

Biblical Interpretation Workshops & Conversations

Building perspectives for 'autistic thinkers'

Pilot Study

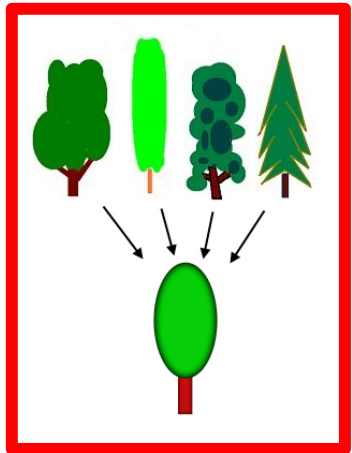
Introduction and Overview

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With special thanks to Prof. Grant Macaskill of Aberdeen School of Divinity, History and Philosophy for additional insights and material (especially on the topic of hermeneutics).

What is the Pilot about?

The Pilot will . . .

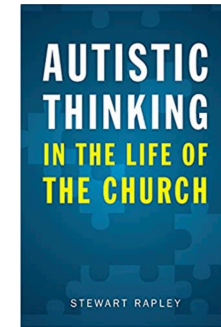
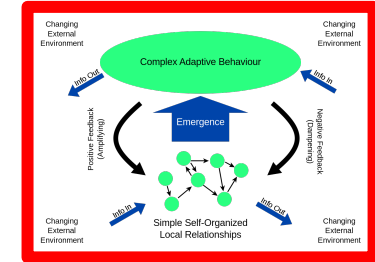


MA DISSERTATION
'ENGAGEMENT MODEL'

1. translate theory into practice

2. provide evidence & credibility for my book

3. create the basis for a lasting contribution



What are we trying to do?



WE ARE SEEKING TO . . .

- Acknowledge and respect different traditions of biblical understandings.
- Enable people to deepen and develop their understanding of the Bible.
- Broaden cognitive options in relation to 'autistic thinking'.
- Establish a 'community' (functions primarily through relationships) that is 'autism-friendly'.
- Affirm autism as a God-given 'way to be' – not addressed in Scripture.
- Provide 'helpfully disruptive' insights to the church.



AND NOT . . .

- Manipulate people into or promote any tradition of biblical understanding.
- Simply provide 'point answers' to 'point questions'.
- Provide a general or comprehensive course on hermeneutics.
- Establish a 'group' (functions primarily through meetings).
- Use the Bible either to justify autism or to prescribe 'remedies'.
- Either simply conform or needlessly object to church norms.

Getting started

You will have ideas about how this community might best work.

You need time to get to know one another and to see what you think.

I will get us on the 'starting grid' with some initial ideas.

We will start to build in your ideas as they develop.

At some point it may make sense to meet the other cohort.



Where does the suggested 'start-up' approach come from?

Management expert Henry Mintzberg made the following proposals* in the context of training managers (in multi-national companies):

PROPOSAL	RATIONALE
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* In his book *Managers not MBAs* published by Berrett Koehler in 2004

What were Mintzberg's mindsets?

Mintzberg suggested (p283) the following 5 mindsets as relevant to his context:

No	MINDSET
1	REFLECTIVE: about self
2	WORLDLY: about context
3	ANALYTICAL: about organisation
4	COLLABORATIVE: about relationships
5	ACTION: about change

Has this been used in a church setting?

I used the approach as the basis for sessions on 'Ministry in the Workplace' at SJE – working on real case-studies using the following mindsets:

No	MINDSET
1	CREATIVE: God is continually creative – work is (ideally) a creative enterprise
2	REDEMPTIVE: God works to bring good out of situations – things go wrong at work
3	KINGDOM: Jesus was/is about realising/revealing God's Kingdom on earth – we are called to this, even at work – God's Kingdom includes the workplace
4	SERVANT: Jesus took the role of a servant – we need to follow this model

I was once challenged to prove that these mindsets are 'the biblically appropriate' mindsets. I am doubtful about whether there is any such thing as 'the biblically appropriate' mindsets. We are simply seeking, within our context, to find a set of ideas that we find to be of practical help within the spirit of a common goal of knowing God and following Jesus.

What mindsets are proposed for CFE-Autism?

I propose to start by adopting the following mindsets:

No	MINDSET
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Please note: these mindsets are not mutually exclusive – they are different ‘windows’ onto a situation, so may interact and overlap on occasions.

