms change over time, but do not go away. Thus autists continue to

Autism experience difficulties with social interaction and communication throughout their lives.

In this chapter I am building a picture of the nature of autism. There is more to the experience of people with autism than the three impairments which constitute the triad, but my discussion will be centred on these key difficulties. At the end of this chapter I will consider the theological questions which arise from the nature of autism, most particularly in its severe form, and the chapters which follow will discuss these issues from a theological perspective. However, before thinking about the theological issues which arise from a discussion of autism, it is necessary to concentrate some more on the experience of autism for both those who are autistic and those who care for autistic people. To this end, what follows are some more personal insights into autism. First, different perspectives on autism are outlined, including an appropriate way to designate people with autism. This is followed by a biographical section in which two voices are heard. The first voice is that of a high-functioning autistic woman. The second is that of the father of a low-functioning autistic boy. These two voices will help us to understand what it means to live with autism, both from the inside and from the perspective of someone who cares.

Perceptions of Autism

Perceptions of autism vary, ranging from those who perceive it as a great tragedy to those who simply want to be accepted as people whose way of viewing the world is different. Many are of the opinion that autism is a catastrophic disability, the diagnosis of which brings grief to the hearts of parents. Frith believes, “[T]he illness should not be romanticised. We must see autism as a devastating handicap without a
Michael Whelan writes of his reaction to the diagnosis of autism for his son, “What would the future hold? I wondered. … I experienced panic attack after panic attack, and again felt the desperate need to take radical action.” Rupert Isaacson reports a similar feeling:

In April 2004 my son, Rowan, was diagnosed with autism. The feeling was like being hit across the face with a baseball bat. Grief, shame – this weird, irrational shame, as if I had somehow cursed this child by giving him my faulty genes, condemned him to a lifetime of living as an alien because of me. Of watching, horrified, as he began to drift away to another place, separated from me as if by thick glass, or the see-through barrier of a dream.

Sadly, some parents have been pushed to breaking point because of their children’s autism, and have killed their own children. Paul Offit mentions several examples. In 2006 a parent in the Bronx killed his twelve-year-old autistic son. He then turned himself in to police. In the same year a pathologist in Illinois suffocated her three-year-old autistic daughter, because she despaired of any hope for improvement. Earlier in 2006 parents of a nineteen-year-old autistic man locked him in their apartment, having set it on fire. Others have killed their children accidently. One such example is of a boy who died during an attempted exorcism in 2003. Offit’s examples of extreme parental behaviour give voice to the stresses which parents of autistic children can experience. While there is no justification for their actions, this tells us something of the difficulties and frustrations that people experience with some autistic children. Having an autistic child, or adult child in need of care, is not like

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112 Rupert Isaacson, *The Horse Boy: A Father's Quest to Heal His Son* (Melbourne, VIC: Text, 2009), 7.
Autism having a child who is not disabled. This is all the more reason why it is necessary to understand autism theologically, and to see people with autism as human beings who are worthy of dignity, love and help. Discussion of the humanity and dignity of persons with autism is the main goal of this thesis.

While many see autism as a devastating tragedy, several high-functioning people with autism have expressed their abhorrence of the idea that autism is something necessitating pity or requiring a cure. Many do not want to be neurotypical (an autistic expression for people without autism). They reject the concept of therapy, which attempts to remove the autistic traits from an individual and make her or him more neurotypical and able to function in the neurotypical world. Some autistic people would prefer to keep their autistic traits and remain in the world of the autistic spectrum. People with autism do not want to be treated as if they are a disappointment because of being autistic. One autistic man has put this very strongly:

Autism isn't something a person has, or a 'shell' that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colours every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person - and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with.

This is important, so take a moment to consider it: Autism is a way of being. It is not possible to separate the person from the autism. Therefore, when parents say, ‘I wish my child did not have autism,’ what they’re really saying is, ‘I wish the autistic child I have did not exist, and I had a different (non-autistic) child instead.’

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Read that again. This is what we hear when you mourn over our existence. This is what we hear when you pray for a cure. This is what we know, when you tell us of your fondest hopes and dreams for us: that your greatest wish is that one day we will cease to be, and strangers you can love will move in behind our faces.115

This is, however, not the view of every person with autism. Some would like to have help to overcome the limitations of the disorder. Donna Williams writes in the conclusion of the second of her autobiographical books:

The most important thing I have learned is that

AUTISM IS NOT ME.

Autism is just an information-processing problem that controls who I appear to be. Autism tries to stop me from being free to be myself. Autism tries to rob me of a life, of friendship, of caring, of sharing, of showing interest, of using my intelligence, of being affected … it tries to bury me alive.116

Autism Terminology

These different perceptions of autism lead to different ways of designating people with autism. Is it acceptable to use the term ‘a person with autism’ or should we refer to the individual in a different way? This is not a simple question to answer. This is because there are (at least) two ways of viewing the phenomenon of autism, as observed above in the extreme reactions of some parents and the opinion of some with autism who are against a cure. The accepted convention in disability literature is to use

116 Williams, Somebody Somewhere, 234. Formatting and capitalization original.
‘person-first’ language, that is, to refer to ‘a person with a disability’ and not ‘a disabled person’. For example, according to Nancy Eiesland:

Although different individuals may designate themselves with various terms, the current phrase acceptable to most persons with disabilities is just that, ‘persons with disabilities.’ This usage underscores the conviction that an individual’s disability is just one of many personal characteristics, rather than being synonymous or coextensive with that person’s self.\(^{117}\)

In keeping with ‘person-first’ language, physician Lorna Wing uses the designation “children/adults with autism/autistic spectrum disorders”.\(^{118}\)

However, many people with autism do not like the ‘person-first’ language employed by other persons with disabilities. One vocal advocate is Jim Sinclair who declares, “I am not a ‘person with autism.’ I am an autistic person.”\(^{119}\) Sinclair makes this statement because he believes that he cannot be separated from his autism. Not only is autism a part of Sinclair, but he insists that it is an essential part of him. According to Sinclair, calling someone ‘a person with autism’ implies that autism is something bad. So he concludes, “I am autistic because I accept and value myself the way I am.”\(^{120}\) Olga Bogdashina, President of the Autism Society of Ukraine and mother of an adult son with autism,\(^{121}\) also believes that ‘autistic people’ is the appropriate designation. She writes:

Here I deliberately use the term ‘autistic people’ rather than ‘people with autism’ because autism is not something that is just attached to them and cannot be easily

\(^{117}\) Eiesland, The Disabled God, 27.


\(^{120}\) Ibid. Emphasis original.

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removed. I am aware of the ‘people first, then disability’ approach. However, without autism they would be different people, as being autistic means being different. If people with autism prefer to name themselves autistic why should we be shy to call them that? Just to show them our respect? There are other ways to do it. Autism is not something to be ashamed of.122

This is, however, not the whole story. As Lydia Brown notes on the Autism Advocacy Network website there is a division in language use between self-advocates and parents. Many self-advocates want to use ‘autistic,’ ‘autistic person,’ or ‘autistic individual,’ while many parents of autistic children and professionals who work with autistic individuals prefer to use ‘person with autism,’ or ‘individual with autism (or autism spectrum disorder – ASD)’. The reason for the difference comes down to some fundamental differences in beliefs about autism. Many self-advocates, like Sinclair above, believe that autism is part of their identity. Parents, on the other hand, do not want their children to be defined by their autism.123

Both sides of the debate have strong feelings about the use of language. I will make no attempt to resolve the issue here, but I will describe what I intend to do regarding the language I will use. Since I do not believe that the identity of anyone is constituted by that person’s disability, as I will argue in later chapters, I would like to be able to use the term ‘person with autism’. I have no desire to insult all those people who prefer to be called ‘autistic,’ but this thesis is not primarily written about people who are high-functioning. For this reason when I refer to persons with autism I will variously use ‘person with autism,’ ‘persons with autism,’ ‘autistic persons,’ ‘autistics,’ ‘autists,’ or ‘autistic individual’. I am aware that this will actually satisfy no one. But,

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in the words of the writer of the blog ‘Autism and Oughtisms,’ “Frankly, you’re going to be damned no matter which term you use, and I’m far more interested in the substance of what someone says rather than getting hooked up on whether they used ‘autistic’ or ‘has autism’.”

There is one more term which needs to be defined as it will appear quite often, that is, ‘neurotypical’ or ‘neurologically typical’ (NT). This refers to people who are not on the autism spectrum. This word was coined by Jim Sinclair and Donna Williams, both of whom are autistic and the founders of Autism Network International. It is used instead of the word ‘normal’ to describe non-autistic people, because ‘normal’ is considered to carry too much nuance. ‘Normal’ conveys the notion that autism, and other disabilities for that matter, makes a person subhuman or less than those who are ‘normal’. Therefore, when referring to people who are not on the autism spectrum (or simply ‘the spectrum’), I will use either ‘neurotypical’ or NT.

I have discussed how perceptions of autism differ, ranging from the idea that autism is a tragedy for which a cure must be urgently sought, to a perception that autism is a different way of thinking and cannot be separated from the person. These differing perceptions of autism result in different preferences for terminology. For many parents who believe that the disability does not define their children, ‘people with autism’ is the desired terminology. On the other hand, for many self-advocates who believe that they are defined by their autism, ‘autistic person’ is the only appropriate designation. As I do not believe that the disability is the defining feature of the person,

125 Bogdashina, Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome, 19.
126 For an in depth discussion of the problem with ‘normal’ see Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion, Chapter 2.
I will use a combination of both kinds of terminology. Now, having provided a basic understanding of autism, I will move on to consider some biographical and autobiographical discussions of autism.

**Two Lived Experiences of Autism**

It is one thing to look at clinical descriptions of the phenomenon of autism and another thing to live with the condition. Many people with autism do not have the ability to communicate what it is like to live with autism. But we are indebted to some who have been able to write about autism from the inside. One such woman is Gunilla Gerland an autistic woman from Sweden. I will begin this section on lived experiences with an overview of what Gerland has said about her own life in *A Real Person: Life on the Outside*. Then I will look at a biography of a low-functioning person with autism. *Joe: The Only Boy in the World* is written by his father, because Joe cannot write for himself. Although it would be ideal to have low-functioning autistic people speak for themselves about their lives, this is not generally possible. For this reason, I believe that the combination of an autistic person who can speak for herself and the observations of a father of a low-functioning autistic boy will provide insight of what it is like to live with this condition.

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127 Gerland, *A Real Person: Life on the Outside*.  
128 Blastland, *Joe: The Only Boy in the World*.  
129 Some people with autism who cannot speak are able to communicate using a keyboard. Some have written about their lives. Many of these people were considered to be mentally retarded because of their lack of speech, but they have demonstrated this is not so. For some autistic authors in this category see Douglas Biklen and Richard Attfield, eds., *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2005). See also Author Fleischmann and Carly Fleischmann, *Carly's Voice: Breaking through Autism* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012). This does not preclude the possibility, indeed the likelihood that many people with autism have severe intellectual disabilities and will not be able to communicate about their lives.
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**Gunilla Gerland – A Real Person?**

Gunilla Gerland writes about her childhood to her mid-twenties, growing up in a dysfunctional home in Sweden. Her father was violent and her mother an alcoholic, addicted to prescription drugs. Although her home life was far from ideal, her main difficulties stemmed from her undiagnosed autism. It was not until the age of twenty five that Gerland was finally diagnosed with autism and was able to begin to overcome her disability. The overriding theme of this biography is Gerland’s search to become a ‘real person’.

As a young child, Gunilla did not fit in her household. She comments, “My family and I did not live in the same world. We scarcely came from the same planet.” Her parents and her sister were to her one entity, “a mother-father-sister unit,” while she was another. She did not engage with the world around her, but spent time inside herself. Yet her inner world was empty, full of nothing. People were mysterious; houses and people had ‘eyes’ and ‘mouths’. Gerland observes, “To me the difference between people and houses was not obvious.” While Gunilla understood that her mother wanted something from her, she could not understand what that something was. Her desire was to be left alone. At the same time she wanted to be loved without conditions. Her plea was, “If I couldn’t be loved, then I wanted to be left alone.”

When Gunilla was four years old her sister began school, leaving Gunilla home alone with her mother, who did not understand her. There were frequent tantrums, which were not because of anger but rather panic. Sometimes Gunilla was without any sense of her own body, unable to fix herself in space or tell up from down. In order to

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131 Ibid., 20.
132 Ibid., 23.
walk Gunilla had to concentrate on every single step. Hearing sounds also involved great effort. Normal volumes could not be heard without a huge amount of concentration, which left her sapped of energy. But she could hear whispers, and her mother and sister would tease her by whispering about ice-cream when there was none. Her thinking was extremely concrete. She did not want toys but only real things. Yet she could not make herself understood.\textsuperscript{133}

It was something to do with language. I felt inside me that I had a grasp of language, and yet it didn’t work. … The older I grew, the more often I had the feeling that when I said exactly what I meant, loud and clear, other people seemed to hear something else. And when I heard exactly what they said, it turned out that they had meant something else.\textsuperscript{134}

Both children and adults were confusing for Gerland. She could play with her sister as long as her sister decided what games to play. They would make things together or draw. But Kerstin was so obviously different to Gunilla.

When Kerstin played with her friends, I was alone. I was alone, by myself, but solitude in itself was no affliction because I was not interested in other children. I did not feel lonely. And yet it was hard not having any friends.\textsuperscript{135}

When three or four children were in the room they became a jumble of arms and legs and noises. This was both scary and tiring. Adults were also mysterious. Her father moved out of home for six months and when he moved back she did not know it was the same person. She had no idea that parents were permanent; they were indistinguishable from other adult men and women. “Mother and father really had

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 24-35. 
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 34-35. 
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 39.
nothing to do with me and I didn’t know what they were for, or what was the point of them at all.”136

Going to pre-school was an overwhelming experience. There were so many children and so much noise that she was sent into a panic. “I couldn’t feel where I began or ended. Was I going to live here now?”137 For Gunilla, all faces were empty, except for those of her family. She had no idea that the faces at school were also people. She regarded them in the same way as she regarded furniture. When she realised that she must continue going to school she knew that she must act like any ordinary child, but this meant, “I had not to be me”.138 She believed that the other children could only exist at the school. The whole experience was full of incomprehensible elements. “I couldn’t work out the point of the other children. What were they for? I could see that they seemed to know each other, but I didn’t understand how that came about.”139

Adults did not understand why Gunilla’s behaviour was so inappropriate. She did not behave as six-year-olds should. She was called careless, inattentive, lazy; she was accused of not listening, not helping, dragging her feet. When asked to play with a three-year-old daughter of one of her mother’s friends she hit the girl on the head. Because Gunilla could not cope with unpredictability, she tried to stop the mother coming up the stairs - to reprimand her - by throwing fruit juice on the woman. Others were frustrated by her concrete answers to questions. At a school entrance test, she did not understand that when people asked a question again they wanted new information. She simply repeated her answer over and over. Her mother would be annoyed when

136 Ibid., 44.
137 Ibid., 63.
138 Ibid., 67.
139 Ibid., 73.
she asked Gunilla, “Can you clean your room?” and Gunilla would say, “Yes,” without understanding that this meant she had to do something.\textsuperscript{140}

When she started school proper she assumed that things would be better, because that is what she was told. It seemed like an appropriate idea to want to have friends. But all the children at school were so many “empty faces” which flew by. Although Gunilla could eventually name the children when they were in her classroom, they melded into one another in the playground. She was frequently bullied at school. A group of boys would hit her at a certain spot every day. She believed that this was normal behaviour, so on the days they did not come to hit her she would go and seek them out. The experience in the classroom was no better. Spelling and reading were not a problem, but turning words into speech was difficult and she could not keep up in conversations. Concentrating on the teacher’s voice seemed impossible when there were so many competing noises – paper rustling, chairs scraping, children coughing. Finding her way around the school was utterly confusing, and being asked to get class lunches on her own caused her to feign sickness many times.\textsuperscript{141}

Sometime during junior school Gunilla began to realise how different she was. One day a babysitter was angry at her for something which some other children had done. The response of the sitter bemused Gunilla.

Aunt Berit told her story about how awful and lost I was ... Had my peculiarities something to do with my having lost something, or someone having lost \textit{me}? ... And what was it they could see on me that I couldn’t see in the mirror? It must be \textit{something}. She’d just said so.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 76-87.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 88-97.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 111. Italics original.
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It was not until many years later that she realised that the reason for her problem with Aunt Berit was her inability to read the emotions of others on their faces. She was simply unable to understand the complex emotions which other people expressed. She had no way of telling from faces and bodies what people thought of her and what were their intentions towards her. This led her to reflect, “Why wasn’t I a real person?”

This concern about not being a real person is a continued theme in Gerland’s autobiography. She was persistently attempting to figure out what was wrong with her, and what was the reason for her life. Her desire was to be like other people; she felt like a broken copy of a human being. Other people seemed to be able to understand things and make connections that she could not. This sense of wrongness and of being on the outer reverberated through her over and over. “My inner refrain went: ‘No real person – no real person – no real person.’” There existed “layer after layer of the fact that I ought to be someone else inside,” until the refrain, “I’m not a real person ... Not a real person, never ever a real person’ filled me entirely – in the end right out to the roots of my hair.”

Becoming a teenager did not solve her difficulties. High school was a shock because it involved a new sea of “empty faces”. It was impossible to concentrate on school while she was trying so hard to cope with all the confusion. Subjects became harder to understand, the problems with navigating around the school were just as acute, and the noise of the students was too much to bear. As a result she retreated into herself, desiring only to be left in peace. Her home life was increasingly difficult, because her father moved out of home and her family had to move house. Not knowing

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143 Ibid., 106-20.
144 Ibid., 117.
145 Ibid., 135.
146 Ibid., 136. Ellipsis original.
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how to cope with this huge change, Gunilla became even more detached than previously.\textsuperscript{147}

To get away from home, Gunilla began to spend time with drug addicts who smoked cannabis. These people did not expect her to put on any kind of social mask. She also felt that the drug-taking would provide some kind of excuse for her unusual behaviour. The drug addicts had closer relationships with one another than she had with anyone. She reflects, “I had two desires in life – to understand myself and to be a real person. As the former seemed impossible, I tried the latter. A real person was normal, and this was what I was striving for.”\textsuperscript{148} To achieve normality she had sex, because it was a way of having relationships without actually having a relationship. At sixteen she wanted to be left alone and to “be a real person”. She moved in with a man named Jon, in order to be a real person. “By living with someone I was trying to be a real person, but I didn’t know how to have a relationship. I didn’t know what the point was or what it was you were supposed to do with the man you were together with.”\textsuperscript{149} Her whole desire was to be “someone who wasn’t peculiar.”\textsuperscript{150}

Jon was violent and abusive. After leaving him, she started taking heroin, but had not become addicted to any of the drugs she was taking. She became involved with another abusive man, on the basis that an abusive relationship was better than no relationship. The culture of heroin addicts was much more clear-cut than ordinary society and she loved the clarity. However, the heroin was doing damage to her body, so she gave up taking it. It was after this experience that Gunilla sought help from psychotherapy. She wanted so much to be a person that she tried imitating others in

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 139-64.  
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 167.  
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 185.  
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 187.
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order to look like one. \(^{151}\) “I was trying to be someone, but I didn’t seem to exist among all the possibilities available, so it had to be someone else. I felt I was empty. ... I hardly knew what I liked at all now.”\(^ {152}\)

The struggles did not let up: her job was exhausting due to dealing with too many people; study was full of information that she could not connect together; and depression over not being normal continued. But one day Gunilla found a book about autism and recognised herself in it. This enabled her to understand many things about herself, and more importantly it led to the realisation, “I wanted to turn to other people.”\(^ {153}\) Gerland comments that many aspects of the disability have abated, but many still remain. It is still difficult to do two things at once, like talking and walking. Doing something new is a stressful experience. It is still difficult to understand the intentions of others. But the feeling of being “not a real person” is gone.\(^ {154}\)

Gunilla’s story provides some important insight into what it is like to live with autism from the inside. Her confusion over what people said and did enables some understanding of the difficulties of being autistic. And her desperate need to be a person like everyone else gives voice to some of the emotional pain which autism can inflict on autistic people. Now I turn to a different voice, that of a father. It is harder to get into the mind of a severely autistic child. Since the child in question cannot speak for himself it is necessary to listen to his father’s voice to gain some clues about what it is like to have severe autism. Blastland paints a picture of a boy who cannot

\(^{151}\) Ibid., 194-211.

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 208. Italics original.

\(^{153}\) Ibid., 239. Italics original.

\(^{154}\) Ibid., 233-54.
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understand the world or the people around him. It seems from Joe’s perspective that he is the only boy in the world.155

_Joe: The Only Boy in the World_

At the time the book was written, Joe was a ten-year-old boy with severe autism. Michael Blastland reflects on his son’s life and his disability in order, he says, to try and understand humanity. “Until you know Joe’s unusual life, you won’t fully understand your own.”156 This is a somewhat counter-intuitive claim.

Ostensibly, he has little to say to the rest of us. He shares few of our pleasures, has many perplexing eccentricities and isn’t someone you’d instinctively turn to for enlightenment. … Joe is packed with strange urges and passions, missing the normal motivations and unable to make sense of the world in ways which the rest of us take for granted.157

The lesson Blastland wants to teach is what makes people people.158

Joe does not seem to understand what ordinary human beings understand about the world. This is at least the way it seems, but we cannot ever actually know what goes on inside Joe’s head as long as he is unable to tell us. Joe lacks the characteristics that, according to philosophers, make human beings unique: self-awareness, culture, use of technology, consciousness of history, language, reason, morality and abstract thinking. Blastland laments that if these are the qualifications for being human, Joe

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156 Ibid., 1.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid., 5.
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does not measure up.\textsuperscript{159} He asks, “How different can you be, how many fundamentals can you lack, and still be human?”\textsuperscript{160}

Blastland recounts an incident in Joe’s life at age eight, in which Joe escaped from his home in pursuit of his obsession, that is, videos of Postman Pat. Postman Pat, and indeed all other videos have been banned in Joe’s house, because he is consumed by his addiction to them. This day Joe ran out of the house and across a road and was hit by a car, which he bounced off unhurt, then succeeded in finding a video in a nearby house. Up to this point it had been impossible to explain to Joe that cars are dangerous. It is not, states Blastland, that Joe is so intellectually disabled that he cannot understand speech. He can understand facts about material things. But he has no access to inner human reality, to the experience of others.\textsuperscript{161}

Joe seems to live within himself to a degree that even the most private among us would find hard to imagine. … [I]t is … a mental isolation, a solitariness of consciousness whereby he fails to learn that other lives are lived too, fails to appreciate that we all exist in a state of subjectivity, all have points of view; fails in short, to think of other people as people.\textsuperscript{162}

Joe is a creature of routine and of habit to the absolute extreme. Joe likes pasta, but not all pasta, or even some varieties of pasta, but only the one kind. The only kind of pasta that Joe will eat is Sainsbury spinach and ricotta tortellini. There can be no substituting another flavour or another brand; only this one will do. In fact, if Joe could have his druthers, he would not eat any other kind of food at all. Joe yearns for the familiar, in songs, in games, in food and in routine. It is very difficult for Joe, as it is

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 6-7.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 14-17.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 17-18.
for other autistic children, to cope with change. Small changes can cause enormous distress and insecurity. For example, when Joe is at the pool with his father, he seems afraid when his father’s hair becomes wet. It is as if he is no longer sure that this man with wet hair is actually his father. This distrust goes away when the hair becomes dry again.\(^\text{163}\)

One of Joe’s familiar habits has become an obsession – videos. His parents have taken the step of banning all videos, because it was impossible to restrict these to only one or two. When Joe was allowed just one at Mum’s house and just one at Dad’s house he would ask for a video the minute he arrived at his Dad’s and then spend his time crying to go back to Mum’s house. Videos have therefore been banned. This was necessary because as Joe watches more and more videos he becomes aggressive, obsessive about other things, more insular and more removed from people, that is, less human. Blastland observes that there is a connection between the need for routine, the obsessiveness and difficulty in making sense of new things. Autistic children often resort to stimming when faced with something unfamiliar.\(^\text{164}\) “They have the appearance of fending off what they don’t know by hanging on to the skirts of what they do.”\(^\text{165}\)

Joe has limited language and his pronunciation is quirky. This is not Joe’s main problem with communication. The real problem is that Joe has no instincts in regard to communication. When, for example, he is asked, “Would you like some beans?” Joe does not interpret this as other people would. He sees it, not as a neutral inquiry into his wishes, but as a declaration of war, an insistence that he must eat beans when he does not want beans. His reactions can extend to violent tantrums or even self-harm.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 26-40.
\(^{164}\) Ibid., 46-53.
\(^{165}\) Ibid., 53.
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Sometimes Joe ignores the communication of others altogether, shutting out the outside world and the persons in it. Joe is unable to mindread, that is, he has no sense that other people are “conscious beings with intentions.”

Joe cannot interpret pitch and intonation in conversation. He does not understand that it is wrong to throw blocks at his sister. He can neither interpret her tears nor his father’s anger because of Joe’s actions. He seems to enjoy seeing his father get angry and sees it as an encouragement to throw blocks again. Joe cannot interpret emotions on the faces of others. The only way to make Joe understand something is on a cognitive level, and even this is limited. If he comes out of the kitchen with a carving knife, Joe’s father tries to get him to give it up by telling him, “Knife, ouch, Joe. Knife ouch,” and by carefully taking it out of his hand. Yet this calm approach does not work when Joe has no direct experience of the hurt than knives can cause.

Blastland reflects:

We behave as if Joe’s emotional register is like ours. We expect to reach into it with casual ease, the way we reach into the minds of everyone else. We deploy a kind of anthropomorphism. Strange to call it that, I know, when Joe looks like one of us already. Surely his instincts will be broadly like ours, his preferences and thought processes too. When his actions resemble ours, we assume he acts for the same reasons. If he hits, we guess that it is antagonism or aggression. We barely stop to wonder whether that action has the same significance for him as it would for us. … Why does he do it? … But if we feel the least bit mystified, think of the purposeless chaos, the bottomless mystery seen through his eyes, as people talk,

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166 Ibid., 58-60, 66.
167 Ibid., 67.
168 Ibid., 70-72.
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grimace, move about, often apparently without agency, often without much fathomable intention. For Joe, the unpredictable world exists outside.\textsuperscript{169}

Joe appears to be utterly unaware that other people have an inner thought life. For this reason, for Joe there is no explanation of most of human action, because he cannot understand that others have intentions, let alone what those intentions might be. “Joe’s instinct is to assume that only he wants, that only he is capable of wanting.”\textsuperscript{170}

One day Blastland was in the kitchen making himself a cheese sandwich when Joe walked in and yelled “Nnaghh!” Blastland comments that it is only possible to guess what goes on in Joe’s head. He imagines that Joe sees the sandwich and thinks: That’s a sandwich, a \textit{cheese} sandwich. But I don’t want a sandwich. The entity that does things for me must have made a mistake, because I am the only one for whom sandwiches are made, and I don’t want one. I must stop this by saying, ‘No!’ Blastland sees this as a symptom of the reality that his son perceives him as a machine which dispenses the things Joe wants. Joe cannot see his father as having a mind of his own. He is there merely as a way of providing Joe what Joe desires.\textsuperscript{171}

Joe’s lack of understanding that others have thoughts and desires cuts him off from all other people. This, then, is why Joe is “the only boy in the world.”\textsuperscript{172}

Blastland laments:

The bitter implication for Joe of these stories seems to be this: that he is alone in a sense none of us can quite comprehend. Unable to reach out with empathy to others and unable to understand the degrees to which we can and cannot reach him, he lives by trying to impose a grossly imperfect regularity on life, by insisting

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 77-78.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 94-100.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 106.
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on routine and familiarity, and by raging with frustration – or subsiding in bafflement – at the mystery of those failed expectations.\(^\text{173}\)

Joe does not understand others and it seems that he cannot understand himself either. What does Joe know of his own self? Ultimately it is impossible to be sure, but his father doubts that he is conscious of himself as he has seen no indication of this. Does Joe know that he is a living person? He is unaware of having been born or that he will die. He does not show interest in his own reflection. He gives the impression that he exists in the feelings and knowledge of this moment alone.\(^\text{174}\)

That Joe does not understand how to act in social settings is evidenced by an anecdote about a trip to the hardware store. At the hardware store Joe disappeared to be found sitting on a display toilet. Joe was oblivious to other people as he took down his pants and went to the toilet in the aisle of the hardware store.\(^\text{175}\) After escaping from the store, Blastland contemplated how to explain this mistake to Joe:

> It’s not real, Joe – that is, it’s real but it doesn’t work – that is, it does work, but it’s not … plumbed in. … For Joe, the idea that this or any other toilet could be in any sense unreal would be absurd. Unreality, even qualified reality, probably has little reality for him: looks like a toilet, feels like a toilet, therefore is a toilet.\(^\text{176}\)

Joe is in some sense an innocent. He cannot know about the evil in the world and does not care about what people think about him. He is not conscious of his own nakedness, not concerned with privacy. Joe seems unable to feel malice because he lacks consciousness that others can suffer. But herein lies the problem. Joe is able to cause harm without knowing that other people can experience hurt. One day in a

\(^\text{173}\) Ibid., 104.
\(^\text{174}\) Ibid., 121, 58.
\(^\text{175}\) Ibid., 126.
\(^\text{176}\) Ibid., 127.
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shopping centre Joe hit a crying baby. He showed no signs of guilt or knowledge that this was wrong. Although Joe cries when he is hurt, he seems unable to imagine that other people have thoughts and feelings like his own.177 “To have no sense of others as thinking, feeling people, to be innocent as Joe is innocent, may be to live free of vanity, but it may equally lead to a life of breathtaking emotional selfishness.”178

Blastland tries to find meaning in his son’s autism. He admits that if philosophy is right in saying that humanity is not defined by the physical, but by our thoughts, then he is forced into the conclusion that Joe is not a human being. In his heart he wants to see his son as human, while having to acknowledge intellectually that Joe does not act like a human being. He opposes the application of Hollywood-type meaning, which claims that people with intellectual disabilities are there “to do the rest of us good”.179 In contrast, he observes with John Macmurray, “We need one another to be ourselves.”180 This is no less true of Joe than it is of anyone else.

Joe may not think so but he needs human society, he could exist in no other. His daily routine is largely set by others, his desires are facilitated (or not) by others, his needs are by and large answered by others. His survival depends on us and even his most idiosyncratic behaviour has evolved among the sparks of abrasion against others.181

177 Ibid., 146-52.
178 Ibid., 155.
179 Ibid., 183-86.
181 Joe: The Only Boy in the World, 193-94.
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The conclusion of this exploration for Blastland is that we can understand ourselves better by looking at the differences which Joe exhibits. He believes that he is able to better understand the way his own mind works by looking at what autism lacks.\footnote{182}{Ibid., 194-95.}

I believe that we do not even know what we are unless we have others, different others and similar others, with whom we can compare ourselves. We are all partial, and autism, even if a little more partial than most, also adds something precious.\footnote{183}{Ibid., 205.}

Blastland’s insight into his son has provided a concrete example of the experience of someone with typical autism. At least Blastland has provided his best guesses as to what life is like for Joe. In the case of Joe it is impossible to be sure what goes on inside his head. Yet it seems equally impossible for Joe to understand the world of people outside his own head. His desires are necessarily frustrated by his inability to understand why others will not do what he wants. Thus Joe’s need for sameness results in severe tantrums, sometimes self-harm, and sometimes harm to others. He appears to regard other people as simply a means to meeting his perceived needs. For Joe, the world is populated, not by people, but only by Joe and other ‘things,’ who facilitate or hinder Joe getting what he wants. This must be a very isolated form of existence.

Conclusion: Theological Questions

These biographical accounts of autism are significant because they provide genuine, personal experiences. But they also raise some questions about autism and what it is to be human. Both Gerland and Blastland raise some questions in their
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accounts of their experiences of autism. Gerland asks over and over whether she is a real person. Blastland wonders whether his autistic son can be classified as a human being. These are significant questions. Indeed, Gerland and Blastland are not the only ones who have asked these questions about autistic people, and some have answered these questions in the negative.

President of the Association of Psychological Science reported in her 2007 Presidential Column that some books and scholarly journals have published the idea that people with autism are not human. She states with dismay:

For example, in a recent New York Times ‘notable book of the year,’ an internationally acclaimed psychological scientist segregated autistic people from other humans and placed them ‘together with robots and chimpanzees.’ The distinguishing feature, according to the psychological scientist, is humans’ ‘innate equipment to discern other people’s beliefs and intentions,’ which he proposed that robots, chimpanzees, and autistic people inherently lack.¹⁸⁴

Other examples of this hypothesis are given in the column. Another similarly acclaimed psychological scientist has claimed that autistic children lack the capacity for “cultural learning” and this, he claims, puts them in a category with chimpanzees. Yet another scholarly article stated that autistic children do not “engage socially with others in the ways that human children do” or “interact with other persons in the species-type manner”.¹⁸⁵

The questions which have been raised above were done so within a secular, psychological context. Nonetheless, from the perspective of theological anthropology,
the nature of severe autism raises similar questions. The difference, I hope, lies in the way in which we arrive at answers to those questions. Theological anthropology so often makes assumptions about what is the nature of a human being. For example, George Carey lists activities which characterise human being: language use, invention and creativity, religious activity and consciousness of death, culture, abstract thinking, literature, and the presence of a conscience.\textsuperscript{186} Michael Horton similarly gives a list of capacities required for bearing the image of God: “certain natural capacities for deliberative reason, intentional relationality, moral agency, and linguisticality.”\textsuperscript{187} But Hans Reinders warns that the commonsense view of what distinguishes human beings from other living things - that is, that they have language, reason, will, a sense of self and the ability to make plans – excludes those who have severe intellectual disabilities. He also observes that this problem cannot be overcome by appealing to the \textit{imago Dei}, because the Christian tradition was responsible for the common sense view.\textsuperscript{188}

The most profound theological question which arises from a discussion of the nature of autism is whether people with low-functioning autism are genuine human persons. There are many challenges to human personhood in the nature of autism. The one which is central to my mind is highlighted in the following statement about personhood by D. Gareth Jones:

When brains have not yet developed or when their functioning is seriously impaired, we find ourselves at a loss to know how best to describe the personhood of those individuals. … \textit{reciprocal relationships are foundational to any concept}
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_of personhood_, since with them comes the commitment of one person to recognise and respond to the personhood of another.¹⁸⁹

The fundamental core of autism is the difficulty with reciprocal relationships. How then can people who find relating difficult in the extreme be considered as human persons? Gillibrand observes that this is a problem for people with severe autism:

[I]f we take this model [of God as triune community] to be determinative, we are in peril of excluding those who – by their own essential nature– find life in community to be problematic. Even if Adam [Gillibrand’s low-functioning, non-verbal, autistic son] could grasp the literal sense of the words in which this model is expressed, we may presume that he would find the model, in itself, baffling, rooted as it is in reciprocal relationships both human and divine.¹⁹⁰

Gillibrand’s statement brings home the need to carefully construct theological anthropology in a way which does not exclude people with autism, especially those whose autism is severe. It is easy to find examples of people with autism spectrum disorders who are verbal, intelligent, relate to other people and have a concept of self.¹⁹¹ The question of the humanity of such people does not usually arise. What I am seeking to do here is to provide a theology which underscores the humanity of people who are severely low-functioning autists. For autistic people whose functioning is low the question of whether they are genuinely human may arise. Low-functioning autists are often non-verbal, may not understand even the concept of communication, may not want to be in the company of others, probably have very low IQ’s, apparently have

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¹⁹⁰ Gillibrand, Disabled Church, Disabled Society, 139.
¹⁹¹ A couple of examples of people with autism who are quite capable of relationships and love, albeit in a different way, are cited by Swinton, "Reflections on Autistic Love." My point is that some people cannot do these things.
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little or no sense of self, and appear not to understand that other people have thoughts or feelings. The general, glib, intuitive comments about what constitutes human being do not apply here. When I write of people with autism in the chapters to come, it is to people who are severely low-functioning that I refer.

The goal, then, of this thesis is to consider this theological question and to explore how the gospel of Christ implies an inclusive theological anthropology which includes people with autism who are severely low-functioning. Unlike Gillibrand, I would not want to question the nature of God as triune. But the reality of low-functioning autism, with its inherent challenges to human relationality, does require deliberate articulation of the nature of human being. It requires that a formulation of theological anthropology takes the entire biblical picture into account, rather than a narrow, simplistic account of humanity. Humanity is no longer the pristine, innocent creation which was declared to be the image of God in the beginning. Sin has entered into the world. But neither has humanity been left in the state of sin into which it fell; God has come to redeem the world. Human beings are not yet what they are destined to be, because there is a future fulfilment to redemption. All of these facts must be explored in order to give a truly biblical account of anthropology, and this is what the coming chapters are intended to provide.
Chapter 2 ‘Creation’

**Introduction**

In the previous chapter I explored the key features of autism known as the triad of impairments. As was noted, autism is characterised by difficulties in social interaction, difficulties in communication, and by repetitive or restricted interests and behaviours. Although it is commonly said among the autism community, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism,” all people with autism experience problems with social interaction, problems with communication, and repetitive or restricted interests and behaviours. Although autism can have many other features, such as sensory overload, the theological discussion in this thesis will centre on the triad of impairments as the core of the disorder. These aspects of autism, specifically in severe form, will be the focus, because it is these features of autism which raise important theological questions.

Therefore, having outlined the key features of autism and explored something of the autistic experience, I can now begin to formulate and to answer some of these theological questions. The larger goal of the thesis is to articulate a theological anthropology based on the gospel and which therefore does not exclude persons with severe autism. This chapter is the beginning of that process. The aim of this chapter is to determine the nature of humanity as first created. This is a necessary first step in understanding what it means to be a human being. The chapter will also discuss why autism exists in the world. These steps are important to the development of an anthropology which is both biblical and inclusive. Without the determination of how
the Bible delineates humanity any question posed about the humanity of autistic people will lack a reference point.

The exploration of human being will focus on significant aspects of the narrative of Gen 1-3. This is the record of the beginning of the physical universe. The first things which the Bible has to say about God, humanity, and the relationship between the two, are found in these chapters. The scene is set there for the whole history of salvation and it points both to the intentions of God for his creation and the disruption of those plans which human disobedience has brought about. My perspective on Genesis is that it is a theological narrative, not a scientific treatise. Genesis presents a theological understanding of the creation of the world and of the first human beings.

The chapter is divided into two main parts: positive and negative. The first half is positive in that it considers the nature of God and the nature of humanity as first created in God’s image. This is a picture of humanity in the pristine innocence of newly created being. The second half of the chapter is negative in that it discusses the entrance of sin into the world and the consequences of the fall. Humanity is no longer innocent and perfect, but subject to the ravages of death. This half of the chapter provides an explanation of why autism presently exists in the world.

The first half of the chapter is written using a chiastic structure. The purpose of this structure is to mirror the autistic triad of impairments, which involve difficulties in relationships (community), communication and coping with new things (creativity). Thus the chapter will discuss God’s communion, communication and new actions, and then it will discuss humanity’s new actions, communication and community.
The chapter begins with God just as the Genesis narrative begins with God. The nature of the Creator communicates a great deal about the nature of human beings who are created in God’s image. God exists as a communion of persons in fellowship with one another; he communicates both within the Trinity and to people; and he is able to do something new, particularly in creating the world. The centre of the discussion is the image of God. This image is a relational image. This is important because of the nature of autism, which has at its core difficulty in relating to other persons. The reverse of the chiasm then examines the first humans in terms of the autistic triad. The first humans were beings able to do new things; they could communicate with one another, with the animal creation and in praise to the Creator; and Adam was not meant to be alone but in to live in community with other humans.

The second half of the chapter seeks to answer the question raised by the first half of the chapter, namely, if the first humans did not have autism then where did autism come from? Here I connect the presence of autism in the world to the fall. Despite the abundant provision of all good things needful for life, Adam and Eve chose
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to eat of the one tree which was forbidden by God – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The consequence of this action is a new reality in which every human being inherits the sin of Adam. Sin affects every part of human existence and the human environment.

One result of the entrance of sin into the world is the presence of autism. This statement must not be construed to be a statement of blame on individual people but a statement of explanation. Being a sinner is the condition of every human and the reality of sin in the world has brought about all manner of different diseases, disasters and events, for which sin is responsible. Knowing that autism is the result of sin implies that it was not God’s original intention to create people with deficits in relationships, communication and coping with newness. It is therefore appropriate to provide help to autistic people to overcome the difficulties they experience with social interaction, communication and restricted behaviours.

In the Beginning *Elohim*: God exists in Communion

The exploration of what it means to be human begins with an exploration of the nature of God. This is because knowledge of God and knowledge of humanness are interconnected. As John Calvin observes, without knowing the self we cannot know God and without knowing God we cannot know ourselves.\(^{192}\) It is fitting, then, that the Genesis narrative begins, “In the beginning God (*ʾlhym*) created (*brʾ*)”. The juxtaposition of a singular verb (*brʾ*) and a plural word for God (*ʾlhym*) is interesting. Martin Luther believes that this is a veiled reference to the Trinity or the plurality of persons in God. Creation is a trinitarian act: the Father created heaven and earth

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through the Son, who is the Word of God; and the Holy Spirit hovered over the yet unstructured earth.\textsuperscript{193} Of course the nature of God as triune is not fully revealed until the New Testament. It is therefore necessary to look beyond Gen 1:1 to understand God as triune, and this I will do in the paragraphs which follow.

Catherine LaCugna explains that in the trinitarian theology of the Cappadocian Fathers, personhood, particularly the person of the Father, is what constitutes the being of God. Everything that is exists because of the person of the Father, including the Son and the Spirit. This does not imply any subordination, but rather that God’s being is personal, arising from love, delight and fruitfulness. God ‘exists’ because of a \textit{person}, not because of an essence. When existence is understood as dependent on relationality then it is inappropriate to speak as if essence defines existence. Substance is not a self-contained referent, but exists only with reference to another. In Greek patristic theology the idea that divine substance can be spoken of apart from the relations of the divine persons is an oxymoron. This would contradict the revelation of God in the New Testament as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{194}

Although there are differences between the trinitarian theology of East and West, both uphold the concept that “\textit{personhood is the meaning of being}.”\textsuperscript{195} Knowledge of a person requires knowledge of that person’s relationships. LaCugna maintains that since Greek theology begins with the personhood of the Father it highlights that “\textit{all of reality … is personal and relational}.”\textsuperscript{196} Greek theology affirms that it is relationship and not substance which is primary. For any being that is

\textsuperscript{193} Martin Luther, \textit{Luther's Works Volume 1: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5}, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 9, 12.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 248. Italics original.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
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sustained in being, existence similarly implies ongoing relationship. God’s being is a continuing fellowship of persons. This is the only true being, that is, being must flow out of a person who loves freely and thereby affirms his identity through communion with other persons.\textsuperscript{197}

The ‘social Trinity’ has been critiqued on a number of levels. But I am not suggesting that the divine persons are in any way analogous to the modern understanding of individuals. Insisting that there are relationships within the Trinity does not imply a voluntaristic union of the persons in community nor is tritheism implied by these relationships since the divine unity is not in question.\textsuperscript{198} Yet, God is not without distinction in the divine oneness, as T.F. Torrance affirms, because the Father and the Son mutually indwell one another and both Yahweh and Jesus Christ are designated ‘I am’. There is a set of relationships between three persons within the Godhead.\textsuperscript{199} As Athanasius puts it, we must think of the Trinity not as three disparate hypostases estranged from one another, alienated in being, and individually separated from one another like created things ... but as a Holy Trinity, not Trinity in name only, but really existing and subsisting, a Father really existing and subsisting, and a Son really existing and subsisting, and a Holy Spirit really existing and subsisting.\textsuperscript{200}

Each person of the Godhead is who he is in relation to the other persons of the Godhead. The Father is only Father in relation to the Son and the Spirit. The Spirit is

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 248-49.
\textsuperscript{200} Athanasius, \textit{Tomus ad Antiochenos} (c 362), 5. (Cited in Torrance, \textit{The Christian Doctrine of God}, 125.)
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not who he is as Holy Spirit without his relations with the Father and the Son. Father, Son and Spirit can be recognised as distinct only by their unique relations with one another. It is because of their distinct properties as Father, Son and Spirit that they mutually indwell one another and give themselves to the other. This *perichoresis* implies an unbreakable unity between the divine persons as they co-inhere or contain one another. Each divine person lives to give to the others and is thereby in communion with the others. It is as Father, Son and Holy Spirit that God exists and is revealed to humanity. What the triune God truly is, then, is a reciprocal ‘movement’ of self-giving love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Theirs is an intimate communion as each gives of himself to and for the other.\(^{201}\)

But, if God exists eternally as a communion of persons who continually give of love towards one another, then why should such a God, who is perfect in communion as Father, Son and Spirit, desire to create something outside of himself? Wolfhart Pannenberg’s response is that the world came into existence because of a gracious, free act of God to grant existence to creatures, creatures who exist together with God but who are distinct from him. God has always been gracious and good, because he has for all eternity loved the Son. The Father first of all loves the Son and through the Son he loves the creatures which he made. The Father draws his creatures into his eternal turning toward the Son in love, and in this way the creatures share in his love for the Son. The distinction of the Son from the Father is both the basis for the distinction of creatures from the Creator and the connection between the two.\(^{202}\)

God is thoroughly relational within the triune fellowship of persons which constitute his being. These relationships have no beginning in time, because it is the

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\(^{201}\) *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 102, 132-33.

eternal relationships between the divine persons, rather than the divine essence, which constitute God as God. Knowing that God exists as a triune communion of persons helps align our thinking toward relationality from the start. Beginning with this understanding of God as relational is necessary in order to correctly understand the nature of human being. It is out of the ever-giving love of the divine persons in their perichoretic dance that humans were given life. Before exploring humanity I will look at other aspects of the nature of God which flow out of his triunity. Two of these aspects are God’s communication and his ability to do new things. These aspects are of interest to my discussion, because difficulties in relationships, difficulty with communication and difficulty with newness are core features of autism. These two aspects of God’s being are explored below in interaction with the Genesis account of creation.

**God Said, “Let There Be Light”: God’s Communication**

Evidence of God’s communication is found early in Gen 1. “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:3). Luther observes that there are two ways in Hebrew to signify ‘word’: ʾmr, which refers solely to the spoken word and dbr, which can refer either to a spoken word or a thing. In the account of creation in Gen 1 the word used is always ʾmr, that is, the spoken word. This demonstrates that the speaker is distinct from the word spoken. Luther therefore concludes that God created the world using only his spoken word.203

God’s communication existed before there were people to communicate with. When the words, “Let there be light” were spoken there was no one to hear this word

203 Luther, *LW 1*, 16.
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except Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This word, which was spoken by the Father in the Godhead, is God’s omnipotent Word, which was with God from the beginning. This uncreated Word of God is within God, and is God, and yet is distinct from God (John 1:1). The uncreated Word is the source of the created word.204 “Thus,” according to Luther, “God reveals Himself to us as the Speaker who has with Him the uncreated Word, through whom he created the world and all things with the greatest ease, namely, by speaking.”205

God communicates by speaking yet his speech is qualitatively different from human speech. Luther comments that when God says, “Let there be light” he does not speak mere words but realities, because when God utters those words there is light. Human beings speak only according to grammatical rules and not realities. Humans can only give names to already created things while God’s word produces reality. God tells the sun to shine and immediately it shines.206 Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s observation is similar. When God creates using his word, his thoughts, his words and what he creates are one. God’s word does not have results as it were, but his word is already the result. With humans the words spoken and the results never occur at the same time and sometimes not at all. But with God they cannot be separated.207 Bonhoeffer forcefully remarks, “With God the imperative is the indicative. The indicative does not result from the imperative; it is not the effect of the imperative. Instead it is the imperative.”208

204 Ibid., 18-19, 22.
205 Ibid., 22.
206 Ibid., 21-22.
208 Ibid. Italics original.
Karl Barth discerns that creation is the external basis of covenant. God freely willed to create the world and its creatures as something which is other than God. He did not do this because he had a need, as if God were lonely, which is not so. He freely chose to extend existence beyond the glory of the triune fellowship. The world was created, then, because God freely chose to do so in love. It is also true that the world was created by the spoken word of God. Therefore, God spoke the world into being in order that he might extend his love to his creation. This divine communication was for the purpose of forming a relationship with the other who is different to God. God’s communication in creating was for the sake of his relationship with human beings.

It is clear from this discussion that God communicates. Although this communication begins as a communication between the divine persons, it does not stay that way. God utters his word and his word is faithful and true. When God speaks, his word creates without effort. This divine communication is a communication of God to his creation, gifting his creation with relationship to himself. Indeed, God communicates in order that he might establish a relationship with something other than himself. His communication serves the relationship which God freely chooses to have with humanity. It might be anticipated that humans would be gifted with the ability to communicate in speech. This will be explored a little later on. For now I turn to the significance of creation ex nihilo.

**Creation ex Nihilo: God’s New Thing**

T.F. Torrance posits that creation was a new event for God. God was, and always is, Father without creation. Yet in creating the world he became Creator. Of

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course, God always possessed both the power and the will to create, but the act of creation was something new for him. Creation did not exist and it had to be brought into being by an act of God. The incarnation was also something new. The Son of God was always able to become incarnate, yet he chose to do so ‘in the fullness of time’ (Gal 4:4). So too was Pentecost something new for God, as it was a change in the form of God’s presence in the world. These three acts of God – creation, incarnation, and the advent of the Holy Spirit – imply something important about God’s freedom.\(^{210}\) Torrance explains:

> They tell us that far from being a static or inertial Deity like some ‘unmoved mover,’ the mighty living God who reveals himself to us through his Son and in his Spirit is absolutely free to do what he had never done before, and free to be other than he was eternally; to be Almighty Creator, and even to become incarnate as a creature within his creation, while nevertheless remaining eternally the God that he always was ... [H]is ever-living, acting Being is always new while always remaining what it ever was and is and ever will be. By his very nature, in the unlimited, uninhibited overflow of his love and grace, God always takes us by surprise.\(^{211}\)

Jürgen Moltmann adds to this study of God’s freedom by comparing creation to play. The Old Testament book of Proverbs describes creation as taking place through Wisdom, who was present before creation. Wisdom declares, “I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world, and delighting in the human race” (Prov 8:30b-31). This tradition understands creation to be like play, delighting both God and humanity. So the world exists, not out of necessity or by chance, but as the result of God’s freedom. Creation pleases God and is thus in

\(^{211}\) Ibid.
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harmony with his essential being. Creation is play in that it is both meaningful and unnecessary. God’s ‘play’ in creating the world is something new and different from anything which previously existed.²¹² Moltmann’s understanding of creation as play suggests that God is able to enjoy and delight in bringing something new into being. He is not constrained by what already is, but is able to open up new possibilities.

