

Reframing Liturgical Theology Through the Lens of Autism: A Qualitative Study of Autistic Experiences of Worship

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Abstract

The way autistic people experience worship services is typically different from the majority, non-autistic church population. These autistic ways of experiencing worship, however, are mostly disregarded in practical and in liturgical theology. This leads not only to exclusion of autistic people from the worshipping congregation, but both the church and liturgical scholarship miss out on the opportunity to enrich its worship practices and theology through the diversity offered by autistic participants. This article presents the results of a qualitative study involving thirteen in-depth interviews with autistic people, summed up in three main themes: the experience of worship, community, and encountering God. The ensuing theological reflection on these themes argues that the indispensability of autistic worshippers to the body of Christ, and the theological evaluation of the “normalcy,” are key principles for reframing liturgical theology through the lens of autism.

Keywords

Liturgy, worship, autism, liturgical theology, normalcy, indispensable, worship practices, disability, neurodivergence

I. Introduction

Rose, an autistic¹ young woman, states that she wished “the people in church were less ableist and could reflect on their behavior, and not use the Bible to back up ableist

1. All participants' names are fictitious. In line with the preference of the majority of people in the autistic community (at least in the United Kingdom), we use identify-first language instead of person-first language (i.e. “autistic” instead of “person with autism”). See Monique Botha, Jacqueline Hanlon, and Gemma Louise Williams, “Does Language Matter? Identity-First Versus Person-First Language Use in Autism Research: A Response to Vivanti,” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* online (2021); Kristen Bottema-Beutel et al., “Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers,” *Autism in Adulthood* 3.1 (1 March 2021) 18–29; Lorcan Kenny et al., “Which Terms Should Be Used to Describe Autism? Perspectives from the UK Autism Community,” *Autism* 20.4 (May 2016) 442–62.

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behavior and not see me less.” This sentiment was reflected in many of the interviews we conducted for our study of autistic experiences of worship. These experiences are different from the majority, non-autistic church population, and are often disregarded, leading to worship practices that might be excluding autistic people. In this article, we explore how the study of worship practices and liturgical theology as reframed by autistic experiences can contribute to worship which is both more inclusive and faithful in its practices.

This article first highlights the lack of autistic studies in the field of liturgy and worship. It then outlines the methodology of our study for which we interviewed thirteen autistic people. After that, the article presents the three main themes that we identified in the interviews, followed by a theological reflection that addresses the question of how autistic experiences of worship might reframe liturgical theology.

2. Literature Review

Theological reflection on autism is a recent phenomenon. In 2009, the *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* (now the *Journal of Disability and Religion*) published an issue on theology and autism in which the guest editors rightly claimed, “the subject of autism and religion, in particular, remains an under-researched area,” a few of exceptions notwithstanding. They continue, “even within the field of disability theology there has been a notable lack of reflection on autism.”² In the last decade, more theological works on autism have been published, with an increase in academic journal articles on the topic in recent years. The experience of liturgy by autistic worshippers, however, is still under-researched, and the question of what liturgical theologians might learn from that experience is not prominent in the literature. Moreover, Waldock and Forrester-Jones demonstrate, in their research on the perception of autism that church members vary widely in their understanding of autism, which results in questionable theologies and practices.³ Finally, a few booklets and guidelines for “autism-friendly” worship have been published or are available online.⁴ These sources are commendable, but it is out of their scope to engage in academic theological reflection in the way we intend to undertake in this article.

Whilst worship and liturgy are commented on occasionally in the literature on autism and theology, in the field of liturgical-theology autism does not surface as a topic. Disability more broadly is an area that some liturgical scholars have researched, but

2. John Swinton and Christine Trevett, “Religion and Autism: Initiating an Interdisciplinary Conversation,” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 13.1 (3 February 2009) 3.

3. Krysia Emily Waldock and Rachel Forrester-Jones, “An Exploratory Study of Attitudes toward Autism Amongst Church-Going Christians in the South East of England, United Kingdom,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* (11 June 2020) 1–22.

4. Esp. Barbara J. Newman, *Autism and Your Church*, Revised, Updated ed. edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive, 2011); Stephen J. Bedard, *How to Make Your Church Autism-Friendly*, 2nd edition (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017); Ann Memmott, *Welcoming and Including Autistic People in Our Churches and Communities* (Diocese of Oxford, 2019), <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Autism-Guidelines-2019.pdf>.

even that remains at the margins of the liturgical-theological field.⁵ Furthermore, the link between disability and autism is not straightforward. Therefore, research focused on the wider topic of disability would need to be used carefully if it were to be applied to the topic of autism.

Given the scarcity of research on the autistic experience of worship and liturgical-theological reflection, this article helps fill the gap by presenting the results of a qualitative study of autism and liturgy and by offering initial liturgical and theological reflections on those experiences. This article focuses less on the practical implementation of the research findings in worship services, and more on presenting the interview analysis and the liturgical-theological questions this analysis raises. It will demonstrate that autistic members are indispensable to the body of Christ, to the act of worship, and, therefore, to liturgical theology. Without autistic people, liturgical theology risks to perpetuate ableism or a “cult of normalcy.”

