

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

**A Study on the Effects of Biblical Counseling Techniques  
on Teacher Relationships with Students with Autism**

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Liberty University School of Divinity  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

by

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Lynchburg, Virginia

January 2024

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

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## THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Christian school students with Autism Spectrum Disorder are in need of greater spiritual care from their teachers. Autism Spectrum Disorder is a concept which is becoming increasingly present in the world of education. With this growing presence, autism is becoming an issue in Christian education, as it seems that Christian educators struggle to understand it and to care for their students with autism spiritually. Further, little to no research has been done regarding autism and this area. The purpose of this study was to train Christian special educators in biblical counseling techniques and perspectives in order that they might better be able to care spiritually for their students with autism. A training session on autism and biblical counseling was conducted, followed by a period of time which was designed to observe participants practicing this training. Regular interviews were conducted, which were designed to demonstrate the effects of the training. Regular journal entries were kept by the educators detailing their interactions with autistic students, and surveys were taken to shed light on the effectiveness of the training. Classroom observations also took place during this time. Discussed in this project will be the effects of biblical counseling on special educators' interactions with their students with autism. The results of this research were recorded using pseudonyms for participants and others involved. The consensus of the research was that if special education teachers are trained in biblical counseling techniques, they are able to care for their students with autism in a greater way spiritually.

Key words: Autism Spectrum Disorder, special education, biblical counseling, challenges, strengths, research tools, image of God

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## **Abbreviations**

ASD	<i>Autism Spectrum Disorder</i>
DMIN	<i>Doctor of Ministry</i>
PBC	<i>Piedmont Bible College</i>
SBC	<i>Salem Baptist Church</i>
SBCS	<i>Salem Baptist Christian School</i>

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a unique struggle of various students throughout the modern world. A greater number of individuals are receiving an autism diagnosis at an early age, which follows them into their childhood and adolescent years. While ASD individuals experience many daily challenges, they have the ability to see the world in a fresh and beautiful way and are able to make great contributions to society. However, for the ASD community to be successful, help is necessary, specifically for students. Students may need different kinds of behavioral or educational interventions, including counseling. However, advocated for in this project is not simply counseling techniques to use with students on the autism spectrum, but biblical counseling techniques, in a Christian school environment, done in part by educators themselves. Further, it is important to understand that, while ASD students of all ages could eventually benefit from this study, the particular age group to be dealt with here is adolescents.

This project will give the reader a greater understanding of biblical counseling techniques as those involved in the research process use them with students on the autism spectrum. The present section will provide a detailed explanation of the ministry context, Salem Baptist Christian School, for this action research project. The ministry context is important to understand in order to see the necessity of the research at hand. Further, the problem which is specific to the ministry context will be expanded upon, followed by the purpose statement of the research. Some limitations of the research process in this ministry context will also be discussed, as well as some delimitations and key definitions which the reader will need to know in order to

understand the research. Each of these sections will be crucial to laying an effective foundation upon which this research may stand.

### **Ministry Context**

In order for proper research to be understood and done well, it is necessary to provide various details regarding the context of the ministry at hand. Therefore, in the pages to follow, the ministry will be identified, its history will be discussed, and its demographics will be noted. Further details regarding the location of this ministry will be provided, as well as the persons involved in the ministry, and any other factors which could influence this research. Each piece of information involving a ministry's context is important when conducting research because it aids both the researcher and the reader in the study of the individuals within that ministry.

