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How do dyslexic people experience engaging with the Bible?

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Centre for Autism and Theology
Research Report





THE NEURODIVERSITY AND FAITH SERIES

Issue 3.0

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Foreword

From the Centre for Autism and Theology



Welcome to the Neurodiversity and Faith series.

The Centre for Autism and Theology is an international hub for research into neurodiversity and theology, working together with neurodivergent people and their faith communities. Our diverse team of researchers work on a range of projects, unified by a desire to equip neurodivergent people and those who seek to support them in living out a life of faith.

This series of reports is designed to present our researchers' findings in a short format, suitable for use by faith communities, religious leaders and interested individuals. But, behind each of these reports lies a much larger project. So, if you are interested to follow up on anything that you read here, please follow the links on the final page to visit our website, where you can find out more about specific research projects, download this booklet, and browse our other resources.

Dyslexic Christians often struggle with reading the Bible, and as a result can face barriers within their faith communities.

This project sought to explore the lived experiences of dyslexic Christians, to enable thriving within communities and in personal relationships with God.

While some resources to support dyslexic Christians do exist, there is a lack of theological research on the topic, meaning we do not have a full picture of what it means to be a dyslexic Christian.



A group of dyslexic Christians worked with me to design the research process and advise throughout.



Before beginning this research, I obtained approval to proceed from the University of Aberdeen's Research Ethics and Governance Board.



**14 participants
shared their
experiences through
reflective journaling
and interviews.**

Four key themes were identified from the data we collected:

- Relationship with the Bible
- Concept of self
- Processing information
- Community

Overall, there was a shared feeling among participants that their communities did not always understand the difficulties and value that being dyslexic can bring, and this impacted mental wellbeing.



My reflections on these themes led me to explore expectations around Bible reading.

A number of participants shared feelings of failure and inadequacy because they struggled with reading the Bible. This is often caused by cultures within communities which create expectations around what a “good” Christian looks like. When these expectations are not met, people experience shame and exclusion.

In some Christian communities, the Bible can be restricted to a text. This can be a challenge for those who struggle to read, or for those who process information differently to others. Instead of focusing on words and cognitive processing, I propose more embodied and sensory approaches to engaging with the Bible. This might involve engaging with Scripture through music or nature. Such approaches may be more suited to dyslexic processing and may relieve shame.



When speed and productivity are valued, dyslexic people can feel like they're behind.

In a society where speed and productivity are valued, dyslexic people often feel as though they are going at a slower pace than others. One response to this is strength-based models. For example, sometimes it is said that a dyslexic person may struggle with reading but can think creatively. But while strength-based models can be helpful, they can also create problematic expectations. For example, a dyslexic person may feel pressure to think creatively to compensate for their other difficulties.

In addition, faith communities often equate hard work with faithfulness. So, while some resources exist to help dyslexic people engage with the Bible, they generally expect individuals to conform to typical ways of engaging with Scripture, and this can be exhausting.

An alternative response is looking at a theology of slowing down and incorporating a Sabbath rhythm into daily living.

The Sabbath reorders priorities and places rest as essential, which has the potential to be liberating for dyslexic Christians. Part of this involves authentically and restfully engaging with Scripture, which is likely to look different for everyone. This may still involve reading, or it may involve engaging with nature and relating sensory experiences to Scripture.

Supporting dyslexic Christians involves tackling power imbalances.



Dyslexic people often need and want support with engaging with the Bible. However, current supports and attitudes are often misguided, uninformed, or overlook the wider dyslexic experience, such as experiencing low self-esteem.



Creating hospitable environments where people feel safe, welcome, and understood is a way in which communities can support dyslexic Christians - valuing and empowering each individual.

This research demonstrated the need to listen to dyslexic people.

This is important to understand the often hidden challenges as well as the value that dyslexia and thinking differently brings to communities.

Participants mentioned things that help them such as putting the readings on a big screen during services. However, it was clear that one list of recommendations for churches to be more dyslexia-friendly would never be relevant across different traditions as Bible use varies considerably.

It was agreed that educating churches and fostering understanding was essential.



Together with the group of dyslexic Christians who worked with me on the project, I have developed a set of tools which took the form of reflective questions for church leaders.



These tools will soon be made available on the Centre for Autism and Theology website.

About the researcher

Zoe was awarded her doctorate in Practical Theology by the University of Aberdeen. She co-hosts the Autism and Theology Podcast.

To find out more about Zoe's work and to get in touch with any questions, scan the QR code.



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To cite this publication:

Strong, Zoe. “How do dyslexic people experience engaging with the Bible?” *Centre for Autism and Theology: The Neurodiversity and Faith Series*. 3.0 (Aberdeen: 2026)

1495



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