3. Methodology

When reflecting on the autistic experiences of worship, it is paramount to listen closely to autistic people themselves.⁶ For this reason, and because autistic voices have been missing largely from the conversation, as said above, we shall spend the bulk of this article on the analysis of the interviews. This article is based on semi-structured interviews with autistic people in the United Kingdom who are regular worshippers in a Christian church. The interviews took place between March 2020 and May 2021. Nine participants were male, and five were female. The participants were between 16 and 55 years old. All interviewees were invited to bring a trusted person to the interview if they wished. Sophie and Xavier, a married couple, and both autistic chose to be interviewed together, and Rachel chose for her (non-autistic) mother to be present and have input. Because of COVID-19, interviews took place by video call, except for the interview with Sophie and Xavier, which took place before the national lockdown. One outlier in terms of sampling is Florence. She is a non-autistic mother of an autistic son. Because in qualitative research the researchers try to understand the dynamics of situations,⁷ we deemed it appropriate to include Florence in the analysis and results, as her insights into liturgy and autism were profound and illuminating.

The interviews included questions along the lines of, “Can you describe a typical worship service in your church?,” “How do you experience the worship service?,” and,

5. Two examples illustrate the point. The recent *Liturgy with a Difference: Beyond Inclusion in the Christian Assembly* (London: SCM Press, 2019) edited by Stephen Burns and Bryan Cones, does not include a chapter on disability. *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM Press, 2013), edited by Paul F. Bradshaw, includes only quite brief entries on “Disabilities, Worship and Persons with,” “Deaf Persons and Worship,” and “Blind Persons and Worship.”
6. Sue Fletcher-Watson et al., “Making the Future Together: Shaping Autism Research through Meaningful Participation,” *Autism* 23.4 (2019) 943–53.
7. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006) 37–38.

“Do you think having autism/being autistic impacts the way you think about God and church? If yes, how?” The interviews were all audio or video recorded and transcribed by an external transcriber. The transcriptions were checked for accuracy by both authors. They both listened to the interviews at least twice and read through each transcript multiple times. The transcripts were coded inductively by each author separately, using NVivo 12 Pro.⁸ After coding the first two interviews, the authors discussed their coding to discern the usefulness of the various codes in relation to the research question and to consider integrating codes that either researcher missed in subsequent analyses. Thematic coding was applied,⁹ which involved the first round of coding, the second-round for accuracy, and additional codes whilst listening again to the interview, after which the codes were analyzed to group them into categories. Each category within each interview was summarized. From an analysis of the categories and summary statements, several themes were identified. The categories and emerging themes were negotiated by the authors over multiple meetings. The themes section below presents the resulting themes and subthemes. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the College of Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics and Governance Committee at the University of Aberdeen.

Three limitations were particularly felt in this project. The first is the impossibility of doing participant observation in the interviewees’ churches due to COVID-19. This would have given a more rounded picture and helped to understand the interviewees’ responses. However, participant observation would have been possible only within a reasonable distance from where the authors work. Without this, it became possible to recruit participants from a wider geographical area, which helped to find enough participants to reach the point of saturation in the data analysis.

The second limitation is that due to the pandemic interviews took place online, which limits the possibility of interviewing those people for whom more creative and in-person methods would be more helpful. Being non-verbal does not necessarily indicate a learning disability, but both share the need for support which were not accessible with the technology available to the researchers. The sample, therefore, is limited to autistic people without learning disabilities and/or speech impairments. Further research with non-verbal autistic people and those with a learning disability is much desired, even more so because they participate much less in research than their verbal and non-learning disabled peers.¹⁰

8. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.2 (January 2006) 83–84, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

9. We followed largely the analytical process as outlined by Braun and Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology.”

10. For example, in 2016, only three of the fourteen funded autism research projects in the UK included people with a learning disability and only two included minimally verbal people. Georgina Warner, Heather Cooper, and James Cusack, *A Review of the Autism Research Funding Landscape in the United Kingdom* (London: Autistica, n.d.), <https://www.autistica.org.uk/downloads/files/Autistica-Scoping-Report.pdf>.

Thirdly, the interview with Florence, mother of an autistic son but non-autistic herself, proved to gain new insights. In a further study, more family members could be invited to participate, which was outside the scope of the present study.

4. Theme I: Experience of Liturgy

The first theme we identified in the data is that autism shapes the experience of worship and liturgy when liturgy is defined as the underlying logic which guides the worshipful actions of the church.¹¹ This theme, the experience of liturgy, included four subthemes: (dis)comfort, sensory aspects, practices as doctrine, and thinking differently.

4.1. (Dis)Comfort

The interviewees spoke a lot about what made them feel comfortable or uncomfortable in church. Positively, Xavier and Alex both felt their churches as “warm” without ignoring the realities of autism. The congregations made each feel welcomed by being accepted just as they are. Doug similarly found his congregation to be supportive of his spiritual needs (regularly asking for personal prayer and turning to the congregation when feeling overwhelmed), even as some of those are atypically expressed given his neurodivergent thought process.