Organization and detail are also important parts of any process, for God is a God of order.<sup>1</sup>

The ministry involved in this research project is that of Salem Baptist Christian School. Salem Baptist Christian School (SBCS) is designed to be an outreach ministry of Salem Baptist Church and has been in existence since 1950. In 1950, a Christian lady by the name of Hazel Donevant observed a need in her community. Like many Christians who came before her, she responded to the gospel call in her area, acting out of what Christ had done for her, as well as what He expected of her (Matt. 28:18-20). Further, this was a direct act supporting JD Greear's assertion that a true understanding of the gospel produces radical obedience.<sup>2</sup> That is, Piedmont Bible College (PBC), located across the street from Salem Baptist Church (SBC), was teeming with life as students entered its doors to prepare for Christian ministry. However, many of these

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Anthony and James Estep, *Management Essentials for Christian Ministries* (Grand Rapids: B&H Academic, 2005), 18

<sup>2</sup> JD Greear, *Gospel Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary* (Grand Rapids: B&H Academic, 2011), 19.

students were the parents of small children, and were in need of childcare while they were attending classes. Mrs. Donevant, having observed this need, took it upon herself to discuss using the SBC facilities to grow her daycare services with Pastor Charles Stevens. Stevens granted Donevant's request, having caught a vision of his own to provide educational services to students of all ages. Thus, Salem Baptist Christian School began, seeking to educate students from a biblical worldview, and telling them the good news of Christ (Rom. 10:14-15).

The school grew for several years, adding pre-K, kindergarten, and first grade classrooms. In 1955, a much-needed construction project began on the Tucker building, which would provide various new classrooms and allow room for the student population to grow. By 1962, four hundred students flocked to the school each year, and the need for more buildings grew. By 1968, a multi-purpose building was opened and ready for use, which was comprised of the gymnasium and several classrooms. By 1969, over sixty employees served the 580 students. The school continued to grow throughout the 1970s, and by the late 1980s, was comprised of over 1,000 students. Salem experienced a setback during the 1988-89 school year, during which the high school had to close its doors. When the high school reopened, enrollment had suffered, with Salem now being comprised of 206 students. However, the Lord remained at work in this supposedly shrinking school.

In the years to follow, SBCS would grow to enroll over 360 students, as well as to gain accreditation from the Association of Christian Schools International. Further, the school's staff began discovering the new wonders and perils of ministering to youth in modern times.<sup>3</sup> In the early 2000's, the school added its Discovery Center, which was designed to minister to the needs of students with disabilities and learning differences. Throughout the years, SBCS saw several

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<sup>3</sup> Alvin Reid, *Raising the Bar: Ministering to Youth in the New Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004), 140-141.

different principals and administrators, and continued to grow. In the present, the school as a whole is thriving, the Discovery Center is moving in an upward direction, and enrollment numbers reach nearly 500. Further, in the most recent commencement ceremony, 30 seniors walked across the stage to receive their diplomas, which is a feat for the school. However, while Salem's history is fascinating and important to the research at hand, it is not the only point regarding context which is necessary to discuss.

While SBCS does not release any formal list of its demographics, one may observe and estimate its demographics throughout the student body. Salem is a school primarily of Caucasian, middle class students. A number of these students attend church regularly, but it seems that many of them also do not. Further, much of the Caucasian population of Salem, (but also the population as a whole) experiences difficulty at home, as well as bears witness to domestic issues such as divorce and abuse. While SBCS is primarily a school of Caucasian population, a fair amount of African American students attend, as well as those students of Hispanic and Asian origins. The African American students who attend Salem, based on employee testimonies and the personal experiences of this author, often have troubled home lives. That is, whether their parents are divorced, a parent is absent, abuse happens in the home, or poverty is in the home, it seems that African American students at Salem have a greater number of difficulties than Caucasian students. Further, more African American students enrolled at SBCS are in a lower social class than Caucasian students. The Hispanic population at Salem seemingly lives well above the poverty line, likely middle class. Further, the Hispanic population seems to experience less issues at home, and is the second lowest student population at Salem. The lowest student population at Salem consists of individuals of Asian descent.

Students of Asian descent also experience a great amount of difficulty in the home, yet are predominately middle class.