Creation out of nothing is not primarily about God’s power but about his freedom. God was free to create or not to create, but he chose to create as a gift of his goodness so that he could share his life with others outside of his triune being. Thus creation out of nothing brought about something new, something which had no prior existence, something totally without precedent. God is not stuck in rigid patterns of behaviour, never able to do anything new. His freedom allows him to create and to redeem and even to become incarnate. God’s freedom means that doing something new, even something playful, is truly a choice for God.

The discussion above is indicative that God is essentially a relational being and has been so for all eternity. Father, Son and Spirit give of themselves in love to one another always. The divine persons communicate within the Godhead and in the creation of the world. God remains forever who he is and yet he is capable of change. This is evident in the fact of creation. Creation was not necessary to God but a free act motivated by love; creation is something new for God. The triune God is a God who relates, who communicates, and who does new things. In chapter 1, autism was defined as involving impaired social interaction, impaired communication, and repetitive or restricted interests and behaviours. Since the triune God experiences none of these problems, I conclude that God does not have autism.

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The fact that God does not have autism is important for comprehension of what humanity is intended to be. Because humans are creatures who share the likeness of God I anticipate that human beings were not made with autism either. But this thought must be put into the background until I have considered what it means that people are made in the image of God. Humanity alone is made in the image and likeness of God, so humanity has a telos greater than that of the animal creation, that of sharing God’s life. Historically the imago Dei has been understood in terms of the mind but this fails to do justice to the triune nature of God. Therefore, the following section focuses on the image of God as an analogia relationis (analogy of relationship) rather than an analogia entis (analogy of being). Even so it is impossible to truly understand the image of God without looking at Jesus Christ.

Let Us Make Humans in Our Image

Humans are unique among created beings because they are made in the image and likeness of God. Genesis 1:26a declares, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’” God deliberated over the creation of humanity, something which he did not do in creating other creatures. Although it is not possible to distinguish animals and humans on the basis of their possession of life, what they eat, or the fact that they are sustained by God, God’s deliberation implies that human beings are set apart as superior to the animal creation. For Luther this superiority means that humans are intended for a better future life than this present physical existence.213

213 Luther, LW 1, 56. Calvin is in agreement with Luther on this matter, calling God’s deliberation over creating humanity “the highest honour with which he has dignified us”. (John Calvin, A Commentary on Genesis Vols 1 & 2 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965 [1554]), 91.)
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This better human future can only be understood correctly through Christ. Creation has Christ as its beginning and Christ as its goal (Col 1:16-17). The Son is the one who both establishes and completes the creation. Irenaeus understood that God created the world so that it might share the glory which is eternally communicated between Father, Son and Spirit. Humanity was intended to move from the infancy of Eden to the full maturity of having the likeness of God. Human maturity into the likeness of God is part of the total advancement of Creation towards its eschatological telos. This telos has been revealed by Christ when he promised the kingdom of God and will be fulfilled in the consummation of the age on the basis of his redemptive work.\textsuperscript{214} Indeed the image of God is not fully revealed until the Son of God became incarnate. The Son was always the image of God, but Adam and Eve had to be created in God’s image. It is the incarnate Son who is the archetype which Adam comes to image.\textsuperscript{215} As Irenaeus writes, “In times long past, it was said that man was created in the image of God, but it was not actually shown; for the Word was as yet invisible, after whose image man was created.”\textsuperscript{216}

Human destiny is greater than the destiny of the general creation because humans are intended for eternal life with God. Human beings, created in God’s image, were from the beginning created for fellowship with God. This is the reason that human telos involves righteousness. This righteousness is part of human relationships with other humans, because human destiny is a corporate destiny. God’s desire is for humanity to become part of the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{217} What I will argue in the next

\textsuperscript{216} Irenaeus of Lyons, \textit{Against Heresies} (c. 175-185), V.xvi.2. (Quoted in Steenberg, \textit{Irenaeus on Creation}, 109 fn. 33.)
\textsuperscript{217} Pannenberg, \textit{Systematic Theology, Volume 2}, 224.
chapter is that finite humans, in particular sinful, finite humans, cannot reach that telos outside of Christ. Humans do not have an intrinsic capacity to develop into what God intends them to be; this development takes place in Christ. Christ does not so much aid our way to human telos, but he accomplishes this on our behalf and then through the work of the Holy Spirit brings us to our telos. Human telos does not depend on human capacity at all.

Since the image of God is unique to humanity, and being created in God’s image is intrinsically tied up with the end goal of human being, we must necessarily ask what the Bible means when it proclaims that humans are made in the image of God. Luther notes that the Church Fathers generally followed Augustine’s view of the image. Luther writes:

In this way, they say, man is created according to the image of God; that is, he has a mind, a memory, a will. Likewise, man is created according to the similitude of God; that is, the intellect is enlightened by faith, the memory is made confident through hope and steadfastness, and the will is adorned with love.218

Luther argues that, although people do possess memory, will and intellect, these cannot be the image of God. If this were so then the devil would also be in the image of God as he possesses these characteristics in greater measure than humans!219

There are other reasons to reject Augustine’s opinion that the image of God corresponds to the three powers of the soul. Augustine’s interior conception of the Trinity tends to individualism. LaCugna explains that Augustine’s theology has relational aspects, but these relationships are interior to the divine essence. Augustine began his thinking with the oneness of God and understood the persons only in terms of

218 Luther, LW 1, 60.
219 Ibid., 61.
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internal differentiation and consciousness. He believed that the human soul – memory, mind and will – was analogous to the Trinity. For Augustine, the soul’s journey toward God is an inward one. Knowledge of God and self is arrived at through internal contemplation and self-reflection. Thus Augustine’s conception of the Trinity tends to obscure the other-focused and communal nature of personhood. For this reason I have rejected Augustine’s three powers of the soul as the image of God in favour of a more relational understanding of the image.

Of the Reformers, Calvin is most direct in his discussion of the image of God as a relational concept. Although he concedes that Augustine’s three powers of the soul in some way resemble the Trinity, he believes that an understanding of the image of God needs a stronger and clearer foundation. The human body as the image of God is not in keeping with the scripture. Nor is Calvin satisfied with the idea that dominion is the image of God, because the biblical expression suggests something internal. Calvin believes that the image of God applies to the integrity of Adam when he possessed right reason, true affections and excellence of nature, therein resembling his Creator. Humans are the covenant partners of God and can thereby reflect God’s glory in a special way.

It is this idea of reflecting the glory of God which leads to the primary metaphor which Calvin uses to explain the image of God, that of a mirror. People do not have qualities which are superior to the animal creation which make them the image of God, but rather humanity is created to mirror the glory of God. As long as the mirror is pointed towards the Creator, women and men reflect or image the Creator in a similar way to a mirror reflecting light. Human beings are the image of God as they are

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oriented rightly towards God in obedience to him. As the image of God humans are to respond to God so that God can see his own reflection in humanity. This metaphor of a mirror can only be understood correctly in terms of human relationships. Mirrors do not turn themselves but people do, turning towards or away from others. When turned towards others, humans reflect well-being, and when turned away, human relationships are broken, resulting in loneliness, distrust and alienation.222

Moltmann also thinks of the image in terms of a reflection. The soul is not that which makes people significant; animals also are ‘living souls’. Humans are made in the image of God. God desired to create a creature who can respond to him. This creature is a human being, whose purpose is to be a mirror in which God can see his own reflection. Moltmann writes:

As the image of God on earth, human beings respond first of all to the relationship of God to themselves and to the whole of creation. But they also correspond to the inner relationships of God to himself – to the eternal, inner love of God which expresses and manifests itself in creation. As God’s image, men and women are beings who correspond to God, beings who can give the seeking love of God the sought-for response, and who are intended to do just that.223

So men and women are made to reflect the very relationships which constitute the being of God.

According to Bonhoeffer, human beings are unique because the Creator dwells in his human creatures. The Holy Spirit in Adam worshiped the Creator and responded in love to God. Humanity was given freedom and that freedom was expressed through one human (Adam) freely in relationship to another human (Eve). Each human was

222 Institutes, I.xv.4.; Hall, Imaging God, 103-05.
223 Moltmann, God in Creation, 77.
dependent on another human being and this dependence was constitutive of their creatureliness. Bonhoeffer therefore concludes that the image of God is not an *analogia entis*, an analogy of being with the being of God. Such an analogy cannot exist, because God alone is self-existent. Rather, humans are like God in an analogy of relationship, an *analogia relationis*. The image of God, then, is not some human potential or capacity, but rather a relationship in which humanity is placed, a passive righteousness. The image of God is not a human possession, but something which points to the one who we image. The image cannot operate unless within the relationship established by God, because it is only within this relationship that true human freedom exists.224

The above discussion provides insights into the meaning of the image of God, but the exact nature of the image is understood only by looking at its expression in Jesus Christ. Luther asserts that, because of the effect of sin on humanity, it is not actually possible to know what the image is to any real extent. The capacities which people possess are, in Luther’s words, “depraved and most seriously weakened, to put it more clearly, they are utterly leprous and unclean.”225 Not only is the image distorted because of sin, but human intellect and perception has been corrupted by sin so that it is impossible to understand the image with the intellect.226 “Therefore,” writes Luther, “when we speak about that image, we are speaking about something unknown. Not only have we had no experience of it, but we continually experience the opposite; and so we hear nothing but bare words.”227 We cannot go back to the world in which people did not sin. Bonhoeffer makes a similar point to Luther:

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224 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 63-66.
225 Luther, *LW 1*, 61.
226 Ibid., 62.
227 Ibid., 63.
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The attempt – with the origin and nature of humankind in mind – to take a gigantic leap back into the world of the lost beginning, to seek to know for ourselves what humankind was like in its original state and to identify our own ideal humanity with what God actually created is hopeless. It fails to recognise that it is only from Christ that we can know about the original nature of humankind.  

Since we cannot truly understand the image of God by looking backwards, we must therefore look to the image expressed in the person of Christ. This is something which I will do in the following chapter. For now I will further consider the creation story to glean something of what humanity was originally like.

**Autism and the Image of God**

Being made in the image of God does not so much give human beings capacities of the soul - intellect, memory and will – but a relationship with the Creator in which humans, like a mirror, reflect back who God is. This involves reflecting the inner relationships within the triune God. The God of the Bible is a relational God, existing in a perichoretic fellowship of self-giving love. One reason God communicates is to have relationship with humans, implying that communication is connected to relationality. The act of creation, a new thing for God, is also clearly connected to God’s relationship to humanity, because it was a necessary precursor to that relationship. In reflecting the relational being of God, then, I would expect that the first humans would be relational, able to communicate and to embrace newness. In other words, relationship is central to the image of God.

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**Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 62.**
The statement ‘every human being is made in the image of God’ appears at first glance to alleviate at least some of the problems associated with disability, its difficulties and stigma. But, as Thomas Reynolds pertinently observes, the idea that people are created in the *imago Dei* “is a perilous topic for people with disabilities, because Christians have often interpreted disability as a distortion of God’s purposes, a marring of the image of God.” As this discussion is focused on people with cognitive disabilities it is significant to see that such people have been most stigmatised by certain understandings of *imago Dei*. Hans Reinders comments that historically, a predominant understanding of *imago Dei* was that it was about human capabilities such as the ability to reason. Unfortunately, locating the image of God in reason, rationality and will, implies that people who cannot exhibit reason cannot be in God’s image.

Since I have concluded that the image of God is not found in human capacity, but rather it is an *analogia relationis*, intellectual disability cannot exclude a person from being in God’s image. Most people with intellectual disabilities are capable of interacting socially. So a relational understanding of the image of God is therefore helpful for people who have mild intellectual disabilities. The situation is more complex as the degree of intellectual impairment increases. The more intellectually impaired an individual is, the more likely that individual is to have autism as well. For people who are profoundly intellectually impaired, that is, those with IQs below twenty, it is difficult to observe any social responses. However, in some cases parents of children with severe intellectual disabilities have characterised them as “friendly and

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229 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 177.
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eager for social contact, like a normal baby”. But, when intellectual impairment and autism coexist a relational view of the image of God presents some difficulties.

The three sections which follow flesh out some of these difficulties as I examine the nature of humanity as first created. The first humans, before the entrance of sin into the world, were free creatures, who were able to do new things, who could communicate with God and with one another, and who were made to be part of a human community. These three: embracing newness, communication, and community participation are the features which are impaired in people with severe autism. Yet the Genesis account shows humanity with these features intact, at least until the entrance of sin. These three features are addressed in the opposite order for humanity than the way in which they were addressed for God above.

**Have Dominion over the Earth: Newness**

Human beings are creative beings by virtue of their creation in the image of the Creator, and the creation account in Gen 1-2 gives some indications of this human creativity. Humans are a reflection of God to the nonhuman creation, extending God’s creative activity to the world. This is evident in Adam’s naming of the animals (Gen 2:19-20). The action is one which provides order and structure to Adam’s world and is therefore a creative action. It is parallel to God’s naming of the day, the night, the sky, the land and the seas in Gen 1:5-10. Adam’s naming of the animals thereby became a participation in the creative process.  

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Human creativity also involves participating with God in both appreciating beauty and making the world beautiful. This thought is expressed by Eastern Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov in his comment regarding Gen 1:31:

God created man in his image, granting to this image three gifts: a mind directed towards the good, the gift of reason and wisdom, and the gift of aesthetic appreciation. Man is meant to be the wisdom of the world, just because he participates in the Logos; he is also meant to be the artist of the world, because he can imbue it with beauty. Man must become not only a good and faithful worker in the world; he must not only ‘dress and keep it’ (Gen 2:15), as he was commanded in Paradise, but he must become its artist; he must render it beautiful. Because he has been created in the image of God, he is called to create.234

Another way of relating God’s creativity and human creativity, according to Barry Liesch and Thomas Finley, is through the concept of newness. God’s creating, that is, brʾ, is frequently associated with newness. Because the word ‘new’ is also associated with human activity, this may provide a legitimate connection between God’s creative activity and human creativity. Newness associated with brʾ has five significant features: newness is without precedent; it is surprising; it is helpful in terms of providing a solution to a problem and being aesthetically valuable; it is transformative; and it remains new. Humans are referred to in the Bible as fashioning new things: houses (Deut 20:5) and carts (1 Sam 6:7). The more common use of ‘new’ is in the realm of musical composition (Pss 33:3; 96:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa 42:10).235


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This connection with musical composition is not surprising, because the capacity for human creativity is intended to be offered back to God as an act of worship of the Creator. Luther believes the imagination should be used to praise God and respond to him. The human heart is intended to be creative in faith and in the Spirit (Col 3:16) and as such it should give to God his due.\(^{236}\) This human capacity to be creative, according to Brian Horne, allows people to choose an act of creativity which will glorify God. In this way humans are above the animals, who can only glorify God by acting instinctively.\(^{237}\)

People have been given dominion over the earth as God’s regents, and part of that dominion is the responsibility to be creative in making the world orderly and beautiful. Like God, humans bring about something new in their creativity. God’s intention was that men and women would use these abilities to offer back to him praise in various forms, through creating new songs and making beauty in the world. Importantly, humans were created with the ability to do and produce something new. Being able to do new things and make new things is an intrinsic part of the original nature of humanity. Yet people with typical autism have a great deal of difficulty coping with newness. This means that human creativity, that is, making and doing new things is the first aspect of the creation story which suggests that autism was not present in the original creation. There are two more aspects of the story of human origins which suggest the absence of autism in the beginning – human communication and human community. I turn first to human communication as exemplified in Adam’s naming of the animals.


\(^{237}\) Horne, “Divine and Human Creativity,” 137.
Adam Gave Names to All the Animals: Human Communication

An examination of the creation narrative reveals several things about human communication. The most obvious of these is that Adam speaks, and in this way, amongst other ways, he is like God. He is given the task of naming the animals in the garden (Gen 2:19-20). This task sets Adam apart from the animals, because he assigns them names and the animals are to be known by those names. Adam speaks because he is given a task which requires him to speak. His communication is part of his purpose on the earth. Therefore, human communication is not incidental to the nature of humanity, but integral to the human task which is given by God.

Communication is also given for relationship with the Creator. Luther believes the image of God involves the capacity to respond to the Creator. Humans are afforded dignity by God in that God gives his word to humanity and the person is enabled to respond in speech. This capacity to respond to God is part of the imago Dei. Human response to God is what sets humans apart from the animal creation. Emil Brunner contends that the animals are created as complete but human beings are not. People cannot be complete without giving a response to the call of the Creator. A human does not exist of itself but is made to be a being who responds, who answers the one who created it. Only human beings are able to respond to God and only they must respond in order to fulfil the purpose of their own creation. God’s word is first of all a word of love which calls people to fellowship with him. This fellowship with God is the destiny of humanity and human beings must respond in order to accept the gift which is

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238 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 188.
239 Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 157.
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offered them. The human must repeat back the divine word which was spoken to him or her, freely returning the word, saying ‘I am yours’.  

The primary purpose of human speech is therefore as a means of responding to God in worship. T.F. Torrance asserts that while every part of creation exists for the praise and glory of the Creator, humans have a unique role in the world, as the crown of creation, the image of God, to declare the glory of God and reveal his amazing love. The world is without speech, but humans are the only part of the visible universe made to verbalise the purposeful intricacy and the overwhelming beauty of the world in praise to God. Thus human speech is given for the unique human function of verbally glorifying the Creator.

While human communication is first intended to be directed towards the Creator in praise and thanksgiving, it is also intended to promote human-human relationships, mirroring the divine inner communication. Human language is used for the purpose of communicating with other people. The very idea of language implies that it must be used in a community of people who share that language. Communication is more than passing on ideas; it involves sharing with another person. This ability to have a communicating relationship with other humans is not surprising because, as Terence Fretheim notes, human existence is the result of God’s inner communication, as expressed in Gen 1:26 – “Let us make humankind in our image.”

Men and women were created to mirror the Creator in the use of speech. Adam had both the capacity to speak and to assign names as well as the intellect required to

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use this capacity. Communication is given for the purpose of responding to the word of the Creator. Humans are intended to use speech for the praise and thanks of their God, who has graciously made the world for their use. Of all creation, only humans can speak and only humans can willingly and voluntarily offer up praise to the Creator. Communication enables people to relate with one another just as God communicates in his internal relations. This clearly set the first humans apart from the mute animal creation.

That communication is part of God’s original creation will pose a problem for an understanding of people with autism. I must later deal with the question of whether people with autism are genuinely human and why people can be born with deficits in communication. The latter will be addressed in the section on the entrance of sin into the world. The former is the major question of this thesis. I will argue in future chapters that Christ is the one who makes us human persons, regardless of the fact that what humanity was originally created as no longer obtains. But for now I will turn to the major feature of human persons, relationality.

It Is Not Good to Be Alone: Human Community

In the second creation account the writer of Genesis describes the creation of Adam, who is at first alone. But, “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner’” (Gen 2:18). Calvin perceives in the creation of Eve that God desires human community. Because Adam was not meant be alone God created Eve as a companion and helper for him. Children are not described here and they are not the primary purpose of the creation of Eve. However, children are ultimately to be included in human society. Human beings are
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indeed ‘social animals’. That it was not good for Adam to be alone is a reality which applies, not only to Adam, but to all people. Human solitude is not good.244

Fretheim argues that people are fundamentally dependent creatures. Eve was made as a helper for Adam (Gen 2:18, 21-22). In saying, “It is not good that the man should be alone,” God declared that Adam was not intended to be independent of or cut off from other people. Human beings do not exist as either individuals or as collective humanity, but as relational beings. Humans need other humans. Each person must relate to at least one other human person. Being in a relationship with the Creator, as important as this is, is not enough to complete men and women and to declare them good.245 The creation account in Gen 2 implies, “God does not intend to be the helper of the adam, at least in this sense; God’s presence is not the solution to the problem of human aloneness.”246

Moltmann notes that this ontological human need for community is a reflection of the divine communion. In Gen 1:26 God said, “Let us make humankind in our image.” The image of God reflects the internal plurality of God as Father, Son and Spirit. God created one humanity in two sexes to mirror the three-in-oneness of the Trinity. God, who is one and at the same time internally distinguishable as three persons, is correlated to the human community, who as male and female come together to become one. Thus it is not possible to be the image of God as a solitary human being, but only in human community. Moltmann makes the strong statement that to live as one who is isolated and alone is to be an incomplete human, because existing in this state does not exhibit a likeness to the relational God. Moltmann goes on to posit that the image of God is found in human community in both the expression of gender

244 Calvin, A Commentary on Genesis Vols 1 & 2, 97, 128.
245 Fretheim, God and the World in the Old Testament, 55-56.
246 Ibid., 57.
and over generations. The communion of the three divine persons is evinced by, is represented by, and is visible in human communities.\footnote{Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 217-18, 22-23, 41.}

It is not enough for women and men that they find companionship with God; people need other people. God made a human companion for Adam in Eve. The creation of Eve was the beginning of human community, which was intended to mirror in some ways the communion of divine persons in the Trinity. Like God, human beings need the communion of an other. Just as God exists as a communion of persons who mutually indwell one another, human beings are not intended to be independent and indifferent to other people. A human who is completely independent, isolated and alone is not fully human.

**No Autism in the Beginning**

I have examined the creation account and noted that people are in many ways like the God who made them. God is relational, self-communicating, and free to make and to do new things. In other words, God does not have autism. Human beings were created to reflect the nature of God and as such they were created to be relational, to communicate, and to make and to do new things with what has been created by God. The conclusion must be that the first humans who were created did not exhibit evidence of having autism. They most definitely did not show any symptoms of low-functioning autism.

In concluding this I acknowledge that it can be problematic to transpose a modern diagnosis, or in this case the lack of a diagnosis, back into an ancient context. Autism is a new syndrome, not labelled until the 1940s. But the condition of autism is
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not the same as its label or the explanations which accompany the label. Despite the recency of autism as a diagnosis, the condition existed long before diagnostic criteria. Christine Trevett sees a place for retrospective diagnoses because of the common human condition of people across time. Therefore, I have taken the liberty to make the negative diagnosis based on the biblical accounts. My conclusion regarding the absence of autism in the first humans brings with it questions about the humanity of people with autism. Since people with severe autism find relating to other people extremely difficult, cannot communicate without difficulty or at all, and are greatly stressed by new situations, are we to conclude that autistic people are not human persons? These questions are significant and central in terms of what this thesis attempts to address. The next chapter will construct a theological anthropology based on the vicarious humanity of Christ and which is thereby maximally inclusive. I will argue that every person alive is essentially broken in their humanness. There is no person who is without sin and no person who is unbroken and fully and truly human. At most this brokenness is a matter of degree. Autistic people are not a separate category of human or some kind of subhuman entities. From a more positive perspective, Jesus Christ is the only true human and only through his vicarious life can human beings, including those who are lacking in what seems to constitute human nature, be made fully human as he is. Jesus Christ is the one in whom all people, autistic and neurotypical, must find their true and full humanity.

This statement foreshadows the answer to the question of whether people with autism are human persons in the image of God. However, there is another question which arises from the discussion about the creation of humanity. If God is not autistic

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and the first people were not autistic, where did autism come from? In other words, if autism was not present in the original creation, why is autism present in the world now? As Luther observes, when the world was first created it was utterly glorious. Humans had no fear of death or sickness, because these things did not exist. Adam and Eve possessed all their physical and mental faculties undamaged; there were no physical ailments in Eden. Since this is not the case in the present, something must have happened to change the world into the one we now know. This change was the entrance of sin.

The Origin of Autism

Three Opinions about the Origin of Disability

The entrance of sin into the world changed everything. I will discuss this below as an explanation of the presence of autism in the world. However, before I offer my own view of why autism exists I will present some alternative views about the origins of disability. Three significant explanations are discussed here. John Gillibrand and Martin Lloyd Williams believe that disability was intentionally part of creation from the beginning. Thomas Reynolds posits that disability is part of the diversity of creation. These authors will provide a counterpoint to the discussion which follows.

Gillibrand reflects on the situation that he finds himself in as the father of a boy with severe autism. His son Adam is permanently affected by autism. His family has been affected because of the difficulties in caring for Adam. Gillibrand himself has suffered from a mental collapse and depression. As a result he asks the question, Why is the world like this? In Evil and the God of Love John Hick puts this question in the

250 Luther, LW 1, 62, 111.
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form, “can the presence of evil in the world be reconciled with the existence of a God who is unlimited in both goodness and in power?”251 Yet Gillibrand does not want to think of his son’s autism as part of the evil in the world, because this would be the equivalent of a failure to accept his son for who he is. As to God’s goodness and power, these can only be explained through analogy. Yet Jesus dissolved his community’s notions of moral purity and impurity through his proclamation of forgiveness. Jesus transformed conceptions of goodness and power.252 Gillibrand claims, “God’s power comprehends weakness, God’s goodness comprehends that which is not good.”253

Gillibrand sees creation and autism as having something in common, an unknown cause. He affirms the Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing and believes that Genesis, rather than being a scientific account, is a theological account which ascribes worth to creation. When God says that the creation is good he does not mean that it is perfect.254 Gillibrand asks, “If creation had been perfect, rather than very good, would it have included autism, and thence people with autism?” His intuition tells him the answer is ‘Yes’. Autism existed before the fall. He rejects the idea that autism is a result of the fall for three reasons: disability should not be associated with sickness; sickness is not the result of sinfulness; and all humanity is made in God’s image. Gillibrand avers, “I could not believe that Adam’s autism in any way mars the image and likeness of God in him.”255

Williams, a priest in the Church of England, has a son with Down syndrome. Williams questions the notion that the fall is the “point of origin for disability.” He

251 Gillibrand, Disabled Church, Disabled Society, 53.
252 Ibid., 54-55.
253 Ibid., 55.
254 Ibid.
255 Ibid., 56.
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suggests that the story of Adam and Eve is not as decisive in the biblical narrative as Christians have come to assume. The Bible provides many examples of choices that the people of God must make in favour of God or against him. The Genesis story is not, as has been assumed, the explanation for the origin of evil. Rather than address abstract issues, the Bible seeks to help people live in a world in which evil exists.²⁵⁶

Williams concludes:

It becomes possible to suggest that there was no world before Adam and Eve’s moment of disobedience that was disability free. It might even be possible to go further and say that the world that God looked at and saw was so good was in fact a world that already, quite intentionally, contained what we now call disability. ... Thus the link between evil and disability, which Jesus destroys in the Gospels, is seen entirely as an ancient human construct having little or no foundation in scripture.²⁵⁷

Williams goes on to suggest that disability would have been pronounced ‘good’ in the Garden of Eden. There would not have been any prejudice or pain associated with disability. In this sense it could not actually have been said to be ‘disability’. Williams posits this picture of Eden as a way of affirming those people he knows who have disabilities. He opposes the idea that the fall should be understood as having greater consequences for people with disabilities than it does for others. It may appear that it is God who has made people with disabilities bear the greater share of the consequences of the fall. However, it is human beings who have imposed the punishment through exclusion of people with disabilities.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Martin Lloyd Williams, Beauty and Brokenness: Compassion and the Kingdom of God (London: SPCK, 2007), 71-72.
²⁵⁷ Ibid., 72-73.
²⁵⁸ Ibid., 73-74.
Reynolds has a son with multiple disabilities. In his book *Vulnerable Communion* his theology of creation aims to provide a positive explanation of disability, which is “neither a blemish in God’s creation nor something God deliberately creates to punish, to illustrate a point, or to work blessings through.”\(^\text{259}\) Reynolds explains the presence of disability as the result of two aspects of creation: diversity and interdependence, and the nothing out of which creation is made. In creating, God chooses to limit his power because of love. Thus creation involves an act of God extending outward from himself to give creatures their own being. God energises creation and gives it a share in the creative work. Creation is steeped in grace. It is good and contains within it great diversity. But this diversity means that there are limits placed on each life-form as a result of their interdependence.\(^\text{260}\) “The very goodness of creation includes deprivations that are components of the differences and variety that makes such goodness possible.”\(^\text{261}\)

God is not in control of all that happens; an open universe contains within it the possibility of tragedy – conflict, peril, suffering and death. Creation is God’s gift, but tragedy is a consequence of the finitude of existence. “Existence is a blessing with a tragic structure.”\(^\text{262}\) The tragic comes from the fact that creation was made out of the chaos of nothingness, leaving a residue of chaos and unpredictability in all that exists, although chaos is not evil. We should resist any suggestion that creation is evil. Finitude is not the enemy of God or opposed to creation’s goodness, nor is suffering evil as such. Natural events like floods and earthquakes are simply part and parcel of life as creatures. It is human sin alone which produces evil. Created things are

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\(^{259}\) Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 146.  
\(^{260}\) Ibid., 160-62.  
\(^{261}\) Ibid., 162.  
\(^{262}\) Ibid., 163.
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changeable and imperfect. God does not determine all events but makes possible tragedy without actually causing it.263

In this section I will offer a different explanation for the presence of autism in the world to those provided by Gillibrand, Williams and Reynolds. It is the entrance of sin into God’s good world which has changed the nature of human life and the structure of creation itself. Sin is now inherited from Adam and each person is born affected by sin. Everyone will die as a result. Yet evil in the world is without rational explanation. Although God is the Creator of each person with autism, he creates in a way which does not annul the brokenness of the sin-affected world. Since my explanation for the origin of autism is quite different to that offered by Gillibrand, Williams and Reynolds, following my discussion about the effect of sin on the world and on humanity, I will offer some reasons why my explanation of the origin of autism is more helpful than those offered above.

**Sin as the Origin of Autism**

Genesis 3 records the events which have changed the world in profound fashion. In the Garden of Eden God placed a tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and he forbade Adam to eat of its fruit, warning him, “in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). The fruit was simply a fruit, but disobedience to God’s command rendered the tree of the knowledge of good and evil the most toxic substance which Adam could ingest.264 Genesis 3:1-6 reports that, after being tempted by the serpent, Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree. Indeed, when they had eaten of the fruit a change came over humanity and over the whole the world.

263 Ibid., 162-65.
264 Luther, *LW 1*, 95-96.
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The result of Adam and Eve eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was that death entered into the world, where death had not previously existed. What does it mean for death to enter the world? Calvin understands death by looking at its opposite. Before sin entered the world, human beings were happy and healthy in body and soul, and free from fear and injury. The lives of Adam and Eve would never have ended; one day they would simply have been translated into heaven. But when they became alienated from God, the source of all life, death entered in. Therefore, humanity experiences wretchedness, lostness, emptiness and misery in both body and mind. Humanity was given over to the reign of death until the day when grace will provide the cure.265

There are ongoing consequences for humanity because of the sin of Adam and Eve. Their sin has been inherited by everyone. Luther explains this by using Ps 51:5: “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” All people are descendents from Adam, and from this one man all inherit sin and guilt. Thus every individual is born in sin and lives and dies in sin, with the reasonable expectation of judgement. The only escape from this cycle of sin and judgement is the incarnation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who bore the sins of the human race and mediates for sinners before God the Father. This judgement on sin is not unjust, since, although people inherit sin from the first parents, each one is responsible for sin just as much as they.266 Bonhoeffer concurs with Luther. It is not only Adam and Eve who are addressed by God in the Garden. “[W]e ourselves are the ones who are affected, are

266 Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 192-94.
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intended, are addressed, accused, condemned, expelled”. The story of the fall is the story of every human being; it is the history of every human being’s guilt.

Death is pervasive, yet to some degree there is mitigation of this judgement due to God’s mercy. Although the brokenness of the world is evidence that God punishes sin, it is also clear that God is merciful. According to Calvin, while everywhere the reality of human alienation from God can be seen, the mercy of God fills the earth (Ps 33:5). God’s goodness is apparent in all kinds of places, so that the full horror of sin and human depravity is not felt. Sin can obscure human perception of the mercy of God, but that mercy is nonetheless present everywhere. Luther proclaims that it is God’s unlimited grace which preserves the world, enabling life to continue instead of allowing creation to fall into nothingness. God does this because he has a purpose, a telos, for the world. God preserves the sinner so that he or she might still have a chance to participate in the destiny which God has planned for human beings.

The world is no longer in the state in which it was originally created. Humanity is no longer in the state in which it was originally created. As Calvin observes, we must not assume that the world is was it was always intended to be, because this would accrue blame to God for all that is wrong with the world. The Creator should not be blamed for human problems which are the result of human sin. So we must live with the inherent contradictions in humanity and the world. Human beings are made in the image of God and the creation is good. But at the same time, the image of God is broken by sin and the creation does not exhibit all the goodness it was first given. Emil

267 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 82. Italics original.
268 Ibid.
269 Calvin, A Commentary on Genesis Vols 1 & 2, 173.
270 Bayer, Martin Luther’s Theology, 183.
271 Calvin, Institutes. I.xv.1
Brunner expresses this contradiction when he explains the nature of Christian anthropology:

The Christian doctrine of man is threefold: the doctrine of man’s origin, the doctrine of the contradiction, and the doctrine of the actual state of man as life in conflict between his origin and the contradiction. The Christian doctrine of man is therefore quite different from all other anthropologies, because it alone takes this conflict seriously, and does not try to explain it away or to neutralise it any direction. 272

When trying to formulate a biblical view of disability, it is not enough to speak only of humanity as created in the image of God.  Creation in the imago Dei is a universal phenomenon which includes all people with disabilities, including people with autism. As such it implies a universal human dignity which cannot be taken away by disability or even by prejudice and ill treatment of people with disabilities. As Pannenberg aptly writes:

A feature of the dignity that accrues to us by virtue of our being destined for fellowship with God is that no actual humiliation that might befall us can extinguish it. In a special way, because they have nothing else that commands respect, the faces of the suffering and humbled and deprived are ennobled by the reflection of this dignity that none of us has by merit, that none of us can receive from others, and that no one can take from us. 273

But this universal human dignity is not the whole biblical picture of human being. That humans are universally sinners has changed the nature of the world in which they live. Therefore, any attempt to present a biblical picture of disability in general, and autism

272 Brunner, Man in Revolt, 83.
273 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, Volume 2, 177.
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in particular, must take the reality of sin, the nature of sin, and the effects of sin seriously. I can say, then, that autism is in the world as a result of sin. This statement is of course a rather general one which requires some clarification.

This clarification comes in three parts: the nature and implications of original sin; the inexplicability of evil; and the way in which God creates individuals in this broken world. First, the concept of original sin provides an explanation of congenital defects such as autism without having to place blame on the individual with autism. In his Lectures on Romans, Luther explains the results of original sin in this way: “For thou [God] impute unrighteousness to all those who are conceived because of the sin which is poured out by their parents, even when they do not sin.” Even though the child has not sinned in the womb, he or she inherits the guilt of Adam and therefore he or she inherits the certainty of death and the possibility of sickness, disease and disability. There is no need to attribute a particular sin to the parents of an autistic child or to attribute sin to an unborn child in order to account for the presence of autism. Every person lies under the power of sin and death. It is only the way in which a person is subject to the dissolution of death that varies from person to person.

Secondly, evil is in some sense inexplicable. T.F. Torrance comments that it is not only human beings who have fallen because of sin, but the whole of creation has been affected. Therefore, it is not possible to separate an understanding of human evil and natural evil. Redemption thus requires a radical change in the entire created cosmos. In addition, evil itself is unexplainable. Evil is by nature an irrational entity, which brings disorder and discontinuity into the world. Human relationships with God, with other people and with the natural world are all disrupted. There is really no

rational explanation for evil. It is a virulent, demonic force radically antagonistic to all that is holy and orderly, right and good. At the same time evil is both impossible and yet perilously real, because it is completely outside the will of God, while having an ambiguous existence due to God’s rejection of it. This concept is one which Barth labelled as das nichtige (nothingness). God does not will evil but his ‘No’ to evil gives it an existence that it would not otherwise have. Yet God never ceases to be lord even over the evil which opposes him and his good creation.

The sheer inexplicable nature of natural evil helps in a way to ‘explain’ the presence of congenital disabilities such as severe autism. Yet does not God create human beings? The answer, according to Luther, is that God created all things, including each human being born throughout time. Thus it is true that God creates people with severe autism. But the question still remains as to why God creates people with these severe disabilities. Bonhoeffer provides something by way of an answer to this question. Bonhoeffer contends that as a result of the fall human beings are openly rebellious against God and have spurned God’s creation of them and their own creatureliness. The fall affects not only rebellious human beings but the entire creation. Humans must now live in a fallen, broken world from which there is no escape. God does not go against these new laws which now govern the created realm. God brings order to the fallen world for the purpose of preserving it. Yet God does not in any way deny the sinful world. Therefore, when God creates each individual person, he does so in a way which is governed by the laws of this sin-filled world. Since this world is broken and hostile to human being, such things as flawed genes and negative or toxic

276 Ibid., 227.
277 Ibid., 227-28.
278 Luther, LW 1, 76.
279 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, 120, 32, 39.
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environmental influences are not overcome in the creation of human beings. The result of this is that some people are created with severe or profound disabilities.

Having emphasised the connection between sin and autism, I must reiterate that I am not suggesting that autism is caused by the individual sin of the autistic person. Each human, with the exception of Jesus Christ, is a sinner and each will come before the judgement seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10) to be judged by the only righteous judge. No human is correct in judging anyone as more sinful than another human. Autism is the result of the presence of sin in the world, but the presence of autism in a human being does not give anyone the right to judge that person or that family as having more sin than any other person or family. None can claim innocence and no person with autism is innocent of sin either. Each one is in need of redemption regardless of the presence of ability or the extent of disability.

Indeed all people are affected in their relationships, their communication and their imagination by sin. Humans are made for life in human community, but sin has changed the way in which humans relate to one another. The presence of sin means that people now alienate other people, resulting in human aloneness. In place of love there is hatred. Instead of being grateful for the limitations placed on humans by the nature of community, now each one sets out to either have power over or tear down the other. Communities have become groups of people in isolation from one another. In this respect autism is not a category of people different to other people, but it involves one expression of what all women and men experience, namely alienation from other human beings.

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280 Ibid., 96, 99-100.
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Communication also breaks down due to sin. As Luther notes, humans are created to receive from God and in turn to give to other people. In place of this generous giving, sin produces thanklessness, avarice and a lack of desire to share with others. Instead of giving back to God in worship and thankfulness, humans refuse to acknowledge their Creator and do not give him thanks for his good provision (Rom 1:21). Communication between people is no longer used to build up but to tear down. Humans do not communicate the truth in love but seek to manipulate one another for their own ends. On the other hand, Olga Bogdashina observes that autistic people do not tend to understand deceit and therefore do not easily lie. Those who cannot communicate are unable to slander others or speak insulting and degrading words to others. In this sense many autistic people are kept from the sins of people who can freely communicate.

Human creativity is also affected by sin. While the proper use of human creativity is to honour God and give him glory, sin distorts this function of the human faculty and instead the human imagination creates idols. Luther avers that each human has cor fingens, an inventive heart. Being a creature with an inventive heart is the way in which humans are created. Yet the inventive heart now interminably invents images and idols. Luther bases his ideas on human imagination on Gen 6:5 (“The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually”) and Gen 8:21 (“the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth”). Luther understands that the human

281 Bayer, Martin Luther's Theology, 183.
282 Bogdashina, Autism and Spirituality, 217.
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imagination is not a disinterested creator of images but generates only idolatrous images because of its proclivity to sin.\(^{283}\)

It is clear, then, that sin is pervasive in the world and it affects everyone. While it is true that people with autism experience difficulties in relationships, communication and creativity, it is also true that neurotypical people experience problems in these areas, as the above discussion suggests. What is different in the nature of autism is the way in which these difficulties are manifested. It is, therefore, not valid to make a judgement about the extent of a person’s sin based on the presence of autism or neurotypicality. Neither autism nor neurotypicality is an indication of how sinful a person is. It is never appropriate to judge a person on the basis of whether that person has autism or is neurotypical.

Positively, accepting that there has been a change from creation to fall provides a particular outlook on cognitive and developmental disability. Autism was not originally part of God’s good creation. It is one result of the brokenness of the good world which was changed by the presence of sin. What this means is that it is appropriate to put effort into education, rehabilitation and intervention as practices which try to restore the autistic person to positive human function. We cannot, however, judge the person with autism as sinner extraordinaire, because the fall of Adam and Eve leaves every human in the same state, that is, in bondage to sin and affected in myriad ways by sin in a fallen world.

Why Alternatives to Sin as the Origin of Disability Fall Short

Having explained my understanding of the origin of autism from a theological perspective, I now need to critique the views of the three men presented earlier in the

\(^{283}\) Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 177.
chapter, that is, Gillibrand, Williams and Reynolds. While I can sympathise with and commend the desire of all three of these men to affirm the dignity and value of their sons, I cannot agree with their analysis of the origins of autism and other disability. Neither Gillibrand nor Williams, by their own admission, has a basis beyond intuition for their idea that disability existed before the fall. Although the account in Genesis is not intended to provide extensive details, there are reasons to believe that autism did not exist in the original creation. These have been explored above. Now I will provide some reasons why the views put forward by Gillibrand, Williams and Reynolds about the origins of disability are to my mind problematic. The problems fall into two categories: an inadequate understanding of sin, and some (potentially) unwanted consequences of their hypotheses.

To begin with, these men have fallen prey to a trend in recent theology that has transformed the theological understanding of sin. Pannenberg explains what has happened to the doctrine of sin over time. The Socinians in the 16th century argued that the doctrine of original sin was unbiblical and the notion that God imputed the sin of Adam to all humanity was morally reprehensible. Protestant theologians in the 18th century also began to doubt the doctrine of original sin. In the 19th century theology tended to weaken the doctrine of sin to include only personal sin. The result of this theological decline in the doctrine meant that sin came to be understood only as individual acts of sin. Thus sin has come to mean nothing more than a moral failure of the individual, and even that moral failure may be considered nothing more than a break with social convention.²⁸⁴

Pannenberg observes that despite this redefining of sin in the modern consciousness, people are still aware of the reality of evil in the world. Since we

cannot locate evil in sin, we must put the blame somewhere and that somewhere is the social system or social structures, both of which are not associated with any particular individual. Evil is thereby located in other people, albeit anonymous people. This contrasts with the Christian view which finds evil located in every individual, and not in ‘other’ people. The new view of evil can sometimes downplay the radical nature of evil and assume that it is not very significant. This can lead to the optimistic notion that evil can be eradicated by getting rid of the section of society which causes it.285

Modern theology, according to Pannenberg, has discontinued the doctrine of inheritance of sin from the one person Adam. In its place there can only be acts of sin for the individual. As a replacement for original sin now sin is viewed through the social nexus. Pannenberg explains:

The most influential substitutes today for a doctrine of original sin rest on a combination of the supra-individual aspects of sin and the individual setting in the social context. In place of the natural transmission of sin from generation to generation we have the concept of its mediation through social relations between individuals. The social nexus can then be viewed as deformed. We can hardly deny this.286

The real question then is whether the evil which is evident in society and in social structures is something found in individuals or only in society as a whole. Pannenberg argues that according to the Bible human beings are not able to detach themselves from sin. Sin is ours, that is, sin is evil as both individual acts and a power which inhabits

285 Ibid., 236-37.
286 Ibid., 255.
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each one (Rom 7:17). Evil does not have society as its centre but the human heart. We cannot put the blame for evil onto impersonal social structures.²⁸⁷

Pannenberg’s analysis makes sense of what these three writers have done. Given the paradigm which assumes that original sin is not a genuine Christian doctrine and that sin can only be understood as individual acts or found in social structures, connecting sin with disability can have only one outcome. That outcome must be to place blame on the individual with the disability. But because these men are (rightly) unable to believe that their sons can be to blame for their congenital disabilities, they have no recourse other than to assume that disability has nothing to do with sin. They must then relocate sin to social structures which fail to affirm and accommodate people with disabilities. Yet this discounting of original sin as a potential cause of disability means that they have necessarily come to the conclusion that disability is part of the original creation. This assumption has a (possibly) unintended result. This result is threefold.

First, if human existence were not ever disability free, then it is not intended to be disability free. If we assume that the world is intended to have disabilities within it, then why did Jesus heal the man born blind (John 9),²⁸⁸ or any of the other people with disabilities in the Gospel accounts? If God had declared blindness to be good then it should not be healed, because that would involve the removal of something good. For Jesus to heal the man born blind would imply that Jesus took away the very nature of the person, a person born blind and thus intended to not see. The healing would have to be viewed as a distortion of the humanity of the blind person. If Reynolds is correct that disability is part of the diversity of creation, then the healing of the blind man

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 256.
²⁸⁸ John 9 is often used to justify the contention that disability and sin are not connected. For example, see Williams, Beauty and Brokenness, 65.
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would be a reduction in diversity and therefore counterproductive. Yet this is certainly not the way it is viewed by the Gospel writer, nor by the man who was healed. The healing of the man born blind is portrayed in a positive light. The only people who were not happy about the healing were the Pharisees who were concerned that it occurred on a Sabbath (John 9:14-16).

Secondly, if Williams and Reynolds are correct then is there any justification for medical intervention or rehabilitation for people with disabilities? Is it appropriate to try to prevent disabilities through better nutrition and prenatal care? There are some disabilities which can be prevented this way such as spina bifida, the incidence of which can be reduced by the consumption of folate by pregnant women. Should we try to reduce the diversity of creation by alleviating or preventing disability? If disability is good and intended to be part of the world, then I would suggest that the answer is ‘No’. I do not think that either Williams or Reynolds would want a world in which medical science and psychology no longer attempted to ease the difficulties associated with disability. Nor do I suppose that they would suggest that we should increase the number of people with disabilities by withholding prenatal care to expectant mothers.

Thirdly, if autism and other disability has no connection to sin and therefore existed prior to the fall, then there is no room for any physical redemption of autism or other disability. If there is nothing wrong with disability then there is no reason why physical disability would be redeemed and healed. The Bible puts forth the hope of physical redemption (Rom 8:23), but if disability was present before the fall we must

\[289\text{I am certainly not suggesting that abortion is an appropriate response to a disability.}
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assume that this does not apply to disability. The resurrection of the dead has been the hope of the Church for many centuries, but the assumptions of Reynolds, Gillibrand and Williams imply that there will be no eschatological transformation of people with autism in the resurrection. There are many people who are ‘at home’ with their disabilities, but there are many who would prefer to not have a disability. What hope can we offer to these people if we assume that disability was present in the world prior to the fall? To my mind these assumptions offer no hope.

Conclusion

Having explored the first three chapters of the creation account in Genesis, I can say something about the nature of human being and the presence of autism in the world. This understanding of humanity is deeply connected to the nature of the Creator God, because human beings are creatures under God and made in his image. In the beginning God created the world and it was good, and humanity was very good. This statement encompasses in brief all that has been written in this chapter about God, the world and humanity as first created. The God who created is a triune being, existing as an eternal communion of persons. This fellowship of three divine persons in perichoretic unity implies that the Creator is a relational God. As a relational God, the Creator communicates within the Godhead and to human beings. He created the world out of love and as something new and unprecedented.

What, then, is the nature of human being as presented in the theological narrative of Gen 1-3? Human beings were made in the image of God, that is, they were

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created to reflect the God who is triune. As part of reflecting the Creator the first human beings were creative in their dominion over the earth, able to bring beauty and order to the world in new ways. They were able to communicate with God, with the other creation and with one another. And most importantly, the first humans were created to live in relationship with both the Creator and with one another in human community. Human ability to do new things, to communicate, and to relate to others in community reflects God’s capacity to do new things, to communicate and his existence as a fellowship of persons. Therefore, the creation narrative implies that autism, most particularly in the form first identified by Kanner, was not present when the world was first brought into being.

Yet autism exists in the present. Something must have happened to disrupt the goodness of creation. That something was the entrance of sin into the world when Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their disobedience resulted in the entrance of death into the world. If it were not for sin there would be no death. With death came all manner of problems, including sickness, disease, disability and autism. Adam and Eve are not the only ones affected by sin, but sin has been passed down from generation to generation, bringing death to every human who ever lived. Whatever people were originally created to be has been marred past recognition by the sin of humanity. Yet God, in his mercy, preserves the human race for the destiny he has planned for them.

Community, communication and creativity are fundamental aspects of being human. But the nature of autism is such that these attributes are lacking to varying degrees in autistics, and in some cases the lack is acute. What are we to make of such people? Do they qualify as human beings created in the image of God? How could
people lacking in such fundamental human qualities be considered human? The picture seems bleak, but this is the reality which sin has brought about. Yet at the same time the picture is bleak for the neurotypical, because no one can escape unaided from the grip of death which sin has brought into the world. I am not content to arrive at such a negative conclusion, and nor will I. There is good news for the world in general and for low-functioning autistic people in particular.

God was not content to leave the world in thrall to sin and death, but he determined to redeem humanity. The Son of God became incarnate to undo what Adam and Eve have done. In terms of our understanding of humanity, Jesus Christ has become for us the definer of what is human. This statement has two sides. First, as incarnate Son of God, Jesus is the only true human being and alone is the true image of God. In this way he defines humanness. On the other hand, he has done this on behalf of every man and woman, so that although no one can match up to the humanity of Christ he is the substitute and representative of all. Jesus is the man *for us*, who gifts humanity and personhood to those who are united to him through faith. In Christ there is no longer any question of whether people with severe autism are human persons, because in Christ they are given human personhood as a gift. Chapter 3 explores this vicarious humanity and personhood through the theology of several theologians who take the humanity of Jesus Christ seriously as they explicate the line of the Nicene Creed which reads, “For us and our salvation, he came down from heaven.”

It has been necessary to spell out carefully the extent of the problem which we are facing as a world of people who have sinned and are therefore broken in many and varied ways. It was necessary to bring out the contrast between the world as it was made by its loving Creator and the world as it is now, a world in which some people
have autism. This chapter in concert with the previous chapter has spelt out the nature and extent of the issues which result from the reality of severe autism, and the subsequent chapters are intended to present a theological response to those issues.
Chapter 3 ‘Incarnation’

Introduction

Thus far I have discussed the nature of autism with a particular focus on the triad of impairments: difficulty in relationships, difficulty in communication, and restricted or repetitive behaviours and interests. These three core features of autism present some theological challenges. The most challenging feature of autism, and therefore the issue which is central to my discussion, is the difficulty with relationships which autistic people experience. Although autism is a spectrum disorder - that is, autistic people may be high or low-functioning or somewhere in between – it is the extremes of low-functioning autism which are what poses the most difficulty for a theological understanding of people with autism. These extreme cases have led some secular psychologists to question whether autists are human beings. The theological perspective I have been pursuing also raises questions.