Charlotte reports that her congregation brings her peace. Xavier, Sophie, Margareta, and Natasha also report feeling accepted and welcomed in comforting ways. The absence of certain common barriers acts as a baseline for this engagement; music cannot be too loud (Xavier and Sophie), the liturgy is predictable and readily learned/memorized (Margareta), the community is authentic (Natasha), and the atmosphere is open (Tim). As Elise names, these positive experiences did not come as a result of hiding or dismissing autism, but from the church supporting interviewees in their needs.

Conversely, Charlotte, Sophie, Alex, Rose, Leona, Elise, Margareta, Natasha, and Oliver all noted specific ways that their churches had made them feel uncomfortable. Feeling “out of control,” was a significant issue for Charlotte, with Elise and Rachel mentioning that larger group gatherings gave them a similar fear about not having the security of predictability. Rose and Charlotte each reported anxiety during worship, particularly regarding social interaction, a challenge also named by Alex. Sophie finds that worship can have unexpected emotional triggers which are difficult for her to address within the service itself. Relatedly, Leona and Margareta find too much liturgical change (e.g., change of seating plan) to be disruptive and difficult to handle.

A further aspect of discomfort appears in the technical side of the liturgy. Tim finds it disconcerting and embarrassing when things go wrong, for example, people forgetting to switch on their microphone during a zoom service. Rose and Margareta both name the

11. Melanie Ross, *Evangelical versus Liturgical? Defying a Dichotomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 10. Liturgy also seeks to facilitate a worshipful encounter with God; rather than these definitions standing in contrast, the experience of the interviewees highlights this relationship as an integral aspect of the religious engagement. This is further explored in Theme 3.

tendency of music to “go awry,” with loud recordings and sound mixes often causing physical discomfort. In a similar strand, Tim and Rose find what they term harsh and judgmental sermons to be grating and uncomfortable.

4.2. Sensory Aspects

Autism is for each of the interviewees tied quite prominently to sensation, affirming a growing body of literature that sees sensory perception as a key to understanding autism.¹² Autism affects Alex, particularly regarding sensory perception. For examples, he wears blue-tinted glasses and prefers a dark environment (much like Rachel), does not like strong smells, and prefers people to give him distance (he is quite happy with services being virtual during the global pandemic). Xavier, Sophie, Elise, Doug, Leona, Margaretta, Rachel, Rose, and Oliver find the music in worship often can be too loud, causing discomfort or even physical pain. Elise, Rachel, and Margaretta add that people being too close or actually touching them is a significant issue during worship.

4.3. Practices as Doctrine

Several practices of the church were named as small, but important, places to start with practical shifts given that the liturgy has implicit meaning beyond its stated expression. Charlotte notes that the Scottish Episcopal Church, “says it does its doctrine in its liturgy.” This means that by enacting and participating in the liturgy, one both learns and is shaped by the doctrines which the church holds. Florence makes this point quite saliently: “I think if you were to analyze it, what happens in our services, in a normal service, actually says a lot about what we think is normal, or what we are prepared to accept is normal. And it also says something about what we think is normal in God.” The structure of the liturgy cannot be divorced from conceptions of God (and thus, doctrine). An example of how “normal” ways of thinking are furthered by liturgy comes from Rose. She finds that some liturgical elements or texts, “either advertently or inadvertently sow seeds of stigma” due to their unfriendly nature toward disabilities; she names as an example the line, “I was blind and now I see” in the hymn “Amazing Grace.” She argues that the lived experiences of autistic people, “may help us see kind of what’s written in the Bible [and hymns, we may add] in a way that’s perhaps reflective of them, which people who perhaps haven’t had those lived experiences, however they identify, perhaps don’t, haven’t quite picked up.”¹³

12. Sarah H. Baum, Ryan A. Stevenson, and Mark T. Wallace, “Behavioral, Perceptual, and Neural Alterations in Sensory and Multisensory Function in Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *Progress in Neurobiology* 134 (November 2015) 140–60; see also Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019) 103–27.

13. For more on disabled readings of the narratives of healing found in the Bible, see Bethany McKinney Fox, *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), John M. Hull, *In the Beginning there was Darkness: A Blind Person’s Conversations with the Bible* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2001), and Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parson, and Amos Yong, eds., *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2018).

The relationship between practice and doctrine, and how autism bears on that relationship, is evident in the way some participants speak about this. Leona links her autistic patterns of thinking with the dynamism of the church. Theologically, given that God is never finished speaking, she says, the church should always be ready to reshape or shift its practices. Autism allows Leona to name specific ways in which her thought patterns reinterpret the words and actions of the liturgy, making autism a vector of doctrinal change. Nevertheless, she simultaneously states that while theologically change is important, as an autistic person she struggles as the church she attended was, “less predictable.” Likewise, Alex says, “the way churches are set up . . . they do not take account necessarily of our needs that it can make it harder to get your head wrapped around what they are saying about God.” In a similar vein, Rose explains that churches operate with a set of expectations, “of how we should approach God” and says that “can be difficult for autistic people.” For example, she says, churches use a lot of language without explaining what it means, making it inaccessible to those unfamiliar with the terms.¹⁴ The worship service reveals much of what the church believes; in other words, the liturgy does reveal doctrine. The interviewees show that the assumptions, doctrines, and what is thought to be normal (cf. Florence above), can be alienating and a hindrance for autistic people to worship and encounter God.