Salem's location is crucial to the research at hand. The school and church are located side by side, in the heart of downtown Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Salem is surrounded by a community of various kinds of people. In front of the campus, across the street, is Carolina University, formerly known as Piedmont International University and Piedmont Bible College. To the left of the campus is a neighborhood and cluster of homes; to the right of the campus are homes and a busy highway. Behind the campus is a cluster of town homes, as well as a series of streets which leads to various shops in the downtown area. SBCS is located on Broad Street, which is known as one of the most dangerous streets in Winston-Salem. While the city is presently seeking to revitalize the area, and the community is steadily becoming safer, it is still considered a dangerous area. A couple of key points may be made regarding Salem's location in the inner city. First, although it is a private school and therefore expensive to attend, Salem's location causes it to attract an inner-city population, as well as a melting pot of families from various backgrounds. This is not necessarily a negative point, but it remains a noteworthy point for the purpose of this project because it helps one better understand the student population. Salem also has the ability to influence the world's dynamic culture, often displayed in the city's downtown area, from its own back yard. This is a crucial and exciting truth, especially in relation to the research ahead.<sup>4</sup> Second, Salem's location is so deep within the bowels of the city that it can sometimes exist unbeknownst to local residents. Several families and individuals of which this author has both heard and spoken to in the last year were unaware that Salem existed—and these were people that knew the downtown area well. This point is less noteworthy in regard to

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<sup>4</sup> Walt Mueller, *Youth Culture 101* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 272.

the research than the first, but is nonetheless important to establish in the interest of a thorough contextual report. This leads to the final area of exploration in regard to ministry context: the individuals involved.

In a general sense, SBCS has five major groups of employees, which altogether hold over 800 years of teaching experience: elementary school, middle school, high school, the Discovery Center, and administration. Each of these five groups are tasked with working together in a way which glorifies God and seeks to push their students to learn and grow to be more like Jesus through the avenue of educational excellence (a Christian environment which is pushed heavily by several prominent authors).<sup>5</sup> Most of the employees at Salem are Caucasian, middle class women. However, various male employees of the same ethnicity and social class are involved at Salem, as well as a minor range of employees of other ethnic backgrounds. Further, the age of employees ranges from 18 to late 60's, and each young employee is encouraged to learn from the older and more experienced.

More specifically, however, the Discovery Center (special education department) is most important to discuss. This is because, as this research project progresses, it will become clear that it involves SBCS special education teachers, who work in the Discovery Center. The Discovery Center, begun in 1999, is being led in the present by Mrs. Melissa Watkins, who has been an educator and special educator for a number of years. Several therapists trained in helping students with learning differences are a part of this department, as well as several full-time teachers. Further, the campus ministries department, which works to care for students' spiritual needs, has recently added a part-time employee to focus on students in the elementary school and Discovery Center. The center serves students of various needs and disabilities and seeks to meet

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<sup>5</sup> Lee Vukich and Steve Vandergriff, *Timeless Youth Ministry* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002), 249.

them on the level that they are currently at. However, in allusion to the problem to be presented, it is important to note that students with disabilities are not always cared for in the highest possible way (specifically spiritually). This is particularly true regarding students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This is no fault of the teachers or administration, but is rather an issue that can be addressed with further training, and specifically training in biblical counseling. This is the place at which this research project becomes crucial.

Overall, Salem Baptist Christian School is a place in which God has been at work since the beginning. Historically, it was created to fill a need which several Christian men and women found in the community, and has been seeking to serve that community ever since. Its demographics have a noteworthy range, and its student population is growing in number. However, as is the case with any ministry, there is always room for improvement and, in order to improve, problems must be addressed. Therefore, it is necessary, in the following section, to present the problem to be researched in this project.

### **Problem Presented**

The problem to be discussed has been formed as a result of issues which have been occurring for a couple of years at Salem Baptist Christian School in regard to the spiritual needs of students. In 2020, the school board decided to hire Mark Jennings to be the campus pastor at Salem for students who needed counseling, as well as to handle the spiritual life of the school. Mark hired two campus ministries employees in 2020 and 2021, this author being one of them. Having been at Salem for a year, however, an issue has been discovered.