Chapter 2 continued to examine the issues which are raised by the presence of severe autism in the world. I concluded that the Creator God is triune by nature and exists as ‘being in communion’. God is relational, communicative and able to engage in new activities. Therefore, the Creator does not have autism. The first human beings, who were created in the image of God, were also made to embrace new things, communicate with God and with one another, and to have a relationship with the Creator and be part of a human community. The first humans, then, did not have autism. But the world became broken when Adam and Eve disobeyed the command of God and sin entered into the good creation. With sin came death and the possibility of
sickness and disability. One of the results of this sin-affected world is the presence of autism. When I claim that sin is the cause of autism I am not saying that autism is the direct result of the individual sin of the parents or the person with autism. However, without the brokenness of the world caused by sin there would be no autism.

Since human beings are created in the image of God and this image is an *analogia relationis* (analogy of relationship), the lack of relationality of many people with severe autism poses a theological conundrum. If people with severe autism have extreme difficulties in relationships is it possible to say that they are imaging the God who is by nature ‘being in communion’? Are severely autistic people human persons? This is the challenge which this chapter seeks to address. It is my contention that the vicarious work of Jesus Christ is totally sufficient to cover any theological difficulties which arise as a result of human inability, including the problems posed by the lack of relationality of people with severe autism.

This chapter examines the work of Christ from various different angles in order to explore the sufficiency of the work of Christ on behalf of those who are unable. Inability poses some perplexing problems for theology, and people with severe autism have several kinds of inability – intellectual, relational, social and communicational. The chapter begins with a brief overview of some attempts at inclusive anthropology. Molly Haslam offers an inclusive anthropology which looks at the image of God as “mutuality and response”. Thomas Reynolds critiques what he calls the “cult of normalcy” and offers a reversal of societal norms by privileging disability. Hans Reinders argues that humanity is grounded extrinsically in the love of God. My inclusive anthropology diverges from both Haslam and Reynolds. I affirm Reinders’ extrinsic anthropology but explain it in a more deliberately Christ-centred way. This is
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done by assuming, with Karl Barth, that Jesus Christ is the only true human being. I use the work of Stanley Grenz to show that Jesus Christ is also the true image of God. All other people must find their humanity in Christ and grow into the image of God through him.

Jesus is not only true human and image of God, but he is this ‘for us’. To understand how the humanity of Christ is lived on our behalf I examine the work of two theologians who explore the significance of the incarnation: Irenaeus and J.B. Torrance. Irenaeus is a 2nd century theologian who sees the incarnation as a recapitulation of all human life. Jesus Christ is both the new Adam and the man for humanity. He lived a human life, recovering the fullness of humanity which was lost through Adam’s sin. He did this on behalf of the whole human race. J.B. Torrance is a 20th century theologian who explores the nature of Christian worship by looking at the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ. Worship, indeed the entire Christian life, is a participation in the perfect human response made to God by the perfect human being, Jesus Christ.

Finally, this chapter explores the question of personhood and how a human being who does not relate to other humans can be considered a person. The nature of personhood is first explored by considering the theology of John Zizioulas. Personhood, or the image of God, is primarily about relationships. The dilemma of assigning personhood to people who struggle to relate to others is resolved by the theological work of T.F. Torrance. Torrance posits that the incarnation makes Jesus Christ the humanizing human and the personalizing person. The humanity and the personhood of every man and woman is a gift from Jesus Christ.
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This chapter aims to demonstrate that human being and human personhood are found first in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the incarnate God. The work of Christ on behalf of humanity is utterly sufficient for people with severe autism. Christ’s work is enough to transform human being, and is done on behalf of all humans. We are human only because the one perfect human, Jesus Christ, gifts us with his humanity. Ability or inability is irrelevant, because autistic and neurotypical are both given humanness and personhood by Christ. This is the basis of a fully inclusive anthropology. The chapter begins with the specific problem which applies to cognitive and developmental disability, that is, inability.

The Problem Which Inability Poses to Theology

In disability discourse, discussions of physical disability and discussions of cognitive disability must address different issues. People with physical disabilities seek to emphasise what they are able to do rather than focus on what they are not able to do. Nancy Eiesland writes about people with disabilities “living ordinary but difficult lives,”292 and is convinced “that an individual’s disability is just one of many personal characteristics, rather than being synonymous or co-extensive with that person’s self.”293 But people with cognitive disabilities have a different set of needs, which must be addressed differently. This fact is acknowledged by Stanley Hauerwas. He believes that using the language of equal rights is not the appropriate approach for those who are intellectually disabled because equal treatment is not the same as just treatment.294 Low-functioning autistic people have yet another set of unique needs, 

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293 Ibid., 27.
294 Hauerwas, Suffering Presence, 185, 207.
which must also be addressed, needs which go beyond those of people with intellectually disabilities.

So for people with severe and profound disabilities, the issue of inability or incapacity cannot be ignored. Hans Reinders observes that the ‘empowerment’ model for disability has limited value in regard to people with cognitive disability. He notes that “improving [the lives of intellectually disabled people] should not be made dependent on their abilities.” Our modern culture has an unspoken belief that human beings are human because of their ability to do something. Unfortunately, theological books commonly make the same assumptions. For example, George Carey cites what he considers to be human characteristics: “the development of language, his inventiveness and creative skill, religious longings and awareness of death as a threat to fulfilment as a person, the creation of culture, symbolic and conceptual thought, the production of literature, [and] the awareness of moral laws which transcend him.” Michael Horton has a similar list of prerequisites for bearing the image of God: “certain natural capacities for deliberative reason, intentional relationality, moral agency, and linguisticality.”

The reality is that both these lists suggest that being human requires capacities and capabilities which people with intellectual disabilities and people with severe autism often do not possess. People with severe autism often possess even less of these ‘required’ characteristics than people with intellectual disabilities, because autistic people have the added problem of relational and communication deficits. These relational and communication deficits gives rise to a unique set of theological questions.

295 Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 19-20.
296 Ibid., 20.
297 Carey, I Believe in Man, 19.
which must be addressed by an inclusive theological anthropology. Therefore, in speaking theologically about autistic people it is necessary to overcome the ‘problem of inability’ and to get past the assumptions about what makes someone human. The contention of this chapter is that the ‘problem of inability’ is overcome by the vicarious ability of the person of Christ.

Some authors have presented the idea that relationships are the key to seeing people with intellectual disabilities as human beings. Herman Meininger is one such example. According to Meininger, the ideal human in Western society is independent and capable of asserting his or her rights, which are concomitant to human freedom. But this ideal tends to exclude people who are intellectually unable, because autonomy requires intellectual capacity. In an attempt to construct a more inclusive anthropology, Meininger posits a more relational understanding of human being. He states, “The limitations of persons who have intellectual disabilities lose their constitutive significance if and when others are oriented towards the unique authenticity of the other.”

This relational paradigm, however, proves to be a problem for people with autism. Since a large percentage of people with severe autism are intellectually impaired, this fact alone causes some to question their humanness. But the added problem of being unable relate to other people as persons means that even the idea that humans are made in the image of God as relational beings seems not to apply to them.

Another theological issue which can stand in the way of addressing inability is the sometime tendency to consider Jesus as primarily an example for humans to follow.

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300 Ibid., 22.
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Since this chapter is centred on the person of Christ, I need to make clear that this is not the primary way in which I view Jesus. He most certainly is the example par excellence and indeed humanity would generally be better off for following his example of love, righteousness and compassion, especially in regard to people with disabilities and others who are marginalised. However, if Jesus is seen as an example only, then people who are intellectually impaired and autistic people in particular will simply be left in the category of those who fail yet again. This can only produce condemnation and condescension. Given the difficulties which autistic individuals experience in relating to other people, they cannot successfully imitate the love and compassion of Christ if reliant on their own abilities. Yet those who are neurotypical must also inevitably struggle to follow the perfect example of Christ, as those of us who are honest must admit.

Instead of viewing Jesus as only an example for us to follow, I am presenting Jesus as the man ‘for us’. He is our representative and substitute. The Nicene Creed declares, “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.”\textsuperscript{301} Jesus came for our sake, to unite himself with our humanity and to transform that humanity into something which God had intended from the beginning. As Martin Luther writes:

The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and

\textsuperscript{301} Emphasis mine.
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suffering, belongs to you. On this you may depend as surely as if you had done it yourself; indeed as if you were Christ himself.  

Christ is therefore a gift for us, both in his person and in his work. This gift is what forms the foundation of our humanity. This chapter sets out to expand upon the idea that Christ is ‘for us’ by exploring this idea through the writings of several different theologians. Each understands the humanity of Jesus as more than example. The humanity of Christ is transformative of our humanity, stands in behalf of our humanity and gifts us with genuine humanity. These three aspects of the humanity of Christ are vitally important because they are not dependent on the ability or lack of ability of the autistic person. But before I can discuss humanity I need to know what humanity actually is. Therefore, the beginning of this chapter is devoted to defining humanity. In a nutshell, Jesus Christ is the only fully human person and he is therefore the definer of humanity. Humanity is measured by the person of Christ. He is what humanity is meant to be, what humanity was created to be from the first. He is the measure of humanity because he is both the Creator of humanity, as the Creator God, and because he is the perfect human being.

This statement, that Jesus is the measure of humanity, needs to be read in the light of his transformation of humanity, his vicarious humanity and his gifting us with humanity. Without these three statements we may be tempted to fall back on the conclusion that because of the impairments of people with severe autism they are not human. The point of understanding Jesus Christ as the true human person is multifaceted. As true human he is able to transform our less-than-human humanity into his full humanity. As the Son of God who has lived a human life on our behalf he

Incarnation enables people to stand before God in the power of his perfect humanity, despite our inadequacies and our inabilities. Indeed, Jesus, as both divine person and perfect human being, gifts us, as less than fully human creatures by virtue of sin, with his full humanity so that we might also share in his complete, full and perfect humanity without reference to our own ability or inability.

**Some Inclusive Anthropologies**

Many people have seen the need for an inclusive theological anthropology, an anthropology which does not exclude people on the margins, in particular people who are intellectually impaired. This would be the *opposite* of what Brian Brock calls “best-case anthropologies,” which must make discussion of disability a “special case”. I desire to construct an inclusive anthropology which does not exclude people with severe autism, who ‘fall through the cracks’ of anthropologies which are based on a human being’s ability to relate to other human beings. John Gillibrand expresses this need as follows:

> Whenever we formulate a sentence with the structure ‘humanity is …’ … we must not inadvertently omit some of humanity. Adam [Gillibrand’s severely autistic son], and many others whose life is characterised by difference, have to be included, in whatever way we finish the sentence.

Like Gillibrand I want to be able to include every human regardless of any inability. Gillibrand does not, however, finish the sentence himself.

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304 Gillibrand, *Disabled Church, Disabled Society*, 53.
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Human beings are created in the image of God. While this seems to be the answer to the ‘problem of inability,’ it is not an actual solution, since it has simply removed the need for definition one step further along. We do not know what it means to be created in the image of God. We cannot know this, according to Luther, because of the fact that the image of God in humanity is no longer intact. In fact, the image is marred beyond recognition. Therefore, an inclusive anthropology must go further than simply making the statement that people are made in God’s image. There have been several attempts at providing a theological anthropology which is inclusive of people with disabilities, and specifically people with cognitive disabilities. Very few books have been written about autism from a theological perspective, so I will examine here three different inclusive anthropologies related to intellectual disability.

**Human Being as Mutuality and Response**

Molly Haslam has worked with intellectually disabled people for many years as a physical therapist. She writes as a theologian with a concern for people with intellectual disabilities. She seeks to provide a theological anthropology which is inclusive of people with profound intellectual disability. Haslam observes that theological anthropology has a significant bias in favour of intellect. Her work is aimed towards “weakening the bias towards the thinking, rational self in Christian theology” and “promot[ing] the well-being of individuals with profound intellectual disabilities.”

Haslam offers a theological anthropology which is constructed around the I-Thou philosophy of Martin Buber. Her inclusive anthropology defines humanity “in

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Incarnation terms of the participation in relationships of mutual responsiveness.” For Haslam, being in the image of God is not about intellectual ability, but involves responding to a responsive partner. “Participation in relationships of mutual responsiveness” does not require the capacity for symbolization or even intentional communication. Haslam draws on the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, who understands God in terms of yearning and the yearned-for. This concept of God as yearning itself does not require conceiving of God in terms of intellectual capacities. This enables Haslam to understand the image of God in a way which is inclusive of those with profound intellectual disability.

The most valuable aspect of Haslam’s inclusive anthropology is the idea that in order to be in the image of God the person must be responsive to another responsive person. Mutual responsiveness is necessary, because without this the responder cannot validate his or her own humanity.

To image God ... is to participate in relationships of mutual responsiveness. Thus, while the ability to respond to an other [sic] is required, it is not possible to participate in the image of God without a partner to whom one responds.

Haslam’s idea complements the discussion of my previous chapter, where I suggested that because God is a communion of three persons, people are intended to be in relationship. Human community is part of the way in which human beings image the Creator. Indeed relationship with the Creator necessitates relationship with other humans (1 John 4:20). Haslam’s concept of mutual responsiveness makes every person responsible for validating the humanity of every other person.

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306 Ibid., 66.
307 Ibid., 104-09.
308 Ibid., 111.
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While Haslam is to be commended for seeking an inclusive anthropology, her approach reduces the essence of humanity to its most basic level. For Haslam, possession of responsiveness constitutes “full humanity”. Yet this would ascribe ‘full humanity’ to animals. Indeed, Haslam agrees that this responsiveness to others is not limited to humanity, but can be used to include animals in the image of God. For Haslam, the term ‘human being’ should not be used only of creatures capable of rationality. I will coin this ‘the lowest common denominator’ kind of theological anthropology, because in order to include as many people as possible it reduces the essence of humanity to an absolute minimum. Yet the Bible does not treat humanity as something minimal but something wonderful.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas (Ps 8:3-8).

Instead of reducing humanity to the bare minimum as Haslam seeks to do, I want to uphold Jesus Christ as the only true human being. The humanity of Jesus Christ is not a minimal humanity but a complete humanity, demonstrating what humans are intended to be, including what human relationships are purposed as. Autism can be a debilitating condition which makes relationships very difficult to form and to be part of. But, because of Christ’s vicarious humanity, people with autism, as with other people with cognitive disabilities, are able to be included within the new creation, of

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309 See for example ibid., 53, 110.
310 Ibid., 114-15.
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which Christ is the firstfruits. This new creation, or the new humanity, is one in which people are transformed to conform to the image of Jesus Christ, the true human person, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Acceptance in Christ confers on an autistic person the status of full humanity and complete acceptance by God. In the eyes of God believers in Jesus Christ, autistic and neurotypical, disabled and able-bodied alike, are fully human persons, who await the completion of their transformation into what they already are in Christ. In an inclusive anthropology with Christ at the centre humanity is full not minimal.

**The Cult of Normalcy**

One of the more significant attempts at providing an inclusive anthropology is provided by Tom Reynolds. Reynolds is of particular interest, because, although he does not write specifically about autism, he has a son who has several disabilities, including Asperger’s syndrome. Reynolds argues that what he calls the “cult of normalcy” dictates for societies what is normal, and people with disabilities fall outside of that definition. Societies set up boundaries in order to protect themselves from strangeness. Bodies are a place in which social identity is found and given. That which is different in body is treated with distain. The “cult of normalcy” generates “a set of rituals trained upon demarcating and policing the borders of ‘normal’ ways of being.” The “cult of normalcy” defines a ‘normal’ body as young, thin and beautiful. It attaches a stigma to all those who fall outside the category of ‘normal’. But the problem is that every person will fall outside the ‘normal’ category at some point in

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312 Ibid., 55-65.
313 Ibid., 60.
Incarnation

life. “The cult of normalcy thus undoes itself, excluding virtually everyone. People are then forced into pretence, living lies by playing roles in order to fit in.”  

Reynolds is insightful in his understanding that almost everyone falls outside society’s definition of ‘normal’. His solution to the problem is for society to change their conception of what constitutes ‘normal’. The way in which Reynolds seeks to redefine ‘normal’ is “through the lens of disability”. His desire is to change the way in which people think by privileging disability. He writes:

The anthropology I shall propose involves a dramatic metaphorical reversal. That is, it inverts the scheme of the cult of normalcy by privileging disability. Instead of being spurned or made invisible, the so-called deformed and dysfunctional become the normative fulcrum for understanding the human. Not ability but disability is basic.

Reynolds believes that society needs disability in order to promote “human flourishing” and “genuine sharing”. This is because vulnerability is an intrinsic part of being human.

Although Reynolds has made a profound observation about the way in which a society defines what is ‘normal’ within a culture and thereby excludes what is not ‘normal,’ I cannot agree with his solution to the problem. I believe that it is unhelpful to make the “so-called deformed and dysfunctional” the new normal. In particular it is not appropriate to elevate the autism spectrum to the status of something which

314 Ibid., 65.
315 Ibid., 70.
316 Ibid., 67-70.
317 Ibid., 104-05.
318 Ibid., 106-07.
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“promotes human flourishing” or which helps “genuine sharing”. The very nature of this disorder is that it can do neither. As one woman remarks in an online forum:

As the older sister of a 52-year-old autistic woman, I find it hard to relate to anyone – whether fictional or otherwise – who believes that autism is the next step in evolution, that its traits might save humanity. My sister, who is very verbal despite her severe autism, is amoral, totally without empathy, and able to form only the most primitive of emotional connections with others, in short, a functional sociopath and hardly the stuff that is needed for the human race to endure and prevail.  

Not every person with autism is “a functional sociopath,” but we should not romanticise the condition. It is possible to reach the goal of acceptance for people with autism without “privileging disability”. A deficit of relationality cannot be promoted as God’s best for humanity. This becomes particularly evident as many authors, including Reynolds, espouse relationships as the means to an inclusive anthropology.

Rather than privileging autism as if it were somehow a disability which may improve humanity, I want to emphasise with Reynolds that there are in fact no ‘normal’ human beings. However, contra Reynolds, I do not want to say that disability is the new normal. Rather, humanity is no longer able to be ‘normal’ due to sin. Now the only human who is normal is Jesus Christ; Christ is the norm to which humanity must now conform. Jesus Christ is not a person with autism: he is able to relate to others in a caring, compassionate way, speaking the truth in love; he can communicate with wisdom and clarity; and he brings God’s new world into being. Jesus is the “man for other men” who demonstrates what it is to love both God and other people. In Jesus

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319 Kenway, "Blessing or Curse?,” 96. Original source unknown.
320 Barth, CD III.2, 212.
Incarnation

Christ, normal is not being fashionably thin and athletic, but living as a person who fully images the Creator in word and action. Conformity to Christ is of course impossible without the vicarious work of Christ and the application of that work by the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christian believers.

Extrinsic Anthropology

The problem with both of the above approaches is that they seek to define humanity on the basis of something within the human being. Haslam’s concern is to be as inclusive as possible, but even her anthropology relies on minimal characteristics of human beings – mutuality and responsiveness. Reynolds wants to prioritise disability as the new normal so that difference is not shunned. But, disability, like ability is focused on characteristics of humans. But the characteristics of human being which are not shared by people with severe autism are the matter at issue. So focusing on these characteristics is problematic. Instead of an approach which looks at what is intrinsic to people with autism, I will now turn to Hans Reinders, who offers a different way of understanding human being, an approach which relies on things which are extrinsic to humanity.

Reinders sets out to understand people with profound disability. His thinking is explicitly theological, because “the truth about human beings is grounded in God’s unconditional acceptance.” He begins with a description of Kelly who is micro-encephalic and therefore exhibits none of the characteristics which common sense dictates make someone a human being, that is, she has no language, reason, will, sense of self or ability to plan. Reinders criticises the notion that human dignity is the result

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321 Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 3.
Incarnation

of self-determination. He does not seek to understand humanness in terms of human characteristics but in terms of the love of God.\textsuperscript{322} He explains:

Nature cannot provide a firm grounding of what it is that makes our humanity special, nor can reason or history. It follows that, if there is anything significant about our existence, it can only be sustained if it is sustained extrinsically – that is, from elsewhere, through the love of God ... That is, [Kelly’s] humanity, as well as our own, is grounded adequately only when grounded unconditionally.\textsuperscript{323}

Reinders’ goal is to define human being in such a way as to not perceive people with disabilities as substandard human beings.\textsuperscript{324} The main theme of Reinders’ anthropology is that human nature is extrinsically grounded.

Reinders argues that secular points of view are inadequate for upholding the humanity of people with intellectual impairment. The only secular option for affirming the humanity of intellectually disabled people is to contend that their humanity is founded on the responses which others make towards them. But secular culture would reject Kelly’s humanity because she lacks self-awareness. Nothing which is intrinsic to the profoundly intellectually disabled makes them human. Reinders concludes that the humanity of the profoundly intellectually disabled can only be affirmed on the basis of the nature and actions of God.\textsuperscript{325} Therefore a theological approach is necessary.

A Christian theological approach must inevitably deal with the question of what it means to be in the image of God.\textsuperscript{326} Christian theology has historically thought of the image of God as based in human reason. But Reinders observes that “If the image of

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid., 1, 3, 11, 19, 23-24, 37.
\textsuperscript{323} Ibid., 39. Italics original.
\textsuperscript{324} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{325} Ibid., 245-46.
\textsuperscript{326} Ibid., 227.
God is identified with uniqueness, as the first chapter of Genesis maintains, then all attempts to ground uniqueness in some quality to be found only in humans will sooner or later fail. To counter this problem, Reinders draws on Karl Barth’s theology of the image as relationality. According to Barth, the image of God consists in being for another. Barth builds his theological anthropology on his christology. Human beings are created in Christ and are therefore able to be united to him. The idea that the image of God is relationship overcomes the basic distinction between ability and inability, but it must be considered as extrinsically grounded. Reinders also draws on the trinitarian theology of John Zizioulas, who posits that God’s being is “ecstatic” because God exists as “being in communion”. Human beings are limited by their biological and psychological existence. However, an individual can escape these by becoming an ecclesial being. Human freedom from natural necessity is possible because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Reinders applies this to intellectual disability, concluding that lack of capacity does not prevent authentic personhood, because the basis of personhood is found in the triune God.

Human telos is found in the relationship that the triune God preserves with human beings through his redemptive work. It begins with creation in the image of God, which is not a matter of particular genetics, but rather a matter of the relationship which God continues with each human being. God sees humanity through the lens of relationship through Christ. Ability or disability is irrelevant to this relationship and its maintenance. This is due to the unconditional nature of the love of God.

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327 Ibid., 238.
328 Ibid., 238-44, 59-68.
329 Ibid., 273-74.
"Theologically speaking, we are truly human because we are drawn into the communion with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."\(^{330}\)

Reinders has presented a careful theological argument towards the goal of an inclusive anthropology. I concur that human being and human value are extrinsically grounded and dependent on the work of Christ. However, Reinders’ argument is more focussed on the ecstatic relationships within the Trinity than on the incarnation. He does not explicitly explain how the work of Christ applies to people who are intellectually disabled. I would like to take Reinders’ theologically-grounded, extrinsic, anthropological argument further by making the discussion more specifically Christ-centred. I am working on the assumption that Jesus Christ is always the hermeneutical key to any theological understanding. For this reason what follows in this chapter is an exploration of the specific ways in which the work of Christ is applicable to theological anthropology and particularly applicable to the way in which we understand people with autism. I will begin with a discussion of Karl Barth’s understanding of Jesus as true human and Stanley Grenz’ discussion of Jesus as the true image of God.

**Jesus Christ: True Human Being and True Image of God**

*Jesus Alone is True Human Being*

In order to address the theological issues which I have raised regarding the humanity of autistic individuals I intend to approach theological anthropology in a way which is different to that of Haslam and Reynolds, and a way which goes beyond Reinders’ worthwhile theological approach. This will involve a solid christological

\(^{330}\) Ibid., 274.
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grounding. I begin with Barth’s Christ-centred anthropology. Barth powerfully asserts, “As the man Jesus is Himself the revealing Word of God, He is the source of our knowledge of the nature of man as created by God.” The word of God is the place where the nature of human being is revealed. This revelation shows us not humanity as it was created, but as it is in its state of corruption brought about by sin. Human beings aretraitors against their own being and stand opposed to their own nature as creatures. Humanity contradicts both God and its own intended destiny. As terrible as this self-contradiction is, God does not allow this to be the last word about humanity. People are objects of God’s grace, because God, in his faithfulness, has decided to take them in a direction different from this contradiction.

The way in which God regards humans in his grace is first of all according to his attitude toward Jesus Christ. He reconciles his enemies to himself, not treating their sin as theirs but attributing it to Christ and attributing Christ’s obedience to them. Therefore, we can know human nature only by looking to the man Jesus Christ. Only Jesus is truly human. As Barth puts it:

The nature of the man Jesus alone is the key to the problem of human nature. This man is man. As certainly as God’s relation to sinful man is properly and primarily His relation to this man alone, and a relation to the rest of mankind only in Him and through Him, He alone is primarily and properly man. If we were referred to a picture of human nature attained or attainable in any other way, we should always have to face the question whether what we think we see and know concerning it is not a delusion, because with our sinful eyes we cannot detect even the corruption of our nature, let alone its intrinsic character, and are therefore

331 Barth, CD III.2, 3.
332 Ibid., 19, 26-27.
333 Ibid., 42-43.
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condemned to an unceasing confusion of the natural with the unnatural, and vice versa.  

Only in Jesus Christ is human nature present in the fullness of its pre-fall character. In him human nature is not deformed by sin, but rather revealed as the true and original nature of human being. To begin elsewhere in attempting to understand humanity is to begin in the wrong place. Beginning with any other starting point will bring us to what humans currently are rather than what they must be. There is no other starting point for theological anthropology than Jesus Christ. To use Barth’s own words:

The ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus. So long as we select any other starting point for our study, we shall reach only the phenomena of the human ... Theological anthropology has no choice in this matter. It is not yet or no longer theological anthropology if it tries to pose and answer the question of the true being of man from any other angle.

Barth’s assertion that Jesus Christ is true human being is beneficial to theological anthropology because this renews its centre. Alan Spence claims that theological anthropology has been impoverished by the Church’s neglect of adopting an understanding of Christ as the “normative man”. This neglect has been fuelled by reluctance, for whatever reason, to embrace the witness in the Gospels that Jesus is a man who possessed humanity like our own – notwithstanding his sinlessness. He experienced real human needs, physical, emotional and spiritual. He needed to draw on

334 Ibid., 43. Italics original.
335 Ibid., 51-52, 132.
336 Ibid., 132.
the power of the Holy Spirit as we do.337 Acknowledging Jesus as the true human can help bring theological anthropology back to its correct starting place. Without a correct starting place conclusions may prove unhelpful.

Barth’s starting point brings into question Reynolds’ privileging of disability as the means of understanding human being. It is not helpful to begin with humanity which bears the effect of the brokenness of this sin-broken world when trying to understand what humanity truly is. When I speak of “humanity which bears the effects of this sin-broken world,” I do not refer exclusively to either of the categories which Reynolds uses – people with disabilities or people who fit the norm of “successful, attractive, young and not disabled”.338 The truth, according to Barth’s schema, is that both of these categories of people are affected by the sin-broken world, and therefore neither is a model for understanding human being. Jesus Christ as the true human is able to reveal what humans are intended to become.339 Sinful and broken is not the telos of humanity.

Barth’s affirmation of Jesus as the true human also enables us to conceive of human being in all the greatness with which humanity was created. There is no need to conceive of humanity using the lowest common denominator as Haslam does. Humanity is something fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps 139:14), created for the glory of God (Isa 43:7), and made a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honour (Ps 8:5). Reducing the essence of human being to something minimal is to ignore the greatness which has been bestowed on humanity by being created in the image of God. Humanity is broken by sin, but an understanding of human being should

339 What humanity will become is not yet fully revealed (cf. 1 John 3:2).
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not in any way diminish this greatness. Barth explains that the person of Christ, the
ture human, provides a lens as it were through which God’s grace operates towards
humanity. Sin, and the effects of sin on humanity, is not the last word about humanity.
Jesus Christ is the last word.

The idea that Jesus Christ is the true human is consistent with Reinders’ idea
that human worth is extrinsically grounded. Human worth is found in and through
Christ because, as Barth declares, the way in which God views humanity is through
Christ. People are estranged from God, yet God reconciles his enemies, not counting
their sins against them. Instead he credits the obedience of Christ to those sinners he
has reconciled to himself. Jesus Christ as true human gives humanity great value.
Therefore, Reinders’ extrinsic anthropology is upheld by Barth’s conception of Jesus as
true human.

There is, however, a problem presented by Barth’s anthropology, which Barth
himself points out. If humanity is defined by the humanity of Jesus Christ, then the
whole of humanity has to be excluded from the category of human, because what
purports to be human “stands in a contradiction to the humanity of Jesus.” Barth
goes on to provide an answer to this problem. He asserts:

To be sure, He [Jesus Christ] is the Deliverer and Saviour of sinful men, and
therefore of the man who denies his fellow-humanity, acting as though he had no
God and no neighbour, and therefore showing himself to be supremely non-
human. But this does not mean that this sinner has ceased to be a man, or that we
are allowed or even obliged to interpret his inhumanity as his humanity or the
work of sin as the good creation of God. Even the sinful man … stands in the
light of the humanity of Jesus. ... But the fact that he has in the man Jesus his

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340 Barth, CD III.2, 226.
Incarnation

Saviour and Deliverer is the pledge that he has not ceased to be a man, a being ordered in relation to this Jesus. The fact that the Good Shepherd has acted on behalf of His lost sheep shows that He does not give it up for lost but still numbers it with His flock and deals with it as His own and not an alien possession.341

Barth’s solution to the inhumanity of every human being who is not Jesus Christ is a solution of grace. It is the humanity of Jesus Christ which means that even people who are utterly sinful do not cease to be human in their sin. Humanity cannot match up to what they are created to be, because sin has made human beings less than human. But the grace of God remains in Christ. “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). It is this grace in Christ which is the central thesis of this chapter. But before exploring this grace further I will first explore how Jesus Christ is the true image of God.

**Jesus Christ the True Image of God**

The statement that Jesus is the only true human being implies that he is the true image of God. Chapter 2 discussed the creation of humanity in the image of God and the effect of sin on the image of God, marring it beyond recognition. But the status quo is changed by the person of Christ. Jesus Christ, as the true image of God, is the restorer of the image in humanity. Here I present a summary of Grenz’s discussion of Jesus as the image of God from his monograph *The Social God and the Relational Self*.

Grenz asserts that the concept of the image of God is a core aspect of the theology of the New Testament. It is alluded to in the matter of giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s and giving to God what is God’s (Matt 22:15-22). James 3:9 exhorts Christians not to curse those made in God’s image, and Paul uses the phrase in

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341 Ibid., 227-28.
conjunction with ‘the glory of God’ in 1 Cor 11:7. But the biblical concept of the
image of God culminates in the New Testament in the statement that Jesus Christ is the
ture image of God. As a result, the community of Christ’s followers is included in this
new Christ-centred anthropology. 342

Grenz approaches the idea that Jesus is the true image of God from various
different angles. The first of these is through the lens of New Testament glory-
christology. Psalm 8:5 speaks of humanity crowned with glory and honour, but the
New Testament (Heb 2:9) interprets this statement as a reference to a particular man,
Jesus Christ. In the New Testament glory has a connotation of radiance, as well as
meaning reflection, by which it approximates the meaning of eikōn (image). While the
_glory-christology of the New Testament points to Jesus as the image of God, the New
Testament also makes explicit statements to that effect. The connection between Jesus
Christ as the glory of God and the image of God is made in 2 Cor 4:4-6. Paul speaks of
“the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” and “the
knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”. In the New Testament
eikōn has the force of the “perfect reflection of the prototype”. 343 Indeed eikōn is more
than a reflection, because it involves a participation in the reality it represents. When
Paul speaks of Christ as the image of God, he emphasises the fact that the image is
equal with the person he images. 344

As the pre-eminent firstborn (Col 1:15), Jesus is more important than the first
human. As the true image of God he is true human being. His central role in the
entirety of salvation history makes him both the revealer of God and the imago Dei.

(Louisville, KY: WJK, 2001), 203-04.
343 Ibid., 209.
344 Ibid., 205-06, 09-10.
That Christ is the firstborn from the dead puts him at the centre of the whole narrative of salvation. Because of Christ’s death and resurrection from the dead, the creation of humanity in the image of God can now find its fulfilment. Grenz quotes Herman Ridderbos, who puts it this way:

The glory that Adam as the Image of God and Firstborn of every creature was permitted to possess was only a reflection of Christ’s being in the form of God. Thus Christ’s exaltation as the second Adam refers back to the beginning of all things, makes him known as the one who from the very outset, in a much more glorious sense than the first Adam, was the Image of God and the Firstborn of every creature ... The new creation that has broken through with Christ’s resurrection takes the place of the first creation of which Adam was the representative.

Some patristic theologians understood that human beings were created ‘in’ the image of God in accordance with the actual image of God who is Christ. This is an important statement. The original creation of humans should be viewed in the light of the incarnation of the Son of God as the true image of God. According to the hymn in Colossians, “the fullness of deity” dwells in Jesus Christ (Col 2:9). Therefore, as the one who fully reveals God, Jesus alone can be considered the image of God. The whole story of God revealing himself to humanity, along with the story of the creation of humanity in the imago Dei, can only properly be understood when seen in the context of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, who is the pre-eminent image of God.

345 Ibid., 216.
346 Herman N. Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 85. (Quoted in Grenz, The Social God and the Relational Self, 216-17.)
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Jesus is not merely the true image of God, but he is the firstfruits of a new humanity which is being formed to accord with the true image in order to fulfil God’s original purpose for humanity. Eschatologically, believers will be fully transformed into the image through Christ and they are presently being transformed. Therefore, the believing community must live in accord with the reality that the image of God is present in Christ, and personally strive towards its actualisation. In Rom 8:29 Paul stresses that believers will definitely attain the telos preordained by God, that is, they will share Christ’s destiny and thereby be formed in his image. God has set his love on his chosen ones from the beginning, and he will therefore assuredly conform (summorphos) believers to Christ, even as they now live in him through his Spirit. This certainty of transformation is reinforced by the other passage where Paul uses summorphos, namely Phil 3:21: “He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.” Those who are in Christ will be what he already is. He is the Son and they are sons and daughters; he is en morphē theou (in the form of God) and they are summorphoi (con-formed ones). Jesus remains the unique Son of God, who alone is the image of God, but believers are changed into the image of the Son.348

The risen Jesus Christ now possesses the full humanness that God intended for humanity from the creation. The creation looked forward to a human telos, which is realised in the eschatological community of Christ followers, who are now brought to life and empowered by the Holy Spirit, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In this new age of eschatological fulfilment, God gives to the new humanity that which sinful humans are unable to achieve alone. Paul has such confidence in the fulfilment of this eschatological goal that he writes as if it were in the past (Rom 8:30).

348 Ibid., 224-25, 27, 30.
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This is so because it has already been accomplished in the person of Christ. Therefore the telos of the new humanity is dependent on, and secured in, the telos of Christ. Since Christ is already glorified, the new humanity, which is united with him, is assured that their glorification has been effected in him.  

What Grenz has to say is important because his claim is that Jesus Christ is both the true image of God and the restorer of the image in broken, fallen human beings. Given the nature of sinful humanity, it is not possible for the image of God to be restored in human beings through any human effort. Instead, participation in Christ is the key to being restored into the image of God. Those who trust in Christ are presently being, and definitely will be, conformed to Christ by the power of his Spirit. That is to say, they will be transformed into the image of God. Humanity cannot conform to Christ on its own but only when empowered by the Spirit.

Human beings were given a telos, that is, a destiny, and that destiny is to be like the person of Christ. This may be stated in another way, namely, humanity was created in the image of God the Son, an image actualised in the incarnation. Although the sin of Adam and Eve set humans on a path that caused them to miss their destiny, Jesus Christ is the restorer of that destiny. For those who are united to Christ, human telos will definitely be attained. It will be attained because Jesus is the true image of God and because being united to him in the power of the Spirit enables people to participate in the new anthropology which has been redefined by the incarnation. Achieving human telos is impossible for sinful men and women, but the Holy Spirit transforms sinners so that they are conformed to the person of Christ, thereby making them what they are intended to be.

\[349\] Ibid., 231-32.
The genuine humanity of Christ is the key to providing an inclusive theological anthropology, particularly one which addresses the issues which severe autism presents. The person of Christ is the one person who demonstrates what humanity is intended to look like, because he is the only one who has been unaffected by the distortion and corruption of sin. As Barth asserts, there is indeed no other option if we are to speak about humanity as humanity is created to exist. This statement, however, does evoke some questions which must be addressed before continuing. To illustrate the issues which arise when discussing human being and the nature of autism, I first consider Gillibrand’s objections to upholding Jesus as the normative human being.

Gillibrand objects to the idea of normalisation for his severely autistic son Adam. While it might be possible to look at Jesus to gain a sense of what humanity should be, Gillibrand prefers to build a negative anthropology by looking “at what humanity is not”. For Gillibrand, the portrayal of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel as one who increased in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:40-52) is problematic, because this tells us that Jesus was not a person with disabilities. According to Gillibrand, Luke portrayed Jesus in this way because as God Jesus could only have had ‘normal’ human development. Thus for Gillibrand the life of Jesus is no help when his son did not have a ‘normal’ adolescent development. Related to this fear of using Jesus as a model for what humanity is intended to be is the claim that people with autism are not in need of restoration. Gillibrand has never sought healing for his son, because “such a prayer would violate Adam’s integrity as a person with autism.”

350 Gillibrand, Disabled Church, Disabled Society, 82.
351 Ibid., 81-82, 113.
352 Ibid., 65.
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Yet if we do not accept that people with severe autism are in need of restoration and healing then we must resort to romantic notions about autism which do not match up with reality. An example of this is a recently created television series *Touch*, in which autism is said to be an evolutionary step forward. The father of an autistic boy is told, “Your son sees everything, the past, the present, the future. He sees how it is all connected.” This is an unrealistic portrayal of autism. The reality is that caring for a child with severe autism can be extremely difficult and stressful for entire families. Indeed Gillibrand himself admits to having post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of living with his severely autistic son. Recognising both these realities does not imply that autistics are lesser human beings than neurotypicals, nor does it imply that people with autism are more sinful than neurotypical people. On the contrary, autistic individuals are worthy of love, compassion and dignity, and the humanity of Christ is the basis for this dignity, which is given without reference to ability or inability.

In order to understand why the humanity of Christ is valuable to a discussion about autism it is necessary to see Jesus as much more than merely an exemplar of perfect humanity. When Jesus is perceived, not as impossible ideal, but as representative and substitute, a man who shares with humanity his perfected humanness because of his grace, then the life of Jesus becomes liberating, healing and utterly grace-giving instead of condemnatory. The aim of what follows in this chapter is to demonstrate that the perfect humanity of Jesus is the key to an inclusive theological anthropology, because he is both representative and substitute human being. Only in

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353 *Touch* is made by Fox Broadcasting Company. Fox Publicity describes it as follows: “Blending science, spirituality and emotion ... At the centre of the story is ... a widower and single father who struggles to communicate with his emotionally challenged 12-year-old son ... Season one unfolded with [the father] realizing that [the son] possessed an extraordinary gift – the ability to perceive the seemingly hidden patterns that connect every life on the planet.” (“Touch,” Fox Broadcasting Company, http://www.fox.com/touch/about/. Accessed 12/2012.)

354 *Touch* episode one aired in Perth, Western Australia on 22nd April 2012.

355 Gillibrand, *Disabled Church, Disabled Society*, 45.
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union with Jesus Christ can anybody realise full humanity. Indeed, realising full humanity is not dependent upon ability and not stymied by inability, because realising full humanity is only dependent on Jesus Christ, the only fully human person.

Jesus is willing to share his humanity with us and to transform us so that we are like him. This gift is something offered to every man and woman, and the gift is independent of ability or inability, not contingent on being autistic or neurotypical. It is a gift. Human beings, bound by and broken by sin, are not what God intended them to be. Sinful humanity cannot truly image God as sinners. Alone, humans cannot become what God intended, but they can share in the humanity of Christ, because he transforms humanity, lives a vicarious human life for us, gifts us with his perfect humanness and makes us into the image of God. This participation in Christ’s humanity is accessed through faith. However, even for those who choose not to have faith in Christ, his humanity is the source of human dignity and value. This chapter aims to expand on these ideas and to explicate how the humanity of Christ is inclusive of people with severe autism.

Irenaeus: Recapitulation

Since the incarnation is central to my inclusive theological anthropology, I will make use of several theologians who are convinced of its centrality. The first of these is Irenaeus, whose theological schema ‘recapitulation’ is a way of understanding the human life of Jesus Christ. Irenaeus takes seriously the transformative value of the incarnation. The human life of Jesus Christ is a life lived as a true human person who is the reality of the image of God. For Irenaeus, Jesus is the prototype human and his appearing in human flesh is the manifestation of what humanity is intended to be.
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Jesus transformed humanity by living his human life as the second Adam. Jesus is not simply true human being and true image of God as example, but he changed broken humanity so that each individual may become true human and true image of God.

The majority of Western theology walks in the paths which were paved by Augustine, but Irenaeus (born c 130-140, died c 202),\textsuperscript{356} coming two centuries before Augustine\textsuperscript{357} presents a different viewpoint. Some of Augustine’s teaching has been interpreted in ways which have had a negative impact on thinking about people with cognitive disabilities, by denying their personhood and value. Augustine emphasises the rational as essential to human nature. Although Augustine himself does not deny the humanity of people who lack the capacity for reason,\textsuperscript{358} Amos Yong observes that Augustine’s “criterion of rationality” resulted in a thousand years of theological anthropology which excluded people with intellectual disabilities as not human.\textsuperscript{359} Therefore, the theology of Irenaeus, which is somewhat different to Augustine’s, will be valuable in thinking about autism.

The heresy which Irenaeus opposes so strenuously in Against Heresies is Gnosticism. The Gnostic worldview divides people into distinct categories: the fleshly have no future except darkness; the soulish might, by pursuing non-material pleasures, rise above their current status; and the spiritual or intellectual are able to gain secret knowledge that could allow them to ultimately escape this world of matter.\textsuperscript{360} Irenaeus opposes this categorisation of humanity by asserting that God provides salvation

\textsuperscript{359} Yong, Theology and Down Syndrome, 31.
\textsuperscript{360} Payton, Irenaeus on the Christian Faith, 4, 6-7.
through Christ and that this is offered to every human. Every human being has precisely the same rank in the sight of God. The incarnation is the site of God’s presence in the world, demonstrating that God himself has sought out humanity.  

What is of interest here for my discussion are not the theological views of Gnostics, but their idea that humanity is divided into categories and especially that Irenaeus rejects this categorization. It is evident that humanity is divided into categories in popular thinking, specifically for my purposes it is divided into disabled and able-bodied and autistic and neurotypical. The theology of Irenaeus implies that this categorisation of humanity is rejected in Christ. In Christ salvation is freely offered to all of humanity. There are no categories of humanity which are inferior or superior to others. I want to emphasise that in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female” (Gal 3:28a), no disabled or able-bodied, no autistic or neurotypical. This is the second reason for paying attention to the theology of Irenaeus.

Irenaeus believes that Jesus Christ is the theological centre of the ‘economy of salvation’. This centrality is not based on the notion of the incarnation as a chronological midpoint of history. Rather, Christ is the centre of all human history, because all of human history both prior to and after Christ is understood only in him. The creation of humanity, while historically prior to the incarnation, is not prior to the person who was born in Bethlehem, but receives its reality from the crucified and risen one. The incarnation reminds us that theology is as much about anthropology as it is

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362 Irenaeus coined the phrase ‘economy of salvation’ (M. C. Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 1.).
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about God, because the two categories meet in the person of Jesus Christ. This is why examining the incarnation through the theology of Irenaeus will shed light on theological anthropology.

Irenaeus takes the idea inherent in the grammatical term ‘recapitulation’ (anakephalaiôsis) – a summing up - and applies it to his theology. For Irenaeus, recapitulation is a way of expressing the entire work of Christ in one word. Christ recapitulated all things in himself. As Paul writes in Eph 1:10, God has a “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up [recapitulate] all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” The following quote from Irenaeus’ major work *Against Heresies* gives an overview of what recapitulation involves.

Being a master, therefore, he also possessed the age of a master, not despising or evading any condition of humanity, nor setting aside in himself that law which he appointed for the human race, but sanctifying every age, by that period corresponding to it which belonged to himself. For he came to save all through means of himself – all, I say, through him are born again to God – infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. So likewise he was an old man for old men, that he might be a perfect master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise. Then, at last, he came even to death itself, that he might be ‘the first-born from the dead,
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that in all things he might have the pre-eminence,’ the prince of life, existing before all, and going before all.\(^\text{366}\)

This passage contains the fundamental concept of recapitulation. Jesus came to save humanity and he did so by becoming a human being and living out the entirety of a human life through its every stage. Gregory’s aphorism, ‘what is not assumed is not healed’ is pre-empted in Irenaeus’ theology of recapitulation. Humans cannot participate in God’s incorruptible being unless God comes to them as a human. This is what Jesus did. He became a human to join humanity to God. The Son of God needed to enter human existence in its corrupted state and in doing so he sanctified every stage of human life.\(^\text{367}\)

Becoming a human being is the way in which the Son of God effected the redemption of humanity. The incarnation is not a precursor to redemption; it is the redeeming work of God. The human nature of Christ is not something static but active, lived out in relationship with the Creator and with other people. The union of Christ’s human and divine natures occurred throughout his human life, from his supernatural conception and virgin birth, through his ministry and his passion, to his resurrection and ascension. Jesus the man, not a ‘nature,’ is united to God. The union of God and humanity was achieved through the living out of an authentic human existence by the Son of God. In his genuine human activity from birth to death and resurrection, Jesus became a human being completely in harmony with God’s will.\(^\text{368}\)

\(^{366}\) Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* (c. 175-185), II.xxii.4. (Quoted in Steenberg, *Of God and Man*, 44.)

\(^{367}\) *Of God and Man*, 44-45.

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There are two main ways in which Irenaeus approaches recapitulation in Against Heresies: Christ as the new man, and Christ in our place. The first of the central themes for Irenaeus’ christology is the contrast between Adam and Christ, such as those presented by Paul in First Corinthians. For instance, “For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Cor 15:22), and “The first man, Adam, became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45). Adam “is a type of the one who was to come” (Rom 5:14). By ‘type’ Irenaeus means ‘imprint,’ so that Adam was formed according to the pattern of Christ, not the other way around. Adam was created to resemble the incarnate Word, who is the visible image of God. Therefore, the incarnation of the Logos is central to the purposes of God in creating humanity.

There had to be clear continuity between Adam and Christ in order for the intended destiny of humanity to be achieved through Christ. Jesus Christ needed to assume the flesh of Adam so that he could be the ‘head’ of those for whom Adam is their ‘head’. In the words of Irenaeus:

The Word of the Father ... having become united with the ancient substance of Adam’s formation, rendered man living and perfect, receptive of the perfect Father, in order that as in the natural [Adam] we all were dead, so in the spiritual we may all be made alive.

If Christ did not recapitulate Adam then humanity as it is could not be saved. It is an important emphasis in Irenaeus that Jesus Christ assumed the flesh of Adam. If

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369 Ibid., 171.
370 Grant, Irenaeus, 52.
371 Denis Minns, Irenaeus: An Introduction (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 100.
372 Ibid., 102.
373 Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, V.i.3. (Quoted in Hart, "Irenaeus, Recapitulation, and Physical Redemption," 164.)
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this were not so then humanity, which God created in the beginning and whose destiny is life, would die and fail to achieve God’s purpose. Jesus could not come as a perfect man unconnected to the original Adam, because then humanity descended from Adam would still die. God, the author of life, had to give his life to the second ‘Adam,’ the man who grew genuinely hungry and thirsty, who needed food and drink to live, the one who grew tired and required rest (John 4:6), who experienced anxiety, distress (John 11:34) and joy, and who knew fear and pain in the face of death.\footnote{Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation*, 95-96.}

Adam was created in the image and likeness of God. Adam lost the likeness of his Creator because of sin; the image of God was destroyed in Adam because of his evil in acquiescing to temptation. But in Christ God became a human being uncorrupted by sin and therefore he is human being as humanity was intended to be. He assumed Adam’s humanity but without the defeat which Adam experienced due to sin.\footnote{Ibid., 84-85, 95.} Death does not belong in the world, but gained power over humanity when Adam gave in to temptation. Christ’s solidarity with fallen humanity means that he experienced even death and humanity’s utter emptiness. The Creator of humanity was entombed by death in order to defeat death, which is the enemy of humanity, thereby gifting humanity with life and growth.\footnote{Ibid., 102-03.} As Irenaeus explains:

He united man with God and wrought a communion of God and man, we being unable to have any participation in incorruptibility if it were not for his coming to us, for incorruptibility, whilst being invisible, benefitted us nothing: so he became visible, that we might, in all ways, obtain a participation in incorruptibility. And because all are implicated in the first-formation of Adam, we were bound to death through disobedience, it was fitting, therefore, by means of the obedience of the
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one, who on our account became man, to be loosed from death. ... And for this reason our Lord received that same embodiment as the first-formed, that he might fight for the fathers and vanquish in Adam that which had struck us in Adam.\[377\]

Jesus did not merely deal with the consequences of sin, but in recapitulating human life, he obliterated sinfulness entirely from human nature by living a perfectly obedient life as a man with the same human nature as Adam. In this way Jesus gave back immortality to humanity, and returned to humanity the image and likeness of God which had been so distorted by sin. The obedience of Jesus granted to humanity a gift, in that human nature is sanctified by it and elevated from its fallen condition, so that now humanity is able to actually do God’s will. But if this is so, then the human nature which Christ assumed as a human being could not be other than the human nature of the fallen Adam.\[378\]

Irenaeus’ second theme in recapitulation is that of Christ in our place. As the new Adam Christ recapitulated the whole human race. His human existence did not just repeat human life, but included all humanity within his actions. As the ‘firstfruits’ of the new human race, Christ is the representative of every human being. In this way Christ “gathered together all things in himself ... summing up all things in himself”.\[379\] The Creator became a part of his own creation, thereby summing it up; by this reiteration all humanity can be lifted up and made new. There is an ontological unity between the one human being, Jesus, and every other human, so that everything that can be said of Christ can also be said of all other humans. In this way Irenaeus explains that Christ is ‘for us’. For Irenaeus, Christ’s inclusive union with the human race

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\[379\] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, III.xvi.6. (Quoted in Hart, "Irenaeus, Recapitulation, and Physical Redemption," 175.)
explains how it is possible to say that his righteousness and obedience can be attributed to others, because he gave his body in place of theirs and his life in place of theirs, and in this way united human beings to God in his incarnation.\footnote{Irenaeus, Recapitulation, and Physical Redemption,” 175-76.}

However, Irenaeus’ understanding of recapitulation does not imply universalism, because it is only as we are in union with Christ that we can share in God’s promises. Christ represents the human race because of his own choice to recapitulate his own creation in himself. If we know that we have been liberated from guilt and alienation and gifted with God’s righteousness then we also know that this is the result of Christ’s obedience in both life and death on the cross, and therefore we experience the call of God to surrender our lives and to allow the Spirit to transform us to be like Christ. Therefore, sanctification takes place on two levels. First, it is accomplished by the fact that Christ has assumed humanity, in which we are given a share as we are united with him. The second level is the process by which believers are changed to resemble Christ. We are both already reconciled to God by Christ and continue to be reconciled by the ongoing removal of actual rebelliousness and disobedience.\footnote{Ibid., 176-78.}

The humanity of Jesus is genuinely God’s humanity. This humanity is united with the life of God, because the Son of God is now also a human Son, living before the Father as human flesh, and thereby redeeming that flesh. The result is that in union with Christ we have a share of the Son’s relationship with the Father which takes place within God’s own being, and we share in Christ’s Sonship because of our union with him effected by the incarnation. In this way human beings are joined to God by the incarnation, and they receive the grace of the Father which was Christ’s alone as the
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divine Son of God. Humans are saved because of their union with the new Adam, in whom God established a relationship with humanity that was formerly something which existed only within the divine perichoresis. Human beings are redeemed by being united to the ‘humanity of God,’ and in this humanity they receive forgiveness, regeneration and adoption by God the Father.382

Irenaeus understands humanity in eschatological terms. We cannot strictly speaking ask what human being is, but rather what human being is becoming in Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in order to be sons of the heavenly Father. Here Irenaeus’ conception of the image of God is significant. Humanity as the image of God can only be understood in terms of the Sonship of Christ and the work of the Spirit. People cannot be fully in the likeness of God until the eschaton. Men and women are becoming what they were always intended to be only because of the incarnation. This was made possible by the anointing of Jesus by the Spirit on the occasion of his baptism. As a result of this anointing Jesus is able to pour out the Spirit on humanity. As a human person grows closer to the likeness of Christ in the power of the Spirit, that person knows the Father more deeply, and at the same time the fatherhood of the Father deepens towards the human person.383

Irenaeus provides a significant understanding of the incarnation. For Irenaeus the destiny of humanity is to become the likeness of God. This is intended for every human since Christ offers salvation to all of humanity. The central idea which Irenaeus brings to us is recapitulation; the Son of God became a human being in order to live out and thereby sanctify every stage of human existence. He did this as the new Adam in order to save those over whom Adam is the head. The humanity of Christ is wholly

382 Ibid., 180-81.
383 Steenberg, Of God and Man, 42-43.
genuine and therefore he was able to defeat death and restore people to the image of God. This he did on behalf of the entire human race; his humanity is inclusive of all. The humanity of Christ is God’s humanity. Human beings are saved by being united with the humanity of God. Yet humanity is not yet what it will be, because it is only in the eschaton that we will attain the likeness of God. These ideas are powerful and I will now turn to a discussion of the implications for an anthropology inclusive of people with autism.