4.4. *Thinking Differently*

A number of interviewees believe that being autistic gives them a different way to think about God and church. This in turn shapes their worship experience, allowing different patterns and emphases within the liturgy to emerge which might not be apparent to non-autistic worshippers. For example, Xavier and Sophie highlighted how their autistic-patterned thinking allowed them to make more connections between theological or biblical strands. Charlotte finds her pattern of thinking uncovers patterns, shapes, and colors within the liturgy. Through this, she is sometimes able to connect with the liturgy even if it is presented in a language she cannot understand. Conversely, she is put off when familiar language is used but does not hold to the expected pattern.

Alex states that autistic ways of thinking are indispensable as they can, more readily than others, think creatively, dare to propose/act on radical ideas, and tend to spot logical holes—for example in sermons. Likewise, Natasha sees some theological practices for the social constructs that, in her opinion, they are. The example she gives is the restriction of drinking alcohol in some churches, which in her view does not make theological sense. “Autistic people are quite good at calling out that stuff that doesn’t sit quite true.” Tim agrees, stating that as an autistic person, “you’re not filtered by some of the preconceptions that society has imposed.”

Leona agrees with Alex that autistic people’s different ways of thinking can benefit churches, and she wants churches to listen to the theologies developed by autistic people. “You probably won’t agree with it, you don’t necessarily have to agree with it, but just—I suppose my dream church would be one that is open to considering slightly

14. For further examples of how autistic thinking might conflict with church expectations, see Stewart Rapley, *Autistic Thinking In the Life of the Church* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2021).

different ways of looking at things, rather than imposing quite a neuro-typical theology onto everybody.” Indeed, she says, “that non-conformity part of autism and yeah, the sort of empirical thinking would have quite a big impact on how I decide to interpret the liturgy. Even basic things like when you say the word ‘God’, what does God actually mean? No one knows ...” Similarly, Alex argues that, “we’re guilty of just passively accepting preaching without engaging properly which it, and I think we are much more likely to stick our hand up and say that does not make sense, teach me that better.”

Seeing patterns, and being able to make connections which others would not can be joyful for autistic people and an aid in worshipping God. Conversely, it can be off-putting when sermons are not logically coherent when hymns express ableism, and when certain practices of the community (within or outside the worship service) appear disjunctive with biblical texts. However, as some interviewees said, the ability to spot these things is one specific marker of how many autistic people are indispensable to the body of Christ. Autistic people can help the church to engage in more faithful worship practices.

5. Theme 2: Community

The second major theme emerging from the data is the centrality of community. Worship was understood by every participant as something which included a social aspect, although the degree to which individuals participated in the life of the community beyond weekly worship times varied considerably. Whether viewed as a positive, additive aspect of their worship experience or as a negative aspect, communal life was deemed necessary and vital. This converges with a significant body of research which highlights that autistic individuals desire deep friendships and communal roles, contrary to some popular perceptions of autism.¹⁵ This theme of community in the data is constituted by the visibility of disability, the church culture, and acceptance.

5.1. Visibility

Although autism can often be “hidden” or “invisible,” many found that the overt presence of autistic worshipers increased their church’s focus on being a welcoming community for those on the spectrum. Leona, Charlotte, and Margareta personally know several autistic persons who attend or lead churches (among other participants with disabilities, such as those who have had strokes). Sophie and Xavier enjoy that their church has more visibly or openly disabled people. Sophie was diagnosed with autism a couple of years ago. They feel that the normalization of the presence of disabilities allowed her to be treated equally before and after her diagnosis.

In some churches, such normalization was not obviously present. Rose finds that the presence of autism is often misunderstood, partly because of preconceived notions about what

15. A. Deckers, P. Muris, and J. Roelofs, “Being on your own or feeling lonely? Loneliness and other social variables in youths with autism spectrum disorders,” *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* 48.5 (2017) 828–39, and F. Sedgewick, J. Leppanen, and K. Tchanturia, “The Friendship Questionnaire, autism, and gender differences: a study revisited,” *Molecular Autism* 10 .40 (2019).

the Body of Christ is and what autism (or other people with “different lived experiences” or “who think differently”) means. This leaves no space for autism in the body of Christ and, thus, did not force any sort of practical changes. Alex and Florence echoed the challenge of naming autism in church, given the diversity that exists under the label. Partly because the definition of an autistic person is nebulous, many interviewees felt their presence was devalued or misunderstood because they did not fit the imagined standard. A lack of visibility of autism, or general disability, reifies these assumptions at the expense of those less visible but already present within the community.