Salem's campus ministries department exists to provide counseling services to all students. In addition, teachers are often able to build relationships with and help students using informal biblical counseling techniques, as well as encouraging them to pursue Christlikeness. In



the special education department, however, several students on the autism spectrum are not able to receive the same care from their teachers, since these teachers (both classroom teachers and occupational therapists) are not trained in biblical counseling techniques involving students on the spectrum. While campus ministries is in place to serve in this area, it is also important that educators are able to use biblical counseling techniques for their ASD students, in order that these students are given the full range of support they need, as well as a quality Christian education. Students who have a diagnosis of autism have learning and emotional differences which are necessary to understand in order to aid them in their educational journey. These learning and emotional differences further affect their spiritual walk, and biblical counseling techniques could help in meeting their needs. Therefore, the problem is that special education teachers at Salem Baptist Christian School do not have training in biblical counseling techniques for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to provide training in biblical counseling techniques for students with ASD to the SBCS special education teachers. The research which is conducted over the course of this project is designed to provide a better understanding of the spiritual needs of students on the autism spectrum, and therefore to provide the SBCS special education teachers with the proper training in biblical counseling. This will not eliminate the need for campus ministries—rather, it will help teachers be able to better serve their students by using biblical counseling techniques. Campus ministries will always be available to help, but not every student needs special counseling outside of class—some need a push in the right direction from someone who, understanding their unique ways of thinking, is able to use biblical counseling techniques.

When a student on the autism spectrum is in need of greater emotional, educational, or spiritual support, the first person to meet this need at SBCS is their classroom teacher. At the risk of being redundant, campus ministries helps meet student needs, but only when the classroom teacher can not. Therefore, training in biblical counseling techniques is needed, specifically in regard to ASD students, so that educators have a greater ability to meet the needs of students from the classroom. Further, even if these needs are not able to be met in full, the educator at least needs to have a greater understanding of his or her ASD students from a biblical counseling standpoint. The benefits of this research will be great in number. Not only will special educators at Salem have the opportunity to understand their ASD students on a deeper level, but they will have tools they need to guide them spiritually from the classroom. This will, in turn, positively affect these teachers' interactions with their ASD students, as well as the students' spiritual growth, understanding, and behavior.

Moving forward, some basic assumptions regarding the research project will be necessary to expound upon. Anytime research is to be completed, especially based upon a hypothesis or thesis, it is crucial that assumptions are identified and discussed. This is because, if the assumptions are not identified, realistic expectations cannot be formed. Each person holds within themselves basic assumptions about the world around them, and this includes major assumptions and minor assumptions. Some minor assumptions, or presuppositions relating to the research and ministry context, will be noted in the section to follow in order to continue laying an effective foundation.

### **Basic Assumptions**

As is the case with any research project, a few basic assumptions may be made at the outset. Therefore, a few will be listed in this section in order for the reader to better understand

what an expected result would be for the process. A primary assumption for this project is that all of the teachers which will be involved are Christians who have been saved by faith through grace upon hearing and receiving the gospel of Christ. Therefore, all teachers involved should be willing to and easily receive instruction regarding biblical counseling techniques.

Second, just as the assumption may be made regarding the salvation of the participating teachers, an assumption may be made regarding the salvation of the students in the classrooms. Undeniably there will be those students who have already received the gospel in their hearts—of this, one can be certain. However, one may also rightfully assume that, if teachers interact with a fair number of students as a result of this project, there is a good chance of interaction with the unsaved. This is not necessarily a negative point, but it is an assumption which is likely accurate.

Third, the assumption may be made that patience, grace, and determination will be needed by all individuals involved, and specifically for the teachers, because ASD students have learning differences and needs which are greater and different than those of neurotypical students. Therefore, any form of learning or counseling for these individuals is going to require a determination to see them succeed, grace when they make mistakes, and patience when they do not understand.

