

Autism Spectrum Disorder: Meeting Challenges with Hope, by Michael R. Emlet. Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2023. 23 pp. \$5.00.

Michael Emlet (MDiv, MD) practiced as a family physician for over ten years before becoming a counselor and faculty member at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF). He has authored numerous minibooks, "Asperger Syndrome," "Chronic Pain," "Angry Children," "Help for the Caregiver," as well as the books *CrossTalk: Where Life & Scripture Meet* (New Growth Press, 2009) and *Descriptions and Prescriptions: A Biblical Perspective on Psychiatric Diagnoses and Medications* (New Growth Press, 2017).

In growing numbers, I receive calls from families of a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). They tell me, "We're leaving our church because we do not feel welcome"—usually provoked by their child disturbing church services. When I make reasoned biblical appeals to stay, they respond, "we've tried, and we do not feel wanted." Some tell stories of church members or even leaders asking them to leave the church. This problem is already significant; and it is growing rapidly with the seemingly exponential increase of people diagnosed with ASD.

But also concerning, I receive calls from pastors who have children with an ASD diagnosis. Exasperated, they inform me that they are leaving the local churches they pastor with plans to start churches specifically for families with ASD. How can we change this growing trend?

The aim of the study under review is to help churches and their leaders understand and respond to ASD better. It makes a reasoned appeal to grasp and support individuals and families by adopting an ASD biblical worldview. The author explains: "This minibook will briefly describe ASD and suggest some general strategies for ministry to individuals on the autistic spectrum.... [It also] offers a basic framework for ministry that reflects research from the scientific community as well as the truth of Scripture" (4).

Who are people with ASD? The prevalence of ASD in the United States is one to two percent of the population and is more common in boys than girls. ASD manifests as impairments of personal, social, academic, or occupational functioning (5). The author appeals to churches and their leaders to understand and act: "What does this mean for the Christian community? We must thoughtfully and compassionately apply a biblical worldview to serve the substantial numbers of children and adults diagnosed with ASD. Our approach must carefully consider the differences between behaviors related to ASD and behaviors related to heart issues found in most children" (5).

ASD is a spectrum. The author explains, "It's important to remember that the diagnosis does not form the core identity of a person" (11). It is said, if you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism. This means there is no special autistic version of the image of God in people with ASD. Neither do they need salvation and spiritual growth, or fellowship and worship, any more or any less than the rest of the body of Christ. Same personhood; same needs. With ASD

as with many other disabilities, it is important to see the glass half-full. The challenges should not eclipse the blessings.

But what about distracting behaviors in church? The author responds, "We seek to make biblically wise distinctions between spiritual or sin issues (the realm of the heart) and bodily or brain-based issues and weaknesses" (13). For example, although it may be more challenging for a person with ASD to obey Scripture in some behaviors, neither we nor they should give up pursuing Christlikeness. We must acknowledge the challenge and support the biblical process of salvation and spiritual growth in every person. All of us struggle to grow spiritually.

How might we respond like a biblical church to the needs of people with ASD and their families? Using the fictitious name, Josh, the author thoughtfully suggests, "Josh's youth leader may need to spend significant one-on-one time with Josh, asking questions and listening to his honest struggles. As trust develops, he can help Josh understand viewpoints other than his own" (16). If Josh's pastor gets called away or is too busy in the moment, he can also look for a few mature and compassionate peers to befriend Josh. One-on-one ministry is a universal response to disability, whatever the disability might be. It should not surprise us that the "one another" passages are a key to addressing disability in the church. What is more, one-on-one relationship is usually what people with disabilities are longing for, even if they cannot show it. In a nutshell, people with disabilities need Christian fellowship. People with ASD need a local church family.

But the church also needs people with ASD and their families. In the future, expect people on the autism spectrum to be more numerous and increasingly prominent in the church. Not only are the numbers of people with ASD increasing, but also, we are starting to understand and discuss the issues that cause people with ASD and their families to feel driven away. Expect more pastors and missionaries, indeed all forms of Christian leadership on the ASD spectrum in the future.

Some families with ASD who have left their local church report that the church does not care about people with ASD, indeed with any disability. I must politely disagree. I believe that churches, congregations, and pastors want to help people with ASD and their families. But they are not sure how. What we need are more studies like this one that inform us, encourage us to respond biblically, and give us practical guidance about what we need to do.

The book's small size contributes to its strength. Although data- and detail-filled, it addresses the basic issues of ASD as well as a biblical response. This reviewer highly recommends the book as it will help individuals with ASD, their families, and their churches gain a better understanding of the blessings and the challenges accompanying ASD. People with ASD can and will contribute to the local church in unique and unimagined ways. They have much to offer. We cannot let them leave.

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