5.2. Church Culture

Doug was particularly positive about his church’s culture, as he felt it was filled with love and friendship. Most, however, felt their culture needed some adjustment. For example, Charlotte believes that the church should be more open to being affected by the liturgy, which she personally links to her autism (e.g., she is comfortable with crying in the liturgy, but many in her church are not). Rachel took her critique further, claiming her church culture as not biblical and standing in the way of her encountering God. For example, she needs relatively small adjustments, like changing the bright lights in the worship space. She feels her church puts up a stumbling block (she refers to Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8), while in her view the biblical action would be, “help other people, so when there’s something really simple you could do to help somebody, why not do it?”

Furthermore, many felt that the social pressures inside and outside of the formal liturgy were difficult and impacted their ability to be present in the church. Nearly everyone found social interaction to be a struggle, especially an eye contact expectations and spoken communication. Charlotte finds it distressing when social interactions begin without clear direction. Alex and Oliver particularly disliked the amount of touching in services. Alex notes how much of the informal conversation before and after worship involves a “chaotic” invasion of space, while Oliver singled out the passing of the peace as a time during which physical proximity felt invasive.

The culture of a church strongly influences how readily autistic worshipers can engage with the wider church community, often noted in negative ways. This may result in making compromises, as acknowledged by the interviewees, but they were not seeking “special treatment.” As Xavier states, a good community adjusts to their needs willingly; “not that we’re special, we’re just loved.” However, “compromise” is often insufficient in churches which did not have strong cultures of disability integration. Alex found it tiring to bear the constant burden of adjusting to the service, rather than have his needs anticipated. Leona felt that speaking one’s mind was not appreciated, which she found difficult when concerning her own unmet needs. Rose highlights that when she is not supported by the community, she cannot in turn give back. The biggest need is, indeed, not for physical or structural support, but for a change of attitude and church culture(s).

5.3. Acceptance and Indispensability

There are, however, moments of positive engagement with community. Acceptance within the Body of Christ does not necessitate conformity among all the participants.

Natasha finds that she often fits in without needing to mask her autistic behaviors because diversity is expected and welcomed. For Margareta, this occurs more readily when engaged with her online church, as it has a strong culture of disability visibility and anticipation. Sophie and Xavier affirm that the visible presence of people with disabilities helps to make one feel welcome and valued, as we saw above.

Whether autistic people are accepted in their community or not is an open question for most contexts when viewed from a practical or descriptive framework. However, a theological theme of ‘autistic people as indispensable to the Body of Christ’ emerged from the interviewees, marking a contrast with the negative experiences many encountered in regular worship. When it is understood that every person has a gift, the Body of Christ simply does not have its full potential and is lacking without autistic members (Charlotte, Doug, Elise, Natasha, Rose, Florence). This is both theoretical and practical. As Sophie describes, “they would not know what to do if they did not have me . . . They would maybe miss me if I wasn’t here.” Moreover, there is a deeper theological issue at stake. In Rose’s words, to be indispensable to the Body of Christ also means, “that we are not broken or need fixing, we are valuable as we are.”

6. Theme 3: Encountering God

The final theme which emerged is the valuation of autism’s role in how one encounters God. Speaking directly on this question, some participants thought of their autism as a barrier, some as positive, and others were neutral. Some participants noted more than one valuation within their own experience. The various valuations are explored in greater detail below.

Xavier and Sophie said that, positively, their autism forced them to be more reliant on God’s external provision for their lives. Doug noted his proclivity for memorizing bible verses, and Elise claims that because of her sensitivity to stimuli, “if I can hear more and I see more; therefore, I must be able to experience God more than other people.” Rose believes autism helps her learn more about God’s empathy, while Natasha simply acknowledges that her experience of autism aids her encounter with God through worship without providing further details.

Doug, Margareta, Natasha, and Rose offered areas in which autism functioned as a barrier, although some of these were associated more strongly with external challenges (ableism/disableism) compared to intrinsic struggles with autism itself. Margareta experiences a free-flowing thought process which she cannot turn off; thus, she struggles with meditative prayers and activities which require quiet introspection and inner silence. Doug similarly notes the challenge of “overthinking,” which he links to autism, in maintaining a worshipful attitude. Natasha struggles with imagination and visualizations, which she finds are commonly linked to some aspects of worship.

Alex, Elise, Rachel, Rose, and Tim all explicitly name that, regularly, churches place barriers in front of autistic worshippers. In this situation, autism is not a hindrance to encountering God directly, but only insofar as the church is exclusive of non-typical ways of encountering God. The logic of the liturgy, which can otherwise provide significant comfort and stability, conflicts with the need for liturgy to facilitate worshipful encounters with God. Natasha and Rachel decry the enforcing of non-biblical rules which exclude them based on perceived ability (e.g., Rachel is excluded from some church activities because she is not an adult yet, which she contrasts with Jesus’ example of welcoming children). Rose points out that

sometimes it is even worse, that is, when ableist/disableist rules and restrictions are claimed with theological logic and biblical evidence. She can feel deeply uncomfortable when preachers are not sensitive towards black or queer people; we already discussed above how she picks up on the ableist language in hymns such as “Amazing Grace.”