A fourth assumption entering into the research at hand is that some changes will be made along the way. That is, an intervention design will be discussed in Chapter Three, with the implementation of this designed described shortly thereafter. While the implementation of the intervention ought not to differ drastically from the design, a few alterations are unavoidable. This is because the world is unpredictable, meaning that events and scenarios may occur, over the course of the research, which are outside of this author's control. This does not have to be a negative point, but it is nonetheless a point which is important to make. As previously discussed,

the point of identifying assumptions before diving into the research process is that realistic expectations might be maintained. Therefore, understanding that alterations may be made to the research design during implementation will aid in a smoother process overall.

A fifth assumption is that, as this research process begins, and biblical counseling techniques are utilized, God's Word will not return void. As it journeys into the minds and hearts of the students, flowing from the hearts and mouths of teachers, the Lord is going to work in some way. While the issue at hand may not be fully solved, the hearts either of teachers or students will be changed for the better. God always uses His Word in a positive way, even when man cannot see Him working. This author has no doubt that this research project may not be fully successful, but it will drive the Word of God deeper into the hearts of its participants—and perhaps this is all the success that is necessary. In the pages to follow, a few key terms and definitions will be established for clarity moving forward.

A sixth assumption may be made that different participants will respond in different ways to the training which they receive and the process which they undergo through the research journey. While the goal is to prove, overall, the validity of the thesis, and therefore to yield some common results, it is not unreasonable to suggest that participants will have some unique responses to the data presented and gathered. This is not a negative point at all, for each individual is different and carries with him or her a specific perspective on life. However, it is still important to both assume and understand that some different opinions and perspectives will emerge as information is presented and data is gathered.

### **Definitions**

In order to understand certain elements of this research project, it is necessary to define some key terms. These terms will be crucial moving forward, for if they remained undefined,

confusion regarding those involved in the research and the nature of the research could permeate this project. As Susan Thurman notes, in any kind of writing scenario, finding the correct terms to use is absolutely essential.<sup>6</sup> This truth is echoed in the work of experienced writer Kate Turabian. She states that defining the right terms, as well as choosing the write terms, is highly important and may determine the reader's comprehension of the writing.<sup>7</sup> The terms to be defined in this section are *neurotypical*, *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, and *biblical counseling techniques*. This author believes that, by defining those terms, confusion will be eliminated moving forward.

*Autism Spectrum Disorder.* A series of continual deficits in communication with others and social interactions with others, which can show themselves in various ways across various contexts.<sup>8</sup> If one were to simplify this definition, it could be said that ASD exhibits itself in unusual behaviors (such as fixated interests, repetitive behaviors, and high sensitivities to sensory input) which often causes difficulty in social interactions. Therefore, Autism Spectrum Disorder is a disability which affects thought processes, the senses, and behavior. Since the brain of the ASD individual works differently than a neurotypical person's brain, the ASD individual may need greater support in daily life.

*Biblical counseling techniques.* Techniques which are utilized by the biblical counselor to advise the individual being counseled according to the Word of God, as well as to help that individual understand him or herself better. In using the term *technique*, the idea is a practice or

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<sup>6</sup>Susan Thurman, *The Only Grammar Book You'll Ever Need: A One-Stop source for Every Writing Assignment* (New York: Adams Media, 2003), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 2013.

<sup>8</sup> *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 2020), 27.

practices which can be used to draw out those things which are going on in the heart of a person. The concept of biblical counseling techniques involves an understanding of the fallen nature of mankind, as well as an understanding that things are occurring in the heart of a person which must be discovered and discussed (and these emotions, desires, choices, etc. are often the reason a negative behavior is occurring).