Multi-Viewpoints Mindset

Many Biblical texts are capable of being interpreted in a variety of ways:

- The autistic mind, particularly, tends to associate a single ('the right'!) meaning to things, whereas a neurotypical mind might see several possible meanings. For example, a pedestrian crossing 'red man' is understood in the neurotypical framework as meaning 'stop', 'go back' or 'hurry forward' according to context.
- Many have been taught to think about biblical "authority" in particular ways, often linked to dominant images: the Bible is a "manual for life" and a historical record of God's dealing with humanity. This is usually accompanied by the conviction that any given verse contains a singular meaning, and that all the verses agree with each other, so that our role as readers is to extract this meaning and say, "This is what the Bible teaches." To do so is to engage in "faithful reading."
- Through history biblical text has not been treated on the basis of having a single, 'right', meaning or interpretation. Note, for example, the ancient Jewish tradition of midrash.
- The 'scientific' notion of truth that we tend to work with is fairly recent – coming from the Enlightenment.
- All of this is not to say that a text can be taken to mean 'whatever we like', but that, often, there can be a number of possible interpretations.



Community Interpretation Mindset

The topic of hermeneutics occupies many books. Different Christian communities have developed their own distinctive approaches to interpreting the Bible. Whilst there will be variations between these, there will also be commonalities – things that distinguish interpretations as ‘Christian’.

Here are some key ideas and principles to start with:

- Often what we seek to extract from our reading of the Bible is the historical situation, event or teaching that we think lies behind the text. Usually, the approach is governed by a dominant metaphor for God—judge, king, legislator—that also governs how we think about “salvation.”
- This is actually a very modern way of thinking about biblical authority. Classically, the church was comfortable to speak of the Bible as a “library,” shaping our life and thought in its unruly diversity and tensions. We therefore read the Bible as a sacred library, allowing both diversity and coherence.
- The “meaning” of Scripture is not something that can finally be identified with the mind state of its author, or with the historical events that gave rise to the texts, but is something actualized as a live ‘event’ when readers encounter the text. Theologically, we can add that this encounter happens in the presence of the self-communicating God.
- We allow the collection as a whole to contextualize its parts, respecting proportions. Isolating texts is dangerous. In particular, we do not simplify the representation of God to one of the metaphors used in the texts and recognize the danger of projecting our natural values onto God.
- Reading the Bible “Christianly” entails reading the whole in the light of Jesus Christ and of his work of destroying barriers and building bridges – between heaven and earth, God and humanity and within humanity. This will differ from other religious approaches, but can dialogue with these.

Context Mindset

Biblical truth, whilst inspired by God, is always understood within a framework of context:

- The autistic mind tends to take text 'at face value'. We need to be aware of the ways in which context is influencing our understanding at a number of levels.
- There is no such thing as 'context-free' interpretation. Jesus probably spoke Aramaic, but the gospels report his sayings in NT Greek, which we then read in English.
- Textual Context: Any statement needs to be understood within the overall document from which it is drawn. This includes understanding what the author is seeking to say.
- Historical Context. Texts are written within the historical context of their times. They are influenced by both 'current' events and also of the worldview of the time.
- Current Context: Texts are read with a context. This involves both consideration of personal attitudes and beliefs and also the current worldview and associated events. We read as late modern people, but are aware that what we read is not a late modern text. Values of morality and historicity may differ.

Textual Context



Historical Context



Current Context



Metaphoric Mindset

Biblical text often makes use of 'indirect language':

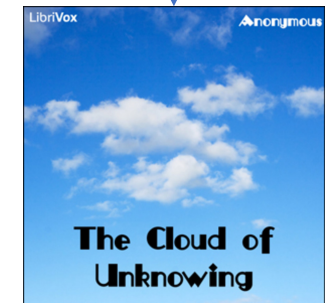
- The autistic mind often finds indirect language difficult to understand or process, preferring language that is more concrete and matter-of-fact.
- There are many important aspects of life (love and justice, for example) which are realities, but which defy definition (mysteries) – we write poems and songs about them.
- It is also common to talk about animals, plants and even inanimate objects as though they were human – 'my laptop is having a bad day' and so on.
- Speaking of the things of God takes us beyond the power of language, especially direct language. Biblical text, therefore, often uses anthropomorphic and indirect language. We visualise God as mother, father, shepherd, judge, king etc..
- It is always worth asking of the text, "Is this telling me something directly, or is there something else going on which the language here is simply hinting at?"



It says . . .



Pointing to . . .



Participating in the Conversation

- Two ways to contribute to the conversation:
 1. By attending a session
 2. By watching a recording and sharing observations by email (in Cohort 1 we recorded some early sessions)
- Standard Agenda for sessions:
 1. Development of one of the mindsets – an individual can present some input or reflection
 - Presentation – 5 min
 - Discussion - 15 min
 2. Working through a case study – an individual can present a question, challenge, issue or concern
 - Presentation – 5 min
 - Discussion – 20 min
 3. Evolving & developing the Community
 - Discussion – 10 min
- General discussions will be structured to give each participant the opportunity to speak.