Charlotte, Margaretta, Elise, and Tim said they were not able to answer the question of whether autism helped them to encounter God because they have never experienced life without autism. The feeling of not being able to answer the question because of having been autistic all their life and, therefore, being unable to compare to different experiences of their own, is itself important. Churches need to be aware of the possibility of the presence of autistic people amongst the worshipers and attentive to possibly divergent ways of encountering God, as was stated time and again by the interviewees. From the themes we have discussed above, it is clear that autism impacts the way one experiences worship and how that in turn creates sometimes barriers or aids to encountering God.

7. Liturgical-Theological Reflection

The question we shall address in this section is how the three themes we identified contribute to liturgical theology, which in turn contributes to more faithful and richer worship. In other words, in what ways does the autistic experience of worship lead to a reframing of liturgical theology? This starts with the crucial claim that autistic worshipers are indispensable to the body of Christ. Their experiences call out a “cult of normalcy” in turn.¹⁶

7.1. Indispensable

The participants in this study were convinced that autistic members are indispensable to the body of Christ. Some would point to their creative, radical, and different ways of thinking. Moreover, being indispensable also means that autistic people should not be thought of as broken or needing to be “fixed.” Nevertheless, the participants can affirm the various studies that have demonstrated that autistic people are less likely to attend worship than non-autistic people,¹⁷ often feeling unwelcome and even judged for their autistic way of being. This contrasts sharply with Paul’s claim that all members of the body of Christ, and especially those seemingly “weaker,” are indispensable (1 Cor 12:22), and with the liturgical-sacramental notion of the priesthood of *all* believers rooted in baptism.

16. For this term, see Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).

17. See Li-Ching Lee, Rebecca A. Harrington, Brian B. Louie, and Craig J. Newschaffer. “Children with Autism: Quality of Life and Parental Concerns,” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 38.6 (July 1, 2008) 1147–60. Accessed October 13, 2021, Andrew L. Whitehead, “Religion and Disability: Variation in Religious Service Attendance Rates for Children with Chronic Health Conditions,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57.2 (2018) 377–95. Accessed October 13, 2021, and Kessler Foundation and National Organization on Disability. 2010. *The ADA, 20 years later*. Washington, DC: Author. Available at <http://www.nasud.org/hcbs/article/ada-20-years-later-2010-survey-americans-disabilities>.

To disregard members of the body of Christ because they do not adhere to the norms of our (church) culture is to partake in what Thomas Reynolds calls the “cult of normalcy,” which entails the stories and practices communities live by.¹⁸ Those stories and practices embody the norms and values of the culture. This cult protects itself against that which is strange or different and, therefore, against anyone who disrupts the community’s culture. Paul urges the believers in Corinth not to be reigned by the surrounding cult of normalcy in which communities were divided along lines of class, ethnicity, and gender (see also Gal. 3:28). Instead, the faithful are to find unity in Christ, which, for Paul, is an ontological reality.¹⁹ The passage about the body, in which Paul claims that no body part is indispensable, is framed by a discussion about the different gifts (1 Cor. 12:4–6). Paul encourages the Corinthians to “eagerly desire the greater gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31) and goes on to “show you the most excellent way” (1 Cor. 13:1). That way turns out to be the way of love. Over and against judgmental looks, Paul advocates love; over and against exclusion, Paul claims the indispensability of all; over and against division along lines of ethnicity, culture, gender, class, and we may add disabilities, Paul points to the Christians’ identity in Christ. Ultimately, the body of Christ is not complete without its autistic members.

7.2. Normalcy

The concept of normalcy, even though it was not explicitly articulated by most participants, runs like a scarlet thread through the interviews. A clear example of how this plays out in some churches was when Rose asked for some adjustments in terms of music (volume and especially a better balance/mixing) and the response was to tell her that they would not change because they had, “always done it this way.” This is one explicit example of normalcy; each worship service communicates in a hundred ways what the normative ways of the community are and, therefore, what one needs to do or be to belong.

Liturgy is a multi-faceted event, with texts, actors, language, sensory relations, communal and individual relationships with God, affects, and ethics. Anyone facet, or many, may be beholden to cultural or contextual understandings of normalcy in ways which preclude the full participation of autistic Christians. Highlighting the ways in which certain sensorial aspects of the liturgy enforce exclusionary concepts of what is “normal” within worship (and therefore *who* is the standard worshiper²⁰) helps to uncover the many layers

18. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 52–63; cf. Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), esp. pp. 23–49.

19. Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, 105–13, esp. 107; Grant Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 22.1 (2 January 2018) 15–41, 25.