Once this understanding and perspective is gained, the term *techniques* is used in relation to using God's Word to speak truth into a person's life. This may be as simple as having a deep conversation and interaction with a person in which their feelings are heard and understood, questions are asked to help clarify their condition, and biblical advice or guidance is given. Seasoned counselor and minister Larry Crabb once noted that, at the heart of biblical counseling is the idea that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.<sup>9</sup> This being the case, it stands to reason that biblical counseling, and the techniques used in relation to it, are designed to use the truth of God's Word to penetrate and change the heart of the one being counseled. Biblical counseling may be defined exactly as it sounds. That is, it is counseling which views that Bible as the supreme authority on life, and therefore seeks to utilize its teachings to change the heart of the one being counseled. Biblical counseling techniques, then, are those techniques which are utilized by the biblical counselor to effectively advise the individual seeking counsel.

Another point which is important to make in regard to the definition at hand is that the kinds of biblical counseling techniques used in this process are based on the "iceberg" model.<sup>10</sup> This means that the biblical counseling techniques in which the participants will be trained are operating under the assumption that emotions and motives are happening in students' hearts

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<sup>9</sup> Larry Crabb, *Understanding People: Why We long for Relationship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 237.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

which must be explored and understood in order to care for them spiritually. This is in direct contrast to other biblical counseling models, such as Jay Adams's *nouthetic* model. The *nouthetic* model assumes that individuals merely need to be provided with biblical truth in order to combat their challenges and misbehaviors.<sup>11</sup> The model of biblical counseling presented in this project will show itself to be a more effective model.

The final point to make on this definition is that, the biblical counseling practices which will be shared and for which this researcher will advocate are 1) asking strategic questions in order to draw out thoughts and emotions, 2) an aspect of cognitive behavioral therapy in which journaling or verbalizing emotions and perspectives are heavily emphasized, and 3) basic discipleship and pointing others the direction which they ought to go for continued Christian growth according to the Word of God.

*Neurotypical.* A term which refers to persons without Autism Spectrum Disorder and whose brains operate in what would be considered a usual and normal pattern.<sup>12</sup> The first definition which is important to understand as the research progresses is *neurotypical*. This is important to understand because it will lead to greater understanding when comparing the behavior of an autistic person with that of the neurotypical person. This leads to the necessity of a proper definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

*Teachers and educators.* While it may seem a bit peculiar to include such a common definition in this section, some clarification remains necessary. That is, throughout this project, the words *teachers* or *educators* will be used to refer to potential and actual participants in the

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<sup>11</sup> Jay Adams, *Ready to Restore: The Layman's Guide to Christian Counseling* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1981), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Casey Vormer, *Connecting with the Autism Spectrum: How to Talk, How to Listen, and Why You Shouldn't Call it High-Functioning* (Emeryville: Rockridge Press, 2020), 33.

study. However, the words themselves carry a different meaning than is traditionally accurate. Several classroom teachers will likely participate in this study, and these participants are teachers in the normal sense of the word. That is, they are classroom instructors who facilitate learning. However, some therapists from Salem's Discovery Center will participate as well. These therapists have different roles than traditional classroom teachers, yet are teachers nonetheless. Therefore, it is important that the reader understand the full definition of teachers or educators as these terms are used. The full definition will be those individuals in the special education department at Salem who interact with students, and in doing so, help these students to pursue and achieve learning goals.

### **Limitations**

While it is true that this research project intends to be as thorough as possible, it is also true that some limitations exist which ought to be addressed. Limitations, regarding a research project, are things which remain outside the control of this author. This research project will attempt to work with and around these limitations, but will not always be successful in doing so because the outcome will be uncontrolled. These things being established, it is necessary to discuss a few limitations of this research project which may affect its results.

The first limitation to be noted is that of time. That is, the research which will take place will have a limited amount of time to be completed. Part of the reason for this limited amount of time is due to the fact that the thesis itself must be completed in a certain amount of time. Therefore, research cannot necessarily be conducted over a period of months or years. Rather, it must be done within hours, days, and weeks, and months. Further, limitations regarding time exist because the research process will involve both teachers and students. Teachers and students both have limited amounts of free time throughout the school day, and any time which either



group dedicates to this research project will take away from their free time. Therefore, not only is the time during which they may participate limited, but their willingness to participate may also be limited.