**The Implications of Irenaeus’ Theology**

Irenaeus’ incarnational theology is valuable to my consideration of autism for several reasons. First, Irenaeus sees humanity as one race. As the head of the race, Adam’s sin caused all his descendents to be subject to death. In contrast, Christ is the head of the human race which is recapitulated in his person. Unlike the Gnosticism which Irenaeus opposes, he perceives humanity as equal before God, equally able to receive salvation because of Christ. Even if it is possible for humans to reject their destiny, they share the God-ordained destiny of becoming fully the likeness of the Creator. This lack of categorisation of humanity is important for my inclusive theological anthropology, because we invariably come to the place of putting humanity into the categories of disabled or able-bodied, autistic or neurotypical. Even the designation ‘temporarily able-bodied,’ which is popular in disability literature, is used to divide humanity into categories. And yet, before God, humanity is fundamentally without categorisation in Christ. Christ has taken upon himself the humanity of every human being. He has joined himself to the human race. He has not

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384 “The designation ‘temporarily able-bodied’ (TAB) has become a common term for able-bodied persons or ‘normals’ within the disability community” (Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 24. fn. 8.).
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joined himself to only one kind of human. The only categories which we may employ are ones which divide people into those who will achieve human *telos* in Christ, and those who refuse the offer of salvation which leads to that *telos*.

The most powerful aspect of recapitulation is that Jesus is not merely an example to follow. He has completely transformed humanity from within by living a totally human life. There are inherent dangers in seeing Jesus Christ as merely an example which must be followed if a person is to be considered human. There is no biblical evidence that Jesus had an autism spectrum disorder during his earthly life. He was able to relate to all kinds of people; he was an expert communicator, often confounding people with his answers to their questions; and he constantly did what was totally unexpected in teaching, healing and performing miracles, especially on the Sabbath. If we are to look at Jesus as only the example by which we must measure our humanity, then autistic people will not measure up according to the triad of impairments. People with physical disabilities will have the same problem, because Jesus evidently had no physical disability prior to his passion.

However, this is the point where recapitulation comes into its own. According to Irenaeus, recapitulation is far more than example. Jesus became human exactly like those he came to redeem and he has restored humanity. Humanity, which was unable to reach its *telos* of becoming the likeness of God, is renewed in the person of Christ. The significance of this fact for autistic people is that *in the person of Christ ability or inability are not categories*. Every man and every woman needs to be united with the incarnate Christ in order to reach their destiny. People with autism are not restricted in reaching human *telos*, because when they are united with the person of Christ, their *telos* is sure. Inability may be present at this time, but when the kingdom of God is
come in its fullness, people with autism who are united to Christ will possess full humanity in the same way that Jesus now possesses full humanity.

Every stage of human life is recapitulated and sanctified by Christ. Jesus’ assumption of human life involved human growth, not a one-time, static putting on of humanness. His life was dynamic in that he took every aspect of human life into union with God. All aspects of life are sanctified by his life. The fact that Jesus has lived out all aspects of human life is important, because he has lived life on behalf of autistic individuals. Many autists have intellectual disabilities and may not reach the mental age of an adult. They have restricted lives which do not include the ‘normal’ range of what humans experience and achieve. Many autistic individuals will not be able to develop into functional adults in accordance with the accepted expectations of society. Yet Jesus has sanctified and recapitulated every stage of the autistic’s life, even those parts which people with severe autism are unable to live out. He has lived human life as it was intended to be lived. Jesus lived as a normal infant and a healthy child on behalf of autistic people who did not and cannot. Jesus had a normal adolescent development – in reality the only normal adolescent development in the history of the human race – on behalf of all those people who did not and cannot have a normal adolescent development. When Jesus grew into an adult he did this for people with autism who cannot live as fully functional adults. When he grew in wisdom and stature, he did this for people with severe autism who cannot grow in wisdom. Instead of Jesus’ normal human development being a threat to the humanity of autistic people, it is the restoration of their humanity. Instead of condemnation in the normal development of the human Jesus, there is healing for broken humanity, including those who are restricted in their development because of severe autism.


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The transformation which Christ accomplished in his recapitulation of human life is not external to the human person, but internal to humanity. Therefore, humanity is truly transformed by recapitulation. People with autism need transformation and this cannot come from without. Christ’s restoration of humanity in recapitulation does not work on the outside but changes autistic individuals so that they can be restored to what people are created to be. In chapter 2 I explained that humanity was created to be relational, in relationship with God and with humanity. This relationality is part of the destiny of people with severe autism who are in Christ. The complete transformation is eschatological in nature, but being in union with Christ results in transformation which begins in the present.

Humanity was created in the beginning to resemble the incarnate Christ. Although the disobedience of Adam meant he could not attain the likeness of God, by his incarnation Jesus restored what Adam lost. In some ways people with severe typical autism do not resemble God, because they have difficulty in relating to others and difficulty in communicating. These deficits do not matter because the image of God is restored in Christ. In union with Christ all of humanity, autistic and neurotypical, is restored to the image of God. Again, the restoration of the image of God in Christ is not dependent on ability or inability, but only dependent upon union with Christ who is the true and perfect image of God.

When Christ recapitulated humanity, he did not recapitulate a perfect humanity, but Adam and his descendents. Jesus assumed the flesh of Adam. If Christ had assumed a totally different and new humanity then he would not have redeemed the humanity of Adam. It is the people who are subject to death and decay - because they are Adam’s descendents - who need to be redeemed. People with autism, as
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descendants of Adam, are people whose humanity is broken and not perfect, and therefore they are among those whose humanity Jesus came to redeem. Jesus restores humanity as it is, autistic or neurotypical, to what God intended it to be. That restoration means that those who are subject to death, including those with autism, which is a manifestation of physical death, are now gifted with life.

The second important theme in Irenaeus’ recapitulation is that Jesus acts on behalf of the entire human race. When Jesus lived his human life he included the whole race within his actions. In his humanity he represents everyone. Therefore he has lived life on behalf of people with autism. While autistics are unable to do all that is considered to be normal human behaviour, Jesus has lived life on their behalf. Jesus communicated on behalf of autistic people, he had relationships with other human beings on behalf of autistic people, and he related to God on behalf of people with autism. In Christ, deficits are no longer relevant because Christ has lived a life which recapitulated all that humanity was intended to do. All that can be said of Christ can also be said of human beings in Christ, because of Christ’s solidarity with humanity.

Lastly, the implications of what Irenaeus has said about the incarnation are significant in terms of a basis for human dignity. I contend that the incarnation is a better basis for the dignity of people with severe autism than the doctrine of creation in the image of God. This is so for two reasons. First, the image of God is so marred by sin that it is difficult to see the image in humanity, and the lack of relationality of people with autism makes it difficult to see how they reflect the nature of God. But the fact that God has adopted our broken humanity means that human beings of all kinds are given dignity and infinite value by God. The second reason for the value of Irenaeus’ centring on the incarnation is that he does not begin with the state of
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humanity in the present, but on the state of humanity as it is becoming. The incarnation provides us with a view of the eschatological goal of human being. While people with severe autism cannot match up to what is considered fully human in the present, those who are in Christ are being transformed into the likeness of Christ, which is the telos or goal of humanity.

The idea that Jesus has acted as a human being on behalf of all humanity is something extremely important to a theological understanding of autism and human personhood. Therefore, I want to explore this further. This is done in the next section, in which I examine the vicarious humanity of Christ in the theology of James Torrance. Torrance espouses a theology of the incarnation which presents Jesus as the one who lived a human life and offered the perfect human response to God on behalf of sinful humanity, who because of sin are unable to meet their responsibilities as people before God.

J.B. Torrance: The Vicarious Humanity of Christ

J.B. Torrance explains the vicarious nature of Christ’s humanity. He does so within the context of Christian worship. The Creeds were written within the context of worshipping communities and these communities made doctrinal statements about the person of Jesus Christ as an outcome of their worship. Therefore, it is quite appropriate to explore the nature of Christ, who came ‘for us and our salvation,’ in the context of Christian worship.385 Although Torrance chooses worship as his context, his thesis about the vicarious humanity of Christ is applicable to the whole Christian life, because Christian worship is not easily disconnected from Christian living (c.f. Rom 12:2).

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According to Torrance there are two basic views of worship. The first is a human-centred version of worship which exhibits no understanding of the Trinity or the priesthood of Christ. In this view of worship the congregation, with the encouragement of the pastoral leader present their worship to God. Each sings, gives money, prays for various matters of concern and listens to the sermon. The worshippers offer their own worship to God because according to this view worship is our activity. This kind of worship is effectively Unitarian – it is human-centred; there is no understanding of Christ as our mediator and high priest; and the work of the Holy Spirit is ignored. This kind of worship is ultimately Pelagian, as it is the result of our own efforts to please God, and it can lead to fatigue and dissatisfaction. But there is another view of worship which Torrance describes like this:

The second view of worship is that it is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father. It means participating, in union with Christ, in what he has done for us, once and for all, … in his life and death on the cross … [and] in what he is continuing to do for us in the presence of the Father and in his mission from the Father to the world.

All that Christians do in worship is a participation in what Jesus Christ has done on behalf of humanity. The communion bread and wine is a sharing in his body and blood; human sonship and fellowship with God the Father is a participation, through the Spirit, in the Sonship of Jesus Christ; Christian prayer is a participation in the intercessions of Christ for the world; and Christian mission and service is a

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386 Ibid., 127-28.
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participation in the service and mission of Jesus to humanity. This is what it means to live life empowered by the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{388}

The second view is, as Torrance affirms, both “Trinitarian and Incarnational”. It embraces the reality that Jesus Christ is our high priest and head of the Church, that he offered himself on our behalf, that the Holy Spirit unites human beings with Christ, and that the Church is Christ’s body. Importantly, this view understands that God’s grace, expressed towards humanity in the gifts of the persons of Christ and the Holy Spirit, means that God has given to us what he requires of us, that is, “the worship of our hearts and lives”.\textsuperscript{389} The Reformers sought to renew this trinitarian and incarnational view of worship, in place of the medieval Church’s theology, in which the Church had supplanted Christ as priest. The Reformers needed to bring the grace of God and the work of Christ back into central view. The Reformed doctrine of justification by faith, and not by works, is important for an understanding of worship. It is not that God accepts our worship on the basis of our worthiness. But rather, the Father

accepts us freely in the person of his beloved Son. It is he who in our name and on our behalf, in our humanity, has made the one offering to the Father which alone is acceptable to God for all humanity, for all nations, for all times. It is he who unites us with himself in the one Body, in his communion with the Father, and in his continuing intercessions.\textsuperscript{390}

Torrance described three theological models in order to provide a contemporary context for his discussion of the incarnation. The first is that used by the 19\textsuperscript{th} century Protestant liberal Adolf Harnack. Harnack believes the centre of religion is the soul’s

\textsuperscript{388} “The Vicarious Humanity of Christ,” 128.
\textsuperscript{389} Ibid., 128-29.
\textsuperscript{390} Torrance, \textit{Worship}, 10.
relationship with God – “God and the soul, the soul and its God”. Humanity relates to God in the same way that Jesus related to God; human beings are the brothers of Jesus who share the same Father. In this schema, Jesus is not incarnate; he is not God. For Harnack, the gospel is about the Father and not the Son. Nothing needs to come between a person and God, not even Jesus Christ. Harnack’s view is Unitarian and divides “person and principle”. Jesus is only an example for us to follow. The reality of his person is irrelevant. It only matters that the principle of love and self-sacrifice exists. This model is unable to give a true account of the absolute uniqueness of Jesus. Consequently, the doctrine of the Trinity is without meaning and all understanding of atonement and grace through the work of Christ is lost.391

The second model described is the existential model, in which faith means experiencing God in the present. At the moment when we encounter God he gives us grace and our response is faith, faith which is made possible by the atonement. Becoming forgiven children of God is possible in the present because of the death of Christ two thousand years in the past. The work of Christ on our behalf is the means by which we come to faith and salvation. Salvation is in Christ and by means of Christ. The cross as an event results in faith as an event. This can be understood in either liberal (e.g. Rudolf Bultmann) or evangelical terms (e.g. early Barth). Torrance asserts that for Bultmann faith arises from the kerygma which is the result of the event of the cross. This kind of faith does not require any belief in the Trinity or the incarnation. For Barth we experience God at the point of decision as we make the commitment of faith based on Christ’s work on the cross. But the emphasis on meeting God through present faith can remove the gospel from its grounding in history.392

392 Ibid., 133.
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While this model attempts to uphold grace alone and faith alone, it is far too centred on human response. There is an emphasis on God coming to humanity in Christ, but Torrance exclaims emphatically:

the human-Godward movement is still ours! It emphasises our faith, our decision, our response in an event theology which short-circuits the vicarious humanity of Christ and belittles union with Christ. For all that it may emphasise the vicarious work of Christ on the Cross to bring forgiveness and make our faith a real human possibility, it fails to see the place of the high priesthood of Jesus Christ as the leitourgos (Heb 8:2). It is he who leads our worship, bears our sorrows on his heart and intercedes for us, presenting us to the Father in himself as God’s dear children, and uniting us with himself in his life in the Spirit.393

Worship should not be reduced to the notion that God has done his part and we must make a response to him on our own. This would be to ignore the fact that Christ has made for us the only acceptable response to God as a human being. He lived a life of obedience and died an obedient death on our behalf. This fact is the assurance of the gospel and the secret of Christian prayer, which is a share in the intercession of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit, who prays for us when we cannot find the words.394 As Torrance puts it, “Whatever else our faith is, it is a response to a Response already made for us and continually being made for us in Christ.”395

The existential model may lead to a disconnection of the work of Christ from the person of Christ. There is a tendency to concentrate on individual, subjective religious experience. Against this tendency Barth in Church Dogmatics emphasised the centrality of Christ and gave priority to ‘Christ for us’ before ‘Christ in us’.

393 Torrance, Worship, 18.
394 “The Vicarious Humanity of Christ,” 134.
395 Ibid.
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Bonhoeffer was also opposed to this individualist religion and entreated Christians to understand atonement in terms of the incarnation and not vice versa. Western Christianity can be very pragmatic, making the gospel into nothing more than the means to an end.396

Torrance’s final model is the Nicene, incarnational model. Here Torrance presents what he believes to be the correct way of understanding Christian worship. Worship is a participation in the (incarnate) Son’s fellowship with the Father. The New Testament picture of Jesus is of a person who lived in fellowship with both the Father and the Spirit. He offered up himself as a human being, on our behalf, to the Father, through the Spirit, and drew humanity to himself, by the Spirit, in order that they might share in both his fellowship with the Father and his mission to the world. Thus, there exists a twin relationship: firstly between God and humanity in Christ, and secondly between Christ and the Church. Both of these are enabled by the Holy Spirit. He both unites the Father and Son in love within the Godhead, and unites the Church with Christ in love.397

In order to understand the Nicene model, it is necessary to understand both Christ’s vicarious humanity and our union with him. According to the early Fathers, the one who was eternally Son of God according to nature became a human being in order that humanity might become sons of God according to grace by being united with him (Gal 4:6; Eph 2:18). Athanasius refers to this as a double movement. The first movement is from God to humanity, from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit; and the second movement is from humanity to God, to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. This means that worship of God is something which is done in Christ, as well as

396 Ibid., 134-35.
397 Ibid., 135.
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through him and because of him. Christian worship is a share in Christ’s worship of
the Father through the Spirit because of Christ’s work on our behalf, both past and
present. Jesus, as our high priest and mediator, brings us to the Father, through the
Spirit of love.\textsuperscript{398}

Jesus Christ has a twofold task in worship. Because of his incarnation he is,
simultaneously, the God to whom we pray and the man who lived a genuine human
existence, enabled by prayer, so that humanity might be reconciled to God. The Nicene
Creed outlines this dual role: “Who for us men and our salvation came down from
heaven ... and was made man.” This dual role of Christ must be emphasised so that an
understanding of the vicarious humanity of Christ in worship is not lost. The Church
must again be reminded of the sole priesthood of Christ so that she can again
understand her part as a royal priesthood which shares in the priesthood of Christ.\textsuperscript{399}

The high priest is a central figure in the old covenant. He represented the
people on the Day of Atonement as he laid hands on the sacrificial victim, vicariously
confessed the sins of the people and repented on their behalf. When he entered the
Holy of Holies he made vicarious intercession for the people. This is seen in the New
Testament as prefiguring the person of Christ, who is the perfect high priest, sharing
our humanity, embracing every ethnic group and feeling the pain of every injustice and
every grief. He offers to God obedience, worship and love, on our behalf, for we
cannot but fail to offer these things. It is Jesus’ entire life of obedience and prayer
which is his self-offering on our behalf, because in contrast to the Old Testament
priests he offers himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In
this he says ‘Yes’ from within our humanity to God’s holy justice, and thereby makes

\textsuperscript{398} Ibid., 135-36.
\textsuperscript{399} Ibid., 136-37.
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God’s covenant promises certain by the shedding of his own blood. Torrance contends:

When Jesus was born for us at Bethlehem, was baptised by the Spirit in Jordan, suffered under Pontius Pilate, rose again and ascended, our humanity was born again, baptised by the Spirit, suffered, died, rose again and ascended in him, in his representative vicarious humanity. Now he presents us in himself to the Father as God’s dear children, and our righteousness is hid with Christ in God – ready to be revealed at the last day. Conversely, because Jesus has lived our life, offered himself through the eternal Spirit without spot to the Father in our name and on our behalf, as the one for the many, God accepts us in him. We are accepted in the beloved Son.

The Existential model, considered above, fails to take in the full meaning of grace, because it ignores the vicarious humanity of Christ. While this model calls people to respond to the love of God expressed in Christ, it does not take into account the response made on our behalf by Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ is not only as God to humanity but also as a human being offering himself to God on our behalf. Torrance concludes:

In other words, the human-Godward movement, in which we are given to participate … is given freely and unconditionally. Our response in faith and obedience is a response to the Response already made for us by Christ to the Father’s holy love, a response we are summoned to make in union with Christ.

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400 Ibid., 138-39.
401 Torrance, Worship, 39.
402 "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ,” 141.
403 Worship, 43.
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Human response to God, then, is made in and through the perfect response of Christ to the Father.

Torrance presents a powerful way of looking at the incarnation. Instead of God expecting that human beings will come to him and make an appropriate response to his love, he has come to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ and made the perfect human response to God for us. This response made to God on behalf of humanity by Christ is of utmost importance to our understanding of how people with autism relate to the God who exists as ‘being in communion’. People with severe autism may well be unable to make the required response to God, but Jesus Christ has done that on their behalf. The implications of this statement must be explored carefully, and this is what I will do below.

Implications of the Vicarious Humanity of Christ

What Torrance writes is helpful in my project of providing a theological anthropology in which the basis for inclusion of low-functioning autistics is the work of Christ. The two theological models which he rejected are unhelpful in terms of providing an inclusive anthropology. The first model of the incarnation which Torrance outlines is the liberal model, which sees Jesus as only an example for us to follow. In this model the main thing is the principle of love and self-sacrifice. This is a theologically unorthodox understanding of the incarnation and is the most unhelpful when dealing with autism. The reason for this is that severely autistic people are unable to copy the example of Jesus. This is so not simply because all human beings are sinners and are morally corrupt. Autism presents its own difficulties, with some autistics lacking a sense of self and other, precluding self-sacrifice. Many cannot
understand words which would communicate how to follow such an example. It is difficult, if not impossible, to follow Jesus’ example of love and self-sacrifice when you are unable to understand that another person has thoughts and feelings different to your own.

The second model which Torrance discusses, the existential model, is better in that it emphasises the work of Christ and his grace. Grace is something which would give people with autism hope of salvation. However, there is too much emphasis in this model on human responsiveness. Many people with autism have difficulty doing what is generally expected by this model, that is, hearing and understanding the gospel, deciding that they need to respond in repentance, praying a ‘sinner’s prayer’ and then going on to Bible reading and church attendance and other matters expected of Christians. There are many reasons for these ‘failures,’ including communication difficulties, difficulties coping with large groups of people in church, difficulty in making decisions out of the ordinary routine, and general difficulties with fitting into ‘ordinary’ settings. Therefore, the existential model is not helpful to autistic people.

Torrance claims that the existential model is probably the most common model of salvation present in churches.\textsuperscript{404} It is certainly the model with which I have been most familiar in my own church experience, an experience which has covered several different denominations. A personal example may serve to illustrate the problem with this common view. Recently, some people have expressed to me that they are worried about getting Alzheimer’s in their old age and forgetting about who Jesus is, and thus losing their salvation. This is a genuine fear for people who have been taught that it is our response of faith which is the basis for our relationship with God. This theology is common amongst people who are ordinary church-goers.

\textsuperscript{404} Ibid., 22.
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But the model which Torrance advocates, which he calls the incarnational model, which is based on the way in which the early Church understood the person of Christ, is one which can provide a solid foundation for an inclusive anthropology. Central to the vicarious humanity of Christ is the fact that humanity is unable to do what is required by God, but Jesus has done on our behalf what we cannot do. Torrance explains, “The coming of Jesus Christ is not only the coming of God as God, but it is also the coming of God as Man to do vicariously for us what we cannot adequately do for ourselves.” With this theological conception there is no need to divide humanity into those with ability and those without ability, no need to divide humanity into autistic and neurotypical. No human being is able to respond to God in the way which God intended humanity to respond. It is not that people with autism cannot respond to God as was God’s intention and that neurotypical people can do so. Neither autistic nor neurotypical are able to do what God requires. Every person is on the same footing before God. The good news is that Jesus Christ has done for us what we could not do alone.

Torrance approaches the vicarious humanity of Christ in terms of worship, so I will begin with the implications for people with autism and worship. The common understanding of worship, which involves the congregation bringing their own worship to God, will cause a problem for people with autism. Autistic people who cannot communicate will be unable to sing, to pray and to understand the sermon. Torrance notes that this kind of worship leads to weariness because it involves self-effort. The problems for autistics are magnified over and above those of neurotypical people, who form the majority in congregations. What goes on in church may well be completely incomprehensible for people with autism. They may not be able to respond because of

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405 “The Vicarious Humanity of Christ,” 144.
lack of understanding or because of sensory overload as a result of the crowds and the music, or in some churches because of the lighting and the smells of the incense. Consequently, many autistics would be unable to do the ‘normal’ Christian activities of worship. If we understand worship as something which is dependent on what we can do in response to God, then people with autism may well fall short.

But if we understand worship as a participation in what Jesus Christ has done and is doing on behalf of humanity, then autistic people will not fall short. Because Jesus Christ has offered the perfect response to God on our behalf, when we are in Christ our response is always as adequate as his response, even though what we do will fall short of God’s perfection. Our human response to God is made perfectly acceptable through the perfect high priesthood of Christ, who has offered the perfect response to God on our behalf. Those who have no ability at all are on the same plane as those who have more ability. People with severe autism are included in the vicarious actions of Christ on their behalf. What response they are able to offer is offered in the power of the Spirit by virtue of the vicarious actions of Jesus on their behalf. Ability or inability is utterly irrelevant here. There are no categories of humanity. There is no need to put people with profound disabilities in a separate category, either in the category of less than human or in the category of those who are not accountable to God. Neither is the case. All of humanity is included in the vicarious work of Christ on our behalf. All have their worship made acceptable to God because of what Jesus Christ has done for them.

Because Torrance’s discussion about the vicarious humanity of Christ is based on the understanding of the incarnation which was held by the early Church Fathers, it is applicable to more than formal worship. Therefore, I want to apply the vicarious
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humanity of Christ to aspects other than worship. In the previous chapter I discussed the creation of humanity in the image of God. Reflecting who God is involves being creatures who are relational, both towards God and towards other human beings. Related to this relationality is the ability to communicate and to be creative. As these aspects of humanness are ones which are in various degrees lacking in people with autism, there are some who would say that autistics are not human. However, as I have said before, sin has marred the image of God and there is no person on the planet who truly reflects God as the Creator intended. But, as the true human being and the true image of God, Jesus is both perfect human and perfect image of God on our behalf. He is what we are intended to be for our sake.

Rather than being a statement which is condemnatory, the reality that Jesus is true human and perfect image of God is good news. Because of Jesus’ sharing of our humanity in the incarnation, he now allows us to share in his true humanity and his perfect imaging of God. What we cannot be on our own because of sin, we can become through the one who is these things on behalf of broken humanity. The vicarious humanity of Christ overcomes the issues which arise when discussing how people with severe autism fall short of the expectations of what a human being is intended to be.

As Torrance observes:

Christ does not heal us by standing over against us, diagnosing our sickness, prescribing medicine for us to take, and then going away, to leave us to get better by obeying his instructions – as an ordinary doctor might. No, He becomes the patient! He assumes that very humanity which is in need of redemption, and being anointed by the Spirit in our humanity, by a life of perfect obedience, by dying and
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rising again, for us, our humanity is healed in him. We are not just healed ‘through Christ’ because of the work of Christ but ‘in and through Christ’. 406

Jesus Christ has taken the broken humanity of autistic people and redeemed it and healed it by his own perfect obedience, and then passed on the benefits to people with autism. Autistics do not have to struggle to prove they are whole human beings, because their wholeness has been achieved by Jesus on their behalf.

Even for those people who are not in Christ, Torrance’s understanding of the vicarious humanity of Christ has positive implications. Commenting on Torrance’s “The Vicarious Humanity of Christ,” Ray Anderson writes:

[T]he incarnation is the pledge of the humanity of Jesus Christ on behalf of all human persons. Thus Christ is the advocate of all persons not merely those who are ‘in Christ’. ... he is the advocate for all humanity, bringing every human person into the place where no human distinctive, whether racial, sexual, or social, can serve as a criterion for relation with God or with one another. 407

While there is a gospel imperative for humanity to turn from sin, believe in and follow the incarnate Saviour Jesus Christ, humanity is valuable because of the incarnation regardless of faith or unbelief. That cannot be taken away. The incarnation is the basis for human dignity. The incarnation is a much more powerful basis for human dignity than being created in the image of God, because the image is broken but the incarnation is a pledge of the love and forgiveness of God and the offer of reconciliation and renewal in Christ. God in Christ lived and died and rose again on behalf of humanity, and this speaks volumes about how human beings are to be treated.

406 Ibid., 141. Emphasis original.
In this regard, human ability or inability is not in any way relevant to human worth or human dignity. There may be debate about how much certain subsets of people image God, but this does not change the value of their humanity. Rather than trying to classify people into subgroups, it is better to think in terms of the fact that Jesus Christ took on the humanity of every human being and lived a human life on behalf of every human.

The work of Christ on behalf of humanity is a helpful basis for an inclusive anthropology, an anthropology which needs no exclusions for any category of people. This is because the vicarious work of Christ, rather than human capacity or incapacity, is the basis for inclusion. It is not necessary to redefine what humanity is, or to reduce humanity to the lowest common denominator in order to be inclusive. It is unnecessary to deny that human sin has affected the capacity for humanity to image the Creator, because our adequacy is found in Christ instead of in our own capacity. The grace of God is far greater than human sin and failure (cf. Rom 5:20: “But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”). Because of the vicarious humanity of Christ, capacity and incapacity are no longer necessary categories when speaking of human being. Every human, whether autistic or neurotypical, is loved, valued and dignified by the vicarious work of Christ on their behalf.

The work of Christ is both powerfully redemptive and inclusive. Christ has done a work on behalf of all humanity, including autistic people, ensuring that severely low-functioning autistics are not excluded from humanity. Autistic individuals are definitely human beings. That is to say, autists can never be grouped with the animal kingdom, but only ever within the human species as those for whom human rights and
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human dignity cannot be removed. But this is only half of the picture. The other half of the picture is personhood. Human persons are persons because of their relationships with other persons. This presents a problem in regard to people with autism, because of their difficulties in relating to other people as people. The question therefore arises as to whether people with autism can be considered human persons. The response to this question is similar to the response to question regarding the humanity of people with autism. It is the work of Christ which was done on our behalf which makes us genuine persons. To understand how this is so, I will now examine the nature of personhood and the way in which Christ gifts humanity with personhood.

The Nature of Human Personhood

To make sense of the gift of personhood which comes from the person of Christ, I will first define the nature of personhood. To begin with I note that personhood has more to do with relationship than with rationality. A short overview of historical understandings of personhood opens this section, followed by a discussion of recent theological developments. The main discussion on the nature of personhood is from the work of Eastern theologian John Zizioulas. Zizioulas posits that the concept of person is derived from the patristic deliberations on the nature of the Trinity. It is the relationships of the divine persons which constitutes the being of God, not a shared divine essence. Human personhood is the way in which human beings image the triune God. As such, to be a person is to be in loving communion with other persons.

Given this stress on relationships for personhood, and the extreme difficulties in relating to others experienced by autistic individuals, it is needful to find a way of understanding human personhood which is inclusive of those with severe autism. This
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is where the theology of T.F. Torrance is helpful. He asserts that in Christ humanity and deity have come close to one another. This union of God and human being means that Jesus Christ has become for us “humanizing Man and personalizing Person”. It is thus through the person of Christ that human beings are gifted with human personhood. This makes the personhood of Christ the ground for the personhood of all humanity, including those with severe autism, whose relationships are minimal. This gift of personhood underscores the value and dignity of even the least unable individual with autism. Now I will move on to a fuller discussion of personhood.

For many centuries the human person has been understood in the West as an “individual substance with a rational nature,” as defined by Boethius in the 6th century. Descartes reinforced this idea by calling the self a “thinking thing”. Accordingly, the human person was conceived of in terms of three parameters: as an individual, with a fixed nature, and characterised by reason.\textsuperscript{408} This understanding of personhood has been utterly detrimental to people with cognitive disabilities, who have been considered by some to be less than human as a result.\textsuperscript{409}

Over recent decades these assumptions have been questioned by theologians. In the 1953 and 1954 Gifford Lectures John Macmurray challenged both the idea that the self is defined as a thinking subject and the resulting mind/body dualism. He asserts that human beings participate in the world as “bodily agents”. In his second series of lectures, \textit{Persons in Relation}, he redefined the person, saying, “The personal is constituted by the relation of the persons. The reference of the personal Other is constitutive for all personal existence.” Pannenberg takes up Macmurray’s idea in his theological anthropology. Human beings are not simply thinking subjects abiding in a


\textsuperscript{409} Yong, \textit{Theology and Down Syndrome}, 31.
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world of ideas, or as agents who interact with objects, but human beings are now to be understood as persons defined by their relationships with other persons.\textsuperscript{410}

But the most influential recent theologian of personhood is John Zizioulas.\textsuperscript{411} Therefore it is important to consider his understanding of personhood in some depth. In an early article Zizioulas observes that Western philosophy has understood person to mean an autonomous individual with a consciousness. But he contends that a person cannot be understood in this way, because persons are entities who “relate to”; personhood involves the “ek-stasis of being”.\textsuperscript{412} To be a person is to freely transcend one’s own boundaries in order to commune with others.\textsuperscript{413} “Thus communion does not threaten personal particularity; it is constitutive of it.”\textsuperscript{414} What makes a person be itself is “communion, freedom and love,” and this is consistent with the fact that God created the world as the result of his free love, because he is love. Since the idea of person is primarily applicable to God, human personhood cannot be complete without a human being becoming the image of God.\textsuperscript{415}

Zizioulas discusses the concept of person further in his later work. According to Zizioulas, Greek philosophical thought made the concept of a person impossible. In Platonism personhood is an impossibility because the soul, which is what gives humans continuity, is not connected to the individual body permanently, but could connect to a different individual body. In Aristotelian thought the person is an impossibility because the soul is connected to one body permanently, but death dissolves the individual totally. In Greek tragedy the term person (prosōpon) came to be associated

\textsuperscript{410} Torrance, "What is a Person?,” 200-02.
\textsuperscript{411} Ibid., 203.
\textsuperscript{413} Ibid., 407.
\textsuperscript{414} Ibid., 409.
\textsuperscript{415} Ibid., 410-11.
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with the mask worn by the actors, whose characters were unable to escape fate. To be a person for the ancient Greeks meant to have added something to his or her being; the person is not the authentic *hypostasis* (substance). The Roman concept was similar to the Greek. The Roman concept of person, *persona*, was about the role the person plays – of which there could be several - and not about the being of the person.416

Zizioulas goes on to explain how the concept of ‘person’ arose out of the early Church’s discussions about how to best understand the God who is triune.417 The Cappadocian Fathers were concerned to safeguard the Church’s understanding of the Trinity against Sabellianism, which taught that God played ‘roles’ in the economy of salvation. In order to do this, the Cappadocians coined new terminology to explain the distinction of the persons within the Trinity. The term ‘person’ was, after some debate, equated with the term ‘hypostasis’.418 This development means that the person is not an addition to being but the being itself. Secondly, the person is constitutive of the being, it enables entities to be. This is the case with the unity of God. It is not that God exists as substance and then as persons, but rather the *person* of the Father is the ‘cause’ of the being of God.419

The Cappadocians were concerned to uphold the fullness of the divine persons, but also the oneness of God. To counter any suggestion that three persons in God negates God’s oneness, they claimed that one substance is shared by all three persons. Human beings differ from God in that they cannot be simultaneously one and many, because human nature exists prior to a person. That is to say, any given human being

417 Ibid., 36.
419 *Being as Communion*, 39-40.
Incorporation of only part of human nature. Therefore, one human can die and this does not result in the death of human being in general. Humans can thus be seen as individual, that is, as “independent ontologically from other human beings”. These problems do not arise when considering God’s existence, because God does not have a beginning. The three persons of the Trinity exist simultaneously with the divine nature. In God, divine nature does not come before the person. In God it is not possible to speak of individuals but only of an unbroken unity. God’s unity is not contrary to his multiplicity, but instead requires multiplicity in order to exist. It was the Cappadocian understanding of the Trinity which resulted in a new way of understanding human being.

The Cappadocian Fathers began their anthropology with the assumption that humans are the ‘image of God’. Humans are not divine but created, so they have a beginning and are limited by both space and time. These limits include individual isolation and ultimately death. But humans are still summoned to an existence which mirrors God’s existence. To mirror God requires going beyond nature to personhood. Nature says simply that something exists and it can apply to more than one thing. Person, however, can only apply to one being in an unqualified sense. In the example of a human being, human nature is not unique and facets of human nature – such as mortality - decide what a human is according to ‘nature’. The ‘image of God’ is about personhood, which is not something which humans can have by nature. Human beings can choose to either live according to nature, which results in division and death, or to

421 Ibid., 46-49.
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live according to the image of God, that is, live as an image of God’s personhood, to ‘become God’. That is what the Cappadocian Fathers meant by the term theosis.\(^{422}\)

Consequently, although human nature precedes human personhood, human beings are called to an attempt to extricate themselves from the inevitability of nature and instead act as if they did not have such a nature. The Fathers believed that this effort to be free from ‘nature’ is vital to all human being. Being the ‘image of God’ necessitates this attempt at freedom from nature, because God’s self is determined by person and not by nature. The importance of the trinitarian theology of the Cappadocians is its implications for anthropology.\(^{423}\) Zizioulas observes:

The person cannot exist in isolation. God is not alone; He is communion. Love is not a feeling, a sentiment springing from nature like a flower from a tree. Love is a relationship, it is the free coming out of one’s self, the breaking of one’s will, a free submission to the will of another. It is the other and our relationship with him that gives us our identity, our otherness, making us ‘who we are’, i.e. persons; for by being an inseparable part of a relationship that matters ontologically we emerge as unique and irreplaceable entities. This, therefore, is what accounts for our being, and our being ourselves and not someone else; our personhood.\(^{424}\)

It is personhood, that is, relationship with another, which makes human beings unique and precious. For God, it is the relationship with his dearly loved Son which accounts for his being. The Father is a unique person because of his relationship with his unique (only begotten) Son. Each human finds his or her reason for existence, not in the ‘nature’ of being, but in the person, that is, “in the identity created freely by love

\(^{422}\) Ibid., 55.
\(^{423}\) Ibid., 56.
\(^{424}\) Ibid., 56-57. Emphasis original.
and not by the necessity of self-existence." A person exists while he or she gives and receives love. If humans only exist as ‘nature’ and not as ‘persons’ then uniqueness and identity are lost. The image of God is a person not a nature. If a human being is treated simply as a member of a species then that human is turned into a thing, and loses his or her personal distinctiveness. Zizioulas asserts:

[D]eath dissolves us all into one indistinguishable nature, turning us into ‘substance’, or things. What gives us an identity that does not die is not our nature but our personal relationship with God’s undying personal identity. ... True personhood arises not from one’s individual isolation from others but from love and relationship with others, from communion.

It is Christian theology, specifically the Christian understanding of God as one God in three persons, which provides a proper perspective on human personhood. People are restricted by nature but able to overcome the problem of individuation, because they are created in the image of the God, who exists as persons in communion. Humans, when directed by nature, will be separated from other human beings, but when acting as persons they will be freed from the limits of nature. Men and women as persons are unique because of their relationships. It is free relationship in love which makes a human being a person, not the possession of a rational nature.

**Personhood and Severe Autism**

The new understanding of human personhood discussed above is valuable and to be much preferred over an understanding of human being in terms of a ‘rational
animal’. The ‘rational animal’ conception of human personhood puts too much stress on the rational aspect of humanness and has the result of cutting off men and women from one another.\footnote{Colin Gunton, "Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the Imago Dei," in \textit{Persons, Divine and Human}, ed. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 48.} A relational understanding of personhood is far better than an intellectual one because humanity is made to reflect the nature of God, and God is triune. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and his being, as Zizioulas explains, is constituted by the relationships within the Trinity. As I observed earlier, the relational understanding of personhood, that is, the image of God, has been applied to people with intellectual disabilities. But this relational understanding of personhood presents a difficulty when considering autistic people, because a deficit in relationality is the core problem of autism.

People with typical autism suffer from a profound isolation from other persons. Both Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger note the isolation of children with autism. Kanner observes, “There is, from the start, an extreme autistic aloneness that, wherever possible, disregards, ignores, shuts out anything that comes to the child from outside.”\footnote{Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," 242.} Asperger in similar vein writes:

\begin{quote}
Human beings normally live in constant interaction with their environment, and react to it continually. However, ‘autists’ have severely disturbed and considerably limited interaction. The autist is only himself (cf. the Greek word \textit{autos}) and is not an active member of a greater organism which he is influenced by and which he influences constantly.\footnote{Asperger, "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood," 38.}
\end{quote}

Isolation is the opposite of personhood. Since many people with Kanner’s autism are shut out from other people and only deal with people as if they were objects,
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relationality is lacking. If persons are persons because of relationships then severely autistic individuals are not persons. Thus autism in its severest form presents us with a theological problem.

There are to my mind only three possible responses to this issue. First, we might say that autistics are a class of humanity who do not possess personhood and are therefore not worthy of human dignity any more than is a non-sapient animal. This is an unsatisfactory response from a Christian perspective, because Christ died for all humanity (1 John 2:2). A second response would be to redefine personhood in order to include people with autism. This response is also unsatisfactory, because it requires that we ignore the nature of God as the definer of personhood. As the purpose of this discussion is to provide an inclusive anthropology, I must provide a third and better alternative that neither denies the problem nor redefines the nature of personhood. This response is provided by the person of Jesus Christ, who in his vicarious humanity gifts humanity with his own personhood. To understand this gift, I now turn to what T.F. Torrance has to say about Jesus as “humanizing Man and personalizing Person”.

**Jesus Christ the Humanizing Human and Personalizing Person**

John Zizioulas makes a very important statement about human personhood:

Jesus Christ does not justify the title of saviour because he brings to the world a beautiful revelation, a sublime teaching about the person, but because he realises in history the very reality of the person and makes it the basis and ‘hypostasis’ of the person for every man.  

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The fact that the personhood of Jesus Christ is the basis for the personhood of every human being is explicated in depth by T.F. Torrance. I will explore Torrance’s conception of the incarnate Christ as “humanizing Man and personalizing Person” and then consider the implications of this understanding for people with autism.

According to Torrance, since human beings are estranged from God, it is necessary for humanity to be reconciled to God. But, as the history of Israel’s relationship with Yahweh demonstrates, sinful humanity is in conflict with their God and this rebellion stands in the way of reconciliation. Yet God has, in the incarnation, provided a way whereby reconciliation with God can be achieved, and that reconciliation is in no way dependent on the worthiness of human beings. Through union with Christ, human beings are transformed in such a way that human destiny is reached in perfect communion with God. In the person of Jesus Christ, God has come close to humanity and humanity has come close to God, so that human being and divine being have become one.432 Torrance explains:

Since in Jesus Christ there became incarnate the very Son of God whose life and being are eternally grounded in the mutual relation between the Father and the Son, in the Communion of love which God himself is in his Being as God, then the mediation of divine reconciliation to mankind in and through Christ means much more than the reconstituting of holy relations between man and God, though it certainly means that. Mediation of reconciliation which takes place within the Person of the Mediator himself means that men and women are savingly reconciled to God by being taken up in and through Christ to share in the inner relations of God’s own life and love.433

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433 Ibid., 74.
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Because divinity and humanity are joined indivisibly in the person of Jesus Christ, the humanity of every woman and man, irrespective of faith or unbelief, is “ontologically bound up with the humanity of Jesus, and determined by it.”

The humanity of Christ is thus the foundation of the human nature of all people. He is, as both God and the image of God, the one who forms humans in the image of God; and Jesus Christ is now the reference point by which we understand what it means to be created in God’s image. Jesus Christ is both “humanizing Man and personalizing Person.”

Only Jesus Christ is fully human, because he is both the Creator of humanity and the one in whom human being has been perfectly realised. He is the humanizing human because he is the source of true human being. Other people are not human by virtue of some intrinsic humanity within themselves, but only because of the humanity which they receive from Christ’s humanity. Being fully human is the result of being in Christ.

In the hypostatic union the divine nature and the human nature of Christ are united in the one person so that neither is extinguished, nor are they mingled together nor disconnected. “In the hypostatic union the human nature of Jesus Christ is taken up, established, secured and anchored forever in its undiminished integrity in the Son of God.”

This union is also an “atoning union,” in which human nature is liberated from its sinful state. The ruined nature of sinful humanity, which is in rebellion against the Creator, is changed by the atoning death and resurrection of Christ. Human nature as we know it in the present world is far from the humanity which was originally created, because it has been bound by “dehumanizing forces” with no way of escape.

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435 Ibid. Italics original.
436 Ibid., 380-81. Emphasis mine.
437 The Mediation of Christ, 80.
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But Jesus Christ has healed and sanctified our human nature by working from within our fallen humanity to bring it back to its right relationship to God. In this way Jesus has become for us the humanizing human because he is the source of humanness for all of humanity. 438

Torrance goes on to say that in the same way Jesus Christ is fully personal by virtue of the fact that he is simultaneously God, the source of personhood, and the perfect human being. God is personal being as he exists as a communion of persons, but in Christ divine person and human being coincide. Therefore, Jesus Christ is now the source of personal being for us as men and women. Humans can only be “personalized persons” because we do not possess inherent personhood; yet personhood is received by union with Jesus Christ and thereby by being in communion with the personal being of the three divine persons – Father, Son and Spirit. 439 “To be truly human is to be truly personal, and to be truly personal is to be truly human – that is the kind of human nature that God has embodied in Jesus Christ.” 440 Instead of riding roughshod over the human person, the incarnation transforms human being into something more personal than it could otherwise ever be. 441

Moreover, the reality is that the union of deity and humanity in the incarnation brought about the redemption, healing and sanctification of humanity in the person of Christ. Thus damaged, alienated and conflicted human being was transformed by the work of God in Christ. People are isolated in individualism and thereby disconnected from authentic relationships with other people, so that all relationships in which people exist are broken and distorted. The incarnate personalizing person entered into this

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438 Ibid., 80-81.
439 "The Goodness and Dignity of Man," 381.
440 Ibid.
441 The Mediation of Christ, 78.
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reality, but instead of embracing its hypocrisy “he healed the ontological split in human being” by uniting human and divine being and, through his atoning sacrifice, remaking the image of God through a human life lived in authentic relationship in the “oneness of his Person as Mediator”. In this way Jesus is “personalizing Person” because he frees humanity from bondage to “depersonalizing forces,” enabling us to once again be personal in relationship with both God and other people.442

To understand the significance of Jesus as personalizing person and humanizing human it is necessary to see this within the context of his being the self-denying God incarnate. God loves humanity with a love so boundless that he willingly gave up his own Son to redeem the human race with the sacrifice of the cross. Therefore, Jesus is the one who loves humanity without condition and who withheld nothing, including his own life. Because of this God can command human beings to love him with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and to love others as themselves. The dignity of women and men is found in giving love unconditionally to others because they are human. The epistles of John speak of a new commandment to love others with the same love by which we are loved by God in his sending Jesus to die upon the cross. The Holy Spirit works in humans to bring them into loving fellowship with God, because God is love.443

As the concept of person derives from the inner relationships of the Trinity, understanding the “humanizing and personalizing” effect of Christ upon human being must begin with these trinitarian relations. God is love within his triune being, and the Holy Spirit is the bond of unity and love between the Father and the Son. In a similar fashion the Holy Spirit pours out the love of God within the hearts of believers, thus

442 Ibid., 79.
443 “The Goodness and Dignity of Man,” 381-83.
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enabling them to be persons, because it is love between persons which defines the nature of personal being.\textsuperscript{444} Torrance concludes:

It is thus that in our frail contingent human nature we may even be ‘partakers of the Divine Nature’ as through the Communion of the Holy Spirit we are allowed to share in the very Love that God himself is ... it certainly means for a man ‘in Christ’ that his human nature as body of his mind and mind of his body is affirmed with a spiritual wholeness and a new ontological interrelation with others that transcends his original creation, for now he exists not just alongside of the Creator, but in such a way that his human being is anchored in the very being of God.\textsuperscript{445}

It is as we are taken by the Holy Spirit into the love relationship between the Father and the Son that we are enabled to become human persons who love as God loves and relate to other human beings as whole persons who are defined by relationships rather than by individuality.

It is through the person of Jesus Christ, who is God and man in one person, that human destiny is attained. Now human being is determined by Jesus Christ, who is humanizing human, the Creator and realiser of human being. The humanity of Christ has healed humanity and reconciled men and women to God. Jesus is both humanizing human and personalizing person, because he is the source of both human being and personhood. Humans do not have intrinsic personhood, but are given personhood as a gift through union with the personalizing person, Jesus Christ. This gift of personhood is the result of the love relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity, mediated by the Holy Spirit. It is humanity and personhood as \textit{gifi} which is most important in my understanding of what Torrance is outlining. True humanness and true

\textsuperscript{444} Ibid., 384.
\textsuperscript{445} Ibid., 384-85.
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personhood are unattainable by human beings without the reality of the incarnation. And importantly, true human being and true personhood are not attained through human ability, but only through union with Jesus Christ, the “humanizing Man and personalizing Person”. Humanity and personhood are gifts of the risen Christ to his people.

Humanizing Human and Personalizing Person and Autism

The fact that Jesus Christ is humanizing human and personalizing person and gifts people with humanity and personhood has implications for the way in which we think about people with autism. In this section I explore those implications, which are both theological and civil. I begin with the theological implications and then proceed to the civil implications which naturally follow.

People are made in the image of the God who exists as persons in communion, and therefore humans are intended to reflect God by being persons in communion with other humans and with God. This is what it means to be a human person, to be in relationship with other human persons. This, of course, presents a theological dilemma when speaking about those on the severe low-functioning end of the autism spectrum. For many autists relationships with other people are difficult or incomprehensible. Must we write off such people as being outside of the category of human being, or as those who cannot be classified as persons? Torrance’s understanding of Christ as humanizing human and personalizing person provides a framework for responding to that question.

