



ADHD, Hyperfocus, and the Beyond-Language Encounter: Towards a Theology of Neurodivergent Attention

Robert Boyd

This paper will explore how ADHD, as a cognitive diversity, reframes the Christian understanding of a person's capacity to conceptualise and engage with God in a world where prayer and worship are often structured around sustained linguistic attention.

Drawing on Simone Weil's theology of attention as receptive waiting and in dialogue with Whitaker's 2025 work on ADHD and spiritual formation, I argue that ADHD does not simply disrupt Christian prayer but can open up neglected forms of non-discursive attentiveness to God.

Using theological reflection informed by lived experience as a late-diagnosed former lay minister, the paper seeks to develop the concept of Holy Focus to name states of intense, absorbed attentiveness — in prayer, Scripture, theological inquiry or creative ministry — and argues that this may function as theologically significant encounter rather than devotional failure.

In doing so, I challenge language-normative assumptions in Christian practice and suggest that neurodivergent modes of attention can expand the church's understanding of how God may be known, addressed, and represented.

Hiding in plain sight: neurodivergent insights in encountering the Word beyond words

Andrew Dowsett

Ancient Hebrew has a far more limited vocabulary than twenty-first century English, with many instances of words that have more than one meaning (semantic range). Typical translation asks, 'Which of the possible meanings makes the most sense in this context?' excluding other possibilities and concealing more meaning than it reveals. As a neurodivergent preacher, I find this typical approach to have an impoverished appreciation of the Story. Instead, I seek to hold divergent readings together, making visible the shimmering presence that lies beyond the 'normal' range of perception. In this paper, I will consider two stories of encountering God at Sinai/Horeb (Exodus 19.18 and 1 Kings 19.4-8), the mountain where God simultaneously reveals/conceals himself. Furthermore, it is typically assumed that autistic people cannot understand metaphor. The reality is far more complex. I propose that autistic use of metaphor plays a role in navigating between masking and unmasking in our congregations.



If I Can't Say a Word: A Theological Reframing of Nonverbal Communication as Worship Language

Terisha Lee

My paper argues that Christian worship has been culturally interpreted as primarily verbal, resulting in the marginalization of nonverbal forms of participation, particularly among neurodivergent worshipers and individuals with limited or no spoken language. Drawing from Black American gospel traditions, where theological meaning is often preserved through embodied expression and examining key scriptural texts (Mark 5:25–34; 2 Samuel 6:14–22; Romans 8:26–27), this study reframes nonverbal communication as legitimate theological language rather than absence of worship. It further critiques the misinterpretation of silence and embodied behavior as resistance to the Holy Spirit and proposes a practical theological reorientation in which movement, posture, and silence are recognized as authentic expressions of worship. Such reframing challenges word centered assumptions and invites churches to interpret nonverbal participation as meaningful engagement rather than disengagement.

When the words move: (un)tangling visual stress in the worship and liturgy space

Krysia Waldock

Neurodivergent engagement with scripture and reading the Bible, for example, dyslexic people (Strong & van Ommen, 2023), has been explored in previous literature. Sensory experiences can also mediate the way language, both written and spoken, enables access to worship and community. More broadly, flourishing for neurodivergent people (see Leidenhag & King, 2024) needs to be a central concern with considering neurodiversity and language within theology. One's experience is that of 'visual stress' ('Meares-Irlen Syndrome'). I will autoethnographically reflect on my experience of being a neurodivergent Christian with visual stress and outline how reliance on the written word creates a socially mediated 'barrier to belonging' (Waldock & Sango, 2023). I will also consider how seeing 'moving words' challenges linear practices of worship, liturgy and being, and how flourishing in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and body of Christ (1 Cor 12) creates new opportunities for neurodivergent growth and glory.



Neurodivergent Communication and the Spirit's Work in Church Language

Emil Lusser

This paper offers a systematic theological account of how the church discerns the Spirit's work in language. Practices such as reading Scripture, preaching, Bible study and prayer are not treated primarily as pastoral settings to be made more accessible, but as ecclesial forms in which Christian language is received, appropriated and handed on. Drawing on Folkart Wittekind's theology of religious language and Christian Danz's account of the Spirit as the communicative 'memory of Jesus Christ' (Danz, 2019; Wittekind, 2018), the paper asks whether church language tacitly identifies pneumatic reception with neurotypical forms of attention, interpretation, verbal fluency, metaphorical competence and visible response. Ruth Dunster's autistic hermeneutic provides the test case: mindblindness, literal-mindedness and fascination are reread as hermeneutical resources rather than deficits (Dunster, 2022). Neurodivergent communication therefore raises a doctrinal question: how can the church recognise the Spirit's work when Christian language is appropriated through non-normative forms of reading, praying, listening and responding?

References

- Danz, C. (2019). *Gottes Geist. Eine Pneumatologie*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Dunster, R. M. (2022). *The Autism of GXD: An Atheological Love Story*. Eugene/Oregon: Pickwick Publications.
- Wittekind, F. (2018). *Theologie religiöser Rede. Ein systematischer Grundriss* (1st ed. ed.). Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Iconographic Discipleship

Ka Ki Samuel Wan

In Raoef Mamedov's re-depiction of The Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples are portrayed by actors with Down Syndrome. Portrayals of an 'imperfect' Christ trace back to Christ Pantocrator (6th century) with more recent artworks by Rachel Holdforth, Derek Yoder, and He Qi depicting Christ embodying the tension of imperfection/perfection, divine/human, sickly/saintly, normate/maimed, and syncretised/contextualised. This paper explores how artworks depicting Christ as disabled, impaired, and neurodivergent are non-verbal revelatory/didactic practices that particularly liberate people who have limited means to language into faithful practices of the church. The canvas becomes the visual sacramental body where the above tensions of Christ's existence and, subsequently, as the true Imago Dei, faithful Christian experiences are expressed, ex-spired, and modelled through non-verbal means (Viladesau, 1999). For in portraying Emmanuel as God incarnated with/as everyone, liberative art dares the viewer to believe that he "is able to sympathize with our weaknesses." (Heb 4:15)