A second noteworthy limitation is that of demographics. That is, while SBCS holds students of different ethnic and familial backgrounds, the number of students with a diagnosis of ASD is mostly limited to Caucasian, middle class individuals. Therefore, the chance to conduct research on ASD individuals of other ethnicities, cultures, or backgrounds is limited. This could certainly affect the outcome of the research at hand because, while one biblical counseling perspective may help a Caucasian, middle class student with ASD, it may not help an Asian, middle-class student with ASD. Further, most of the teachers in Salem's special education department are Caucasian, middle class women. Therefore, at the risk of redundancy, the scope of the individuals who engage in the research process is limited.

A third limitation of this research project is that not every ASD student has the same level of autism. That is, because autism is a spectrum, the struggles of one ASD student may be more severe than another. While those with autism all experience similar struggles, the nature of those struggles may be different based on where they are on the spectrum. Therefore, a limitation exists because a biblical counseling technique which works for one ASD individual may need to be modified for another. That is, it is difficult to generalize the use of biblical counseling techniques to the entire ASD community. Therefore, the finite nature of the research process is once more demonstrated.

A fourth and final limitation of this research project is that some students with ASD at SBCS do not have a personal, saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Due to this fact, if a non-Christian, ASD student is interacted with in the research, they may not respond well to biblical

counseling techniques based on a failure to accept biblical truth. While biblical counseling techniques have the ability to aid the unsaved, the spiritual authority which they highlight is generally unaccepted by the unsaved. Therefore, this fourth limitation exists because the author has no control over the heart posture of the ASD individuals in the classroom. No discussion on limitations would be complete without the discussion of delimitations. Therefore, the reader may turn his attention to the discussion which follows.

### **Delimitations**

While there may be several limitations of the study at hand, various delimitations can also be listed. That is, certain elements of this research project are within the bounds of the author's control. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss these delimitations in order to understand how they may affect this study positively. The first delimitation which may be noted is the fact that the research will take place in a controlled environment. That is, the research will take place in structured classrooms in which both the student(s) and teacher(s) feel comfortable. While this does not necessarily guarantee successful research, it does help, because both the teachers will know what to expect environmentally each time they participate.

A second noteworthy delimitation is time. While time can also serve as a limitation in that the research must be conducted during the school day, time can also serve as a delimitation. This is because the time of day the research is conducted can be controlled. Whether the research is regularly conducted at the beginning, middle, or end of the school day is able to be controlled. Further, if this is the case, factors are able to be considered such as sleepiness, hunger, or boredom. Therefore, time becomes a greater asset in that it will help one to understand what is occurring in the mind of the teacher as he or she is participating in the research.

A third delimitation of this project is that of the mode of research which will be conducted. Whether the research involves a group or a case study of an individual is entirely under the control of the author. Therefore, this provides an opportunity to consider the best approach to the research project and the pursuit of this approach. A fourth delimitation lies in the fact that Salem Baptist Christian School is in a set location. That is, the school will not move over the course of this research, meaning that the same buildings and environment will be utilized throughout the process. Therefore, in a broader sense than the aforementioned classroom, this research project will be conducted in a controlled environment. The choice to engage in research in a controlled environment was simple to make, as it will allow, in some ways, for more controlled outcomes.

Fifth and finally, a delimitation to be considered involves demographics. The demographics of the participants are in this author's control to a certain extent. This is not to say that participants would be denied participation if they do not fit a certain demographic. However, it is to say that participants of certain demographics will choose to participate in this study based on this author's offer and presentation regarding the study.

These things having been discussed, it is now necessary to turn to the thesis regarding this research project. The thesis is the ultimate "why" behind the research to be conducted. That is, a problem has been demonstrated previously. Now, in the thesis, the statement to be presented is an educated guess regarding the way in which the problem may be fixed. Without the thesis, ultimately no research can be done, because there is no way to organize the intervention according to a fixed goal. Therefore, the thesis statement is the most important piece of this primary chapter.