20. Rebecca Spurrier discusses the importance of diversity in worship, critically noting that “Descriptions of Christian worship often assume an ideal worshiper, who is also an able-bodied, able-minded congregant capable of demonstrating that he is being shaped by God through the sacraments and Christian practices in a particular way.” She continues to point that implicit in the focus on such an ideal worshiper is the view “that certain people with disabilities lack the ability to be in relationship with God.” In her book, Spurrier explains that this deeply impacts what we believe the symbolic meaning of liturgy is. Rebecca F. Spurrier, *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), quotation on p.16.

operative within liturgical expression. Every aspect of the liturgy is integrated, a point reflected particularly through the interviewees' experiences in enjoying or struggling with sensory challenges in worship.

The multi-layer dress of the liturgy means, however, that God can and does meet us in these different layers within the liturgy, validating our diversity of experiences and challenging communities to go well beyond simple accommodation. If, in fact, God might be working through the senses just as through the text or the liturgical actors, liturgy must become a place of integration for diverse people with diverse gifts and needs. That this goes beyond accommodation becomes clear when listening carefully to the heightened sensory perception of some of our participants. For them, the senses become constitutive of their worship experience.²¹ To recall two examples that were discussed above, Charlotte finds patterns, shapes, and colors across liturgies, enabling her to worship with a congregation even in a language she does not understand; conversely, a liturgy in her own language can lack a coherent liturgical shape and thereby prohibits her worship practice. Elise is less specific but feels that her intense experience of the senses might lead to experiencing God more intensely than other people.²² When the church starts to listen to experiences of worship like those of Charlotte and Elise, and receives God's self-giving through such experiences, it can be enriched by their autistic members in a way that would be much harder by mere accommodation of difference in what is considered to be normal (and therefore normative).

Normalcy, when not critically evaluated by theological standards, is inevitably an excluding framework. For autistic people, it can not only be difficult to pick up all the cult's implicit cues, but it might also be impossible for some to play along in every game of normalcy. For example, some may struggle with the volume of music (or a more fine-grained issue like an instrument being out of tune), but the church may have up-beat (and therefore preferably loud) worship music as their hallmark. That does not mean that churches cannot have their own habits and culture—each community inevitably has those. It does mean that they need to be evaluated considering the Christian Scriptures and tradition. Normalcy trades on—often implicit and unacknowledged—assumptions of what the community considers normal ways of thinking, perceiving the world, ways of interacting, etc. It usually fears that which is different because difference throws the order of normalcy. However, these assumptions need to be called out if they are excluding (and indeed foster fear of) those who are different from the normalcy picture. Above we saw that autistic people may be particularly helpful in calling out such

21. For a historical exploration of the constitutive aspect of the senses in worship, see Beth V Williams, "The Significance of the Senses: An Exploration into the Multi-Sensory Experience of Faith for the Lay Population of Christianity during the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," in *Liturgica and Tractatus Symboli, Orientalia, Critica et Philologica, Historica*, ed. Markus Vinzent, Papers Presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 2015, Volume 18 (Leuven Paris Bristol (Conn.): Peeters, 2017).

22. Such a statement from Elise is hard to verify, but the point is not to establish empirically whether one person experiences God more than someone else, but that Elise experiences a closeness to God because of her heightened sensory awareness.

assumptions and practices that “we do because we’ve always done it this way” but that are nevertheless unbiblical, potentially putting up stumbling blocks for those whose minds, sensory perception, and social communication (to name the three most mentioned features in our study) work differently than most of the worshipping community.²³

Over against such a cult of normalcy, St. Paul urges the church to revolutionize their frameworks and habits by giving special attention to those who deviate and do not pass the threshold of normalcy. That may mean treating the autistic members with special honor (1 Cor. 12:23), valuing them as indispensable members. As Brian Brock discusses helpfully, this does not mean reversing who is at the center and who is on the margins of the community, but rather acknowledging the God-given place of everybody in the body of Christ.²⁴ “This is not to erase people’s legitimate needs, but to treat it . . . only as seriously as necessary without allowing it to constrain our expectations of what the Spirit might be bringing into the world through them. The inability to grasp this point is the fundamental problem of the modern church.”²⁵ In this quotation, Brock argues that the cult of normalcy determines the autistic person’s needs by its own standards of normalcy, leading to incorrect assumptions of what supports are necessary and potentially concealing what the Spirit gives to the community through this person. Brock challenges the church and, thus, liturgical theologians, to think deeply about these points because the inability to do so, “is the fundamental problem of the modern church.” Autistic members of the body of Christ challenge liturgical theology to foster more faithful practical theologies of worship. After all, as members of the body of Christ, loved by God, having their identity in Christ, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they are members through whom God reveals Godself.

Eunjoo Mary Kim calls for a critical familiarity with ableism (a concept closely related to normalcy) in preaching for ministers to truly embody the proleptic eschatological nature of sacraments.²⁶ Preaching is not, as noted by several interviewees, the only point of connection between God and the congregant and thus this critical perspective must be carried into the whole of the liturgy—from sound mixing to baptisms and from communion to congregational attitudes. Parmley and Shannon explore succinctly the elements of Christian liturgy as each relates to disabilities, challenging those charged with organizing worship to directly include disabled Christians in every aspect of worship.²⁷ Applying this call, set nearly thirty years ago, to autistic worshippers, it has not been sufficiently answered in the lives of those interviewed—even when they themselves are in leadership roles.