Torrance points out that all of humanity is estranged from God and in need of reconciliation. This reconciliation is accomplished by the work of Christ and is not
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dependent on human capabilities. Because this reconciliation is accomplished by the
person of Christ who is both God and a human being, humanity is given a share in the
actual life of God. It is as the person in whom humanity and deity are forever joined
that Christ defines and constitutes human being. He is both Creator of humanity and a
human being. Therefore we cannot look to any individual human aside from Christ to
understand the nature of humanness. He is both definer of human being and the one
who grants humanness to humanity.

As the “humanizing Man and personalizing Person” Jesus Christ gifts people
with humanity and with personhood. If we look to autistic individuals and try to find
within them some characteristic which makes them human or not human, persons or
not persons, then we must arrive at one of two conclusions. Either people with autism
fall short of what it means to be human persons because of their relational deficit, or we
must redefine what it means to be human in order to include those who do not appear to
have the necessary characteristics to be included as human persons. Neither of these
options is acceptable. However, if we understand, as Torrance does, that humanity and
personhood are not an intrinsic characteristic or set of characteristics within each
individual, but rather something which is gifted to humanity because of the humanity of
Christ, then we will see that humanity and personhood are not dependent on ability or
negated by lack of ability, but given as a gift.

The “atoning union” of Jesus Christ with humanity means that human nature is
changed and freed from the “dehumanizing forces” which bound humanity because of
sin. The difficulty which autistic individuals have in relationships is one of the
manifestations of the brokenness of humanity because of the presence of sin in the
world. Therefore, the humanity of Jesus has freed people with autism from that which
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bound them and from which they could not escape. This freeing of people with autism from “dehumanizing forces” is what makes it possible for Jesus to be their source of humanness. It is not that severely autistic people have within themselves the capacity to be human beings as human being should be, but this is something which is gifted by Jesus Christ. This freedom from isolation and brokenness will not be fully actualised until the return of Christ. However, the freedom which comes from being gifted with the humanness of Christ begins in the present. Autistics who are in Christ reflect the God who created them because they are human beings in Christ.

Personhood is also a gift from Jesus Christ, who is the only fully human person. He is both the source of personhood and the perfect human being. Autistic individuals may not have the ability to relate to other people as persons, but personhood is not an intrinsic quality of women and men. Jesus Christ is the source of personhood for autistic individuals. The incarnation enables people with autism to be persons through the personhood of Christ. Jesus Christ as personalizing person gifts autistic people with personhood, and therefore personhood is no longer something which should be seen as dependent on capacity or something stymied by incapacity. Instead personhood for autistics, as well as for people who are neurotypical, must be understood as a gift from outside.

Human beings in general are isolated from one another because of sin, which results in hypocritical and inauthentic relationships. Thus, while people with autism struggle with relationships, it cannot be said that neurotypical people have relationships as God intended before sin entered into the world. All people, autistic and neurotypical, need the healing of relationships which Jesus Christ has provided by becoming a genuine human person. Jesus gifts autistics with freedom from
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“depersonalizing forces” so that they are able to enter into relationships with other human beings. The Holy Spirit pours out his love into the hearts of people with autism who are in union with Christ and enables the love of God to flow through them, despite being unable to love in their own ability. This statement must come with a caveat, in that this freedom involves a process of growth and will not be fully actualised until the end of the age. This growth must take place within the community of the Church, where God is sanctifying and growing his children into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Torrance asserts that being fully human is the result of being in Christ. All that I have said above is dependent on union with Christ, because it is in union with Christ that the benefits which he gives are conferred. As Calvin avers, “As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.” Humanity, as it is bound in sin and subject to death and disease, cannot be fully human or fully personal. Humanness and personhood are a gift from the incarnate Son of God, through union with him. All people, autistic or neurotypical, need to be in union with Christ in order to fully take hold of these gifts. In Christ there is no differentiation between autistic and neurotypical, because all are in need of Christ’s gifts and are given free access by grace to those gifts. This union, and the gifts bestowed by it, is not dependent on capacity or prevented by incapacity, but only requires a faith which clings tight to the person of Christ, who is humanizing human and personalizing person.  

446 Calvin, Institutes, III.i.1.
447 Union with Christ by faith will be discussed in chapter 6.
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Yet what of people who are not believers? Torrance is clear that the humanity of every human being, whether or not he or she is a believer in Christ, is “ontologically bound up with the humanity of Jesus, and determined by it”.448 This means that humanity draws its humanness and its personhood from Jesus Christ, regardless of belief. This is because there exists no other true source of humanity or personhood. Although being fully human and fully personal requires being united to Christ by faith, the humanity of Christ - the incarnate God - is the basis for treating every individual, regardless of ability or inability as a human person, worthy of love, respect and dignity. Because of the incarnation no man or woman should be treated in inhuman ways.

Humanity outside of Christ cannot attain human telos, yet the vicarious humanity of Christ is more than sufficient as a basis for treating humans as worthy of love, respect, care and dignity and this regardless of ability or inability. This is applicable both before and after birth. Before birth the value and sacredness of people with autism must be safeguarded, especially because of the possibility of a prenatal test for autism. Some work has been done towards such a test. If a test were developed and used, there are both positive and negative possibilities. Positively this may prepare parents for the challenges involved. However, there is a need for more research into autism interventions and their effectiveness, and more support services for expectant parents would be necessary.449 Negatively, there is reason to expect that prenatal testing will result in abortion in many cases. Linda Ward laments:

The consequence of advances in genetic knowledge and the huge proliferation of prenatal tests, has not, thus far, been therapy, treatment or ‘cure’ for a fetus

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detected as having an impairment; the anticipated outcome of a positive prenatal test for impairment remains abortion.\textsuperscript{450}

For this reason the Church must work to uphold the humanity, personhood and value of people with autism, regardless of its severity.

Upholding the dignity and value of autistic people does not cease to be important after birth, because many autistic people are in need of a great deal of care in their lives. Although people with severe autism cannot fit the model of the person required by the modern ideal of liberal citizenship,\textsuperscript{451} the human dignity and value provided by the incarnation does not depend on an assumed capacity inherent in humanity. When dignity, value, respect and concern for others are assigned on the basis of some capacity, then many people are ignored and mistreated.\textsuperscript{452} But when we view autistic people through the lens of the incarnation, and understand Jesus Christ as humanizing human and personalizing person, who gifts human beings with humanness and personhood, without reference to capacity or incapacity, then people with severe autism will be seen as people deserving of love, compassion, dignity and value. It is evident that this viewpoint will impact on the treatment of both autistics and their carers. Expenditure on people with disabilities is a topic of policy and budgetary considerations for governments.\textsuperscript{453} The Church must therefore stand up for the weak and vulnerable, including autistic people, so that funding for care of autistics inside and outside of the family home is not reduced or neglected.


\textsuperscript{451} For a comprehensive critique of the paradigm of liberal citizenship see Reynolds, \textit{Vulnerable Communion}, 77-97.

\textsuperscript{452} For numerous examples of this unfortunate reality see Jennie Weiss Block, \textit{Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities} (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 38-42.

\textsuperscript{453} For example, the Australian government was discussing the funding for disabilities at the time of writing. ("Disabled, Carers to Help Design N.D.I.S. [National Disability Insurance Scheme] ", \textit{The West Australian} 1/5/2012.)
Conclusion

The Problem and Its Parameters

I began with the issue of relational deficit and its relationship to theological anthropology. The existence of severe autism raises questions for relational theological anthropologies because autism is defined by impaired social skills. Unless we choose to dispute the idea that humans are intended by God to be in relationship with other humans and with God, the issues remain. An appropriate response to this difficulty does not require positing that people are not intended to be in relationship. Neither does it become necessary to exclude autistic people from a consideration of theological anthropology. This is because of the person and work of Jesus Christ, giver of human personhood.

In constructing a theological anthropology which is inclusive of all humanity there are several matters which need to be considered. Humanity has varied physical, intellectual and relational abilities which must be accommodated by a theological anthropology. It is difficult to make generalisations about human being without coming up against the presence of ability and disability, or capacity or incapacity. Generalisations about humanity often result in exclusion of one part of humanity on the basis of a lack of ability. On the other hand defining humanity by the lowest common denominator of human capability can reduce humanity to something which is indistinguishable from the animal creation. Yet humanity is something which is “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps 139:14) and therefore not reducible to one simple quality.
Secondly, humanity and the world which humans inhabit are affected by the presence of sin. Because sin affects both people and the created order in profound and major ways, sin should not be ignored when constructing a theological anthropology. Sin affects every facet of human being – intellect, will, memory and the physical body. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude that sin has had an effect on human capacity and incapacity. It must be noted at this point that the effect of sin is neither uniform nor necessarily easily quantifiable. That is to say, because sin has affected the human capacity for reason as well as human spiritual discernment, there is no basis for making a judgement about the relative sinfulness of individual humans based on a set of observable capacities or incapacities. Human judgement and discernment is not the judgement and discernment of God. Sin is a factor which must be considered, but the deceitfulness of sin (cf. Jer 17:6; Heb 3:13; Rom 7:11) means that human judgement of another human’s worthiness or unworthiness based on capacity or incapacity is invalid.

Thirdly, an inclusive anthropology should take human telos into consideration. Human being is not something which ends at death, but humanity has an eternal destiny in relationship with God. If we consider humanity without considering human telos then we will never be able to get away from the effects of sin and the problem of different human capacities and incapacities. Human being, no matter what ability or inability each currently possesses, is not what human being is intended to be. This is also true of human personhood. Relationships are presently invariably tainted with sin. There will come a time when human telos is fully actualised and then it will be possible to see what humans, both individually and corporately, are intended to be. Until then, humanity is only a shadow of what it is created to be.
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Lastly, along with the above considerations, a theological anthropology which is inclusive should be one which takes into consideration the nature of the God in whose image humanity is created. If we are to say anything true about human being it must reflect the biblical truth that humanity was originally created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). God exists as persons in communion – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This communion of persons is intended to be reflected by human relationships with the Creator and within human society. This brings us back to the difficulties which the nature of severe autism poses for an inclusive theological anthropology. An anthropology which is inclusive of autistic and neurotypical, which takes into account the matters discussed above, is to be found through seeing people in light of the person and work of Christ.

An Inclusive Theological Anthropology

The goal of this chapter has been to present a theological anthropology which is maximally inclusive, particularly of people with severe autism. This anthropology must necessarily be centred on Christ, as he is the only true human person and is the perfect image of God. Human beings lack the capacity to be fully human outside of Christ. But Jesus has assumed a human nature and he has renewed humanity from within human being. That which is marred and distorted by sin is restored in Christ. He has done this on behalf of humanity. What we are unable to do, Jesus Christ has done for us. Because Jesus is a truly human person, he is able to gift us with full humanity and personhood. The work of Christ is a gracious work, one which is accomplished as a gift on behalf of and for the benefit of humanity.

This is of benefit to all human beings, but the particular human beings I have been considering are autistic individuals, who have in many cases very minimal
capacity in terms of intellect, communication and relationality. While these issues seem to present a problem for a theological anthropology which is inclusive of autistics, the gracious work of Christ is greater than any issues which the nature of autism presents. Christ has done a work of renewal on behalf of people with autism, and he is able to gift them with full humanity and personhood. These gifts for autistics are not dependent on capacity and are therefore not hindered by incapacity. The way in which these gifts are received is by faith in the person of Jesus Christ.

Even though not every human being, nor every person with autism, has been united with Christ through faith, the humanity of Christ is still relevant to autistic people who are unbelievers. The incarnation is the most compelling reason for treating all human beings with respect, dignity and love. That Jesus has assumed a human nature implies that humanity is of supreme value to the Creator. Therefore, people with severe autism must be treated as human persons who are valued, dignified and worthy of care.

The work of Christ on behalf of humanity, including autistic people, is without doubt wonderful. However, in all this discussion of the work of Christ several assumptions have been implicitly made. First, the work of Christ applies to those who have been united to him through faith. This raises the issue of how a person with a severe developmental disability can have faith. This is a work of the Holy Spirit and will be discussed in chapter 6. My second implicit assumption is that human being is eschatologically directed, because humanity has a *telos* which has not yet arrived. We cannot but ask what the eschatological outcome will be for those who are presently autistic. The expectation for those who are in Christ is that they will become fully like Christ in the resurrection of the dead, finally actualising their humanity and
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personhood, which are presently only ascribed proleptically. Chapter 5 is devoted to this topic.

Lastly, I have assumed, as per the discussion in chapter 2, that autism is the result of the existence of sin in the world. Therefore, in order to bring about genuine healing of autism, sin must be dealt with fully. This is the topic of the next chapter, which discusses the atonement. Chapter 4 will discuss two aspects of the work of the cross: Christ’s victory over sin and death, and his bearing of aloneness and loneliness on the cross. When Jesus took the sin of humanity upon himself on the cross he conquered sin and death and made the healing of autism possible. This healing will be actualised in the resurrection. As Jesus died alone, forsaken by human beings and seemingly by God the Father, he understands the isolation which people with autism often feel. This experience is taken into the experience of the Trinity with the result that God knows what it is like to be alone.
Introduction

So far in my discussion of autism I have argued that autism did not exist in the pre-fall world. God does not have autism, but rather God is triune, eternally in perichoretic fellowship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The human creatures which God first created in the world were made to image this relational God. Humans were made to relate to God and to one another in human community. But sin entered into the world, bringing with it death. The world which now exists is not as it was intended to be. Autism, with its main characteristic being difficulty with social interaction, was not part of God’s original creation. Yet neurotypical humans also have problems with relationships, although instead of a failure to understand social cues and to relate to people, neurotypical people are plagued by such relational problems as self-centred behaviour, lies, unloving communication and a lack of compassion. Whether a person is autistic or neurotypical no one reflects the Creator as he or she was designed to.

I have also discussed the significance of the incarnation for autistic individuals. The incarnation is extremely important for affirming the humanity of every individual, both autistic and neurotypical. But the incarnation provides more than an affirmation of the value of people. In examining the incarnation I argued that Jesus took the broken humanity of Adam and transformed it by living out every stage of human existence as it should be lived, thus sanctifying human life. He offered to God the perfect human response of worship and thanksgiving, making the worship of sinful humanity acceptable in himself. Jesus also gifts people with both humanness and personhood,
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because he is both human and the Creator of humanity, both a divine person and a human person.

Yet all that the incarnation conveys about human life, human value and human personhood is proleptic of the completed work of Christ. This completed work requires both the death of Christ and his resurrection from the dead. In order to restore humanity fully to its created purpose and to achieve the eschatological goal of human being, the underlying problem with people must be properly dealt with. It is not enough that Jesus Christ took on the humanity of Adam, but he needed also to conquer death, which is the consequence of Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. If sin and the consequence of sin, that is, death, are not dealt with then there can be no new humanity. The new creation in Christ is dependent on Christ becoming the first-fruits of that new creation. There can be no resurrection without the cross.

The foundation of acceptance of people with autism is the incarnation. The healing of people with autism will come in the resurrection of the dead. Yet it is impossible to understand either the incarnation or the resurrection without comprehending the work of the cross. The work of the incarnation is not complete without the self-offering of Jesus Christ on the cross. By the same token there is no ground for the resurrection of the dead without the work of the cross, by which Jesus overcame sin and death. The resurrection of the dead could not be radically transformative if sin and death still had power over humanity. For this reason this chapter is a bridge between the previous chapter on the incarnation and the following chapter on the resurrection.

This chapter will explore the significance of the atonement for the healing of autism. The first half of the chapter will interact with the work of T.F. Torrance on the
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atonement as explained in The Trinitarian Faith. The Son of God became human in order to take upon himself the consequences of human sin. Atonement takes place within the person of Christ, the mediator between God and humanity. A wonderful exchange takes place because of the atoning work of Christ; he took our sinful humanity, both body and mind, and in exchange gives men and women his holy and righteous life. It is through the atonement that the healing of autism takes place. The second half of the chapter is more focused on the experience of autism, particularly the core feature of being cut off from other people. In the events of his passion, Jesus experienced what it is like to be cut off from others – both human and divine others. Because the atonement took place within the life of the mediator the events of the cross have become part of the ‘history of God’. Now God understands what it is like to be alone, something which he could not have understood prior to the cross. In this way the second half of the chapter is an instantiation of Gods’ particular concern for autistic individuals.

The Meaning and Purpose of the Atonement

T.F. Torrance on the Atonement

Torrance’s discussion of the atonement is predicated on the foundation of the ministry of Christ as the one mediator between God and humanity. The salvation of women and men is utterly dependent on the fact that the one who is eternally Son of God became a genuine human being. Jesus entered into the world as a human person and thus fully identified himself with humanity. In this way he stands as the mediator who brings the things of God to humanity and presents humanity to God. It is the

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vicarious humanity of Christ which makes possible “the atoning exchange” that enables reconciliation between God and people.\footnote{\thefootnote}

In the cross Jesus sacrificed himself for the redemption of all people. In this act there cannot be any division between the humanity of Christ and his deity. If God himself were not the one present in the person of Christ, taking our humanity, our sin, and our death on the cross, then there can be no redemption. It is the Son of God who had necessarily to become Jesus the man, servant of humanity, in order to be both priest and offering on behalf of us all.\footnote{\thefootnote}

[U]nless the death of Christ on the Cross was the vicarious act of God himself in order to effect atoning reconciliation in the ontological depths of our creaturely existence, then what took place on the Cross would have been in vain.\footnote{\thefootnote}

There would be no reconciliation with God if Jesus did not die as the incarnate Son of God. The unity of the Father and the Son in the work of the cross must be upheld, because any separation of the two would imply that God is totally unmoved by the seriousness of the human predicament. So too must the genuinely historical humanness of Christ be maintained. The core of the gospel is the fact that the man Jesus is God in the flesh.\footnote{\thefootnote}

The Father and the Son relate to one another within the life of God and therefore the incarnation takes place within God’s life and being. Since Jesus Christ is simultaneously human and divine, the atonement takes place within his own being and life as the one mediator between God and humanity. In other words atonement happens within the incarnate person of Christ. When the Son of God assumed our humanity, in

\footnote{\thefootnote}{Ibid., 4.}
\footnote{\thefootnote}{Ibid., 142.}
\footnote{\thefootnote}{Ibid.}
\footnote{\thefootnote}{Ibid., 142-49.}
bodily and physical unity with us, and died an atoning death, he did so as both our substitute and representative. The atoning death of Christ is effective because he acted from within the very depths of his union with us and ours with him, and therefore rescued humanity from the penalty of death and from its concomitant corruption and damnation.\textsuperscript{459} In regard to Christ’s substitutionary and representative death Torrance comments:

Through his incarnation the Son of God has made himself one with us as we are, and indeed made himself what we are, thereby not only making our nature his own but taking on himself our lost condition subject to condemnation and death, all in order that he might substitute himself in our place, discharge our debt, and offer himself in atoning sacrifice to God on our behalf. Since sin and its judgement have affected the actual nature of death as we experience it, Christ has made our death and fate his own, thereby taking on himself the penalty due to all in death, destroying the power of sin and its stronghold in death, and thus redeeming or rescuing us from its dominion.\textsuperscript{460}

The Nicene theologians understood that the Son of God had united himself with human existence and provided atonement within his being as mediator. Therefore they gave emphasis to the apostle Paul’s doctrine which states that Jesus is the substitute for humanity, taking on our sin and death in order that human beings can participate in his life and righteousness. Although it must be stressed that Jesus was without sin, he truly took on the corrupt human nature of Adam, with its bondage to sin and its subjugation to death. In doing this he conquered the forces of evil which enslaved humanity. By coming as the holy, utterly obedient Son “he condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8:3) and freed humanity from sin and death. In Jesus’ assumption of human nature a

\textsuperscript{459} Ibid., 155-56.  
\textsuperscript{460} Ibid., 157.
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wondrous exchange takes place; he took what is ours and gave us what is his. Instead of rejecting our fallen, sinful humanity, he took it upon himself and sanctified it by his holy, vivifying life.\footnote{Ibid., 161-62.}

The atonement effects the salvation of the whole person, both body and mind. This truth was upheld by patristic theologians such as Athanasius, who writes:

The Saviour having in very truth become man, the salvation of the \textit{whole man} was brought about … Truly our salvation is not merely apparent, nor does it extend to the body only, but the whole body and soul alike, has truly obtained salvation in the Word himself.\footnote{Athanasius, \textit{Epistula ad Epictetum} (c. 370), 7. (Quoted in Torrance, \textit{The Trinitarian Faith}, 163.)}

But it is Gregory of Nazianzus, in opposing the Apollinarian heresy that Jesus did not possess a human soul or mind, who writes the most oft quoted expression of this principle:

The unassumed is the unhealed; but what is united to God is saved. If only half Adam fell, then what Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of him who was begotten, and so be saved as a whole.\footnote{Gregory of Nazianzus, \textit{Epistulae}, 101. (Quoted in Torrance, \textit{The Trinitarian Faith}, 164.)}

This statement was directed especially at the redemption of the human mind, which is bound in sin. If the atonement did not bring about the redemption of the mind then redemption would be salvifically vacuous.\footnote{The \textit{Trinitarian Faith}, 164-65.}

The assumption by Christ of a truly human mind involved his entire life from birth until death. He shared all human experiences, living a life of obedience which
triumphed over human disobedience and sanctified every aspect of human existence. This culminated in his priestly self-offering to God on the cross. There Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34c). This cry is the vicarious cry of forsakenness and desolation by the one who in divinity cannot suffer and yet who suffered for humanity. He assumed the consequences of human sin and wickedness. Logic may dictate that no one can offer a life or soul in exchange for another. And yet this is exactly what Jesus has done. In Mark 10:45 Jesus claimed to offer his life as a ransom for many. In this statement he drew together both the concept of atonement according to the temple sacrifices and the suffering servant of Isaiah. As the servant of Yahweh Jesus offered his life as a sacrifice that would usher in the new covenant and liberate the people of God. The life of Christ, but supremely his death on the cross, effected atonement for sin and the redemption of humanity.465

In this way the death of Christ brought about an “atoning exchange”. He gave his body for our body, his soul for our soul, his mind for our mind, his whole self for our whole self. The cross, therefore, cannot and must not be disconnected from the resurrection of Christ. The atonement is effected by both the cross and the resurrection and ascension; it is brought about by death and condemnation, and then life, liberation and glory. Jesus became poor that we might become rich, he became a servant that we might be exalted, he endured temptation that we might overcome temptation, he experienced dishonour that we might experience glory, he ascended to heaven that we might ascend with him.466 Because of this wonderful exchange all the “creative, redemptive and sanctifying purposes of God” are opened up to us.467

465 Ibid., 166-69.
466 Ibid., 180.
467 Ibid., 181.
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The “blessed exchange” between the God-man Jesus and humanity means that humanity and Jesus Christ are permanently ontologically related. The resurrection of humanity thus has its foundations in the cross of Christ. Torrance states:

Through his penetration into the perverted structures of human existence he reversed the process of corruption and more than made good what had been destroyed, for he has now anchored human nature in his own crucified and risen being, freely giving it participation in the fullness of God’s grace and blessing embodied in him.

The person of Christ has, in his life and death, changed humanity so that the complete healing of human being is found in him.

The suffering of Christ as the mediator between God and humanity means a transformation of God’s apatheia to a sharing in human suffering. It is correct to think of God as impassable (apathe), but this does not mean that God is unconcerned with the sufferings of his people. Since the atonement occurred within the person of the mediator, the one who is both divine and human, the suffering of Christ was the suffering of the Son of God. It was not simply the man Jesus who died, but the incarnate Son as a human being who suffered and died. Jesus entered fully into human pain, into the situation of men and women under the wrath of God, and even into their abandonment and forsakenness, and yet in doing this he applied his divine peace (apatheia) savingly to human suffering. Human salvation was not achieved by a mere divine decree, but through the costly act of the Son of God, which brought him into the depths of human existence in order to save humanity from within.

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468 Ibid., 182.
469 Ibid., 182-83.
470 Ibid., 184-87.
The Implications of the Atonement for Autist Individuals

It is the work of God done in the person of Christ as a genuine human being which has wrought the undoing of sin and death. As the one genuine mediator between God and humanity, Jesus Christ has undone both sin and the consequences of sin, namely death. Since autism is one of the results of the fall, it is a consequence of sin and part of the broken world, which is in bondage under the sentence of death. This means that in undoing sin and death, Jesus has opened the way for the healing of autism. In his life he lived for autistic people and when he died he died for autistic people. As representative he has died as representative of every person with autism. As substitute he has died the death which autistic persons must die and he has taken their place, bearing in his own body the corruption and condemnation which should have been theirs. Autistic individuals are thereby rescued from the dominion of death.

Since “the unassumed is the unhealed” Jesus assumed not just a human body, but a human soul and a human mind. Autism is not a physical disability like paralysis or blindness. It affects the brain and the mind. Putting aside discussions about the brain and the mind and the question of how these are connected, as opinions on this vary greatly, Jesus had a fully human brain and a fully human mind. In assuming a human mind and a human brain, both under the power of sin and death, Jesus has borne the dysfunctional aspects of the autistic brain, because he is the substitute and representative of every autistic person. This was done through bearing the consequences of sin and death on the brain and mind. But there is no evidence that Jesus actually had autism.

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Having taken the humanity of the autistic, he now offers the ‘wonderful exchange’ so that it is his perfected humanity which he offers to every person with autism. He took human brokenness and gives wholeness in its place. Having overcome sin and death, there are no more forces which are able to hold people in bondage to severe autism. The broken state of people with severe autism is restored to wholeness because Jesus bore that brokenness in his own body on the tree. He took on a body subject to death and will provide the redeemed with a body which can never die or be subject to any of the consequences of sin. Corruption of body and brain is overcome and replaced by Christ’s blessedness. This ‘wonderful exchange’ provides hope that in the resurrection there will be no more severe autism and no more people who are unable to enter fully into reciprocal relationships.

Thus it is on the cross that autism is overcome. The cross is the place of healing for autism, the place in which everything which hinders the person with autism is dealt with in the most definitive way. The whole work of salvation was completed on the cross. The resurrection of Jesus brought about the consummation of that work for Jesus himself and the resurrection of believers will bring about the consummation of that work for humanity. And yet, although death is overcome, humanity still lives in a world in which death is present. There are still people troubled by severe autism and cut off from relationships with other people. Why is this so? Why is autism still present in the world if death is defeated and the work of healing complete? These remarks of Bonhoeffer from his ‘Communion Homily on 1 Corinthians 15:55, Sigurdshof, Remembrance Sunday, November 26, 1939’ are helpful in response:

And now God’s word does not speak to us about our victory. It does not promise us that from now on we will be victorious over sin and death. It does say with all power, however, that someone has won this victory, and that this one will also win
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the victory over us when we have him as our Lord. It is not we who are victorious but Jesus. … We see the reign of death, but we preach and believe in the victory of Jesus Christ over death. Death is swallowed up in victory. Jesus is victor, resurrection of the dead, and eternal life.

It is like a *mocking song of triumph* over death and sin that the Holy Scripture sings here: O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory? Death and sin puff themselves up and instil fear in humankind, as if they were still the rulers of the world. But it is only an illusion. They have long since lost their power. Jesus has taken it from them. Since then, anyone who is with Jesus no longer needs to fear these dark lords. Sin, that sting of death with which death causes us pain, has no more dominion. Hell no longer has any power over us who are with Jesus. They are powerless. They still rage like a vicious dog on a chain, but they cannot get at us, because Jesus holds them fast. He remains the victor.472

Death is defeated but its power is still evident in the world. Jesus has conquered death and his victory will be manifest upon his return. For people with low-functioning autism and their parents and carers it is possible to live in hope, because death has been defeated, even if death seems to continue to reign (Rom 8:24).

Therefore, I am not claiming that the healing of autism will necessarily be manifest in this life. My contention is that the work of the cross is both necessary and sufficient for overcoming the underlying reason for the existence of autism in the world. It is therefore both necessary and sufficient ground for the eschatological healing of autism in the resurrection. The humanity of people with severe autism is now anchored in the crucified and risen being of the mediator Christ Jesus. There it is possible for the person to participate fully in the life of God. This life is a communion

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of divine persons, who are fully relational without remainder. Thus, the person who is presently “only himself,” as Asperger puts it, will be transformed by participation in the divine communion. No more will the autistic person be restricted in relationality or communication or behaviour. In being united to the crucified and risen one autism will be completely healed.

Now I return to Torrance’s final point. God in Christ is very much concerned with the suffering of humanity. God is concerned with the suffering of every autistic individual. In the second half of the chapter I consider the experience of Jesus on the cross in terms of the autistic experience of being cut off from others, the experience of aloneness and loneliness. Although it cannot be said that Jesus experienced what it is to have autism during his life and ministry, it can be said that Jesus experienced utter aloneness (and human emptiness and meaninglessness) on the cross. In Jesus’ experience of human aloneness and rejection he was in solidarity with autistic people. The section begins with revisiting the autistic experience of aloneness and being cut off from other people. Then the experience of Jesus on the cross is examined to show his active sympathy with the reality of being isolated and alone. Finally, I turn to how the experience of the cross has affected the experience of the Trinity. This is done through interaction with Jürgen Moltmann’s The Crucified God.\textsuperscript{474}

\textsuperscript{473} Asperger, "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood," 38.
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Jesus Bears the Loneliness of the Cross for Us

The Experience of People with Autism

Autistic people often experience being alone and cut off from other people. The primary impairment in autism is an intense difficulty in making emotional connections with other people. Adults with high-functioning autism have described a “disconnection from other people,” having an inability to break out of the self and as if being locked away. Yet many high-functioning autists want to partake in social interactions with others. It is very difficult to discover what are the thoughts and desires of low-functioning autistic individuals, because these are cut off by their lack of communication. But we may assume that the difficulties with social interaction are, at least possibly, accompanied by sadness that social interaction is not possible.

This condition of inner aloneness is one which requires a response of compassion from those who are more easily able to form relationships. Isanon, who has worked for many years with low-functioning autistic people, writes:

Just as there is no cure for autism, there is no solution for the loneliness that accompanies the condition. Loneliness is a reality that must be faced by all human beings. It is therefore crucial that when we are present, we are present without any other agenda other than love.

This intense experience of loneliness for autistic people prompts me to ask whether God has any understanding of what it is alike to be shut up within himself or to be alone. At first glance, the answer must be ‘No,’ because from all eternity the Creator God has been in perichoretic fellowship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God

\[\text{Losh and Capps, "Understanding of Emotional Experience in Autism," 809.} \]

\[\text{Isanon, Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum, 112.} \]
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has, therefore, never been alone and never been lonely. Indeed the triune God exists as the communion of the three divine persons within the being of God. How, then, can a God who has never been without trinitarian communion have compassion for one who is shut up within herself, who “is only himself”\textsuperscript{477}? God’s \textit{apatheia} does not imply a lack of compassion for human suffering, but this does not arise from the experience of loneliness. Yet genuine understanding of human loneliness and aloneness is possible for God because of the events of the \textit{passio magna} of Christ.

In the lead up to the cross and on the cross itself Jesus experienced aloneness and loneliness in both his human relationships and his relationship with his Father in heaven. It was there that he experienced being utterly alone. Although not experienced for the same reasons as autistic aloneness, this experience has at its core the same fundamental pain. In this section I try to build a picture of how Jesus experienced rejection and loneliness as his friends and others rejected him and left him to die an ugly, undignified death. Then I will explore the experience of Jesus being separated from the Father, an experience which he never had before his crucifixion. All this is to demonstrate Jesus’ utter, radical solidarity with those who have been alone, rejected, lonely and unable to reach out to other human beings.

But it is not simply that the man Jesus of Nazareth experienced loneliness, but that the God-man Jesus Christ took this experience into the trinitarian relationship. The profound trinitarian understanding of the cross which Moltmann explores in \textit{The Crucified God} helps explicate how Jesus’ experience of forsakenness and loneliness is taken into the ‘history of God,’ so that the God who could never know what it is to be alone, because he exists in perichoretic communion, now knows what loneliness is like.

\textsuperscript{477} Asperger, ”’Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood,” 38.
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This is the powerful message which the loneliness of the cross presents to autistic people who are lonely and cut off from others; God understands that loneliness.

**Jesus Cut Off from Other Human Beings**

The Gospels record the increasing human aloneness of Jesus Christ as the time of his crucifixion approached, beginning with the distress of Gethsemane.\(^{478}\) According to the Gospel of Mark, the disciples had failed to understand who Jesus is and what he must do in his mission. At the critical hour one of his disciples betrayed him, one denied knowing him and the others ran away in fear. Jesus’ closest companions abandoned him in his passion and death.\(^ {479}\) His family and his community, the king and the religious leaders, and the people of Jerusalem, all abandoned Jesus to a shameful and painful death at the hands of the occupying enemy.\(^ {480}\)

The epistle to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus being executed outside the city. “Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood” (Heb 13:12). Being crucified outside the city put Jesus into the same category of sinners as blasphemers (Lev 24:10-16, 23) and sabbath-breakers (Num 15:35), both of whom must be stoned “outside the camp”. The writer’s placing of “outside the city gate” alongside “he suffered” emphasises the shame of the suffering. Jesus died as a man rejected and condemned by his own people, as an outcast whose messianic claims had been rejected by Jerusalem’s leaders.\(^ {481}\)


Jesus Cut Off from Divine Relationship

To be rejected and abandoned by friends and family is crushing enough, but this was not the end of Jesus’ abandonment and aloneness, because it seemed to him that he was also abandoned by God at that time. From the cross Jesus cried out as one forsaken using the first words of Ps 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1; Mark 15:34). The Gospel writers interpreted the events of the crucifixion in light of several key existing texts, including in this case Ps 22. Psalm 22 is a psalm of lament that begins with the cry from the depth of wretchedness. The psalmist laments that he is a worm (v 6), without strength (vv 14-15) and near death (v 20). His enemies are on all sides and they become for him terrifying figures of the imagination (vv 6-8, 12-13, 16-18, 21). Worse than all else God is distant and has forsaken him (vv 1, 11, 19). His suffering makes no sense to him, because God’s absence and lack of help are out of kilter with his previous experience. But he continues to trust in God. After the cry of godforsakenness the petitioner remembers God’s past acts of deliverance (vv 3-5, 9-10). Yet he realises that God himself has brought the suffering upon him (v 15). The psalm ends with a song of praise in the midst of the congregation (vv 22-25) and a sacrificial meal celebrated with the poor and needy (v 26).  

Jesus’ words imply an allusion to the whole psalm. Yet in trying to understand the crucifixion, it would be a mistake to put the emphasis on the end of the psalm. Mark quotes the psalm to emphasise the suffering of Jesus on the cross. The cry of dereliction should not be watered down. Jesus was not mistaken, but in fact his previously uninterrupted communion with his Father must have been at this point

483 Ibid., 39.
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“clouded over”. Jesus’ identification with sinners meant that he experienced the awfulness of sin so markedly that at that moment on the cross his communion with his Father was broken. It was as a man that Jesus died, and as such he must have experienced the spiritual dread of the death of a sinner along with the desolation which that entails.484

This is best understood in concert with the anguish of Gethsemane. “He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated” (Mark 14:33). Jesus was a man tormented by his forthcoming death. He was not afraid simply of the end of his life, but terrified of the kind of death which he was destined to die. This death was the death of sinners, in which he would bear the sins of the world. He knew that he would have to drain the ‘cup’ which God had given him (Matt 20:22; 26:39; Mark 10:38; 14:36). The Old Testament uses ‘cup’ as a metaphor for God’s punishment of sin. The ‘cup’ which Jesus had to drink was the ‘cup’ of God’s wrath against sin.485 The torment of Mark 14:36 is connected with the cry of dereliction from the cross, “which marks,” according to Leon Morris, “the veritable descent into hell of the sinless Son of God – His descent into the hell of utter separation from the Father.”486

In his explanation of the Creedal line, “He descended into hell,”487 Calvin writes:

And surely no more terrible abyss can be conceived than to feel yourself forsaken and estranged from God; and when you call upon him not to be heard. It is as if God himself had plotted your ruin. We see that Christ was so cast down as to be

485 Ibid., 46-47.
486 Ibid., 47.
487 Calvin does not write of a literal descent into the underworld, but rather a spiritual torment. (Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.10.)
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compelled to cry out in deep anguish: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46). ... Yet we do not suggest that God was ever inimical or angry toward him. How could he be toward his beloved Son, ‘in whom his heart reposed’ (cf. Matt 3:17)? How could Christ by his intercession appease the Father toward others if he were himself hateful to God? This is what we are saying: he bore the weight of divine severity, since he was ‘stricken and afflicted’ (cf. Isa 53:5) by God’s hand, and experienced all the signs of a wrathful and avenging God.\(^{488}\)

Jesus, who had never from eternity been apart from the intimate fellowship with the Father and the Spirit, because he is the eternal Son of God, was at the cry of dereliction no longer conscious of his Father’s presence. The unbroken (even at this point) unity of the Trinity, who exists only as persons in communion, experienced something at this point which was without precedent. Jesus, as he cried the cry of dereliction, could no longer feel the love and comfort of his Father through the bond of the Spirit. He was bereft of experience. His subjective experience was that of utter aloneness and forsakenness. No human being ever experienced such a depth of communion with God as did Jesus prior to his crucifixion. And no human being ever experienced such an aching, empty loneliness as Jesus did at that moment on the cross. The loneliness was compounded by the magnitude of the previous fellowship.

The double forsakenness as one who has been abandoned by fellow Jews, followers and faithful friends, and as one who felt abandoned by his heavenly Father, was crushing loneliness and forsakenness. In the words of Ps 22, “But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;” (Ps 22:6-7). Hans-Ruedi

\(^{488}\) Ibid., II.xvi.11.
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Weber observes that Ps 22 is quoted with reference to the crucifixion because of a “profound analogy of situation”. The experience of Jesus was at that moment no longer that of the beloved Son of God and rabbi to his followers, but that of something less than a human person.

**The Necessity and Intentionality of the Cross**

The events of the cross were not arbitrary events which simply happened to no purpose; the events of the cross were all within the purposeful sovereignty of God. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus sought God for the removal of his suffering, yet he knew and accepted that his passion and death were from the hand of the Father. Indeed, while God was at work in the cross, so too Christ himself was active in fulfilment of Isa 53:7-11, which asserts that he did not only suffer because people did things to him but he actively permitted himself to suffer and offered himself as a sacrifice for sin, bearing our iniquities. Jesus was beset by restlessness, terror, dread and anguish, culminating in the moment which the Church has always believed to be the deepest place of suffering, the cry of dereliction. Yet during all of this Jesus never ceased to be willing to lay down his life. These events cannot be understood without laying hold of the fact that the suffering of Christ was necessary.

In his lecture on Gal 3:13, Luther writes of Jesus’ experience on the cross:

In short, all evils were to flood over us, as they will flood over the wicked eternally. But Christ, who became guilty of all laws, curses, sins, and evils for us, stepped in between; He took upon Himself and abolished all our evils, which were supposed to oppress and torment us eternally. They overwhelmed Him once, for a brief time, and flooded over His head, as in Ps. 88:7 and 16 the prophet laments in

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Christ’s name when he says: ‘Thy wrath lies heavy upon Me, and Thou dost overwhelm Me with all Thy waves’ and: ‘Thy wrath has swept over Me; Thy dread assaults destroy Me.’ Being delivered in this way from these eternal terrors and torments by Christ, we shall enjoy eternal and indescribable peace and joy, provided that we believe this.\textsuperscript{491}

Jesus did not bear the utter forsakenness and loneliness of humanity outside the purposes of God. Indeed, he willingly accepted the cup of suffering which his Father gave him to drink. This he did on behalf of men and women so that, as people who have been united with him by faith, we might “enjoy eternal and indescribable peace and joy,”\textsuperscript{492} as Luther puts it. The cross is the place where Jesus experienced what it is to be totally and utterly alone, having relationship with neither human being nor God his Father. This utter aloneness means that he has experienced a loneliness that is in many ways comparable to the loneliness of some autistic individuals.

That someone might experience this involuntarily would give that person empathy. But that the Son of God experienced this intentionally means more than simply that Jesus has empathy with autistic individuals. The intentionality of the loneliness and forsakenness of the cross means that the cross is an expression of God’s intent to bring healing to people with autism, so that they may be reconciled both to God and to fellow human beings. It means his intention to overcome the aloneness which characterises the experience of many people with autism. In fact, the cross is the place of anguish for Jesus the Son of God and the place where healing for people with autism comes about. The cross, however, did not only affect the person of Jesus Christ, but the entire Trinity. How this occurred is discussed in the next section, in concert with the work of Moltmann.

\textsuperscript{491} Luther, \textit{LW} 26, 290.  
\textsuperscript{492} Ibid.
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The Experience of the Trinity: Moltmann’s Theology of the Crucified God

Earlier I asked how God who has never been without trinitarian communion could understand what it is like to be alone. The answer to this question involves the events in the human experience of Jesus as described above, and the events of the divine experience of Jesus in his relationship with his Father. To explore this I will utilise Moltmann’s theology of the cross in his book The Crucified God.

Moltmann argues that the cross is an event between the Father and the Son. He insists that in order to understand God we must abandon metaphysical and psychological concepts of God as the one who cannot suffer or die. To think of God in such terms empties the cross of deity, because that is the place where Jesus Christ suffered and died. The communication of attributes applies only to the person of Christ and not to abstract natures. So it is possible to say that the person of Christ suffered and died, but not possible to say that his divine nature suffered and died.⁴⁹³ According to Luther, “In his nature God cannot die. But now that God and man are united in one person, when the man dies that is rightly called the death of God, for he is one thing or one person with God.”⁴⁹⁴

Moltmann expands on this idea of the cross as an event between the Father and the Son. The Son is delivered up to death by the Father. But forsaking the Son also involves the Father being forsaken as he forsakes himself. The Father surrenders the Son and in this also surrenders himself. While Jesus suffered in being forsaken by the Father, the Father suffered as he grieved over the Son, because of his love for him. This event can only be understood in trinitarian terms. “The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son.” The Son becomes like one without a Father and,

⁴⁹³ Moltmann, The Crucified God, 201, 14, 32.
⁴⁹⁴ Martin Luther, Weimarer Ausgabe, vol. 50. 590, 19. (Quoted in Moltmann, The Crucified God, 234.)
correspondingly, the Father becomes like one who is without a Son. As God has chosen to define himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, he “suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of his Son.”

Moltmann makes a very strong statement about this mutual forsakenness:

Only if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God himself, is community with this God eternal salvation, infinite joy, indestructible election and divine life. The ‘bifurcation’ in God must contain the whole uproar of history within itself. Men must be able to recognise rejection, the curse and final nothingness in it. The cross stands between the Father and the Son in all the harshness of its forsakenness. If one describes the life of God within the Trinity as the ‘history of God’ (Hegel), this history of God contains within itself the whole abyss of godforsakenness, absolute death and the non-God.

In line with Moltmann, I affirm that the aloneness, loneliness and forsakenness of the passion and crucifixion have had an effect on the Trinity. Although, it is not possible to say that the Trinity is ever divided or their unity in any way broken, yet it is possible to say that in the cross the experience of Father and Son is different to what has taken place before or since. In the event of the cross the Son experienced separation from the Father and the Father experienced separation from the Son. The loneliness of the passion and crucifixion are now part of the ‘history of God’. Therefore, the God who has for all eternity existed as the communion of three divine persons has experienced what it is to be alone and lonely. So Moltmann can write,

495 The Crucified God, 243.
496 Ibid., 246.
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“There is no loneliness and no rejection which he has not taken to himself and assumed in the cross of Jesus.”

Because of this, the cross is the place of healing for human aloneness and loneliness. For autistic individuals this is good news, because the aloneness of autism is more extreme than the aloneness of those who are neurotypical. If God, through the cross, has taken human forsakenness and loneliness into himself, then he has thereby extinguished that loneliness. Jesus Christ, having taken on all human loneliness and emptiness, is now experiencing eternal joy at the right hand of God (Heb 12:2). The loneliness and emptiness to which humanity in general, and autistic people in particular, is subjected, has been completely dealt with by the willing subjection of the Son of God to utter forsakenness and aloneness.

Therefore it is unwarranted to claim, post crucifixion, that God is apathetic towards people with autism. He has pathos for their situation. It is not that God did not care about people with autism prior to the cross, but the cross has made a difference in the experience of the Trinity and therefore in the way God cares. Thomas Weinandy expresses this difference in God’s empathy like this:

This is what humankind is crying out to hear, not that God experiences, in a divine manner, our anguish and suffering in the midst of a sinful and depraved world, but that he actually experienced and knew first hand, as one of us – as a man – human anguish and suffering within a sinful and depraved world.  

The difference lies in the fact that God now has a human experience as part of his ‘history’ and can empathise in a human way. Autistic individuals do not need to feel excluded and uncared for by the God who is being in communion, because this God of

497 Ibid., 277.
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perichoretic fellowship is now the God who knows the pain of rejection, forsakenness and aloneness. Yet he is also the God who has healed all of these by taking us into his life and allowing women and men to join in his perichoretic fellowship of Father, Son and Spirit. Therefore, anyone who is united with Christ through the Spirit is never alone again, because he or she is always enjoying fellowship with God.

Conclusion

The experience of severe autism is a fact for many, one which brings with it difficulties in interaction with other people. While the incarnation provides affirmation of the humanity and personhood of even the most severely affected autistic individual, it does not provide a complete means of healing for autism. Healing finds its ground in the cross of Christ and its completion in the resurrection of the dead. Since in the cross Jesus bore the consequences of the fall for every human being, as our substitute and representative, he has overcome sin and death. Because the ultimate cause of autism is the fall of humanity, the work of the cross is both necessary and sufficient for the healing of autism. The full healing of autism must wait for the resurrection of the dead.

God is not unconcerned with the plight of people with autism. In the cross that concern for autistic individuals is demonstrated by Jesus’ solidarity with the autistic experience of aloneness and loneliness. In his passion Jesus was rejected and abandoned by his friends and fellow Jews. He also underwent the experience of believing himself abandoned by God the Father as he suffered crucifixion. But in this experience, he was joined by the suffering of the Father, who suffered the loss of his Son. In this joint experience of suffering in the cross, aloneness and loneliness has become part of the ‘history of God’. Jesus did not have autism and the triune God
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exists as a fellowship of divine persons. But because of the cross, the Creator now knows what it is like to be cut off from another, an experience which is in some ways comparable to the experience of a person with severe autism. God has genuine compassion on and genuine empathy for people with autism.

This chapter has served to complete the discussion of the work of Christ that has made possible the healing of autism. However, that healing will not be actualised until the resurrection of the dead. The following chapter will discuss the nature of the resurrection and what will be the eschatological state of people with autism who are found in Christ. It is in the resurrection that all that is presently proleptic of the humanity and personhood of autistics becomes fully realised. The goal of humanity is to be like Christ, rather than to be neurotypical. Therefore, people with autism will become like Jesus. Although there is some mystery about exactly what we will become in the resurrection, there will no longer be the problems with social interaction and communication which keep people with autism from communing with other persons.
Human beings cannot be understood apart from their bodies. In the Hebrew worldview, the word בָּשָׂר (flesh) encompasses the whole person as a corporeal being. Humans are embodied persons; the flesh gives expression to human being as a creature of God. Humans can only relate to God as embodied people. The theology of the apostle Paul is consistent with this Hebrew view of the human. Humanity was created as corporeal and is saved as an embodied being. Indeed, a person both possesses a body and is a body. The body is the locale of human salvation; it is the sphere in which the salvific actions of Christ come to bear upon the human person. As the apostle Paul observes, “[The Lord Jesus Christ] will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory” (Phil 3:21a). The human person was once in the sphere of condemnation, but is made part of God’s new creation by the Holy Spirit. This is possible only because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In terms of the individual person, this work of God is begun in baptism and will come to completion in the eschaton, when the earthly body becomes the spiritual body.\(^{499}\)

Human embodiment will find its fulfilment in the resurrection of the dead. This is the topic of the present chapter. Up to this point I have considered the nature of human being in the beginning and under sin, the vicarious humanity of Christ and the gift of human being and human personhood he provides, and the way in which Christ

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has dealt with sin in his death. Now I have arrived at the subject of human *telos* and how people with severe autism fit within the consummation of all things at the resurrection of the dead. The question which I will specifically address here is, what will the resurrection of the righteous be like for people with autism?

It is crucial that our conception of the resurrection of the dead, and of the kind of people we will become at that point, is founded on an accurate theological understanding of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. It is not sufficient to simply argue over particular passages in isolation from the broader theological framework which the Bible presents. For this reason, this chapter will discuss both particular passages about the resurrection and provide a broader theological framework in which to understand them. The resurrection of the dead is not disconnected from the work of God which has come before, because it is the completion of everything for which God has been working since creating the universe. All that has been done towards the redemption of humanity will come to fulfilment in the resurrection of the dead. All that is promised by God is ‘Yes’ and ‘Amen’ in Christ (2 Cor 1:20), and those promises find their final fulfilment in the resurrection of the dead, which has begun in the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Much of this broader framework has been developed in earlier chapters. Therefore, I will revisit themes from previous chapters and add to these ideas, while interacting with the arguments of Nancy Eiesland and Amos Yong, who will be discussed below. The relevance of these earlier discussions will be highlighted as the argument progresses.

It is my contention that people with autism who are united to Christ will be fully healed of their autism in the resurrection of the dead. In this contention I am at odds with many writers of disability theology, who believe that disability will be present in
the resurrection. I have chosen two people whose conceptions of the resurrection I believe to be representative of the ideas I find problematic in disability theology. These are Nancy Eiesland and Amos Yong. I will present a position which avoids the weaknesses of their understandings of the resurrection. Eiesland and Yong have had a significant influence on recent thinking about the resurrection in regard to people with disabilities. Eiesland’s conception is aimed at people with physical disabilities and Yong’s is intended to address the resurrection of people with Down syndrome. Eiesland argues that Jesus is disabled in the resurrection, because he is raised with the wounds of the crucifixion still present in his hands and his side. Yong believes that a person with Down syndrome must have the marks of Down syndrome in the resurrection, because to remove the disability would be to remove the person. Thus the chapter begins with an outline of how Eiesland and Yong conceive of the resurrection.

**Eiesland: The Disabled God**

Nancy Eiesland was a woman with a lifelong disability. What began as her Masters dissertation became the book *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, which has been formative in the field of disability theology. Eiesland’s training was in sociology, not theology, and she put together her argument on the basis of a perceived need. In *The Disabled God*, Eiesland sets out to provide a theology of disability that provides people with disabilities “access to the social-symbolic life of the church,” and to provide the church “access to the social-symbolic

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lives of people with disabilities.” The goal is to enable full participation in the Church for people with disabilities. Eiesland employs Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of symbol, summed up by Ricoeur in the maxim, “the symbol gives rise to thought.” This maxim bridges the distance between complete rejection and naive acceptance of traditional Christian symbols.

