

Neurodiversity and Rest

Michael Gembola | CCEF National Conference 2024

I. Introduction

- A. Pictures of difference
- B. Disclaimers
- C. Overview

II. What Neurodiversity Is

- A. Perspectives
 - 1. The difference lens
 - a) Seeing God's design (1 Corinthians 12:1–30)
 - b) Seeing functional differences: analogies
 - (1) Inhabiting and managing different kinds of houses
 - (2) Using differing operating systems

Cleveland Clinic: "Neurodivergent is a nonmedical term that describes people whose brains develop or work differently for some reason. This means the person has different strengths and struggles from people whose brains develop or work more typically. While some people who are neurodivergent have medical conditions, it also happens to people where a medical condition or diagnosis hasn't been identified."¹

- 2. The dignity lens
 - a) Seeing personal strengths
 - b) Seeing spiritual gifts
 - c) Seeing spiritual wisdom

Olivia Bustion: "The theology constructed by autistic Christians to make sense of their intimacy with God, then, has Trinitarian contours: the loving Father understands autistic people; the Holy Spirit helps autistic people understand the Father; and the Son exemplifies the best of

¹ "Neurodivergent," Cleveland Clinic, (2022) <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/23154-neurodivergent>

those traits that autistic people find in themselves, thereby providing both consolation and inspiration."²

3. The difficulty lens

a) Seeing the descriptions of difficulty

- (1) Difficulties in the names of diagnoses: ADHD, Auditory Processing Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Dyscalculia, Dyslexia
- (2) Experiences of ADHD and the spiritual disciplines

b) Seeing the similarity of difficulty: analogy of sleep loss

c) Seeing the differences in our difficulties

Johnson: "People with 'higher support needs' [includes] a category encompassing severe intellectual disabilities (say, adults with a mental age under four), serious difficulties with language and communication, and patterns of self-injurious behavior (biting, head-hitting, hair-pulling) that can cause permanent bodily damage. Most parents of children who suffer like this would be mystified by benign appeals to 'neurodiversity.' They are grateful for therapeutic advances, and they have no trouble calling autism a disorder. But it doesn't seem to be a matter of one 'side' being right and the other wrong. Given the wide variations among people on the spectrum, it seems natural that some of their advocates will focus on securing accurate diagnoses and effective treatments for severe disorders, while others will focus on confronting the stereotypes and stigmas that hold some [autistic people] back."³

B. Synthesis

1. Seeing neither superpower nor fatal flaw

Hans Asperger: Their "special gifts . . . were inextricable from their impairments."⁴

2. Seeing the need for stewardship in community toward Christian maturity

III. Why Rest Is So Important

² Olivia Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 85-3 (2017), p. 676.

³ Eric L. Johnson, An Autistic Christian Speaks: A Taylor University Professor Pushes Back on Stereotypes Held by the 'Neurotypical Majority,'" *Christianity Today* 65:6 (2021), p. 71.

⁴ Steve Silberman, *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* (Penguin, 2016), p. 129.

- A. For *all* of God's beloved
 - 1. In creation
 - 2. In redemption

- B. For being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world
 - 1. Finding rest by anticipating the difference and difficulty
 - a) Examples: masking and autistic burnout
 - b) ADHD and the Christian disciplines

 - 2. Finding rest by thriving within limits
 - a) Making practical adjustments
 - b) Working with the "budget"

- C. For the parenting journey (1 Kings 19:1–18)
 - 1. Pursuing rest in diverse experiences of parenting

 - 2. Pursuing rest through connection amid the pressures to isolate

 - 3. Pursuing rest through compassion and understanding

IV. What the Good Life Means for Neurodiversity

- A. The goodness of simple life

Waring: "So I ask Thee for the daily strength, to none that ask denied, / And a mind to blend with outward life while keeping at Thy side; / Content to fill a little space, if Thou be glorified."⁵

- B. The goodness of a focused life

Anonymous: "God will be using . . . people on the spectrum to change the world, putting the wise to shame and helping Him bring the kingdom to earth. So let's keep dreaming, believing in God's promises and the truth of His word, using our unique talents to make this world a better place before Jesus comes back!"⁶

⁵ Anna Laetitia Waring, "Father, I Ask that All My Life" (1850).

⁶ Olivia Bustion, "Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 85-3 (2017), 673-674.