23. For two recent publications in this regard, see, Joanna Leidenhag, “Autism, Doxology, and the Nature of Christian Worship,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* (2021) 1–14; Rapley, *Autistic Thinking*, 2021.

24. See Brock’s in-depth treatment of 1 Cor. 12 in relation to autism and disabilities in Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019) 201–24.

25. Brock, 223.

26. Eunjoo Mary Kim, “Sacramental Preaching in the Culture of Ableism,” *Liturgy* 35 (2020) 32–37.

27. Ingram Parmley and Tresco Shannon, “Ministry and Persons with Developmental Disabilities,” *Worship* 66 (1992) 10–24.

This failure to engage in worship begets a related lack of engagement with disability in liturgical studies. Cults of normalcy often go unnoticed. This is true in churches but also in theology. Unfortunately, many of our interviewees told stories of not being loved. Churches thought they were accepting these autistic members but, in being stuck in their own ways of doing things and unwilling to genuinely listen to these members, some churches failed to facilitate the encounter with God through worship for the autistic people. Thus, to reflect a more faithful worship which is guided by love reflects the scriptural statement that supposedly weaker members are indispensable, and takes seriously the identity-forming nature of Christ in the lives of autistic members, we must revisit how we “do theology.”

Here, it is helpful to draw on Kavanaugh’s distinction between *leitourgia* and *worship*, in which the former intertwines belief and action with the eschatological and pneumatological presence of God while the latter acts merely as the mechanisms by which Christians act. To fixate on worship practices is to treat liturgy as a type of “machine” which can be more or less suited for various individuals to use.²⁸ Rather, the liturgy is, “nothing less than the way a redeemed world is, so to speak, done.”²⁹ With regard to autistic Christians, this involves listening closely to those members of the body of Christ whom society deems dispensable, acknowledging that what the world deems normative is not necessarily related to what is understood as truthful in worship. After all, to paraphrase Florence, what we find normal in our liturgy says a lot about who we think God is. Reynold’s “cult of normalcy” infiltrates both belief and action, although such disordered living can be effectively countered with theologically driven liturgical responses to the gifts, needs, and perspectives of autistic members. For those interviewed, autism led to a greater reliance on God, increased understanding of God’s empathy, and heightened sensory awareness of the meeting place between God and humanity. Such insights deepen liturgical theology and bolster congregations’ capacity to learn from the diverse embodiment of those within the Body of Christ.

What does a liturgical theology that takes the above considerations seriously look like? The analysis of the interviews suggests that such a liturgical theology acknowledges and, then, tries to deconstruct the cult of normalcy in liturgical theology itself and in worshipping congregations. Because normalcy often goes unnoticed, it is important that those deemed different (despite being indispensable in the body of Christ) should be treated with the special honor (to use St. Paul’s terminology again) of uncovering through their presence a more faithful alternative. When treated and listened to in this way, they will tell both how liturgies can be exclusive and what can be done to make them inclusive. Liturgy aims to facilitate the worshipful encounter between God and people (Theme 3), but also serves as the guide for how a church is consistent and faithful in practice (Theme 1). Autistic worshipers can highlight these challenges, creating opportunities to name this often-ignored tension. In our research, the interviewees pointed out the wide variety of church communities and cultures (Theme 2). Some churches did create an environment of belonging and acceptance, and indeed acknowledged the indispensability of their autistic members, aided by the visibility of disability in the congregation. Other churches perpetuated a culture of normalcy by way of neglecting the voices of their autistic members. A liturgical theology that is reframed through the lens of autism would be particularly attentive to the

28. Aidan Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, Min.: Liturgical Press, 1984) 99.

29. *Ibid.*

embodied aspect of worship (sensory aspects and what creates comfort or discomfort), to the way different ways of thinking (often called “neurodiversity”) might contribute to the worshipping life of the church, and how liturgy expresses doctrine (Theme 1).

8. Conclusion

Liturgical theology and worshipping congregations need to treat their so-called weaker members with special honor, realizing that in God’s economy they are indispensable. When members who are thought to be different and are, therefore, often pushed to the margins, are listened to, they will expose cults of normalcy in the church. The fact that autistic people are often perceived to be the “weaker” member is itself a reflection of normalcy.³⁰ Our study has been an attempt to listen to autistic people, most of whom told of their experiences of exclusion, but also of communities and people who were supportive and acknowledged their gifts and their value as children of God. We offer the above presentation of our interview data and analysis, and our theological reflections prompted by the participants, as an attempt to initiate a wider discussion on normalcy in liturgy, of autistic worship experiences, and thus a small beginning to reframe liturgical theology. Our proposal has centered on the principle of indispensability and evaluating normalcy; how this materializes in terms of the content of liturgical theologies will need to be the subject of further study.

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30. Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections”; Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*.