The power of symbolization is of immense significance in understanding what Eiesland has to say about the resurrection. Eiesland has much to say about the power of symbol:

Religious symbols point individuals beyond their ordinary lives. Religious symbols not only prescribe or reproduce social status, but they also transform it.

The power of symbols and myth is in the motive force they engender.

Because people with disabilities are marginalised, it is necessary to provide religious symbols which have the power to bring about altered responses and liberatory action. The symbols of Jesus Christ as suffering servant and conquering lord are, according to Eiesland, oppressive for people with disabilities. Therefore, these need to be replaced by a symbol which is empowering. If this is not done then the prevailing symbolization of the able-bodied will continue to foster attitudes which “defraud people with disabilities into sharing the prejudices about ourselves and others held by the able-bodied community, leading to feelings of self-rejection and shame.” This symbolization, which involves deconstruction of existing symbols and reconstruction of new symbols, must both liberate people with disabilities and bring disquiet to the

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504 *The Disabled God*, 23.
505 Ibid., 91.
506 Ibid.
507 Ibid.
able-bodied majority. People with disabilities have been alienated by the Church, but they will not remain silent and will not go away.  

Eiesland describes her journey of trying to find a symbol which would be empowering for disability. One day, while leading a Bible study in a rehabilitation centre for people with spinal cord injury, she asked residents how they would know if God understood their experience as people with disabilities. One man responded that God would understand if he were in a sip-puff wheelchair (the kind of chair most often used by quadriplegics). Eiesland reflects on this incident, calling it an epiphany. From this she derives a new image of God. In Eiesland’s words:

I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair … Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright. I recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged ‘not feasible,’ ‘unemployable,’ with ‘questionable quality of life.’ Here was God for me.

It was this ‘epiphany’ which led Eiesland to develop her new liberatory symbol, which she hopes will provide a basis for disability theology.

The symbol which Eiesland conceives of is Jesus Christ as the disabled God, risen with the marks of crucifixion still present in his hands and his side. This symbol was chosen, because Eiesland believes that contextualised christology can “[unmask] the ways in which theological inquiry has frequently instituted able-bodied experience

\[508 \text{Ibid., 98.}\]
\[509 \text{“Encountering the Disabled God: The Church Has All Too Often Been Complicit in Stigmatizing and Oppressing Persons with Disabilities. Jesus Invites Us to a New Way of Healing, Justice, and Liberation,” The Other Side 38, no. 5 (2002).}\]
\[510 \text{The Disabled God, 89.}\]
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as the theological norm." The symbol of Jesus Christ as disabled God is best expressed in Eisland’s own words:

In the resurrected Jesus Christ, [the disciples] saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and imago Dei. …

In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected saviour, calls his frightened companions to recognise in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation. In doing so, this disabled God is also the revealer of a new humanity. The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.  

Eisland concludes:

Jesus Christ as the disabled God provides a symbolic prototype and opens the door to the theological task of rethinking Christian symbols, metaphors, rituals, and doctrines so as to make them accessible to people with disabilities and remove their able-bodied bias.

One major difficulty with Eisland’s understanding of the resurrected Christ is the implication of her symbol. Eisland’s understanding of the resurrected Christ is that of a God who is disabled for eternity. Jesus continues to carry the wounds of his crucifixion in his resurrected body, and he is therefore disabled as a resurrected human being. This ongoing disability in the person of Jesus Christ is the basis for Eisland’s liberatory disability theology. Eisland does not elaborate in any systematic way about

511 Ibid., 99.
512 Ibid., 99-100.
513 Ibid., 104.
the resurrection of people with disabilities. However, a couple of remarks suggest that she does not anticipate the removal of disabilities in the resurrection. In *The Disabled God* Eiesland remarks, “Resurrection is not about the negation or erasure of our disabled bodies in hopes of perfect images, untouched by physical disability.” Elsewhere Eiesland comments that as a child she was told that her body would be whole in heaven. She responds:

> [H]aving been disabled from birth, I came to believe that in heaven I would be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God. My disability has taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge?

Therefore, if we are to take Eiesland’s ideas about the resurrected Christ seriously, then we must conclude that when people with disabilities are resurrected on the last day they will continue to be people with disabilities. Disabilities will not be removed on the last day as would be the expectation of a traditional theology of the resurrection of the dead.

This idea has permeated the disability literature. Indeed, it is hard to find disability theology which does not reference Eiesland, because she is seminal in the field. One example of the influence of Eiesland’s conception is Martin Lloyd

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514 Ibid., 107.
Williams. Williams has a son with Down syndrome and believes that his son will still have Down syndrome in the eschaton. He writes:

Indeed when I think about our own son, if I believe as I do that God knew him before he was born, knitted him together in his mother’s womb, that Down’s syndrome did not slip in when God lost concentration or was looking the other way, then Benedict is no mistake and logically God would not want to remake him as a different person for the purposes of heaven.\textsuperscript{517}

Given the influence of Eiesland’s ideas, it is necessary to question whether her conception of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its implications for the general resurrection of the dead, is valid. I will make some preliminary comments about Eiesland now, but as I also want to examine the view of Amos Yong about the resurrection, I will hold off a full discussion of the nature of the resurrection and how it applies to people with autism until later in the chapter. For now I note some difficulties with Eiesland’s idea.

Eiesland’s conception of the resurrection of Jesus is driven more by her theological agenda than by careful exegesis of the biblical texts. This is evidenced by her own admission that she was seeking an image of God which would serve the purpose of providing a liberatory theology for disability. In this Eiesland is not alone. Other writers of disability theology are seeking images of God which will fuel their desire to provide theological backing to their disability agenda. Deborah Creamer asks the question, “What God for disability?” as an introduction to her discussion on images of God which have been proposed by disability writers.\textsuperscript{518} Yet this question, along with Eiesland’s quest for an appropriate symbol of God for disability, is misguided.

\textsuperscript{517} Williams, \textit{Beauty and Brokenness}, 75.
\textsuperscript{518} Creamer, \textit{Disability and Christian Theology}, 80.
The question cannot be, “What God for disability?” as if there were a choice of available options, but rather, who is the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ?

We must not reduce the person of Christ to a mere symbol for the purpose of fuelling an agenda. To make Jesus Christ into nothing but a symbol revisits the ancient heresy of docetism. Bonhoeffer, in his *Lectures on Christology*, explains how docetism has arisen again in liberal theology’s use of Jesus Christ. He comments:

Liberal theology only wanted to see, in Jesus, the embodiment of a certain doctrine. Thus the humanity of Jesus is basically not taken seriously, even though liberal theology has so much to say about Jesus as a human being. The idea of Jesus’s [sic] humanity bypasses here the reality of Jesus as a human being, confuses the ideal of his humanity with its reality, in short, makes his humanity into a symbol.\(^{519}\)

Since Jesus Christ is a genuine person, both human and divine, to speak of the symbol of Jesus Christ the disabled God is to diminish the personhood of Christ. For Eiesland, Jesus is no longer the Son of God who has humbled himself and become incarnate for the salvation of the world. Rather he has become a symbol which is convenient to the purposes of providing a theological justification for disability rights. Regardless of whether Eiesland is correct about Jesus being risen disabled, although I contend that she is not, thinking of Christ as mere symbol and not as a person to whom worship is due is an abuse of the biblical accounts. Since the personhood of all human beings is dependent on the personhood of the God-man Jesus Christ,\(^ {520}\) if Jesus Christ is no longer a person then the personhood of all human beings is diminished, including

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\(^ {520}\) This is discussed at length in chapter 3.
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those for whom Eiesland is trying to campaign. Therefore, her use of Jesus as symbol is somewhat counterproductive to her cause.

Further critique of Eiesland will be included in the longer discussion of the resurrection later in the chapter. For now I will move on to discuss someone else who is very influential in disability theology, Amos Yong. Eiesland intentionally confines her theology to people with physical disabilities. Yong, however, addresses the telos of people with Down syndrome, which is both a physical and a cognitive disability, making his conception of the resurrection very relevant to thinking about the telos of people with autism. For this reason I will spend somewhat more time discussing Yong than I did discussing Eiesland above.

Yong: Removing the Disability Would Remove the Person

Disability perspectives are important to Yong in his theological understanding of Down syndrome. Yong’s agenda in *Theology and Down Syndrome* involves reading the Bible “amidst other texts from disability perspectives.” Yong states that “this volume is finally a late modern reconstruction of the systematic theological loci in dialogue with disability perspectives”. Yong’s other monograph on disability, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, is also written from a disability perspective. In it Yong uses “a disability hermeneutic, an approach to the Bible that is informed by the experiences of disability.” The theological issue which arises from Yong’s methodology is that of the weight given to the disability perspective as against the

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522 Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 42.
523 Ibid., 195.
weight given to a biblical perspective. Yong, like Eiesland, makes disability, rather than Christ, a centring principle in his theological discussion.

In *Theology and Down Syndrome*, Yong observes that it is important to discuss eschatology, because our eschatological assumptions shape the form of our present lives. Yong believes that the traditional Christian understanding of the resurrection, which he sees articulated in the theology of Augustine and Aquinas, is problematic for people with intellectual disabilities. For many Christian believers with disabilities heaven is the place where disabilities are healed. However, there are people with disabilities who hold different views. For these people, if disability is completely taken away in heaven their personal identities will be compromised. Yong avers that this is more significant for people with intellectual disabilities in general and especially so for those with Down syndrome. Because Down syndrome affects the whole person at the genetic level, that person would become a different person altogether if his or her Down syndrome were removed.\textsuperscript{525}

While not every person with disabilities is in agreement with these new views, the disability theology proposed by writers such as Eiesland has raised questions about the traditional understanding of the resurrection of the body. Yong posits, “If they are to survive the interrogations informed by the experience of disability, our eschatological and theological visions may need reformulation.”\textsuperscript{526} This reformulation is intended to produce a more dynamic understanding of the eschaton. Yong aims to maintain central biblical teachings about the Christian hope while bringing these into conversation with disability perspectives. He does this by reinterpreting Paul’s

\textsuperscript{525} *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 260-70.
\textsuperscript{526} Ibid., 270.
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theology of the resurrection body and interacting with Gregory of Nyssa’s doctrine of eternal progression. 527

Yong claims that Paul’s understanding of the resurrection body as imperishable only refers to a lack of bodily decay and does not address disability. Since Jesus Christ is the one whose resurrected body is the pattern for ours, the resurrection does not take us back to some pre-fall state of perfection. Jesus is resurrected with the marks of crucifixion still present, and this fact is compatible with the notion that “the resurrected body retains the marks of personal identity rather than removes them.” 528 The resurrection of the body involves a transformation into the image of Christ, but it does not necessarily involve becoming able-bodied. 529

The second significant theological idea which Yong presents is an idea posited by Gregory of Nyssa called *epectasis*. Gregory spoke of the soul’s journey towards God. The soul is that which preserves the essence of the person after death. Gregory’s Neo-platonic metaphysics included an understanding of God as infinite and perfect. The soul eternally journeys towards God and his perfections and is transformed so it can participate in the divine life. Since God’s infinity cannot be brought to an end, so too the soul’s journey cannot end. This understanding of eternal life means that human beings will continue to grow in knowledge of God and in participation in God’s life, yet never cease to be creatures. Human love will continue to grow eternally, yet the love on each point in the journey is still full. 530

Yong believes that the Holy Spirit is the one who ties together Paul and Gregory. In Yong’s words:

527 Ibid., 271.
528 Ibid., 273.
529 Ibid., 274.
530 Ibid., 274-77.
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Together these pneumatological characteristics suggest that life in the Spirit is forever the ‘arrival’ of a new creation, the engaging of new and ever-receding horizons, and the surprising transformation from glory to glory into the new image of Jesus. … I see no reason to think that the process of deification is limited to the work of God in the present life, especially when the infinite qualitative distinction between God and creatures is taken into account.\textsuperscript{531}

This does not imply that there will be hierarchies in heaven. None will be closer to God than any other, but each person will experience the glory of God at their level of capacity, while continuing to desire more of God and journeying to the next level.\textsuperscript{532}

Yong combines Eiesland’s theology of Jesus resurrected with the marks of crucifixion and Gregory’s eternal journey of the soul to God to conclude that the Holy Spirit’s redemption of the body involves some continuity with our present existence. Therefore, the glory of the resurrection body is not contained in being able-bodied, but rather in the reality that the Spirit of God is active in it. It is then possible that the resurrected body, like the soul, is continuously on a journey of transformation. Accordingly, people with Down syndrome will not necessarily have transformed chromosomes, but instead they will be recognised as having “central roles both in the communion of saints and in the divine scheme of things.”\textsuperscript{533} The Spirit eternally continues to transform people with Down syndrome so that they increase in goodness and knowledge of God. But this eschatological vision applies to all people, because each person’s identity is constituted by his or her physical body.\textsuperscript{534}
Here Yong adopts an expression which encapsulates his vision of eternal transformation – “the eschatological long-run”. People with disabilities will not stay disabled in “the eschatological long-run”. The oppression and marginalisation of people with disabilities will cease in the eschaton, and there will be as yet unfathomable transformation as well. Human relationships will be healed and people reconciled to one another. All social, political and structural relationships, as well as human relationships with God, “will be transformed over the eschatological long-run.” Yong’s “eschatological long-run” is something which he finds more helpful than a static understanding of eschatology. He expresses it this way:

I suggest a dynamic eschatology is better suited to comfort those who remain behind insofar as it better preserves the personal identities of those who have gone on before even as it reinforces the Christian hope about the transformation of the whole communion of saints.

Preservation of personal identity is expounded to a greater extent in Yong’s other monograph on disability, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*. In this book Yong adds some arguments to those presented above. He contends that the biblical images of the resurrection of the body, “when understood from a normative perspective, are instruments of oppression in the hands of non-disabled people”. According to Yong there are some impairments which are constitutive of personal identity. It would therefore be destructive of that identity to remove those impairments. His list of such impairments includes Down syndrome and autism spectrum disorders as well as some physical impairments, including blindness and deafness.

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535 Ibid., 284-86.
536 Ibid., 287. Italics mine.
537 *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 118.
538 Ibid., 119-20.
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Suggesting that disability will be eradicated in heaven implies a normative bias which assumes that disability has no place in the kingdom of God. It assumes that disability is the result of the fall. Able-bodied people seek to get rid of disability so that they will not be contaminated by its presence. People with disabilities have therefore been excluded from churches. Consequently, Yong claims that resurrected bodies will still contain the marks of impairments. The transformation, then, will be one of values, without denying that bodies will in some way be transformed. Yong questions why Paul did not state his theology of the resurrection (1 Cor 15) in a different way more consistent with his earlier discussion of the weakness of the cross (1 Cor 1:18-2:5). Paul opposed worldly standards of strength and power and he could have explained that the resurrection body might still be weak and yet glorious by God’s standards.539

The resurrection bodies of believers are continuous with their present bodies as Jesus’ resurrection body is continuous with his earthly body and still bears the marks of crucifixion. These marks are present in the resurrected body of Jesus to confirm his identity.540 Yong therefore concludes:

So, on the one hand, the marks of impairment point to the tragic element that remains, that hasn’t been eliminated altogether, even in the resurrection accounts; on the other hand, the marks are also ‘somehow “transvalued”’ so that they reflect the gloriousness of the spiritual and heavenly body – of the last Adam and, so we can hope, of ourselves. Hence, that which is redeemed is the perishable, dishonourable, weak, physical body, but the new imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual body is not necessarily defined by the elimination of the marks of our present existence. Instead, an epistemology of the cross and a theology of

539 Ibid., 121-24.
540 Ibid., 128-29.
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weakness would exult in the redemption of the blemished, defective, and impaired body, since it is precisely in the salvation, rather than in the erasure or elimination, of such bodies that the wisdom, power, and glory of God are most clearly revealed. 541

Yong’s statements about the resurrection become somewhat ambiguous at this point. 542 He claims, “My argument is that there will be no more tears in the eschaton not because our impairments will be eliminated but because they will be redeemed.” 543

He avers that people with disabilities will not literally still have disabilities in the eschaton. 544 However, he wants to contest the absence of disability images in eschatology. Instead of the resurrection removing the marks of impairments from bodies, there will be transvaluation and transfiguration. Hence God’s final salvation honors people with disabilities distinctively by redeeming their weaknesses so that the divine power, wisdom, and glory are thereby most clearly and finally magnified. 545

The marks of impairment can still be present in the bodies of people with disabilities, but these will not be “felt,” because the shame and stigma attached to disability will no longer exist in the eschatological redeemed community. 546

541 Ibid., 129-30.
543 Yong, The Bible, Disability, and the Church, 135.
544 Ibid. Yong attempts to clarify his position on disability in the resurrection in a short article - “Disability Theology of the Resurrection: Persisting Questions and Additional Considerations - A Response to Ryan Mullins,” Ars Disputandi 12 (2012): 5. However, this does not seem to make things any clearer.
545 The Bible, Disability, and the Church, 135.
546 Ibid.
Critique of Eiesland and Yong

The core difficulty with accepting Yong’s understanding of the resurrection is that, although Yong claims that his argument is a christological one, he has shifted the theological centre from Jesus Christ to the experience of disability. In this Yong is not different to Eiesland or to many others who desire to make disability acceptable in the Church. While it is commendable to value people with disabilities and to promote their inclusion, it is not appropriate to make disability or the experience of disability the theological centre. If Christ is not the theological centre, then there will inevitably be distortion, either small or great, of the theological conclusions at which we arrive.

It is through reinstating Christ at the centre of the theological discussion that I will critique both Eiesland and Yong. A critique of Eiesland and Yong cannot be accomplished with a few simple statements, but requires a theological framework from which to address the issues which these two have raised. As the theological framework is one which, in the main, I have already set out in previous chapters, much of what follows is not new. But for the sake of clarity, I will revisit several of the themes of the previous chapters and make clear the significance of these previous themes for an understanding of the resurrection of the dead. This methodology is in keeping with the biblical notion that the resurrection is the culmination of salvation for humanity. As the culmination of salvation, the resurrection can only be correctly understood in the light of the broader context of salvation: creation, fall, incarnation, and atonement. These themes are revisited below.

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547 See, for example, "Disability Theology of the Resurrection: Persisting Questions and Additional Considerations - A Response to Ryan Mullins," 5.; and also The Bible, Disability, and the Church, 118-19.
Resurrection

Revisiting the Beginning

In the beginning God made human beings in his image. This image is one which mirrors the perichoretic relationships within the Trinity. Human beings were made to be people in relationship: in relationship with God and in relationship with one another. The image of God involves many things, but this project concentrates on three things: being people in community, being able to communicate, and being creative. Autism is characterised by deficits in these three areas – relationships, communication and the ability to cope with newness. Since the triune God does not experience problems in these areas and the first human beings did not experience these problems prior to the fall, I concluded that autism was not present as part of the original creation. Instead I believe that autism is one of the results of the fall. Humanity made a choice to disobey the word of God in the Garden of Eden, and this resulted in the entrance of sin into the world. The fall brought about serious consequences for humanity, including the entrance of autism into the world. Humans are now subject to death and consequently to bodily weakness, disease, illness and disability, including autism. I am not suggesting that autism is the result of individual sin, but that without the presence of sin in the world there would be no autism.

This is important in terms of my understanding of what will occur in the resurrection of the dead. While the resurrection of the dead goes beyond the condition of humanity in the Garden of Eden, it certainly does not result in something less than those conditions. If the pre-fall human beings did not have autism, then those who participate in the resurrection of the righteous will be restored to a condition in which autism does not exist. It is important to note that restoration is not the same as changing someone into something which they were never intended to be. Since autism was not part of the original creation, it was never intended that human beings should
have this condition. Therefore, removal of autism in the resurrection is a positive change, not a distortion of being. More will be said about this in the following section where I discuss the healing ministry of Jesus.

The view of Eiesland and Yong that disability need not necessarily be healed is unsatisfactory in dealing with autism, particularly in its severest forms. As David Keck observes in relation to Alzheimer’s, “any attempts to construct an exclusively this-worldly kingdom of God or eschatology seem incapable of addressing the phenomena of Alzheimer’s disease.” The same applies to severe autism. While there are many with autism spectrum disorder who do not want a cure for autism, because they want simply to be accepted as people who process information differently to neurotypical people, the matter of severe autism is different. A great deal of pain and grief is both inflicted on and caused by people without social skills or communication, and a theology which does not deal with human telos must ignore these realities. It is not enough to suggest that the resurrection removes prejudices and social barriers. The dysfunctional aspects of severe autism need to be addressed and this can only be done with a proper understanding of the resurrection.

Having reviewed my understanding of creation and sin, I will now move forward to discuss the nature of redemption. The first aspects of redemption discussed in the New Testament involve the actions of Jesus in his ministry. Although I have not discussed the ministry of Jesus in previous chapters, but only his person and vicarious work, this is significant in terms of understanding the eschaton. This is because the ministry of Jesus is presented by the Gospel writers as something which inaugurates the kingdom of God on the earth. The kingdom will be consummated when Jesus returns.

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and the dead are raised to life. Therefore, consideration of what Jesus did in ushering in the kingdom should provide a picture, albeit incomplete, of what the future will be like. With this in view I present here a perspective on the resurrection seen through the lens of the healing miracles of Jesus as written in the Gospels, a perspective which suggests that it is God’s intention to restore humanity to full bodily wholeness.

*Healing as Proleptic of the Resurrection*

The vocabulary of the Gospels suggests a clear connection between the healings of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. As T.F. Torrance explains, the New Testament uses two words for resurrection, from the verbs *anistēmi* and *egeirō*. Both have the basic meaning of lift or raise up, both in secular Greek and in scripture. While *anistēmi* is used of getting someone up from sleep or raising from death, secular Greek writers did not use *egeirō* for either raising the dead or raising up the sick. Therefore, the New Testament is unique in its use of *egeirō* for both of these. *Egeirō* is the word preferred by the New Testament writers for the resurrection of Jesus. It is usually in the passive voice to denote the miraculous work of God in raising Christ from the dead. That *egeirō* is used of raising the sick implies that healings are connected to the resurrection and indeed are proleptic of it. In the healing miracles of Jesus the resurrection is being declared and demonstrated in advance.

The connection between the miracles of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead is important for the purpose of understanding what will happen to people with disabilities in the resurrection, and of course in determining what will happen to people with autism, who are the main focus of this study. The work of Herman Hendrickx will add

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549 One exception to this statement where *egeirō* used in secular Greek for raising the dead is noted in Albrecht Oepke, "εγείρω, ἐγείρος, ἐξεγείρω, γρηγορέω (ἀσφυκω)," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 334.
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breadth to Torrance’s comment about the resurrection being evinced by the miracles performed in Jesus’ ministry. In The Miracle Stories of the Synoptic Gospels, Hendrickx discusses the miracles and the kingdom of God. The miracles of Jesus are signs of the entrance of the kingdom of God. That which God desires for human beings, his work of salvation motivated by love, is present in the ministry of Jesus. The miracles announce the presence of the kingdom.

The New Testament understands sickness as one result of human rebellion against God. Therefore, the healing ministry of Jesus, as part of the proclamation of the kingdom of God, involved the restoration of human bodies from the physical effects of the ravages of sin. And yet this healing ministry is not a complete manifestation of God’s kingdom, because the signs are merely proleptic of the greatest sign of all, the resurrection. Jesus’ healing miracles cannot be understood other than “in the light of the resurrection, which is the total realisation of the covenant: the man Jesus totally lives the life of God and opens up for his brothers and sisters access to this new life.”

The healings of Jesus should be understood in terms of the new creation of God. Several scholars have posited that Jesus often healed on the sabbath, not merely to oppose the religious leaders’ interpretation of the law, but also to emphasise that his healings were a continuation of God’s creative activity. Jesus said, “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (John 5:17). John’s Gospel often designates the miracles of Jesus as ‘works’ (Greek erga), a word used by the Septuagint with reference to the original creation. “And on the seventh day God finished the work (ta erga) that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work (tōn ergōn)

553 Ibid., 12. Italics original.
that he had done” (Gen 2:2 with Greek insertions.). Jews at the time of Jesus believed that God was constantly creating; he creates each new day of history, despite the statement in Gen 2:2 that God rested on the seventh day. As Jesus equates his healings with these works, that is, the Father’s works in creation, his healings are a new creation, an activity which overcomes the decay of the old creation.\textsuperscript{554}

In Jesus Christ the kingdom rule of God breaks into the world, and when this happens people who encounter Jesus are healed. This must not be reduced to healing in only a spiritual sense – like forgiveness of sins. Rather this healing is of the entire person, including the body of the person, because salvation encompasses the whole person. Yet this healing activity is not yet finished, because the ultimate action of God for human bodies is the resurrection of the dead. The salvation which Jesus both began and anticipated in his ministry is eschatological in nature. His healing miracles point us forward to the future when God’s kingdom will be consummated and his people will be raised from the dead.\textsuperscript{555}

I want particularly to stress here the connection between healing and the resurrection. In his ministry, Jesus healed many people with disabilities – blind, lame, ‘lepers’ and demoniacs.\textsuperscript{556} This healing included restoration of relationships and social inclusion, but involved more than this. The healings of Jesus, it must be emphasised, were firstly (although not exclusively) \textit{physical}. That is to say Jesus physically restored people with disabilities to full bodily function. The fact that these healings are an indication of the presence of the kingdom of God and the new creation has significant implications for an understanding of the resurrection. The healings were proleptic of the resurrection of the dead, something which Torrance and Hendrickx

\textsuperscript{554} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{555} Ibid., 14-15.
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correctly point out. If the healings of Jesus pointed forward to the resurrection then we should expect in the resurrection of the dead that *nothing less* will take place than took place in the healings of Jesus. We would, indeed, expect that something greater than these healings would happen at the resurrection of the dead. Therefore, Eiesland’s and Yong’s contention that people with disabilities will still have their disabilities (or the marks of their disabilities) in the resurrection does not stand within the wider framework which the Gospels present.

*Christ, Not Disability, Is Constitutive of Identity*

The ministry of Jesus to people with disabilities strongly points to the absolute healing of disabilities in the resurrection. The other aspects of Jesus’ work, his transformation of human being and his death and resurrection, are equally significant for understanding the resurrection. These matters will be reviewed here with a view to opposing one of Yong’s main arguments about the marks of disability in the resurrection of the dead. Yong argues that to remove the disability is to remove the person, at least in the case of certain disabilities, which Yong describes as “identity-constitutive”.

To understand personal identity and what constitutes this it is necessary both to look back to what I have written about the incarnation and the atonement as well as to look forward to the nature of the resurrection of believers as understood through the lens of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I begin with the backward view and move onto the forward view later. There are several themes discussed in chapters 3 and 4 which are pertinent to the question of what is constitutive of identity. In sum these are the nature of human being and what Jesus has done to transform and redeem humanity from its post-fall state.

557 Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 120-21.
As I argued in chapter 3, human being cannot be understood by looking at humanity after the fall, because the image of God is distorted beyond recognition by sin. We must not underestimate the reality of sin and the power which sin holds over humans who are in Adam. All who are in Adam die (1 Cor 15:22). “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned--” (Rom 5:12). As a result the identity of every person in Adam is constituted by sin and death. The consequence for human identity is that all human identity without Christ must be constituted by sinful choices, experiences which are mediated by sin and relationships which are engaged between sinners. Given that disability is one aspect of a world broken by sin, saying that disability is constitutive of identity is equivalent to saying sin and death constitute identity.558

But it is precisely this world under the power of sin and death into which Jesus entered. The Son of God became incarnate, taking on the human nature of fallen Adam in order to transform human nature from within. When Jesus assumed the flesh of Adam he remade human being from within the fallen nature of Adam, and sanctified that human nature, rendering human nature new and holy. Humanity is transformed by the person of Christ. That transformation is something which every human person is able to share through union with Christ, regardless of ability or disability. It makes no difference whether a person has autism, severe or mild, or whether that person is neurotypical. It is the person of Christ and his work of transformation which is constitutive of the new person in Christ. It is not the disability or ability of the person in Christ which is constitutive of his or her identity.558

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558 This situation still obtains for those who are outside of Christ. It is not my concern here to discuss the eschatological end of those outside of Christ, but only to discuss the nature of the resurrection of the righteous, particularly what that resurrection will look like for those people with autism who are in Christ.
Since the perfect human response to God has been made by Christ on behalf of every woman and man, the relationship of a person with the Creator is not determined by the ability or inability of that person. Relationship with God can only be determined by the person of Christ, who has given people a share in his perfect relationship with the Father. The relationship of the eternal Son with the Father is constitutive of the identity of Jesus Christ, because he is titled Son of God by virtue of that relationship. As the Nicene Creed confesses, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father…” And since those who are in Christ are given a share in his relationship with the Father, the relationship of humans with the Father, as human sons and daughters of God, is constitutive of identity for human beings. Again this is in no way related to ability or inability. Identity is constituted by sonship, that is, by being sons and daughters of the living God, not by the presence or absence of a disability.

To be human is to be a creature made in the image of God. To be in the image of God is to be a person made to image the nature of the God who is one God in three persons. Yet the image of God has been distorted by sin, and therefore human being and human personhood is distorted. We are unable to be fully human persons on our own. The only true human is Jesus Christ, because he is both the perfect image of God and the only person who is without sin. But the wonder of salvation is that Jesus Christ comes to us as the “humanizing Man and the personalizing Person”.559 It is only as Jesus gifts us with his humanity and his personhood that we are able to be fully human persons. I want to emphasise again that this personhood and full humanity is not in any way dependent on ability or hindered by disability. Since identity cannot be divorced from our personhood, and since personhood is dependent on sharing in Christ’s

personhood, identity cannot be constituted by anything other than Christ and union with him. Our identity and our personhood are thus not constituted by disability or ability.

By his vicarious death on the cross Jesus has freed humanity from sin and death. His death has wrought an ‘atoning exchange,’ whereby all the negative consequences of our existence as fallen humanity have been exchanged for his glorious life. Now humanity and Christ are ontologically connected. In the risen person of Christ human corruption has been reversed and exchanged for God’s life and blessing. Thus instead of disability - which is one aspect of living in a fallen world - being constitutive of identity, the glorious life of God, which Christ gives us, is constitutive of identity.

The difference between what Yong claims about identity and what I have been arguing is the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic. Yong’s argument relies on the notion that a person’s identity springs from something which is part of that person, in this case a disability. Since disability is fundamentally part of bodily existence it must determine identity. However, as I have been arguing, humanity and personhood are not intrinsic to individuals. They are gifts of grace because of the vicarious work of Christ. Since humanity and personhood are grounded in something extrinsic to the individual, identity does not depend on something intrinsic to bodily experience. Instead of identity being grounded in disability, it is grounded in the one who gifts each one with humanity and personhood. This extrinsic ground of identity does not diminish the uniqueness of any individual human person or deny the bodily nature of human existence, but it does preclude identity being constituted by disability or by ability.

Since Jesus Christ is constitutive of identity for those who are united to him, it is incorrect to suggest that disability, or ability for that matter, is constitutive of identity. There is no need then to postulate with Yong that to remove the disability is
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to remove the person. We can have an expectation that autism will be healed in the eschaton without compromising the identity of the person in question, because the identity of those united to Christ is constituted by Christ and not constituted by his or her autism, or by her or his neurotypicality. To suggest otherwise is to deny that salvation is fully wrought by Christ and must have some ‘extra’ component added to it. Disability cannot add to that which is completed by the person of Christ in his life, death and resurrection. Identity is not an addition to salvation but an integral part of it. Disability thus cannot be “identity-constitutive”.

I have reviewed the claim that autism is part of a world broken by sin, discussed how the healing ministry of Jesus is proleptic of the resurrection of the dead, and considered the basis of identity in the resurrection. I will now look forward to the nature of the resurrection itself. In this section I will interact with two main authors – T.F. Torrance and N.T. Wright. Torrance writes systematic theology of the resurrection and Wright takes a biblical theology approach. The two complement one another, providing a thorough understanding of the resurrection of the righteous. Other writers will add to the discussion as it progresses. After gaining a general understanding of the nature of the resurrection I will spell out, as far as it is possible in the present, my expectation of what the resurrection will be like for people with autism who are in Christ.

The Resurrection

_The Resurrection of Christ as the Prototype for the Resurrection of Believers_

Because we live in a world which is fallen and broken, a world in which bodily dissolution and death are inevitable, our conception of the resurrection of the dead
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requires a window into the world to come. This window is found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the firstfruits of those who will rise from the dead. When we consider the resurrection body of Jesus we gain insight into what our own resurrection will be like. The resemblance between the resurrection body of Jesus and our own resurrection bodies is the subject of the following discussion.

In *Space, Time and Resurrection*, T.F. Torrance observes that the resurrection of Christ is, by virtue of his representative nature, a resurrection which incorporates the resurrection of all humanity. Torrance claims, “The New Humanity is already raised in Christ.”

His resurrection has affected the whole of human existence, and has therefore affected every man and woman, because the death and resurrection of Christ has brought an end to death, condemnation and eternal punishment once and for all. He “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25).

N.T. Wright in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* notes the same idea in several passages in the New Testament. In 1 Thess 4:13-18 Paul encourages the church by reference to the resurrection of the dead. Those who have died, he writes, will be raised from the dead in the same way that Jesus Christ was raised (4:14). Thus the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the archetype of the resurrection of believers. In Colossians Paul uses the resurrection of believers in a metaphorical sense (3:1-4) to speak of their standing as people who are ‘in Christ,’ the one who has been literally raised from the dead. The metaphorical resurrection of believers is proleptic of their actual resurrection, in which they will participate in Christ’s glory. All this is possible because the person of Christ is the ‘firstborn’ of both creation and new creation (1:15;

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560 *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 34.
561 Ibid., 35.
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1:18). In dying and rising from the dead, Jesus Christ has brought about a new exodus, which brings the participants out from under the power of sin and death into a place of sharing in the blessings of the Messiah.562

Jesus has become the firstfruits of the resurrected dead (1 Cor 15:20). As the one who is true human and true image of God, Jesus is the guarantee of the resurrection of his followers. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the new creation, which is itself the culmination of all that has come before in the biblical narrative. Paul’s argument in 15:20-28 is one which explores the themes of Gen 1:26-28 and 3:17-19 in particular. Humans are the image of the Creator and given stewardship over the world, but they fell into sin. The resurrection of Christ is the zenith of redemption, which brings the story of humanity to its ultimate telos.563

The prototypicality of Jesus’ resurrection must, however, be understood to have some limits. That is to say, there are things which can be said of Christ in his resurrection which cannot be said of others when they are resurrected from the dead. Gerald O’Collins observes several things which can be said about Jesus’ resurrection that cannot be said of the resurrection of believers. The dead body of Jesus was unique in that it alone was the dead body of the Son of God, the one who is Saviour of the world, who had suffered and died for the sins of humanity. When that unique body was raised from the dead it was also unique in other ways. In being raised from death only Jesus revealed his divinity (Rom 1:4), and only Jesus was revealed to be the Saviour of all humanity. Only Christ brought about justification by his resurrection (Rom 4:25) and only Jesus Christ will bring about the resurrection of all the other dead (1 Cor

563 Ibid., 333-34.
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15:22). This points to the fact that Paul does not portray the resurrection of Jesus as an exact prototype of the resurrection of believers.⁵⁶⁴

In affirming that the resurrected body of Jesus is the prototype of our resurrected body, it must be noted that both Eiesland and Yong claim to use Jesus as a prototype of the resurrection as well. Eiesland points out that the resurrected body of Jesus still contains the scars of crucifixion. Yong takes this as precedent for saying that people with disabilities will retain the “marks of disability” in the resurrection. But as noted above, there are aspects of Jesus’ resurrection which do not pertain to us. The marks of crucifixion are one of these things. The marks of crucifixion are unique to the person of Christ, as they serve to indicate who he is as the crucified and risen one, the Lamb that was slain, who is now Lord over death and the giver of life. He is able to do more than he could before his death and he is not hindered by his wounds. He is exalted above all, so no stigma can be attached to these wounds. Although we may correctly claim that Jesus was disabled during his passion, we cannot correctly claim that Jesus is disabled in his resurrected body.

First, the wounds which are present in the hands and feet of the resurrected Jesus are for the purpose of identification. They serve to identify Jesus to the disciples as the same person who was crucified days earlier. This was necessary to provide the disciples with a basis for understanding the new creation brought about by the resurrection.⁵⁶⁵ The body of Jesus was transformed by his resurrection, but the wounds in his hands and feet demonstrate continuity with his former existence.⁵⁶⁶ Jesus had to

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retain the marks of crucifixion, because the cross must not be forgotten as if it were simply an event of the past. The cross can never be disconnected from the resurrection, because without the cross the resurrection is not a saving event, and the apostle Paul makes this connection explicit in Rom 4:25. The wounds of the resurrected Jesus, therefore, are not present as some kind of example of ongoing disability in the resurrected state.

Secondly, the wounds in the hands, feet and side of Jesus are in no way disabling, even according to Eiesland’s own definition. Eiesland provides the following clear definitions:

‘Impairment’ refers to an abnormality or loss of physiological form or function.

‘Disability’ describes the consequences of the impairment, that is an inability to perform some task or activity considered necessary. ‘Handicap,’ on the other hand, generally denotes a social disadvantage that results from an impairment or disability.

Assuming this definition, Jesus has at most a loss of physiological form in retaining the scars from the crucifixion. These, as I have noted above, are for the purpose of identifying him as the crucified Lord. They do not, however, constitute a disability or a handicap. There is no task which Jesus is unable to perform as a result of his scars. On the contrary, the risen body of Jesus is transformed and more able than the pre-crucifixion body. As recorded in the Gospel accounts, in his new mode of existence the resurrected Jesus was not limited by the constraints of matter or space. He was able to move through matter - the sealed tomb (Matt 28:2, 6) and closed or even locked doors (John 20:19, 26). He could appear and disappear at once, since his

567 Moltmann, The Crucified God, 182.
569 Eiesland, The Disabled God, 27.
body responded instantly to his will. Jesus is thus not disabled in his resurrected body.

Thirdly, the resurrected Jesus is not handicapped by Eiesland’s definition. Rather than experiencing social disadvantage, the risen Jesus is exalted. The stigma of crucifixion is totally reversed by his resurrection from the dead. The New Testament frequently applies Ps 110:1 - “The LORD says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool’” - to Jesus Christ. Jesus has been exalted by the Father and given the title ‘Lord’. The result of Jesus’ obedience was glory for the Father (Phil 2:9-11), and hence the Father has both raised the Son from the dead (Rom 6:4) and has given him authority over the whole of creation, so that humanity shall now revere the Son in the same way in which they revere the Father (John 5:23). Thus there is no social disadvantage attached to the resurrected Christ and he is therefore not handicapped.

We can rightly understand the resurrection of Jesus as the prototype for the resurrection of believers, as long as our perspective is balanced by the unique aspects of the resurrection of Christ. Since he is uniquely Saviour and Lord, his resurrection has some features which do not pertain to believers. In particular we cannot take the scars of the crucifixion as precedent for saying that people with disabilities will be resurrected with disabilities still present, or even “the marks of disability” as Yong puts it. A correct perspective on the resurrection of the dead also requires that we understand the biblical balance between continuity and discontinuity of the person in the resurrection.

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571 For example, Acts 2:34; Eph 1:20, 22; Heb 1:3, 13, 8:1, 10:12.
572 Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 78-80.
573 Hooke, *The Resurrection of Christ as History and Experience*, 57.
The Resurrection Constitutes a New Reality

Yong and Eiesland are eager to point out the continuity between the present body and the resurrection body. This is valid in that it is one of the emphases which Paul gives weight to in his discussions of the resurrection of the dead. However, Yong and Eiesland have put too much emphasis on the continuity and have downplayed the discontinuity between the present body and the resurrection body. It is this one-sidedness which has distorted the picture of the resurrection for people with disabilities. It is this unbalanced understanding which I hope to correct in this section. To do so I will consider the theology of the resurrection that is present in Paul’s writings, with a concentration on the argument in 1 Cor 15. My discussion will rely mainly on the work of N.T. Wright.

Eiesland and Yong have both misunderstood the radical nature of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and thus misunderstood the resurrection of believers. The resurrection of Jesus is not something which has comparable antecedents. Jesus has gone from being the Son of God, who has taken on weakness and fleshly existence and who has assumed the ultimate weakness of death upon a cross, to being raised from the dead never to die again. The person of Christ is the same person, but the reality in which Jesus Christ now stands is far different than the reality in which he lived under the power of fleshly weakness. The resurrected Christ is no longer weak or subject to death. It is this radical transformation, the discontinuity, which I seek to emphasise here.

Although the apostle Paul considers the resurrection to be important to all his theological thinking and hence makes reference to the resurrection of Christ in most of his correspondence, it is in the correspondence with the Corinthians that the main
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passages dealing with the resurrection are to be found. The whole of 1 Cor 15 is devoted to the resurrection of the dead. Paul’s entire argument is an explication of the resurrection of those who are in Christ, and is structured around the idea of new creation. Paul alludes throughout the chapter to the creation story in Gen 1-3, both using the creation narrative as a structural feature and as a source of his illustrations. The whole chapter explores the nature of the new creation with humanity at the centre. Since death is an interloper in God’s good creation, its existence cannot be tolerated and it has therefore been conquered by Christ and he will completely do away with it (1 Cor 15:26).\textsuperscript{574} Wright observes, “‘Resurrection’ does not refer to some part or aspect of the human being not dying but instead going on into a continuing life in a new mode; it refers to something that does die and is then given a new life.”\textsuperscript{575}

The second half of 1 Cor 15 intersects most directly with the point of my discussion. In verses 35-49 Paul addresses the question of the kind of body the dead will have when they are raised. His answer leads up to the statement, “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven” (15:49). Central to the matter of the kind of body with which Christ’s followers will be raised is the nature of the body in which Christ is now resurrected. The resurrection will involve “discontinuity within continuity”. Just as a seed is planted and something grows which is different from the seed, yet comes from the seed, so the new body has continuity with the present body, but will not be corruptible like the present body. The new body will be created and sustained by the Spirit, because of the vivifying work of Christ, the new Adam. Paul stresses that the resurrection of the body is radically

\textsuperscript{574} Wright, \textit{The Resurrection of the Son of God}, 21-213, 313-14.
\textsuperscript{575} Ibid., 314. Italics original.
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different from resurrection of dead flesh. A seed does not grow into a tree by being unearthed and restored to being a seed.\textsuperscript{576}

In the penultimate section of chapter 15 (vv 42-49), Paul emphasises the discontinuity between the present body – corruptible and subject to decay and death – and the resurrection body – incorruptible and immortal. Corruption and incorruption are the key designations which distinguish the two kinds of bodies: the earthly body which must go back to the dust and the heavenly body of the new creation. Genesis 2:7 (LXX) tells of God making Adam into a living psyche. There is no underlying essential form of human being; this is human being. Humanity is not meant to abandon bodily existence, but rather take on the form of body which is provided by the Spirit of God. The resurrection is not a return to the original creation of Eden, now corrupted by sin, but a transition into the new creation, which was always intended for humanity but has not previously existed.\textsuperscript{577}

Paul’s final remarks in chapter 15 (vv 50-58) emphasise the victory over death which has been won; in the new creation there is no death because that which brought death into the world, that is, sin, has been overcome (vv 56-57). Those who participate in the resurrection of the dead will be clothed with immortality, that is, they will be given a new body which can never deteriorate, never be corrupted and never die. When Paul says that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (15:50), he is not referring to human physicality as such, but to the ‘flesh’ which is corruptible and mortal. In the future, human being will still be corporeal, but it will not be decaying and mortal.\textsuperscript{578}

\textsuperscript{576} Ibid., 340-42.
\textsuperscript{577} Ibid., 347, 53.
\textsuperscript{578} Ibid., 357, 59.
The discussion in 1 Cor 15 about the future resurrection is characterised by its attention to both the continuity and the discontinuity with the present body. If the body which will be resurrected is not the same body as the one which we presently inhabit then we will not be the same persons, but someone else. But at the same time, the body which will be resurrected will be radically different from the one in which we now dwell. This also is necessary, because the present bodies are subject to corruption, disease, dishonour, dissolution and death. The present body is not suitable for eternal life in that it is mortal and subject to decay. Such a body must be radically transformed in the resurrection, and that is exactly what we would expect based on Paul’s discussion in 1 Cor 15. It is exactly what we should expect given the nature of the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

It is this radical transformation of Jesus which Torrance observes about the resurrection. The same language is used of Jesus’ resurrection and the resurrection of saints (Matt 27:52), the raising of Lazarus (John 11:23) and of people who are healed. Yet the resurrection of Jesus is different to all of these events, even though a similar vocabulary is used. Jesus rose from the dead and cannot die again; he will never again be subject to corruption, but rather his humanity has been radically transformed.\(^{579}\) Therefore, as Torrance so forcefully states:

> It means that the risen Jesus Christ cannot be discerned within the frame of the old conditions of life which by his resurrection he has transcended, and cannot be understood except within the context of the transformation which it has brought about. If it could be discerned and understood within the old frame and context, then … that would imply the subjection of Jesus once again to his passion.\(^{580}\)

\(^{579}\) Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 35.

\(^{580}\) Ibid., 37.
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Jesus cannot be subject to his passion again, and therefore cannot experience physical corruption or disability any more.

Since the risen Jesus inhabits a new reality, and since his resurrection encompasses the resurrection of every believer, there should be an expectation for believers that the future existence, which we are promised as an inheritance shared with Christ (Rom 8:17), will be glorious in a way which is presently unimaginable. To project this life of weakness, corruptibility, shame and suffering into the resurrection is to rob believers of the expectation of glory. The contemplation of the glory of the resurrection is presented in the New Testament as something which can give impetus to our present service for God. Wright comments pertinently:

But whereas in 1 Corinthians the movement is primarily towards the future, straining towards the resurrection and discovering what needs to be done in the present to anticipate it, in 2 Corinthians the movement is primarily towards the present, discovering in the powerful resurrection of Jesus and the promised resurrection for all his people the secret of facing suffering and pain here and now.581

The suffering of people with autism should not be ignored. In disability studies it is considered important to dissociate suffering from impairment. In many cases people with disabilities suffer, not as a result of their impairments, but as a result of exclusion or societal attitudes and practices towards people with disabilities.582 Stanley Hauerwas argues that people with intellectual disabilities do not suffer from their disability, but they do suffer from being ill-treated in the world.583 Brett Webb-

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581 Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, 300.
582 Amos Yong, “Disability and Suffering: Pastoral and Practical Theological Considerations” (paper presented at the Summer Institute of Theology and Disability, Dallas, TX, 2014).
583 Hauerwas, Suffering Presence, 170-71.
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Mitchell attributes the suffering of people with disabilities to pressure from others to conform to societal norms, because people do not accept those who are different.\(^{584}\) No doubt autistic people suffer because of the way in which they are treated by others. However, there is genuine suffering which is the result of the impairments associated with autism. An extract from a recent autistic biography *Carly’s Voice* will illustrate this point. Author Fleischmann laments about his daughter’s autism:

> I saw no beauty in this condition. Autism was a thief. The opportunities it stole from Carly were obvious: the chance to participate, to play, to learn, to fit in. It stole a sister from Matthew and Taryn. It stole energy and money and patience. It was stealing our daughter, bit by bit. I saw not beauty, only evil. What force of good attempts to rob a parent of the love of a child?\(^{585}\)

Since people with severe autism frequently undergo suffering, both from the symptoms of the condition and stigma and prejudice from some neurotypical people, the comfort of the future resurrection is important. What we look forward to can enable us to live lives which honour God, or keep us from doing so if our future expectation is without hope. We must therefore have a genuine estimation of the greatness of that glory. Eiesland in particular underplays the present glory of the risen Jesus, because she conceives of the risen Christ as the one who is still disabled, one whose risen existence is “unself-pitying, painstaking survival,” eternally living with the damage done by the sword which pierced his side.\(^{586}\) Such a conception removes the hope of the healing of disability in the resurrection and thereby takes away one means by which people with disabilities can be comforted about their present difficulties.

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\(^{585}\) Fleischmann and Fleischmann, *Carly's Voice*, 83.

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The radical transformation of the resurrection must not be underestimated. It is vital to the hope of people with disabilities to have a true estimation of the discontinuity alongside the continuity of the person who will be resurrected. The discontinuity is a reflection of the fact that the resurrection of the dead is the final step in the work of redemption. It brings an end to the world of sin and death. We must not forget that the resurrection of the dead should not be separated from the entire work of the person of Christ. It is to an appreciation of its proper context that I now turn.

**The Context of the Resurrection**

The resurrection must be understood within the New Testament framework of redemption from sin. Its meaning cannot be disconnected from this framework without utterly distorting its significance. According to Torrance, the interpretation of the resurrection must not be disconnected from the actual historical event of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Torrance makes this comment in the context of German New Testament scholarship which separated history into two kinds: actual historical events and that which has its centre in the inner life of a person. It is important that any interpretation of the resurrection fully appreciates that the gospel is founded in historical events.\(^{587}\) Torrance writes:

> But if the interpretation is only put upon the fact by way of valuation and bears no intrinsic relation to it, if the meaning is only a ‘plus’ to the occurrence by way of the interest it has for the persons involved in it and is not inherent in the occurrence, then in the last resort the interpretation or meaning is detachable from

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\(^{587}\) Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 40-41.
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the occurrence or fact and can have an independent life apart from it as some sort of spaceless and timeless ‘event’.

This comment is apt in regard to Eiesland’s conception of the resurrection of Jesus as the disabled God. The way in which Eiesland has interpreted the resurrection of Jesus has more to do with her stated agenda - to bring about inclusion of people with disabilities in the Church and to enable full participation in the Church – than it has to do with the actual event of the resurrection of the Christ from the dead. She has disconnected the meaning from the event itself and given the resurrection a meaning which none of the biblical writers has attached to it. It is not so important to the symbol of the disabled God that Jesus is risen from the dead as a glorified human being, as it is important that this provides the desired symbol. The symbol is a meaning detached from the actual event in history.

Torrance avers that if we are to understand the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the way it is exposited in the New Testament, then we cannot separate the resurrection of Christ from the powerful act of God in the incarnation, an act which encompasses the whole gamut of events from the birth of Jesus to the crucifixion, in which he overcame sin, death and the powers of evil. “The resurrection cannot be detached from Christ himself.”\textsuperscript{589} It must be understood in terms of the person of Christ, who is both human and divine. It is the person of Christ who rose from dead. It must at the same time never be divorced from the salvific work of Christ, who took on mortal flesh and human corruption, living beneath the pall of death and judgement, to bring about the salvation and transformation of human being.\textsuperscript{590}

\textsuperscript{588} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{589} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{590} Ibid.
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It is similarly impossible to separate the message of the cross from the message of the resurrection. The New Testament communicates to us, not a Christ of Good Friday and a Christ of Easter Sunday, but only the crucified and risen Lord, the Lamb who was slain and who lives forever. Jesus united himself with human nature in its weakness, corruption and existence under wrath and judgement, living a pure, holy and righteous life, thereby overcoming all enmity with God and enabling in himself the resurrection of human nature in union with the Father. Thus the resurrection must be understood, not only as the conclusion to the work of salvation, but actually now part of the essence of the person of Jesus, the one mediator between God and humanity.\(^\text{591}\)

According to Torrance, Jesus overcame death by his absolute holiness (Rom 1:4). Now death has no rights over humanity; it is only ever the wages of sin and never a true part of human nature. Death is not natural to humanity. We must not fail to see the resurrection as part of Christ’s overcoming of sin. Just as the crucifixion would have no saving value without the resurrection, so too the resurrection would have no possible saving value without the overcoming of sin and judgement in the cross. Disconnected from the cross the resurrection is vacated of forgiveness and is only an exhibition of naked power.\(^\text{592}\)

Eiesland contends that the resurrection of Christ with the wounds of crucifixion still in his hands demonstrates that disability has nothing to do with sin. “The disabled God repudiates the conception of disability as a consequence of individual sin. Injustice against persons with disabilities is surely sin; our bodies, however, are not artefacts of sin, original or otherwise.”\(^\text{593}\) Such a claim can only be made by disconnecting the resurrection from the cross and from the purpose for which Jesus

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\(^{591}\) Ibid., 49-50.

\(^{592}\) Ibid., 54, 58.

\(^{593}\) Eiesland, \textit{The Disabled God}, 101.
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became incarnate. Since the resurrection makes no sense without the crucifixion, the wounds must be understood as the consequence of sin, because Jesus was crucified for sinners. Rather than showing that disability has nothing to do with sin, the scars in the hands of the resurrected Christ remind us continually that Jesus was crucified, and consequently disabled on the cross, because of the sin of the world. He came that we might be freed from sin. That he is resurrected with the wounds of crucifixion is a demonstration that the resurrected Lord is the Lamb of God who has overcome sin and death.

Resurrection Is of the Whole Person

I have situated the resurrection within the whole salvific event which includes the crucifixion. It is now necessary to consider one further issue – the way in which disability is conceived of - before coming to a conclusion about the resurrection for people with autism. Torrance emphasises that the resurrection is the redemption of the whole person. Human beings are, by virtue of sinfulness, under judgement and bondage to sin and corruption and the inevitability of death. Resurrection restores humanity to a place wherein this bondage is undone. The resurrected person is released from the threat of non-being, released from the power of evil and released from the power of death. When redemption includes resurrection the whole person is redeemed into complete humanity, including the restoration and liberation of the physical body.\footnote{Torrance, \textit{Space, Time and Resurrection}, 74.} This understanding of the resurrection of the whole person is important to an understanding of disability.

Many disability writers are concerned about the medical model of disability, which “locates disability solely in the individual body and understands disability in
relation to the medical diagnosis, correction, or rehabilitation of the individual body.”

Eiesland opposes the medical model and instead defines disability in terms of a social problem, that is, disability is not contained within the person, but results from societal practices which cause a lack of access plus discrimination against people with impairments.

Similarly Yong notes “that disability is to be understood not only in biological or medical terms, but also in social terms.”

People with disabilities must deal, not simply with the physical limitations posed by their impairments, but also with social prejudices, stigmas and unhelpful attitudes of others.

While it is vital to be aware of the social factors which make having an impairment more difficult, so as to address these matters, disability should not be understood as exclusively a social issue. Sally French points out that the problems which people with impairments face cannot be fully solved by a social model of disability. Even if appropriate social policies might be implemented this would not eliminate disability.

Dia R. Thompson expresses it this way:

For probably all of us, at least at times, being disabled hurts. Even if the larger community would adopt totally fair and appropriate attitudes towards people with disabilities, this would still not eliminate the sense of loss, the frustration, and indeed the anger we feel just because we are disabled.

The point is that we cannot ignore the medical and physical aspects of disability, even if social factors play a significant role in disability.

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597 Yong, The Bible, Disability, and the Church, 12.
598 Ibid.
Resurrection

This fact impinges on my understanding of people with disabilities in the resurrection. In an effort to emphasize that which had been ignored in the theology of others, Eiesland and Yong concentrate on a model which assumes that disability is the result of injustice and discrimination. Therefore, in their theology the resurrection of the dead does not adequately deal with disability on an individual level, but only on a social level. That is to say, according to Eiesland and Yong’s understanding, in the eschaton disability as a social problem will not remain. People may still have their impairments (or the marks of impairment), but there will no longer be injustice, exclusion or discrimination and shame. This theology, however, is inadequate in terms of an understanding of the whole person in the resurrection.

The theology of Yong and Eiesland ignores the fact that people with disabilities are not simply members of society or even members of the Church. They are in fact whole people. It is the whole person who is healed in the resurrection, including the body and brain of the person with a disability. Thus, while the social model of disability is no doubt a useful corrective to the previous exclusive use of the medical model in theology, the social model is not complete on its own. The biblical picture is not merely one of individuals and their problems, nor one of society and its problems, but of individual persons who are placed together with other persons to form the body of Christ. Each one of those persons in the Church is united to Christ and shares in his resurrection life. Together the people of God share in the life of God as the body and bride of Christ. Therefore, we cannot ignore the social aspects of disability which will be healed in the resurrection as Yong has attested. But neither can we ignore the healing of the individual believer with a disability. Therefore, any theology of the resurrection which discusses disability must also articulate the healing of individual physical and mental characteristics of the person with a disability.
The Destiny of People with Autism

So far my argument has been a negative one in that it was aimed at countering much of what has been said about the resurrection of the dead in Eiesland and Yong, as representative of a large amount of disability literature. Now I want to be able to make some positive statements about the destiny of people with autism who are in Christ. It must be said at this point that our knowledge of the future glory that will be experienced by those who are in Christ is necessarily limited by our present perspective. As the apostle Paul writes, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). The apostle John also articulates this uncertainty, “Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

In previous chapters I have argued that humans are created in the image of God, but that image has been radically distorted by sin. It is not possible, then, for humans to attain the image of God without divine intervention on their behalf. This is exactly what Jesus Christ has done. As the perfect human being and true image of God, he is able to gift men and women with a share in the image of God. Not only is Jesus the true image of God, the archetype in whose likeness humanity was created, but he is the firstfruits of a new humanity which is being made to be the image of God as God originally intended. To explore this idea I return to and expand on the discussion based on Stanley Grenz’s The Social God and the Relational Self, a discussion which I began in chapter 3.
As I have explained previously in chapter 3, Grenz asserts, according to his exegesis of Rom 8:29, that conformity to Christ is the “divinely determined and divinely guaranteed destiny” of the community of God’s people. Conformity to Christ is the endpoint of human being; it is human *telos*. Christian believers have participated (past) in Christ’s death and will participate (future) in his glory. Believers will become joined to the kind of existence of which Christ’s existence is the prototype. Romans 8:29 is the ultimate exegesis of Gen 1:26-27 about the creation of humanity in God’s image. Since Christ has risen from the dead he is now the one in whom full humanness exists. This fullness is what was always intended for humanity from the start. Yet this fullness is not meant for Jesus alone, but rather he is the giver of full humanity to all who will be conformed to his image.

Grenz explains how that image will come to fruition in the eschaton. The new humanity, which will bear the image of Christ, cannot be understood merely from Rom 8:29, but needs to be seen in light of 1 Cor 15:49: “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.” Here the resurrected believer is connected to the image of God. Human destiny involves sharing in the resurrection of Christ. Up to this point in 1 Cor 15, Paul has argued on the basis of a contrast between the first human Adam and the first of the new humanity, namely Christ the last Adam. Jesus is the last Adam who ushers in the eschatological resurrection by his own resurrection from the dead. Adam brought death into the world, and Christ will make alive those who are united to him. His resurrection is

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602 Ibid., 229-31.
proleptic of the resurrection of all others. “In this sense, Adam and Christ become the representatives of two corporate realities.”

When believers are resurrected, Christ’s victory over death will be completed and the whole of salvation history will arrive at its climax. People were always intended to have spiritual bodies. This is not an intrinsic part of human being, but rather the eschatological goal of human being, brought about through the work of the last Adam. But the spiritual body must await the arrival of the new humanity, whose destiny is to share in Christ’s resurrected state. The new humanity will be clothed with the image of the heavenly man, just as the present humanity is clothed with the image of the earthly man. The destiny of the new humanity is to share in the glorious qualities of the risen Christ.

Grenz sums up the nature of the image of God this way:

The biblical narrative of the *imago Dei* moves from creation to Christ and then on to new creation. It begins with the creation of humankind to be the divine image, and moves to Christ as the fullness of the divine image, before concluding with the glorified new humanity sharing in the divine image.

The point is that the image of God, which was given in Genesis and broken by sin, is being restored by participation in Christ, but will come to eschatological fullness in the resurrection of the dead. All that is proleptic in the life of the person who is presently united to Christ will be brought to completion in the resurrection of the dead. Indeed, it would be meaningless to speak of people being human persons in Christ if that did not have a future referent, that is, the actualisation of that humanity and

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603 Ibid., 233-35.
604 Ibid., 235.
605 Ibid., 235-39.
606 Ibid., 240.
personhood in the resurrection of the dead. What we experience now cannot be a true participation in what Christ presently has if that participation does not come to fruition in our own experience of complete human existence when raised to life with Christ. So all that I have said about ability and inability being irrelevant for those who are in Christ, because of the work of Christ on their behalf, must culminate in the complete transformation of every human being in Christ at the resurrection of the dead.

**Conclusion: The Actualisation of Human Personhood**

What then does that actualisation look like? Answering this question requires going back to the beginning, to chapter 2, where I discussed three aspects of what it means to be created in the image of God – community, communication and creativity. Women and men are made to image the triune being of God, to be persons in community, to communicate and to be creative. Since these three things are aspects of the image of God which are problematic for people with autism, I anticipate that the resurrection of the dead will bring restoration in these areas. Just as I have argued that Jesus has done these things on behalf of people with autism, I now argue that he will **actualise** their participation in his humanity and personhood by restoring the fullness of community, communication and creativity.

So people who have been unable to relate to other people because of their brain dysfunction will be freed from that dysfunction. The ability to communicate will be perfected and there will no longer be difficulties in communicating, either verbally nor non-verbally. The ability to embrace newness will become a reality. There will be nothing in the eschatological community of the people of God which hinders the communion of people with other people or hinders the communion of people with God.
Resurrection

Whatever problems that the present characteristics of autism have presented for people with autism, and for those who care for people with autism, will be removed in the resurrection of the dead. People with autism will be fully healed.

When I speak of the restoration of people with autism to full humanness and full personhood, I am conscious of the positives which exist in autistic people. I want to acknowledge here that people with autism often have unique and wonderful insights and understandings which others do not. I therefore expect that whatever is positive about autism will not be changed, except to make that good into best. People with autism are not merely defined by deficits. Even with the present difficulties, each has a positive contribution to make in the world. Yet even our positive traits will be transformed in the resurrection of the dead. There is no person who will not be radically transformed, autistic and neurotypical.

The goal of the resurrection of the dead is complete conformity to Christ. It must be stressed that the goal is not that people with autism become neurotypical, although this may be the result. Being neurotypical is not the same thing as being Christ-like. Since the only person who is normal is Jesus Christ, he is the one to whom autists will conform. Nor is it true that healing in the resurrection is only for people with autism; every human being is presently in need of radical healing transformation, since every person is broken by sin. Therefore, people who are neurotypical will be radically transformed and may even acquire some of the characteristics of some people with autism. But people with autism will no longer have the same difficulties with relationships, communication, and repetitive and restricted behaviours and interests. As these things are truly holding them back in terms of the perfect life of communion that is the destiny of human beings, these problems cannot continue in the resurrection.
Resurrection

I have emphasised the radical nature of the transformation which takes place in the resurrection. However, there is also real continuity of the individual with autism. The person with autism, even if that autism is severe in the present, will still be somehow recognisable as the same human being. Rather than the transformation destroying the identity of an individual with autism, the resurrection of the dead takes the autistic person to complete humanness and actualised personhood. The resurrection makes the autistic individual into a fully human person, capable of Christ-like reciprocal relationships. There is a distinct element of mystery as to how we will be transformed and yet be the same people. But the autist’s identity is not destroyed and replaced by someone else, only fully actualised into their identity found in Christ.

My position on the resurrection of autistic people is contrary to that of both Eiesland and Yong. Contra Eiesland, I content that disability is not present in the resurrected body of Jesus, even though he retains the marks of crucifixion. Thus there is no reason to expect that believers will retain their disabilities in the resurrection of the righteous. Contra Yong, I contend that people with autism will not be defined in the resurrection by their autism, but by their likeness to Christ. This transformation will be both radical and instantaneous. There is no reason to suggest a long (eternal) transformation, because we do not take our identities from what we once were under the power of sin, but instead we will take our identities from the one who has conquered sin and death. Upon the consummation of all things in the resurrection of the dead, the transformation to the new humanity will be complete. People with autism will be complete human beings and complete persons, with none of the features of autism that are presently holding them back from relationships, communication and embracing newness.
Resurrection

Contra Yong’s notion that the marks of impairment remain without the stigma attached, I contend that the transformation brought about in the resurrection will be a transformation of the person and not simply a transformation of the community of God’s people. I agree that there will be no more stigma or rejection, but this alone is insufficient. The transformation will be far more radical than this. The whole person will be changed, not only the place of the person in society. The person with autism will be completely able in the resurrection. He or she will be able to take a reciprocal place in the communion of saints. The resurrection will do away with stigma and rejection, and it will do away with impairment. Since, according to The Westminster Larger (and Smaller) Catechism, “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever,” there can be nothing in the resurrected state which would hinder enjoyment of God. Many features of autism could well be said to hinder a person from fully enjoying God. But the resurrection of the dead will completely heal anything in the person that hinders such full enjoyment. When a person with autism is raised from the dead, he or she will know God as he or she is fully known (1 Cor 13:12). But fully intimate knowledge of God implies an ability to commune – both to relate and to communicate. So the conclusion of the matter is found to be that the person with autism will no longer be a person with autism, but rather a fully human person who has realised his or her chief and highest end in fully enjoying God forever.

Now that I have come to a conclusion about the final destiny of autistic people there is still one matter which needs to be discussed. Throughout this thesis I have argued that ‘in Christ’ there is no room for categories of people, no autistic and no neurotypical. Those who are ‘in Christ’ are fully human persons. Those who are found ‘in Christ’ will be fully healed in the resurrection of the dead. Yet the implied question

still remains, how can autistic individuals who are severely low-functioning become people who are ‘in Christ’? In other words, how can typical autists, who do not communicate, come to faith in Christ? This question will be addressed in chapter 6.
Introduction

Throughout this thesis I have argued that ability and inability are irrelevant categories for people who are in Christ. The work of Christ is comprehensive; Christ has become a human person and his person and his work encompass all that is necessary for humanness and personhood. All who are joined to him by faith are fully human and fully personal by virtue of his vicarious humanity. Ability or inability is not something which matters in relation to those who are in Christ. All who are in Christ are being transformed into the image of Christ, that is, they are being restored to the image of God, which was distorted and marred by the entrance of sin into the creation. When people united to Christ are resurrected their humanity and personhood will be fully actualised.

This paints a picture of the inclusivity of Christ for all who are joined to him by faith. Autism is not something which has any bearing on the worth or personhood of someone who is joined to the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. However, the whole of my argument hinges on the matter of being united to Christ by faith. This raises a question which cannot go unanswered: How can a person who has severe autism come to faith in Christ? To put this another way: How can a person who is unable to understand speech understand the gospel of Christ? How is it possible for a person who does not have a sense of self and other to take hold of Christ by faith? How can a person whose ability to relate to others is seriously impaired develop a relationship with God?
These questions again presuppose the necessity of ability in order to become united to Christ. They assume that certain abilities are a requirement of salvation. If salvation is restricted to people with certain abilities, whether these be intellectual or relational, then we are back to the problem of categories of disabled/able and ability/inability, which I have been arguing are irrelevant in Christ. This chapter is intended to address this issue. In keeping with my perspective that there are no categories of able/disabled in Christ, I will argue that coming to faith in Christ, that is, being united to him by faith, is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.

To be clear I am not intending to take the route, adopted by some, that argues on the basis of the capacity of some people with autism. Since autism is a spectrum disorder, there are many people who have capacity to understand rationally and who can articulate faith. These people are not the focus of my attention here. My interest is in people for whom communication, social skills and imagination are severely impaired and who therefore would find it impossible to rationally think through the gospel message and who could never articulate faith. I am also not intending to provide examples of people with profound developmental disability who have faith, although examples could be given. My intention is to develop a theological explanation of how faith is possible for people with severe cognitive and developmental disability. This is not an argument that all people with severe cognitive disabilities will be saved, but rather an argument that it is possible for all people, regardless of ability, to have genuine reciprocal relationship with God by personally experiencing faith in Christ.

The problems posed for people with severe autism are not exactly the same as those posed for people with severe intellectual disability, although there is overlap.

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Several writers have brought these problems to light. Erinn Staley recounts a story once told to her about the baptism of a young child with Down syndrome. During the baptism a woman commented that it was sad that the girl would be unable to partake of communion, because she could never understand it. Staley notes that this story illustrates a common attitude of Christians towards people with intellectual disabilities; it is often supposed that such people cannot “really know and love God”.

John Swinton similarly observes that this attitude toward people with intellectual disabilities is common. He explains:

The assumption here seems to be that, in order to find joy in one’s relationship with God, one has to understand God via the intellect and to be able to articulate this knowledge in a way that reveals, in quite particular and selective ways, one’s conscious awareness of God. … To know God is to understand who God is at an intellectual level. Such a position automatically excludes those who do not appear to have such capacities.

Many people with autism share the problem of intellectual impairment, and consequently the assumption is made by many that they will not have the capacity to actually know God. Indeed, the nature of autism poses further difficulties.

Several autistic traits appear to be a hindrance to a relationship with God. In an article of the same name, James Gordon asks, “Is a sense of self essential to spirituality?” According to Gordon’s Baptist tradition:

[S]pirituality is about human beings encountering the presence, activity, and reality of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and then each person living out the

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practical consequences of that encounter. However, a sense of God as Other presupposes ability to recognize the reality and significance of ‘the other’ over and against ‘the self’.611

Yet understanding self and other is something which many people with autism are unable to do. How, then, can people with severe autism know God?

This is not the only potential problem for people with severe autism. John Swinton and Christine Trevett, in an editorial piece, point out the potential confusion that must be manifest in the minds of people with autism when confronted with the story “about a man dying and being resurrected and living inside of you. Where exactly does he live? Heart? Lungs? Kidneys?”612 Religious thinking can be very problematic for autistic people, so much so that it would be easy to suggest that no one should encourage people with cognitive disorders such as autism to be involved in religious practices.613

Quinton Deely raises a third difficulty for autistics related to ‘theory of mind’ and understanding the scripture. ‘Theory of mind’ is the ability to understand the mental states of others such as beliefs or intentions. ‘Theory of mind’ is necessary to grasp the intentions of the characters in stories like those found in scripture. Therefore, it would be reasonable to expect that deficits in mentalizing would correlate with difficulties in understanding references to biblical characters such as God, Jesus or prophets. The same author also wonders whether people with narrow and restricted

611 Gordon, "Is a Sense of Self Essential to Spirituality?," 52.
613 Ibid.
interests - something which is true of people with autism - would have any concern for meaning in life.\textsuperscript{614}

The problems discussed above are real problems for some people with autism, and I do not deny this fact. Indeed, these may pose pastoral challenges when ministering to and discipling people with autism spectrum disorder. However, I contend in this chapter that these issues do not prevent people with severe autism from coming to faith in Christ. This is because people come to faith, not through a matter of cognitive processes as such, but through the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, who witnesses to the person of Christ and to his redeeming work on behalf of humanity. But before I discuss the work of the Spirit, I will first consider ways in which other people have dealt with the issue of faith for people with intellectual disabilities and those with autism.

**Three Views of Salvation for People with Cognitive Disability**

In this thesis I have interacted with several authors who have considered either autism or intellectual disability. Here I will present the thoughts of these writers in regard to the salvation of people with severe and profound disabilities. While Hans Reinders believes that it is possible for God to have relationship with people with severe and profound intellectual disabilities, he cannot say what this would mean from their perspective, nor can he explain how this is possible.\textsuperscript{615} Others have provided more explanation to varying degrees. I will first consider the ideas of John Gillibrand and Abe Isanon, because both are concerned with low-functioning autistics. Then I

\textsuperscript{614} Quinton Deely, "Cognitive Style, Spirituality, and Religious Understanding: The Case of Autism," ibid.: 78, 81.
\textsuperscript{615} Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 377-78.
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will examine what Amos Yong has written about the salvation of people with Down syndrome.

**Gillibrand: Adam Is Part of the Church Because of Baptism**

John Gillibrand has a son, Adam, with severe autism. Adam cannot understand God. But Gillibrand does not necessarily consider this a problem, because he believes that no one can understand God. He suggests that not trying to understand God allows God to be God. Gillibrand states that it is not possible for Adam, indeed for anyone who is unable to use language, to receive Christian tradition. His concern is that even speaking about the ‘word’ of God puts autistic people and those who care for them on the outer and leaves them without comfort.  

Gillibrand does not explicitly formulate a way to salvation for his son other than suggesting that the meeting of human need may be a way of salvation. However, he does make some comments on Adam’s membership of the Church. Gillibrand accords with Frances Young’s comments regarding her micro-encephalic son Arthur. Young asserts:

He will never be able to make his own response of faith, but his baptism as an infant means that he is a member of the body of Christ, and no one can take that away from him or exclude him.  

As an Anglican, Gillibrand sees Adam’s baptism as an entrance into the Church and sees the faith of his parents and godparents as a stand-in for the faith he cannot express himself.

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616 Gillibrand, *Disabled Church, Disabled Society*, 73-74, 101-03.
617 Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998 [1990]), 94. (Quoted in Gillibrand, *Disabled Church, Disabled Society*, 132.)
Although Gillibrand believes that Adam cannot make a commitment of faith, Adam’s confirmation, “just like his baptism, represented a moment of divine acceptance and inclusion.” Confirmation is also something which is part of Adam’s cultural heritage and therefore he has a right to participate in it. At Adam’s first communion, there was some small indication that Adam was co-operating. However, even though Adam is able to say some words, he has never said ‘God,’ and the concept of God, who is not part of Adam’s physical environment, would be baffling for him.

On the other hand Gillibrand sees his son as someone who is almost innocent and therefore not in need of repentance. It is not possible for Adam to choose to do something wrong, because to do so would require language and the capacity for abstraction. Adam does not have these. Adam’s behaviour is dictated by his autism and not by lack of self-control. “Adam is very nearly innocent,” but not totally. To say otherwise would be to ignore the fact that Jesus was without sin so that he could die for sinners.

It is clear that Gillibrand is wrestling with the issues posed to his own faith by the existence of his autistic son. The difficulties with which his son must contend have challenged his theology and he must attempt to strike a balance between embracing the tradition in which he has been ordained and the need to accept his son as he is. The faith tradition to which Gillibrand holds does not provide a satisfactory basis for including his son, because of its heavy dependence on language in scripture and liturgy, something which Adam cannot share. But Gillibrand has tried to be consistent to both

618 Disabled Church, Disabled Society, 123, 32.
619 Ibid., 134.
620 Ibid., 135-38, 43.
621 Ibid., 146-47.
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agendas. In this regard, Gillibrand’s use of baptism and confirmation as a means to include his son in the Church is in keeping with his theological tradition.

Positively, Gillibrand’s response is an inclusive one, because it opens up a way for people with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities to be part of the Church. It requires very little from them except a modicum of co-operation in baptism and confirmation. Adam was not excluded because of his disability, but rather included in the same way other people were included. If we hold to Gillibrand’s understanding of the importance of Church membership, then this could provide a means of addressing the issue of faith for people with developmental disabilities.

Yet the obstacle to accepting this view lies in the notion of Church membership. If Church membership is nothing more than something which is culturally prescribed because of Adam’s heritage then it is not actually salvation as described by the Bible or the long historical tradition of the Protestant church. According to Gillibrand, Adam cannot know God; he is unable to ever have faith for himself. If I am to provide an answer to the question of how a person with severe autism can have faith, Gillibrand cannot help, because in his opinion it is simply not possible. The closest Adam can come to faith is the vicarious faith of his parents and godparents. But this can never actually allow Adam to have a relationship with God for himself. The relationship with God will always be someone else’s relationship.

Salvation as offered to human beings because of the work of Christ is exceedingly more than what Gillibrand describes as ‘Church membership’. Salvation involves a participation in the life of the triune God on the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. A person who receives salvation becomes part of the body of Christ and is united to him by faith. To be part
of the body of Christ is to be part of the Church. Thus Church membership involves a profound union with both God and the human members of Christ’s body. This goes way beyond the rights of a cultural heritage to which Gillibrand believes his son has claim. Thus Gillibrand’s solution to the problem does not go far enough.

**Isanon: Liberatory Spirituality**

The second author of interest to this discussion is Abe Isanon. In his monograph *Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum,* Isanon aims to develop a liberatory spirituality inclusive of people on the autism spectrum, even those who are on the low-functioning end of the spectrum. Having worked with people with special needs and autistic conditions for many years, Isanon comes from a place of love and concern for people with severe and profound autism. His liberatory spirituality is “grounded in human experience”. He defines spirituality “as the spirit with which we confront concrete reality”. Liberatory spirituality must involve giving preference to the poor and the marginalised. Isanon believes that what is needed is a spirituality which can accommodate autism-related problems.

Isanon sets out to achieve his goal of crafting a form of spirituality which will meet the needs of both people with autism and those who care for them. He works with the developing tradition of liberation spiritualities, such as feminist and gay spiritualities, to give a voice to marginalised people. Isanon claims that his understanding of spirituality is in continuity with the apostle Paul’s theology of ‘life in the Spirit’. Isanon expresses his version of spirituality like this:

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623 Ibid., 12.
624 Ibid., 13.
625 Ibid., 13, 94.
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An encounter with Spirit is neither abstract nor systematic. It is an encounter not only with a transcendent Absolute but also with an immanent God, present and active in human history. This encounter with Spirit is initially a subjective experience of spirit that very often occurs in time of crisis or uncertainty. The subjective experience of spirit is the means by which we recognize and respond to the challenging face of God as it emerges in the context of historical reality. Here, God is not postulated in terms of speculative Platonic or Aristotelian categories, but is rather seen as an event of meaning, of hope, of transformation and ultimately of liberation.  

Liberation spirituality is both contemplative and something which involves compassionate identification with the oppressed and marginalised. This brings together faith, life, prayer, action, spirituality and politics.

Isanon then applies his ideas about liberation spirituality to people who are on the low end of the autism spectrum and cannot speak for themselves. Many people with low-functioning autism are in institutional settings and experience abuse due to lack of resources and understaffing. The response to the needs of people with autism must firstly be compassion, and this compassion is most concrete in being present to those people. Presence must be accompanied by unconditional love. Relationships with autistics are crucial to Isanon’s liberation spirituality. These relationships are “intuitive rather than conceptual, experiential rather than abstract.” Contemplation provides a way of understanding the mystery of other and of God. Liberation spirituality asserts that marginalised human beings are the ones through whom God

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626 Ibid., 99.
627 Ibid., 95-103.
628 Ibid., 113.
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reveals himself. To communicate love to people on the lower end of the autism spectrum touch through physical activities of caring can do what words cannot.629

Importantly, Isanon expresses genuine concern for people with severe and profound autism. His concern for those who have been poorly treated and marginalised by institutionalisation is something which is commendable. He has provided practical means of caring for people with autism without being overbearing and without being authoritative. The emphasis on compassion, valuing the marginalised, and entering into solidarity with the broken and poor, is absolutely vital for those who are concerned about people with cognitive and developmental disabilities.

However, Isanon’s approach to spirituality has no connection with Jesus Christ. The closest that Isanon comes to speaking about God is to write of “Wholly Other”630. His spirituality involves everyday acts of compassion and loving presence, but has nothing to do with relationship with God. For Isanon, spirituality is simply about interacting with concrete reality and struggling to be human. In this understanding of spirituality, it apparently makes no difference what kind of beliefs a person holds or which god he or she worships, if indeed a god is worshipped at all.

Isanon claims that his understanding of spirituality has continuity with the theology of the apostle Paul. However, this claim is difficult to accept, because Paul wrote of the Spirit in relation to the person of Christ, not in isolation. To walk in the Spirit is to live in obedience to God the Father as a result of the work of Christ on our behalf. Isanon has conflated the person of the Holy Spirit with the human spirit and even with the idea of spirituality as justice and meditation and contemplation. The apostle would consider genuine human spirituality to be impossible without the Holy

629 Ibid., 104-22.
630 Ibid., 14, 97, 114,16, 17, 22.
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Spirit’s work of making Christ known. Isanon’s spirituality is thus not a spirituality in keeping with the theology of Paul.

So while Isanon has validly sought to provide something which would be helpful for people on the low end of the autism spectrum, his spirituality does not help in the search for a solution to the question of how a person with a severe disability can come to faith in Christ. His spirituality does not involve any action on the part of the person with the autism spectrum disorder at all; it is about compassionate action towards the autistic person. I doubt that Isanon would consider the question of how a person with autism can come to faith one which should even be explored.

**Yong: Reimagining Soteriology**

The third significant voice in this discussion is Amos Yong. Yong chooses to approach the question of salvation for people with intellectual disabilities in general, and Down syndrome specifically, from a perspective he calls “performative theology”. Performative theology is concerned with thinking about theology which “informs, shapes, and guides the practices of the church”. Yong asserts:

> Within such a performative framework, then, the perennial questions about the mystery of salvation regarding infants, the unevangelized, and the intellectually

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632 Ibid., 232.
disabled are not merely abstract speculations but are directly pertinent to Christian discipleship and mission.\textsuperscript{633}

The first view of salvation for the intellectually disabled considered by Yong is known as the age of accountability, that is, the notion that people are not accountable to God prior to a certain mental age. Yong critiques the idea of an age of accountability, both because the Bible does not clearly state this, and because there is no corresponding idea in regard to the ignorance of the unevangelised. He notes that others have suggested that most of the intellectually disabled have reached an age of accountability. But this statement raises many questions. What is the age of accountability? What of those who cannot reach this age of accountability? And is it absolutely necessary for a person to confess and believe in order to be saved?\textsuperscript{634}

The necessity of confession and faith for salvation is the most problematic theologically for people with intellectual disabilities. But, Yong asks, what other options are there for the intellectually disabled? Yong rightly rejects salvation by works, suggesting that this would be even more difficult to attain for people who are intellectually disabled. He also rejects the idea of post-mortem evangelisation, contending that this raises more difficulties than it solves. Another option is to think of salvation for people with intellectual disabilities in terms of faith and not knowledge. However, Yong believes that if we assume that salvation should be thought of in terms of faith and not in terms of knowledge, this leaves a faith which has been denuded of content and a universalism which denies real human freedom.\textsuperscript{635}

\textsuperscript{633} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{634} Ibid., 233.  
\textsuperscript{635} Ibid., 234-35.
Having rejected the above options, Yong proposes a different kind of response to the difficulty, one in which he redefines the nature of salvation. According to Yong, the traditional understanding of the ordo salutis, order of salvation, lacks recognition that human beings are creatures with bodies who live in social groups. Yong prefers to speak of a via salutis, way of salvation, which is more dynamic and flexible. Yong explains the via salutis this way:

In other words, human salvation is a complex reality that extends across the many dimensions (synchronic) and processes (diachronic) that constitute human lives. We may be more or less converted and transformed at one level than at another at any point of our lives, even as conversion and transformation in any sphere impacts the other spheres of life, and even as conversion in any sphere can be neglected or intensified from moment to moment. The result, I suggest, is a pneumatological way of salvation – a via salutis – that emphasises the synergism of the saving work initiated by the Holy Spirit and the multifaceted possibilities of human decision and responsibility across space and time.

Yong adopts a model proposed by John Swinton, who suggests that people with intellectual disabilities can become “religiously engaged”. Swinton posits that those who are intellectually disabled are able to experience “saving experiences of God” through loving relationships. According to Yong, non-disabled people need to be converted to the disabled. It is this change of heart towards those with intellectual disabilities which enables the intellectually disabled to experience salvation.
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The conversion of people with intellectual disabilities would then be bound up in their relationships among themselves, with others and with God. So at the affective level, they could experience a kind of moral conversion that sets them in right relationship with others, even if at the cognitive level they might not be able to understand what it means to stand justified before God in Christ.639

Yong wants to approach salvation from a disability perspective, centering his ideas around loving human relationships, beginning with family. Loving relationships, “through which God sustains human life and nurtures human flourishing”640 are, according to Yong, the objective aspect of salvation. These healing relationships are also present in the community of the Church, where individualism is overcome. Salvation begins in the relationships of love in which people with intellectual disabilities find themselves. The subjective dimensions of salvation, then, involve the emotional experience of God’s work. One example would be conviction experienced as consciousness of broken relationships. Regeneration could be experienced through changed lives and restored communities. Belonging demonstrates to people with intellectual disabilities that they are accepted by God.641

Yong also redefines the doctrine of justification. While he begins with the caveat that this doctrine has an objective aspect due to the work of Christ, he then develops a subjective view of justification for people with intellectual disabilities. This version of justification involves the story of each person with intellectual disabilities. By telling each person’s story we do justice for them.642 Accordingly, “In this framework, then, the justification of people with intellectual disabilities depends on

639 Ibid., 238.
640 Ibid., 251.
641 Ibid., 251-52.
642 Ibid., 252.
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their self-advocacy and self-testimony (to the extent that is possible) as supported by
the advocacy and testimony of many others. 643

Yong’s discussion contains some valuable points, the main being his emphasis
on relationships and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the Church. He
is correct in suggesting that people may come to an understanding of God within the
context of loving relationships, in families and in the Church. It is difficult to see how
people who struggle with formal reasoning could come to understand salvation without
the demonstrable care and concern of other humans who have experienced the love of
God for themselves. This is, however, not merely applicable to people with intellectual
disabilities. People of normal intelligence need to experience the love of God through
genuine relationships with the people of God in the Church in order to come to faith.

The importance of healing in loving relationships and working for justice in
social and political arenas should not be downplayed. Yong points us towards a
broader understanding of salvation than the usual individualistic Western understanding
of personal salvation. Salvation has, as Yong explains in detail elsewhere, multiple
dimensions. Salvation includes personal transformation and deliverance from spiritual
bondage. But it also involves: salvation of families; community dimensions through
being included in the body of Christ; physical and emotional healing; social aspects
such as racial, class, and gender reconciliation; a transformation of the cosmos; and a
final, eschatological salvation. 644 He brings these different dimensions of salvation to
bear in his attempt to open salvation to those with little intellectual capacity.

643 Ibid., 253.
644 The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology (Grand
Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 91-98.
The major problem with Yong’s suggestion in regard to people with intellectual disabilities is that he “reimagines” salvation for them. Whatever salvation is, it is the same for every person regardless of their intellectual or relational capacity. Yong’s re-imagining of salvation leaves the distinct impression that salvation for those with Down syndrome is different to salvation for others. Conviction, regeneration and justification are no longer the biblical categories that theology has explicated over centuries, but new categories which have only come to be understood in the post-modern (late modern in terms of Yong’s book title) context.

Yong’s reimagining of salvation seems to have made the mediation of Christ, and indeed his work on behalf of humanity in its entirety, redundant. Now salvation appears to involve “self-advocacy,” “self-testimony” or treating the intellectually disabled with love and dignity. These things in themselves are not without merit, but they are by no means salvation according to the biblical picture. Yong writes a lot about the Spirit and his work. However, I disagree with Yong’s exegesis of scripture. The Holy Spirit does not merely enable good relationships, although he does do this, but he first and foremost points us to the person of Christ. In Yong’s reimagining the work of the Spirit is disconnected from Christ and his work.

Infant Salvation

Given that the suggestions above have proved insufficient in regard to the salvation of people with severe autism, there needs to be some way of moving forward to a solution. As the Bible does not speak directly about autism or intellectual disability, addressing the question of how people with severe autism can come to faith in Christ might best be tackled through looking at what people have said about infant
salvation. There are two reasons for this. First, the Bible does at least mention infants in relation to Jesus. Secondly, there is a larger body of theological literature about salvation of infants than about salvation of persons with intellectually disability. In regard to how infants receive salvation there are three general viewpoints: Catholic, Baptist and Reformed. There are minor variations on these, but these three should provide a fair understanding of the way in which this matter has been historically approached.

Catholic View: Infants Enter the Sphere of Salvation through Baptism

The Catholic Church still largely holds to the theology of Augustine. Infants are born tainted with original sin, inherited from Adam and Eve, and are therefore in need of salvation. The means of salvation in the Catholic Church is the grace of Christ received in the sacrament of baptism. The Catholic Church practices infant baptism because to do otherwise would “deprive [infants] of the means of salvation”. The rite of baptism is very important in the salvation of the infant. Infant baptism confers on the child life in Christ. In baptism the child dies with Christ, is buried with him, and is raised to life with him. Through baptism a person “enters into the realm of salvation.” In Catholic theology, baptism provides incorporation into the Church and therefore incorporation into Christ. Baptism is not merely a promise of salvation, but something objective occurs when a child is baptised, namely, he or she receives life

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647 Ibid., 38.
648 Ibid., 40.
from God. However, there is an assumption made that the child will receive instruction in the gospel and grow in the Christian life.\textsuperscript{649}

To understand the way in which salvation is conferred in infant baptism it is necessary to understand the Catholic doctrine of sacraments. Grace is not a ‘thing’ which can be quantified and therefore given or received by the sacrament. Rather grace is part of a relationship of communion. The sacrament effects grace in two ways. The first is \textit{ex opere operato}, that is, ‘by the work worked’. This means that the efficacy of the sacrament is not dependent on the worthiness of the minister or the recipient, as long as no serious sin hinders the reception of grace. This is not a magical working of grace, but the result of the faithfulness of Christ, who keeps his promises. The other means of effecting grace in the sacrament is \textit{ex opere operantis}, that is, ‘from the work of the person working’. This involves the attitudes of the person receiving the sacrament, who must have faith and inner conversion.\textsuperscript{650}

As the sacraments both require faith and strengthen faith, faith is necessary for the baptised person. The difference between those who practice infant baptism and those who baptise only believers is not whether faith is present or absent at baptism, but only where that faith is found. In the Catholic tradition faith is expressed on behalf of the child during infant baptism by both parents and godparents. The faith of the Church comes prior to the faith of the child, but infant baptism demonstrates the inclusion of the child into the community of the Church. The child can experience evangelisation and teaching in the faith later so that he or she can make an individual

\textsuperscript{649} Ibid., 44-49.
confession of faith. The corporate proxy faith of the Church is based on the fact that faith is a work of God and not a work of the individual.\textsuperscript{651}

Catholics hold that infants who die without baptism are without a means of salvation. Although the Church no longer holds with Augustine that unbaptised infants who die will be condemned, albeit to the mildest extent,\textsuperscript{652} there is no actual alternative to baptism in present Catholic doctrine. The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states:

By its doctrine and by its practice, the Church has shown that it knows no other means than baptism to assure to infants their entry into eternal beatitude … With regard to infants who have died without having received baptism, the Church can only commit them to the mercy of God, as it does in the funeral rites that it has created for them.\textsuperscript{653}

The Catholic doctrine of baptism is theologically very deep and its objective nature offers some positives in regard to the question of the salvation of people with severe and profound disabilities. The objective nature of the sacrament means that there are no requirements to be met which would exclude people with cognitive disabilities. In 1995 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops provided \textit{Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities}. These guidelines state: “By reason of their baptism, all Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God, and have the same divine calling.” Thus the Catholic doctrine of baptism is positively inclusive of people with intellectual disabilities. In regard to the sacrament of baptism

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\textsuperscript{651} Ibid., 345, 48.
\textsuperscript{652} Sullivan, "The Development of Doctrine about Infants Who Die Unbaptized," 3.; Augustine of Hippo, \textit{A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sin and on the Baptism of Infants} (412), 1.21.; \textit{Enchiridion ad Laurentium} (c. 420), 93.
\end{flushleft}
the *Guidelines* state: “Because it is the sacrament of universal salvation, baptism is to be made available to all who freely ask for it … Disability, of itself, is never a reason for deferring baptism.” The document goes on to encourage people with cognitive disabilities to participate in the sacrament of confirmation “at the appropriate time”.654

Edward Schillebeeckx explains the Catholic sacramental view as one which depends on the truth that Christ alone is the sacrament of God and grace is mediated through him. Although the validity of the sacrament is based on the work of Christ, it is also true that a response is needed from the recipient of the sacrament. Without this human response of faith there can be no mutual encounter between Christ and the recipient.655 But it is here that infant baptism becomes problematic. God works in the sacrament through the finished self-offering of Christ, but this takes place in concert with the faith of the recipient. Baptism of infants does not assume the faith of the infant, but rather assumes that faith is present in the parents and godparents.

I agree with Karl Barth’s opposition to the idea that faith can be exercised on behalf of the child by parents and godparents. Although Christians live together with the faith of others:

There is vicarious faith, however, only in the form of the faith which Jesus Christ established for us all as the ἄρχηγος τῆς πίστεως (Heb 12:2), who empowers us for our own faith, and summons us to it, even as He stands there in our stead with His

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faith. Through His faith we are not only moved but liberated to believe for ourselves.\footnote{Karl Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics IV.4 The Doctrine of Reconciliation}, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004 [1969]), 186.}

The baptismal candidate must, therefore, have faith of her or his own, regardless of whether that faith is weak or strong.\footnote{Ibid.} It is not sensible to speak of baptism of infants in the same light as baptism of believing adults. When baptism is discussed in terms of adults it assumes that the baptismal candidate exercises faith and expresses a desire to be baptised. Neither of these statements makes sense in regard to the baptism of infants.\footnote{Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 102.}

In respect to the question I am trying to answer, can the baptism of infants provide a way for people with severe autism to come to faith in Christ? The answer, I believe, is ‘No’. The baptism of infants is based on the proxy faith of the parents and godparents of the infant. The infant is not the person with faith. People with autism cannot be saved on the basis of the faith of others. Nor does baptism produce faith in the infant. The assumption is made by Catholic theology that the baptised infant will experience evangelisation and catechism as he or she grows older. These, then, allow the baptised person to express personal faith at a later age. However, many people with cognitive disabilities will never reach a mental age when this catechisation is possible. The question remains, then, how people with autism can have faith of their own, because such faith is necessary for salvation.
The Baptist view of infant salvation provides a somewhat different viewpoint than the Catholic doctrine of salvation through infant baptism. The Baptist doctrine has its basis in some arguments which came out of the Radical Reformation. Anabaptist Simon Menno claims that infants are unable to die to sin, because they have not been made alive to sin. However, neither are they able to come to faith while they are not old enough to understand the word of God. Regeneration comes through faith and this can only come to those able to understand the preached word. He argues against Luther’s claim that infants have faith, on the basis that the Bible states infants cannot know good or evil. Early Baptist leader John Smyth echoes Menno’s thoughts in a “Short Confession of Faith in Twenty Articles” (1609). He writes, “There is no original sin, but all sin is actual and voluntary, viz. a word, a deed, or a design against the law of God; and therefore infants are without sin.”

Jesus commanded that the gospel be proclaimed to all creatures so that people may believe and receive the promise of salvation. But Menno believes this does not apply to infants. “For Jesus’ sake, sin is not imputed to infants that are innocent, and incapable of understanding.” Jesus blessed infants and said that the kingdom of God is theirs. They receive the grace of God and are acceptable to God; they are part of the covenant people the Church, but they cannot be taught the word. Infants are unable to

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659 Not all Baptists hold to an age of accountability. Historically, many Baptists have been Reformed in thinking. See for example ‘The London Confession’ (1644) in John Albert Broadus, Baptist Confession, Covenants, and Catechisms, ed. Timothy George and Denise George, Baptist Classics (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996). Chapter 3.


662 Broadus, Baptist Confession, Covenants, and Catechisms, 32.

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have faith and therefore are not regenerated. Yet despite children not having faith, they are blessed and heirs of the kingdom of God on account of grace. Believers can be assured of the salvation of their children. These ideas are the ground of the now popular Baptist viewpoint that infants are innocent and therefore acceptable to God.

A contemporary Baptist author Millard J. Erickson provides one Baptist viewpoint on salvation of infants and those with developmental disabilities. In his consideration of original sin, Erickson concludes regarding Rom 5:12, “we were actually present within Adam, so that we all sinned in his act.” Having stated what seems to be the universal problem of sin, he then ponders the position of children before God, asking whether children who have not consciously chosen to receive the grace of God are condemned eternally. In response to his question he argues on the basis of Matt 18:3 and 19:14 that Jesus did not consider children under condemnation, but rather they are people who will inherit the kingdom of God. David’s belief that he would see his dead infant son again (2 Sam 12:23) is also used as evidence for his position.

According to Erickson, the Bible provides several indications of an “age of accountability,” that is, an age before which a person is not morally accountable. Here Erickson cites three passages: Deut 1:39 – “And as for your little ones, who you thought would become booty, your children, who today do not yet know right from wrong, they shall enter there; to them I will give it, and they shall take possession of

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664 Ibid., 46-50.
665 Cross, "Baptism," 139.
667 Ibid.
668 Many Pentecostals share a similar view to Baptists in regard to an age of accountability. An example of this is found in Myer Pearlman and Earnest Williams, who claim that children under the age of accountability do not have any sin to repent of and cannot exercise faith (Steve Studebaker, "Baptism among Pentecostals," in Baptism: Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspectives, ed. Gordon L. Heath and James D. Dvorak (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 214.)
it”; Isa 7:15-16, which contains two references to children who have not reached an age where they know right and wrong; and Jonah 4:11, which refers to an ability to make moral decisions.\textsuperscript{669} He concludes, “Underlying these statements is the apparent fact that prior to a certain point in life, there is no moral responsibility, because there is no awareness of right and wrong.”\textsuperscript{670}

Erickson has a concept of original sin, but it is different to the general Reformed view. He argues, on the basis of the parallels in Rom 5 between the imputation of sin from Adam and the imputation of righteousness from Christ, that because we are not considered righteous without a conscious choice to accept Christ, we are not considered condemned in Adam without a conscious choice to sin. Infants are participants in Adam’s sin, but accepted by God nonetheless. Because infants have not reached an age where they can make conscious moral choices, they are not condemned. If a child dies in infancy then he or she will be treated by God the same as someone who had been saved by the atoning death of Christ through faith. The corrupt nature of those who die in infancy will be sanctified in similar fashion to believers who have not been fully sanctified before death. The original sin of children is not imputed to them until they reach an age at which they approve of their own sin.\textsuperscript{671}

This Baptist understanding of salvation puts a strong emphasis on personal confession of faith in opposition to the proxy faith assumed effective for infants by the Catholic doctrine of infant baptism. This emphasis on personal faith is consistent with the biblical call to repentance and faith because the kingdom of God has come (Mark 1:15). Baptists want to take seriously the need for discipleship in the Christian life, something which calls for a personal response to the gospel. In regard to the salvation

\textsuperscript{669} Erickson, \textit{Christian Theology}, 654-55. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{670} Ibid., 655.
\textsuperscript{671} Ibid., 655-56.
of people with profound cognitive disabilities, I want to affirm that a personal response to the gospel is absolutely necessary. However, the Baptist view simply bypasses the need for such a response in children and people with cognitive disabilities by positing an age of accountability.

The Baptist doctrine of an age of accountability is problematic for several reasons. One problem is a lack of consistency in this doctrine. First, if children share in Adam’s sin then they need salvation. But if infants do not have sin reckoned to them they do not need redemption. If infants are not condemned because they have not consciously sinned, why do they need to be justified? Secondly, the salvation for infants as described by Erickson does not encompass the full salvation which is offered to those who express faith. In fact, the salvation granted to infants is different to the salvation of others, because it is salvation “apart from faith”. Thirdly, if infants do not sin and therefore do not deserve eternal punishment, then why do they suffer the temporal punishments of disease and death?

There are further difficulties with the idea of an age of accountability. The Bible does not provide a clear basis for this doctrine. Yong critiques the age of accountability because the same criteria are not applied to the unevangelised. If children are saved because they cannot understand the gospel, then why are the unevangelised not saved because of their ignorance of the gospel? A another problem with the age of accountability lies in determining exactly what age this actually is. In one place, Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest indicate that the age of accountability

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673 Ibid., 66-67, 72.
674 Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 233.
may be twenty years of age, but by the age of twenty a person can no longer be considered a child, and both sin and faith are clear possibilities. Indeed, it is difficult to set an age which can be justified on the basis of human development, because of huge variations in individual psychological and moral development, particularly in people with developmental disabilities, including people with autism.

**Reformed View: Infants Are Included among the Elect**

The final view to consider is the Reformed understanding of infant salvation. To provide an idea of the Reformed view I will concentrate on John Calvin. In *Institutes* IV.xvi Calvin argues that baptism is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament covenant sign of circumcision. As circumcision was done to infants, so too should baptism be administered to the children of believers. Baptism is both a sign and a promise of regeneration and forgiveness of sins. Baptism is the entrance into the Church, just as circumcision was the entrance into the covenant people in the Old Testament. The children of Christians are holy offspring because they are heirs of the covenant.

By taking little children into his arms, Jesus showed that the Father’s grace wants to embrace children. The kingdom of heaven belongs to children and infants, even those still being suckled by their mothers. Thus infants should receive baptism, which is “the symbol of our communion and fellowship with Christ.” Infants are in need of salvation, because they are born sons and daughters of Adam and are therefore “in death,” but Christ is life. Infants need to be regenerated and this is a work of God.

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676 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvi.2-6.

677 Ibid., IV.xvi.7.
The case of John the Baptist, who was sanctified in the womb, is proof that God can do this for infants.\textsuperscript{678}

It is not the baptism of infants which provides salvation for them, and lack of baptism does not condemn any infant. Calvin emphasises that their election in Christ is the significant factor. “Truly, Christ was sanctified from earliest infancy in order that he might sanctify in himself his elect from every age without distinction.”\textsuperscript{679}

Therefore, there is no hindrance to infants being saved. Although normally people come to faith by hearing the word, this does not mean that infants cannot be sanctified. Although they are not yet able to come to repentance and faith, the seeds of these are planted in them by the Spirit.\textsuperscript{680}

[I]f those whom the Lord has deigned to elect received the sign of regeneration but depart from the present life before they grow up, he renews them by the power, incomprehensible to us, of his Spirit, in whatever way he alone foresees will be expedient.\textsuperscript{681}

There are several valuable aspects of Calvin’s discussion which I would like to take up in some detail. Calvin’s emphasis on the work of Christ is important, although his understanding of election is problematic, because his voluntarist\textsuperscript{682} understanding makes election totally arbitrary. Here Karl Barth’s doctrine of election provides a helpful corrective. Calvin cites John the Baptist as a biblical indication that infants can respond to the gospel. I will explore the case of John the Baptist more fully. This is followed by a discussion about the vital work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to

\textsuperscript{678} Ibid., IV.xvi.7, 9, 17.
\textsuperscript{679} Ibid., IV.xvi.18.
\textsuperscript{680} Ibid., IV.xvi.19-21, 26.
\textsuperscript{681} Ibid., IV.xvi.21.
\textsuperscript{682} “For Calvin, God does as he wills.” (R.S. Clark, "Calvin on the Lex Naturalis," Stulos Theological Journal 6, no. 1-2 (1998): 14.)
Holy Spirit
faith in Christ. But first I will have a brief word of about Calvin’s justification for infant baptism.

As with the Catholic understanding of infants, and in contrast to the Baptist view, Calvin rightly recognised that infants are sinners in need of salvation, because they are dead ‘in Adam’. In contrast to Catholicism, however, Calvin does not make baptism the means of salvation, but only a sign pointing towards it. Yet the reasons which Calvin espouses for infant baptism are open to critique. The comments made about infant baptism in the critique of the Catholic view are applicable here. In addition, Barth opposes Calvin’s argument for the equivalence of circumcision and infant baptism. Israel was a nation chosen by God to serve him. Circumcision was given to newborn males on the basis of physical descent. However, the new covenant community is not a nation and is not grown through procreation. Instead, the members must be born of the Spirit. Thus Christian baptism must not be administered on the basis of physical descent.683

Positively, Calvin’s emphasis on election in Christ is more important than the baptismal ritual. This is in keeping with the emphasis of my argument thus far. It is the work of Christ which is central to both salvation and our humanity and personhood. Since infants are unable to express faith outwardly it is election which is the key to infant salvation. However, Calvin’s doctrine of election has problematic aspects which need to be addressed.

In Calvin’s doctrine of election, it is clear that he believes that according to God’s eternal decree there are some destined for salvation and some for condemnation. Some humans are created for one purpose and some for the other. God is not required

683 Barth, CD IV.4, 178.
to be gracious to all of humanity and he is not gracious to all, but only to the elect. For
the non-elect the door of salvation is tightly shut. The decision is firmly in the hand of
God and it is inappropriate for anyone to question this decree. Calvin’s double
decree of election raises questions about the nature of God and presents some
challenges in regard to people with severe autism. Does God desire people with severe
disabilities to be saved? It is difficult enough for anyone to be certain about whether a
person with a severe disability is displaying faith, but if doubts remain about whether
God desires such people to be saved, the difficulties are multiplied. It is here that
Barth’s understanding of election can be helpful.

In contrast to Calvin, Barth does not understand God’s freedom as a freedom to
decide for or against people, but rather as the freedom of a God of grace who has
revealed himself in the person of Christ. God’s freedom is a gracious freedom. Barth
denies the existence of the double decree. God’s will is not hidden in darkness but
revealed in the person of Christ. Jesus Christ is the centre of Barth’s doctrine of
election; he is both “the electing God” and “the elected man”. Jesus Christ is
God’s elect and all of humanity is elected in Christ. No person is elect apart from
Christ, but only in him. As the electing God, Jesus chose every human in his own
election. Thus the election of Christ means the election of all persons. In electing
Jesus Christ, God has chosen to elect every other human and decided to act graciously
towards every one of them. There are no rejected human beings, because Christ has
taken their rejection by becoming the rejected one.687

684 Calvin, Institutes, III.xxi.
685 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics II.2: The Doctrine of God, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance,
686 Ibid., 110.
Regardless of whether Barth can correctly be understood as a universalist, Barth’s theology provides a positive starting point for salvation instead of a negative one. In Augustinian and Calvinistic thinking, there is a negative starting point in that everyone is condemned to begin with and there are only some who are elect. But Barth provides a theology of a God who “does not will to be a God without us,” a God who desires humans to be with him. Humanity begins by being elect in Christ instead of beginning as rejected. Thus people with severe autism begin life as those who are elected, not rejected. Grace is more powerful than sin. Tracy Demmons’ application of Barth’s theology leads her to the following conclusion:

Election is significant ontologically in terms of the nature of the human person living with an intellectual disability. It is also significant in terms of knowledge of God as it signals God’s first move towards humans in the ultimate act in Christ. This act in a sense enables and makes possible the very possibility of knowledge of God.

This possibility of the knowledge of God for people with cognitive disabilities and developmental disorders is further enhanced by Calvin’s insistence that God’s elect are not hindered by age in regards to their salvation. God is able to sanctify his elect by a work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin puts forward John the Baptist as an example to prove his point. The following discussion will take up the two of Calvin’s points, namely, the possibility of infant salvation exemplified in the person of John the Baptist, and the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to salvation. These significant points will

688 Barth’s discussion of election in *Church Dogmatics* is long and complex, taking over 500 pages (ibid., 312.) There is a debate among Barthian scholars as to whether Barth’s doctrine inevitably leads to universalism or incoherence (Oliver D. Crisp, “The Letter and the Spirit of Barth’s Doctrine of Election: A Response to Michael O’Neil,” ibid.79, no. 1 (2007): 53.) I cannot enter into this debate here.
provide a basis for discussing how people with severe autism can come to faith in Christ.

**John the Baptist: Exemplar of Infant Salvation**

John the Baptist is an important biblical example of the possibility of the salvation of infants, and therefore of people with severe intellectual and developmental disabilities. Both Luther and Calvin make mention of the passage in Luke (1:39-45) in which the unborn John the Baptist recognised the unborn Jesus.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (Luke 1:39-45).

Luther comments on this passage:

John knew before his mother that Mary was carrying the Saviour. This shows that the Baptists are wrong when they say that babies should not be baptised because they do not have their full five senses and have not arrived at the age of reason.
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John had none of his five senses, let alone reason, but God and the Holy Spirit have reason enough. 691

Calvin writes in similar vein, “God provided a proof in John the Baptist, whom he sanctified in his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15) – something he could do in others.” 692

There is a reason why these Reformers used John the Baptist as an example of infant salvation. He is no doubt the clearest example, potentially the only example, in the Bible of an infant who shows signs of expressing faith. That this is a unique example should not be a deterrent to exploring this case. But it is not enough to suggest that the expression of faith by infants is possible. For my purpose it is necessary to explain how it is possible for (the yet unborn) John the Baptist to have faith in the (yet unborn) Christ child, in order to explain how it is possible for people with severe and profound disabilities to come to faith in Christ. For this reason I want to take up an exploration of the Lucan account of the birth of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist “is at once both the forerunner and the follower of Christ.” 693 This vocation is reflected in his birth narrative, which parallels that of Jesus. The parallel accounts of their births launch John’s role as both prophet and predecessor of Christ, in order that John might herald the great salvation of God. 694 Therefore, the birth narrative of John the Baptist elucidates the significant role which John will play in the history of salvation. The birth of John the Baptist will bring joy to many in Israel because of his association with God’s salvation. He will be a prophet, great in the sight

692 Calvin, Institutes, IV.xvi.17
693 Alexander J. Burke, John the Baptist: Prophet and Disciple (Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger, 2006), 7.
694 Ibid., 25.
of God. He is forbidden to drink alcohol, because he is set apart for a unique purpose in Israel (Luke 1:14-15).  

Because of John’s consecration as a prophet, he is filled with the Holy Spirit while in the womb of his mother (Luke 1:15). Filling with the Spirit is significant as a sign of God’s choice of John as his servant. Unlike the norm in the Old Testament, John is permanently filled with the Spirit. This anointing is provided so that he can fulfil his prophetic role. Darrell Bock observes, “In his intimate relationship with the Spirit, John the Baptist is a precursor of God’s coming ministry of the Spirit in the church when the Spirit will be given not just to a few but to all who believe.”

These two factors – John’s infilling with the Spirit and his role as Christ’s predecessor – are both vital to an understanding of the narrative in Luke 1:39-45, in which Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth. There the unborn John the Baptist encounters the unborn Jesus as they both reside in their mothers. “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:41). When John leaps in the womb, this is interpreted by Elizabeth as a response which carries prophetic significance. John is, even while still in utero, demonstrating his role as the forerunner of Christ. John’s sanctification as a yet unborn infant is indicative of God’s election by grace. Just like the prophet Isaiah before him, it is said of him, “The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me” (Isa 49:1).

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696 Ibid., 85-86.  
697 Ibid., 86.  
698 Ibid., 132, 35.  
In both Luke 1:41 and 1:44 the narrative mentions that the baby ‘leaped’ (skirtaō) in Elizabeth’s womb. The verb skirtaō has eschatological overtones. It is used in the LXX of the movement of Rebecca’s twins in the womb (Gen 25:22), a skirmish which prefigured their destinies, and also used in Mal 4:2 where it expresses joy over eschatological salvation. These two allusions combine in the case of the unborn John the Baptist to produce the impression of John’s movement as recognition of the eschatological coming of God in the person of Christ. The addition of ‘gladness’ in 1:44 refers back to Luke 1:14, where eschatological gladness is mentioned by the angel who promised the birth of John. The word skirtaō is used again in Luke 6:23, also within an eschatological context. Importantly, the leaping of the unborn John is indicative of incognizant recognition of the eschatological event of the coming of God, that is, a recognition which was made without the intellect. Such a response suggests a participation in the salvation offered through faith in Christ, even though this faith is neither expressed in a verbal confession nor with intellectual assent.

The infancy of John the Baptist is illustrative of some significant biblical ideas which are important to my argument. First, the fact that the unborn John the Baptist could respond to the presence of (the yet unborn) Jesus is indicative of the possibility that human beings not yet capable of rational thought can respond in faith to the person of Jesus Christ. Secondly, this narrative demonstrates that the divine person of the Holy Spirit is the one who makes this recognition of Christ possible. There is, in some Christian circles, a clear overemphasis on the need for reasoning ability before a person can come to faith in Christ. The case of John the Baptist and his response to Christ while in the womb suggest that the ability to reason is not the determining factor in

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faith. Rather, the presence of the Holy Spirit enables a person to recognise the person of Christ and to express faith. To understand this response of faith I will explore further the person and work of the Holy Spirit. But first I will define what I mean by faith.

**The Nature of Saving Faith**

There are different theological understandings of faith. For Thomas Aquinas, faith consists in assent to propositions, which are formulated by the Church. In one place he asserts, “Since, then, science and opinion are about propositions, it seems that faith is likewise about propositions.” In another he writes, “to believe is an act of the intellect inasmuch as the will moves it to assent.” If faith involves intellectual assent then many people with severe autism are excluded from having faith. The approach of the Reformers to faith is in my view more biblical. For Luther, faith is laying hold of the work of Christ. It involves a knowledge that the work of Christ was done for me and is able to deliver me from the accusations of guilt which come from the conscience. For Calvin, faith involves trusting in the gracious promises of God which declare that he is our Father.

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

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702 Ibid. II-II, Q 4, A 2.


704 Calvin, *Institutes*. III.ii.7
Holy Spirit

Faith, for Calvin is more about being certain of God’s favour than about comprehension.\textsuperscript{705}

To be clear here, when I write of people with severe developmental delays and cognitive impairments coming to faith in Christ, I am not speaking of an intellectual assent to the gospel. This may not be possible. The reality is that we cannot know for sure what people with severe autism do or do not understand on an intellectual level. However, to be united to Christ through faith does not require intellectual understanding, but it does involve trust. So when I refer to faith in this chapter I am understanding faith to be \textit{fiducia}, trust, not assent to propositions. The heart, when enabled by the Spirit, is able to take hold of Christ. This understanding of faith, although bypassing the intellect, does not make it something simple. As Calvin asserts, it is more difficult for the heart to have assurance than it is for the mind to understand things with the intellect.\textsuperscript{706} That is why we must not bypass the work of the Spirit in trying to come to grips with how faith is possible for people with severe autism.

The Holy Spirit: The Divine Person Who Enables Faith in Christ

\textit{Torrance and Smail: Christ’s Faith and Our Faith}

The case of John the Baptist suggests that people who have not attained a capacity to reason are able to have faith in Christ. Here I will consider \textit{how} a person, whether capable of rational thought or not, comes to have faith in Christ. To begin this discussion, I will bring together the objective understanding of Thomas Torrance, who emphasises that faith is a work of Christ, and the helpful corrective of Tom Smail, who

\textsuperscript{705} Ibid. III.ii.14
\textsuperscript{706} Ibid. III.ii.36
avers that a person is only able to have faith because of the work of the Holy Spirit who
draws people to faith in Christ.

In *The Mediation of Christ*, T.F. Torrance approaches faith and conversion
from the perspective of the completed work of Christ. Rather than assuming that faith
is a human activity which must be done by the believer alone in response to the gospel,
Torrance puts emphasis on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. It is not that human beings
do not need to believe; human beings need to respond in faith to the gospel. But faith is
not something which is possible independent of the work of Christ. God faithfully
upholds the weak faith of those who respond to him. In the words of Torrance:

> We must think of Jesus as stepping into the relation between the faithfulness of
> God and the actual unfaithfulness of human beings, actualising the faithfulness of
> God and restoring the faithfulness of human beings by grounding it in the
> incarnate medium of his own faithfulness so that it answers perfectly to the divine
> faithfulness. … That is to say, if we think of belief, trust or faith as forms of
> human activity before God, then we must think of Jesus Christ as believing,
> trusting and having faith in God the Father on our behalf and in our place.

When the New Testament refers to *pistis Christou* (e.g. Gal 2:16; 2:20; 3:22) it is
expressing both that the faithfulness of God is fully revealed in Christ and that in Christ
humanity has truly answered that faithfulness.

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707 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*.
708 Ibid., 91.
709 Ibid., 92.
710 Thomas F. Torrance, "One Aspect of the Biblical Conception of Faith," *The Expository Times* 68, no. 4 (1957); Recent scholarly discussion of *pistis Christou* passages in the undisputed Pauline epistles has yielded a new interpretation of this expression. Many now consider that a subjective genitive is in view as Torrance is assuming here (Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 58-60.)
Torrance approaches conversion and regeneration in the same way. Human beings are commanded by the gospel to repent, have faith in God, and follow Christ. While every person must do this, and no one can do it on his or her behalf, there is one who must be the substitute for every person, that is, Jesus Christ. Indeed it is vital that we allow Jesus to be our substitute at this juncture, for to do otherwise is to fail to appropriate the fullness of Jesus’ atoning death. Human repentance is utterly inadequate, because humanity is so bound by sin. But Jesus has perfectly repented on our behalf in his bearing of the judgement of God upon sin, and brought human nature into freedom from sin when he was resurrected from the dead.711 Thus Torrance can write:

[O]ur new birth, our regeneration, our conversion, is what has taken place in Jesus Christ himself, so that when we speak of our conversion or our regeneration we are referring to our sharing in the conversion or regeneration of our humanity, brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake.712

For Torrance, therefore, faith and conversion are objective matters, in which human beings are given the privilege of sharing. The work of Jesus Christ is primary in faith and regeneration, just as it was in the transformation of human nature in the incarnation and the atonement. This is a solid basis for understanding the salvation of people with severe and profound disabilities. The work of Christ does not depend on our ability, nor is it hindered by our inability. Salvation is the same for every human regardless of ability or inability. Yet despite the depth of Torrance’s insight in this matter, he does not explore the work of the Spirit in drawing people to Christ.

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712 Ibid., 96.
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However, there is a perspective which provides a balance to Torrance’s view, that is, the work of Tom Smail.

Smail comments positively about Torrance’s book *The Mediation of Christ*. He agrees with Torrance’s discussion about the significance of the work of Christ on our behalf. Torrance’s work is important in that it opens up the doctrine of Christ in explaining that human beings cannot respond to God alone. Salvation by grace includes the reality that God must work, not simply on our behalf, but also within each of us.713 Smail’s criticism is, however, a significant corrective to Torrance’s work. Smail comments:

I am bound to say, however, that Professor Torrance leaves me dissatisfied with his failure to take adequate account of the equally important New Testament insight that, Christ’s response on my behalf has to become my own response to Christ before it can take effect in me. It is indeed true that I cannot respond by myself till Christ has responded for me; it is also true that I must answer for myself and that I have not done so until the Spirit brings Christ’s vicarious ‘Yes’ to God on my behalf, and makes it available to me on my side of the relationship. It is then that I say my own ‘Amen’ in the Spirit to the answer he has given, and glorify him as I say it.714

Smail notes that even Calvin, who is famous for his concentration on divine sovereignty, understood that each person must respond for himself or herself. It is necessary for the Holy Spirit to apply to each man or woman what Christ has done so

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714 Ibid. Italics original.
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that each may gain the benefit of Christ’s work. Until a person is united with Christ by the Holy Spirit, all that Jesus has done for that person is without value to her or him.\textsuperscript{715}

Smail argues that the distinct personhood of the Holy Spirit is able to safeguard genuine human freedom in responding to the person of Christ. “Our response to him is not something he imposes upon us from outside in an authoritarian way; it is rather something that we bring to him for ourselves and that he receives from us.”\textsuperscript{716} The confession of Peter that Jesus is the Christ exemplifies this truth. Jesus did not impose this understanding on Peter, because Peter needed to answer for himself. And yet Peter did not come to this realisation by himself, but was given knowledge of Jesus from outside. In the Gospel account, prior to Pentecost, it was the Father who revealed this knowledge to Peter, but after Pentecost this is the role of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{717}

This story reveals two very important things in regard to human freedom and response to Christ. First, the work of the Holy Spirit in a person is distinct from the work of Christ. The human response to Jesus is based on who he is and what he has done. Yet this response to Jesus is not given by Jesus, but by the Holy Spirit who opens minds and hearts to knowledge of Jesus and enables the human will to respond, saying, “Jesus is Lord”. People are not constrained in their confession of Christ as Lord, because human freedom to respond is genuine. But this freedom to respond is not something which is innate in humanity. Rather it is a freedom which is granted and sustained by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:17).\textsuperscript{718}

Smail’s conception of salvation is a thoroughly trinitarian one. Life is offered to people because of the grace of God. The Holy Spirit is, as the Nicene Creed states,

\textsuperscript{715} Ibid., 111.
\textsuperscript{716} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{717} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{718} Ibid., 68-69.
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“the Lord, the Giver of life.” But the Holy Spirit is not himself the source of that life. The Father is the source of life and the Son is the archetypal pattern of life. What the Holy Spirit does is to bring to us that life which the Father has given to the Son and which the Son has incarnated into human form. The Holy Spirit brings that life “over to our side of the relationship”.719

Smail emphasises that individuals must respond to the gospel for themselves, yet individuals cannot respond to the gospel by themselves.720 In Smail’s words:

For ourselves, but not by ourselves. The ‘pelagian’ English, to say nothing of the ‘arminian’ Americans, who seem sometimes to believe in the power of human free will more than they believe in the power of God, need constantly to be reminded that it is not in the power of fallen humanity to say ‘Yes’ to what God has done for us in Christ. Left to ourselves we are indeed dead in sins and trespasses. … The ‘Yes’ that we say to God in Christ is our own ‘Yes’; yet it is ours not as an achievement that has its source in us, but as a gift of which the Giver is the Life-giving Spirit.721

Both Torrance and Smail contribute important points to the discussion. Torrance puts his emphasis on the objective nature of the work of Christ, who is the author and finisher of faith (Heb 12:2). Without the work of Christ, whatever faith a person may have in Christ would be insufficient and inadequate. Christ is our mediator in all matters pertaining to salvation, including standing in the gap for us by expressing perfect human faith on our behalf. Smail provides a balance by emphasising the need for each person to express faith. This is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit, who draws people to Christ and gifts each person with the ability to believe for himself

719 Ibid., 166-67.
720 Ibid., 173.
721 Ibid., 174.
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or herself. Thus the Holy Spirit is the divine person who makes possible the response of faith to the person of Christ in persons with severe autism.

To gain a fuller grasp of this idea, I bring three more voices into the conversation, two ancient and one contemporary. The first is John Calvin, whose theology is insightful in regard to the role of the Holy Spirit. Calvin argues that the benefits of Christ are made available by the Holy Spirit as he works to enable faith. The second is Sinclair Ferguson, who presents a biblical case for the work of the Spirit in regeneration. Ferguson emphasises the Spirit’s ability to overcome human inability in regard to salvation. Luther claims that the word of God in the gospel is heard because it is penetrated by the power of the Holy Spirit to enable reception of the gospel. Therefore, those who have ‘ears to hear’ are not hindered in receiving the gospel.

**Calvin: The Benefits of Christ Are Made Available by the Holy Spirit**

Calvin, “the theologian of the Holy Spirit,” so insightfully points out, “that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.” For the benefits of Christ to be effective in a person, Christ must come to the person and dwell in her or him, and this occurs through faith. However, since not every person accepts the work of Christ in faith, it must necessarily be asked how this faith comes about. Faith is made possible by the secret working of the Holy Spirit. Those who believe are called the “elect,” because they are “sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood” (1 Pet 1:2). For the

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723 Calvin, *Institutes*. III.i.1
Holy Spirit

blood of Christ to have an effect each must be “cleansed by the secret watering of the Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is the one who unites us with Christ.\textsuperscript{724}

Calvin goes on to argue that the Holy Spirit is the beginning and the foundation of heavenly life in the believer. According to the prophet Joel (2:28), Yahweh says, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.” This hints that God will make disciples by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, disciples who would otherwise know nothing of spiritual things. It is only through the communion of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14) that a person is able to experience the favour of the heavenly Father, that is, the benefits of Christ.\textsuperscript{725} The Holy Spirit is called the ‘Spirit of adoption,’ because he witnesses to the Father’s favour towards us and enables us to be bold in our approach to the Father, even giving us the very words to speak, that is, ‘Abba, Father’. The human response to God is the result of the grace of the Holy Spirit, without which the human heart would remain in darkness. Only by the Holy Spirit can a person become united with Christ. The Spirit grants human beings membership of the body of Christ by grace and enables them to know that they belong to Christ.\textsuperscript{726}

Bringing people to faith in Christ is the main work of the Spirit. Becoming a child of God is a supernatural gift given through the Holy Spirit. Without this work of the Spirit, who enables the word of God to address the heart, the gospel would have no effect and people would remain in unbelief (Eph 1:13). The apostle Paul writes, “God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth” (2 Thess 2:13). This passage demonstrates that faith can only be brought into existence by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is thus “the key that unlocks for us the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven.” He

\textsuperscript{724} Ibid. III.i.1
\textsuperscript{725} Ibid. III.i.2
\textsuperscript{726} Ibid. III.i.3
Holy Spirit

illuminates the mind so that people are able to see, and thus by the Holy Spirit Jesus
draws to himself his own, who the Father has given him (John 17:24).\textsuperscript{727}

The Holy Spirit is thus the one who enables a person to experience the benefits
of Christ through union with him. The indwelling of the Spirit enlivens the person to
spiritual things and to relationship with the Father. People are drawn to Christ by the
Spirit. Calvin’s insights into the Spirit are important because they demonstrate that
faith is the result of a divine work of grace. In what follows, Ferguson explains the
work of the Spirit in regeneration to overcome human inability in regard to salvation.

\textbf{Ferguson: The Holy Spirit Brings About Regeneration}

A modern voice in this discussion is found in Sinclair Ferguson, who discusses
the relationship between the Spirit and regeneration. Regeneration in the New
Testament is not specifically linked with the Spirit but entrance to the kingdom of God
via new birth enabled by the Holy Spirit is clearly attested in the Gospel of John (John
1:12-13). It is clear, in the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, that this new birth is the
Spirit’s work. “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and
Spirit. … what is born of the Spirit is spirit. … So it is with everyone who is born of the
Spirit” (John 3:5-8 abridged). In his epistles John uses the term ‘born of God’ to refer
to believers in a way which parallels Paul’s use of the term ‘in Christ’ (e.g. 1 John
2:29).\textsuperscript{728} Ferguson observes:

The New Testament’s statements on regeneration emphasise the sovereign,
monergistic, activity of the Spirit. The metaphor of birth itself implies not only a

\textsuperscript{727} Ibid. III.1.4
\textsuperscript{728} Ferguson, \textit{The Holy Spirit}, 118.
radical new beginning, but one which is never autonomous. … The priority here is accorded to God, not to man. The reason for this is that man is ‘flesh’.

Jesus said to Nicodemus that he should not be surprised that he must be born again (John 3:7). This passage emphasises the inability of human beings; five times human inability is mentioned in John 3:3-10. Flesh cannot enter the kingdom of God. In John’s Gospel, ‘flesh’ describes humanity apart from God. Those who are flesh need to be reborn, because as flesh they are without the life of the Spirit. In order to enter the world of the Spirit a person needs to be born from above by the Spirit. Entering the kingdom of God is impossible without the help of the Spirit in a parallel way to an infant, who cannot bring him or herself to birth without help.

There are four aspects to the Spirit’s work of regeneration. The first involves illumination of the mind so that what could not be seen by the unspiritual person becomes visible. All people who have been anointed with the Holy Spirit have unmediated knowledge of God (1 John 2:20, 27). Knowledge of God is not exhaustive at regeneration, but the capacity to know God is restored. Secondly, regeneration involves releasing the will from its enslavement to sin (John 3:5, 20). Thirdly, the Holy Spirit cleanses the heart (Ezek 36:25-27; Tit 3:5; cf. 1 Cor 6:11), changing the desires of the person so that he or she now desires the things pertaining to the new age. The whole person, down to the core, is thereby transformed by the Holy Spirit. Regeneration is as total as the depravity which preceded it. While the change is not complete in the moment of regeneration it is nonetheless comprehensive in extent. Regeneration will, in the resurrection, bring not only moral renewal but physical

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729 Ibid., 119.
730 Ibid., 120-21.
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renewal, so that the entire person is encompassed in the Spirit’s work of regeneration.  

How, then, does the Spirit bring about regeneration in a person? In one sense it is not something which a person can know, because the Spirit moves like the wind and all that can be seen is the result of regeneration in a changed heart. But this work of the Spirit does not take place in a vacuum. Regeneration is something which takes place through the word of God as attested by many passages of scripture – for example, 1 Pet 1:23; Jas 1:18; John 15:3. Although regeneration is a monergistic work of the Spirit, the Spirit is “the divine originating cause” (e.g. John 3:5; 1 John 3:9; 5:1) and the word is “the instrumental cause” (e.g. John 15:3; 1 Cor 4:15; 1 Pet 1:23) Ferguson expresses the relationship between the Spirit’s work and the gospel in this way:

Since faith involves knowledge, it ordinarily emerges in relationship to the teaching of the gospel found in Scripture. Regeneration and the faith to which it gives birth are seen as taking place not by revelationless divine sovereignty, but within the matrix of the preaching of the word and the witness of the people of God (cf. Rom 10:1-15). Their instrumentality in regeneration does not impinge upon the sovereign activity of the Spirit. Word and Spirit belong together.

Ferguson’s point here is significant because it fits well with my contention throughout this thesis that there is too much emphasis on human ability, in particular in regard to coming to faith. Salvation is not a matter of human ability and therefore human inability is not relevant or of consequence. The work of regeneration is not a human work; to suggest that it is so is Pelagian. Much of contemporary theological thinking is Arminian, and as such it puts too much emphasis on the need for people to

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731 Ibid., 121-23.
732 Ibid., 123-25.
733 Ibid., 126.
decide to have faith in their own ability. Such thinking, common with Baptists and Pentecostals, is demonstrated by their need to posit a concept of ‘the age of accountability,’ because, according to their understanding of faith, small children are incapable of the rational thought required for coming to faith. Such theology could never accept that people with severe cognitive disabilities could have faith, because they are unable to reason. But if, with Ferguson, regeneration is understood as participation in the new age made possible by the Holy Spirit, then people with severe and profound disabilities, even those incapable of rational thought, are able to come to faith.

Ferguson does, however, raise a point which needs to be addressed, that is, the Holy Spirit works in concert with the proclamation of the gospel. If the words of the gospel cannot be understood by people who cannot grasp communication in general, then how can a person with severe autism be the subject of the work of the Spirit? In other words, if “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17), then what becomes of the person who does not comprehend words?

**Luther: The Deaf ‘Hear’ the Gospel**

This connection between the work of the Spirit and the proclamation of the gospel presents a problem, but not an insurmountable one. The truth that the Holy Spirit is the one who draws people to Christ is vital for an understanding of how people with autism come to faith. However, this fact cannot be disconnected from the gospel message, and therein lies a problem. Is not the gospel communicated in words which many people with autism cannot understand? A comment of Luther’s in his *Lectures on Galatians* is pertinent.
Commenting on the expression “the hearing of faith,” Luther writes that this is the same thing as “the Word of faith that is heard.” This is clear from passages such as Acts 10:44: “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word”; and Isa 53:1a: “Who has believed what we have heard?” But then Luther asks what to do about the deaf who cannot hear the words of the gospel. He cites the opinion of Jerome who wonders about how the deaf can be saved in light of Rom 10:14: “And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” Paul’s sequence in this passage goes: preaching, hearing, believing, calling on the name of the Lord, and then obtaining salvation. Luther further asks, “How are infants saved and how are they baptised when they themselves do not hear?”

According to Jerome, it is acceptable for faith to be only partial, and the deaf may come to understand the gospel from the actions of believers. Yet what of infants, how can they have faith? Luther, agreeing with Jerome’s final argument, opines, “that to the word of God nothing is deaf and that it speaks to those ears of which it is said: ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear’ (Matt 11:15).” Luther’s enthusiasm is evident as he writes:

I like this answer very much, because the Word of God is not heard even among adults and those who hear unless the Spirit promotes growth inwardly. Accordingly, it is a Word of power and grace when it infuses the Spirit at the same time that it strikes the ears. But if it does not infuse the Spirit, then he who hears does not differ at all from one who is deaf. Consequently, when an infant is not

734 Saint Jerome, Commentarius in Epistula Paulinas ad Galatas.
735 Martin Luther, Luther's Works Volume 27: Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 5-6; Lectures on Galatians 1519 Chapters 1-6, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1964), 248.
736 Ibid.
737 Ibid., 248-49.
confused by other things, it is easier for the very sound of the Word – the sound uttered through the ministry of the church – to be operative through the Spirit.\textsuperscript{738}

Luther was concerned, both here and elsewhere, with demonstrating that infants can have faith, no doubt to justify infant baptism. I do not share his motivation, but his contention is nonetheless valuable. ‘Hearing’ the gospel in this context might be better expressed as being enabled to respond to the gospel. People with severe cognitive disabilities can also hear the gospel as they are enabled by the Holy Spirit to do so. Therefore, the fact that some people cannot understand spoken communication is not an insurmountable difficulty for the divine work of the Holy Spirit.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Is it possible for people with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities to respond to Christ in faith? If this question were considered on the basis of human ability then the answer must be ‘No’. However, in keeping with my emphasis throughout that human ability and inability are not relevant categories in relation to Christ and his work, the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit makes possible a response to Christ, even for people who cannot understand the gospel in a rational sense. Some Christian circles have placed too much emphasis on the capacity for reason in responding to the gospel. Reason is not without value as per Anselm’s aphorism ‘faith seeking understanding’. It is, however, not reason which is the primary way in which people are enabled to respond to the gospel. Since the main problem that human beings have in relation to God is sin, it is primarily human rebellion against the Creator which

\textsuperscript{738} Ibid., 249.
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must be overcome. Reason cannot overcome human rebellion, but the work of Christ brought to humanity through the Holy Spirit is able to do so.

In saying that people with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities can have faith in Christ, I am not suggesting that people with severe cognitive disabilities and those who are unable to communicate will be enabled to cognitively express faith by a work of the Holy Spirit. The response of faith by people with severe autism may not be something visible to others. There may be no way for autistic people to communicate their faith to other people. Rather, I am suggesting that people with autism will be enabled to respond to Christ, and they will thereby be united to Christ and brought into the realm of salvation, a salvation which will be completed at the return of Christ. Being able to articulate words is not necessary for salvation. Although it is usual for Christians to confess with the mouth that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9), it is not the words which procure salvation for anyone. This is evident from what Jesus said about those who call him Lord and do not obey him (Matt 7:21). What effects salvation is the finished work of Christ and the union of a person to Christ through the inward work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, even without words the low-functioning autist is able to have a genuine reciprocal relationship with God through Christ.
Conclusion

Review of the Thesis

I began this thesis with a question about the humanity of people with severe autism. It is all very well to have a vague notion that disability should not prevent someone from being called human. However, in the case of severely low-functioning autistic individuals there are real philosophical and theological challenges to affirming their humanity and personhood. Since this is a theological treatise and not a philosophical one I made no attempt to address the philosophical issues. There are still real theological issues which needed to be addressed in order to produce a theological anthropology which is maximally inclusive of people with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities. This is what I have done in the preceding pages.

The first two chapters outlined the issues which needed to be addressed in relation to the humanity and personhood of low-functioning autistic individuals. The next three chapters provided a christological response to the challenges which were outlined in chapters 1 and 2. These chapters expound the significance of the confession of the Nicene Creed - “For us and our salvation he came down from heaven, … For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate … On the third day he rose again” – for people with severe autism. The final chapter responds to a question raised by my implicit assumptions about how the benefits of the vicarious humanity of Christ are applied to a person with autism.
Conclusion

Chapter 1 gave a psychological description of autism and biographical descriptions of the experience of autism. Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder characterised by a triad of impairments: impaired social skills, impaired reciprocal communication and repetitive or restricted interests and behaviours. Difficulty relating to other people is the central problem in autism. The other characteristics are always present when this problem is present. Autism is both pervasive and developmental, affecting the whole of a person’s life and lifespan. There are more dimensions to the experience of autism than these three features, but for the purposes of this thesis these are the characteristics I have concentrated on in terms of thinking theologically about autism.

In chapter 1 I allowed two voices to speak about their experience of autism. The first voice was that of a high-functioning autistic woman who describes her life up until about age twenty five when she was diagnosed autistic. The disquiet which permeates her account involves the repeated doubt that she was not a ‘real person’. The second voice was a father of a low-functioning ten-year-old boy with autism. The father of Joe reflects on his son’s humanity or lack of it. He believes that thinking about the human qualities which his son lacks can help other people to understand their own humanity better. These two people both raise significant questions about being autistic. Professionals have also raised questions about the humanity of people with severe autism. It is precisely the concerns about the humanity of autistic individuals, in particular those who are severely affected, that this thesis has attempted to address.

Chapter 2 began the theological examination of autism. I did this by considering the nature of humanity as first created through looking at the creation account of Gen 1 to 3. I concluded some significant things with reference to autism.
about the nature of God and the original nature of humanity. The God who created the world exists as a communion of persons. He communicates within the Godhead and with creation. In creating the world God does something new. Thus it is clear that God does not have autism. Human beings are created in the image of God. I have argued that the image of God is not an *analogia entis* but an *analogia relationis*. Being human therefore involves being in relationship. The first humans did not have autism, since they were made to participate in God’s creativity, they were able to communicate, and very importantly they were made to be part of a human community. In these ways the first human beings imaged the God who created them.

This analysis of the Genesis creation account raised two important questions about people with autism. Firstly, since the original humans reflected the Creator by being relational beings, and many people with severe autism do not relate to other people as people, can we say that individuals with severe autism are human persons? A response to this question is the focus of the later chapters this thesis. The second question raised by the Genesis account is in regard to the presence of autism in the world. Where did autism come from if it was not present in the original creation? My conclusion is that the entrance of sin, due to the disobedience of the first humans, radically changed the world. Sin brought with it death and everything that death entails, including the presence of disability in the world. Autism became one part of the experience of people in a sin-broken world.

Although the first two chapters paint a bleak picture about autism, even suggesting that low-functioning individuals with autism may not be human persons, this is not the last word. Chapter 3 began with a discussion of several different attempts at developing an inclusive theological anthropology. Some of these
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anthropologies can rely too much on some intrinsic characteristic of the person, even if that characteristic is minimal. What is needed is an anthropology which looks to something extrinsic to the individual for the basis of his or her humanity and personhood. For this reason chapter 3 takes up the theme of grace as a response to the issues raised in chapters 1 and 2. The extrinsic basis of human personhood espoused in this chapter is the vicarious work of Jesus Christ. My discussion of the incarnation provides a positive theological response to the question of whether people with severe autism are human persons.

Since human nature is deformed by sin, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is the only genuine human being. He is the perfect image of God and the firstfruits of a new humanity which is being restored to the image of God. Jesus is therefore able to be the basis of the humanity of every other human being. There are three ways in which this is accomplished. The first understanding of the incarnation I discussed was recapitulation. Jesus assumed the humanity of Adam and lived out every stage of human life, sanctifying the entire human lifespan, and transforming human nature from within. He did this on behalf of all humanity. Recapitulation removes the need for categories of humanity. In Jesus humanity is united to God and thus humans can become sons and daughters of God. Since humanity is seen in eschatological terms, it is what we are becoming that is important, rather than what we are now. Individuals with severe autism are included in humanity because of the way in which Jesus recapitulated human life on their behalf.

The second understanding of the incarnation I presented is the vicarious humanity of Christ as explained by James Torrance. Jesus has lived a vicarious human life for the benefit of every human being. He has offered the perfect human response to
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God as the obedient Son of the Father. It is difficult for people with severe autism to do many of the things which are expected of Christians – prayer, attendance at church, Bible reading. But since the perfect worship of God was done on behalf of each person with autism it is impossible for people with autism to fall short. Instead, each is given a share in the perfect human response to God made by Jesus. Jesus has healed the humanity of autistics, not in the manner of a doctor but in the manner of one who became the patient to transform the very nature of humanity from within.

The first two understandings of the incarnation provided sufficient basis for the humanity of persons with severe autism. However, the concept of personhood involves relationship with other persons so it raises another difficulty. Since the concept of person was introduced by the early Church in the context of explaining the trinitarian relations, we must think of personhood in terms of relationships with other persons. If this is the case, can autistic individuals who do not relate to others as persons be called human persons? My response to this was to use the theology of T.F. Torrance, who calls Jesus Christ “the humanizing Man and personalizing Person”. Because Jesus is both God and a human being he is both maker of humanity and the perfect human. He is thus humanizing human. He is fully personal as a divine person, while simultaneously existing as a human, and therefore he is the source of personhood for every human. People with severe autism are therefore persons by virtue of the personhood of the personalizing person, Jesus Christ. Humanity and personhood are not dependent on ability and not diminished by inability.

The result of this transformation of humanity, the vicarious life of Christ, and his gift of humanity and personhood, is an extrinsic understanding of human being and personhood. It does not matter whether an individual is autistic or neurotypical,
because the humanity and personhood of that individual comes to them from without, from the person of Christ. Jesus has restored the broken image of God for people with autism. There are now no categories of humanity; it is irrelevant whether someone is able or disabled. The only thing which matters is whether a person is found in Christ, who is the source of all humanity and personhood. Regardless of whether a person has faith in Christ or not, the incarnation provides the best basis for the dignity and value of autistic people, because the fact that God took on humanity is the greatest possible affirmation of human being.

The incarnation provides an extrinsic basis for humanity and personhood and thus a positive way of constructing a theological anthropology which is inclusive of people with severe autism. But the incarnation is incomplete without the atonement, which is the subject of chapter 4. Since autism is only present in the world because of sin, sin must be dealt with before autism can be fully healed. In dealing with sin on the cross, Jesus enabled the eschatological healing of people with autism and their restoration to full humanity in the resurrection of the dead. In his passio magna Jesus took into his own experience what it is like to be cut off from other persons, something which is in some ways like autistic experience. Now the God who has never been alone, because he exists in eternal fellowship as Father, Son and Spirit, knows what it is like to be alone. In this way God can empathise with autistic people and their pain over loneliness.

The climax of the argument in chapter 5 is my discussion of the nature of the resurrection of the dead for people with autism. Here I argued against two significant voices in disability theology – Eiesland and Yong – in regard to their understanding of the resurrection. For both of these people disability in some form will continue in the
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resurrection. I contended that, for those who are found in Christ, the resurrection of the dead will restore autistic people to fully human persons. All that has been said about the transformation of human being, the vicarious humanity of Christ, and the gift of humanness and personhood by Jesus as the source of human personhood, is proleptic of the resurrection of the dead. What can be said about people with autism in the present anticipates the complete transformation of autistic individuals into the image of God as they were always intended to be. In the resurrection of the dead there will no longer be disability. That which has been dysfunctional will be healed and that which is good will be made best. Autistic people will be fully Christ-like.

Chapter 6 deals with something which was implicit in most of my discussion. Much that has been said about the humanity of an individual with autism presupposes that the person will be ‘in Christ’ through faith. This raises the question of how a severely low-functioning individual with autism can have faith in Christ. The closest biblical parallel to the case of cognitively impaired people are infants and this is why I discussed the salvation of infants in the theology of different traditions. I concluded that the biblical example of the unborn John the Baptist recognising the presence of the unborn Jesus provides evidence that it is possible for people with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities to respond positively to Jesus Christ. It is true that Christ has had faith on our behalf, but equally true that we need to make a response to God for ourselves. This subjective response of faith in Christ is made possible by a work of the Holy Spirit. Although it is normal for the Holy Spirit to work in concert with the proclamation of the gospel, the work of the Spirit does not require the capacity for reason or communication in the person with autism.
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Implications of This Thesis

The conclusion of this thesis is that an inclusive anthropology is possible if it is based on the vicarious humanity of Christ and his work for humanity. This extrinsic basis for theological anthropology is necessary because of the nature of severe autism. The characteristics of severe autism confront us with some challenging questions about the nature of humanity. It is evident that if we follow the standard philosophical definitions of humanity that many people, particularly those who are on the low-functioning end of the autism spectrum, will be excluded from the category of human person. Because people with severe autism can neither ‘pass the test’ of rational being nor demonstrate relationality as per the relational understanding of imago Dei, they appear to be excluded from humanity on two counts. But I have shown that using the humanity and personhood of Jesus Christ as the basis for the humanity and personhood of every man and woman provides a strong foundation for the humanness and personhood of people who are severely affected by cognitive and developmental disabilities. My theological anthropology is not confounded by inability. Although being fully human - that is, being psychically, socially and physically everything which God designed for humanity - depends on being ‘in Christ’ and awaits eschatological fulfilment - when sin and death will no longer impact on humanity - the gift of genuine humanness and personhood from the only truly human person is sufficient basis for the humanity and personhood of every other individual. There is no need to look for an intrinsic quality or characteristic which can be a basis for human personhood. It is therefore both possible to see these individuals as human beings and imperative that we do so.
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It is imperative that we see individuals with severe developmental disabilities as human persons, because the consequences of not doing so are considerable. Rather than looking at the consequences of exclusion I prefer to elaborate the consequences of inclusion. When theological anthropology is inclusive of people with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities this provides a sound basis for action in two arenas: the Church and the wider society. In the Church my inclusive anthropology means that it is possible to extend Paul’s statement in Gal 3:28 to read, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female;” there is no longer autistic or neurotypical, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Therefore, the Church must never regard one person as superior or inferior to another. This is because the humanity and personhood of each individual is determined by grace; they are gifts not intrinsic characteristics of an individual. So if someone lacks a particular characteristic it makes no difference. Cognitive or developmental disability does not prevent a person from being part of the body of Christ.

Inclusion in the Church is not simply a matter of access into buildings, and for people with cognitive and developmental disabilities physical access is not really the issue. Rather inclusion must be more about seeing people with autism as people who are valuable and have something to contribute to the body of Christ and the life of the Church. Each person in the body of Christ has unique gifts for the benefit of the other members of the body. People with severe disabilities are also people with unique gifts. If the Church assumes that this is true then those gifts will be discovered and encouraged. This is one of the underlying assumptions of L’Arche communities. Henri Nouwen observes, “L’Arche exists not to help the mentally handicapped get
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‘normal,’ but to help them share their spiritual gifts with the world.” Steven Fettke also remarks that any ministry to people with developmental disabilities “requires a paradigm shift: the disabled can be considered people created in God’s image with their own needs to be addressed and their own gifts to contribute.” It is only when we assume that individuals with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities such as autism are genuine human persons that we can think in these terms. Without an inclusive theological anthropology the best that we might do is to think of people with severe autism as individuals who might need to be cared for, somewhere out of sight.

Physical inclusion in church is not enough. According to John Swinton, what is needed is not merely that people with disabilities are physically present in church buildings, but that they belong. As Swinton correctly maintains, political action can only result in laws which ensure physical inclusion. It cannot bring about belonging, “To be included you just need to be present. To belong you need to be missed.” Swinton argues that fostering an environment of belonging in the local church requires that we begin to see each other ‘in Christ’.

My inclusive anthropology contributes to fostering an environment of belonging, because it provides a strong basis for understanding one another ‘in Christ’ rather than as people who are defined by ability or inability, as either autistic or neurotypical. An inclusive anthropology like this one is vital if the Church is going to move beyond the cultural assumptions which pervade our thinking about what makes someone human. Without it, these cultural assumptions will continue to hinder belonging.

742 Ibid.
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Thirdly, this theological anthropology can enable churches to think positively about the spiritual needs of people with severe autism. Having a severe cognitive or developmental disability does not mean that an individual is incapable of knowing God. People with low-functioning autism are able to respond positively to Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, churches should expend effort to meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of autistic people, not just the needs of those who care for autistic people. Resources are available to help churches meet these needs.\textsuperscript{743} What is needed is a perception that these needs exist and that it is important to meet them.

Wider Australian society is not in general swayed by theological argumentation. However, the Church is responsible for advocating on behalf of the weak and marginalised. People with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities fall into this category. Advocacy is needed for the preservation of babies in utero that might be aborted because they are unwanted, or for encouraging people to adopt or provide foster care for children with developmental disabilities. Therefore, my inclusive theological anthropology can contribute a basis for encouraging the Church in this much needed advocacy role in the wider society. It will, however, be necessary for others to consider arguments which will be accepted by secular agencies. The arguments I have presented here are unsuitable for presentation to government as they are aimed particularly at an audience which is interested in theological discussion.

My inclusive theological anthropology is not applicable only to autism. It has application to people with other conditions. For instance, people with intellectual disabilities are often marginalised and it is assumed that they cannot believe in God or understand spiritual things, because of a deficit in rational cognition. People with

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dementia may be considered as non-persons because of the affects of memory loss and physical deterioration. There are also other conditions which have some features in common with autism. These include Rett syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, Angelman’s syndrome and tuberous sclerosis. None of these conditions can negate the humanity or personhood of anyone. The same basis for the humanness and personhood applies to people with autism, people who have intellectual disabilities, people with dementia or people who are neurotypical, people with ‘normal’ intelligence, and people without dementia. For all of these people it is the genuine humanity of the person of Jesus Christ which is the basis of their humanity and personhood.

My thesis has made a contribution to filling a present gap in the literature regarding theological discussions of autism. However, it has done more than simply fill a gap. I presented a disability theology from an evangelical perspective. Evangelical theology has been in the minority when it comes to speaking about disability. Much of evangelical theology is concerned with discussing traditional theological loci rather than social issues. However, it is possible to combine the evangelical focus on traditional theological loci with an application to the issues presented by disability. More evangelicals need to think theologically about disability. The theological voice of evangelicals in disability literature is needed in order to counter the voices of people who are not concerned to uphold the sacredness of the scriptures and the Christian tradition.

I have kept the person and work of Christ at the centre of all my theological discussion. This is something which is both necessary and significant. Disability theology does not need to be centred on disability as such, nor does theology have to be

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approached from a disability perspective in order to have something to say about
disability. An approach which puts the work of Christ at the centre provides a way in
which we can actually unite persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities.
When the focus is on a disability perspective there must necessarily be a divide
between those who do and do not have a disability. Putting Christ at the centre of
disability theology can realign thinking within the historic Christian tradition. The
work of Christ is absolutely sufficient for the task of dealing with disability, the
experience of disability, for valuing people with disabilities, and for bringing people
with disabilities to wholeness in the resurrection of the dead. There is no need to
elevate disability to a place which is above Christ or above the Bible or above the
Christian tradition.

Weaknesses and Further Research

I cannot say that I have written a definitive theology of autism. What I have
done is begun a process of discussing autism from a theological perspective. There are,
I believe, three significant ways in which the theological discussion might progress
forward. The first is through discussion with Christian parents of autistic children and
with autistic Christian adults. Those who are experiencing the difficulties and joys of
the autistic life and who have thought about the issues from a theological viewpoint
could provide a valuable perspective. Certainly, some literature has been written by
Christian parents of autistic children, including devotional literature and Disabled
Church, Disabled Society, which is an academic discussion. I am, however, unaware
of any Christian adults with autism who have written of their theological reflections on
autism. This avenue of research is by no means exhausted.
Conclusion

For reasons of lack of space, I have concentrated on a narrow definition of the autistic experience and a narrow set of theological loci. Future research could fruitfully discuss different aspects autism beyond the triad of impairments such as sensory overload. In addition there are many aspects of the autistic experience which are positive, for example, heightened ability to perceive patterns or savant skills. I have not discussed many of the aspects of Christian living in relation to autism: prayer, church attendance, Bible reading, spirituality, suffering, sanctification, Christian maturity, and growth to Christ-likeness for people with autism. These deserve some attention in future theological discussions.

Thirdly, I am conscious of the fact that I have provided a theology which has focused on worst case scenarios in autistic people. A weakness of this thesis is that there has been no discussion of how God uses those with autism for his purposes in this life. Since God works all things together for the good of those who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28), there are no doubt many things which could be said about this. God works through the weak and marginalised to his own glory and for the advancement of the kingdom of God. But since my thesis has been aimed at discussing the extremes of autistic experience and the grace of God I have not delved into this. This is something which future research should address.

Conclusion

The humanity of autistic people is no longer in question. I can say this with confident certainty, because the humanity of Jesus Christ is not in doubt. Since

745 A very worthwhile discussion of the way in which God uses people with profound cognitive disability, both for his own glory and to transform other people, is found in Henri J. M. Nouwen, Adam: God's Beloved (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).
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humanness and personhood are something extrinsic to the individual, disability or ability cannot compromise the humanity or personhood of anybody. Autism does not prevent an individual from being a human person. Neurotypicality does not make someone human. The wonder of the gospel is that Jesus Christ became a human being and he has given everyone a share in his perfect humanity. The answer to my original question of whether people with severe autism are human has served to emphasise the grace of God to all human beings, for without that grace no one could rightly call themselves a human person.


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