### **Thesis Statement**

Special education teachers at Salem Baptist Christian School need to make deeper connections with their ASD students, and they can make these connections by understanding and utilizing biblical counseling techniques. At the risk of being redundant, this will not render campus ministries obsolete, but will actually serve as an extension of campus ministries, allowing teachers to better handle students on the autism spectrum and their problems in a way in which they would otherwise be unable, prior to a campus ministries referral.

Whether the training provided for these SBCS employees helps them to better understand their students, or helps them to better minister to their students will remain unknown until the research is completed. This author is hopeful, however, that this research project will aid both the SBCS student with autism and the special educator. The importance of the special education teacher can not be understated, and if, by way of this research, the teachers' ability to counsel students on the spectrum is enhanced, an excellent result will have been reached. In fact, it stands to reason that ASD students at SBCS will have a fuller educational experience if their teachers are trained in biblical counseling techniques pertaining to their needs. Further, it is believed that the efficacy of the training which will take place is measurable in increased positive behavior of ASD students and the increased ability of the teachers to interact well with their ASD students. Therefore, if training in biblical counseling techniques is provided for SBCS special education teachers, then they will be better able to serve their ASD students.

### **Conclusion**

Over the course of this first chapter, several issues have been discussed which serve to lay an effective foundation moving forward. First, the ministry context of the research at hand was explored, and was designated as the Salem Baptist Christian School special education

department. The history of the school and the subsequent ways it has led to the research today was further discussed. Following the ministry context, the reader found his way to the problem presented and the purpose statement. Ultimately, the issue is that Salem's special education teachers lack proper training in biblical counseling techniques and the ways in which they may be used to help ASD students. The purpose, then, would be to provide training for these teachers in order that better spiritual care may be provided for their ASD students. Some basic assumptions were discussed, these being noteworthy for their implications regarding realistic expectations. Following these basic assumptions, definitions were provided which will remain crucial throughout the entire process. Following on the heels of the research definitions were the limitations and delimitations of the project at hand, designating aspects of the process within and outside this researcher's control. Finally discussed was the thesis of the entire project, perhaps the most important section of Chapter One. The thesis, in its simplest form, is that if training in biblical counseling techniques is provided for SBCS special education teachers, then they will be better able to serve their ASD students. The remainder the of the project at hand could not be made possible without the cornerstone and foundation provided here. Attention may now be turned to a review of current literature on the topics at hand.

## CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

A Doctor of Ministry project must be completed in a relevant manner, as well as in a way that takes the literature on a given subject into account. If a literature review of the project's topic is not conducted, then a proper study on the topic has not been completed. A proper study consists of thorough research, discovering what others are saying, and allowing them to contribute to the conversation. Further, a thorough literature review is important in order to address any gaps on the topic that may exist among the current literature on that topic. Echoing the words of Michael Kibbe, the sources here were not examined for the sake of themselves, but rather for furthering the research strategically on the topic at hand.<sup>13</sup> These things being established, it is important to note that the following works played an essential part in the research process for this project. In fact, one may venture so far as to say that, without the following works, the research would crumble, because the truths which have been recorded on these topics serve as a tool to propel this research forward. The importance of understanding others' work on a given topic or topics can not be underestimated. A mastery of others' research is important in order that a given subject may be explained effectively. That is, simply put, if one is unable to understand what others have stated about a topic, then one is not able to help others understand that topic. These things being established, one may now turn attention to a review of literature regarding the topics to be addressed and explored in this research study.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2016), 69.

## **Literature Review**

Autism is a spectrum, and those who have been diagnosed with it are placed somewhere on this spectrum. Further, many challenges are faced daily by those with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. These challenges can be overcome to differing degrees, but some are more difficult than others. The project at hand specifically deals with Christian educators' ability to biblically counsel students on the autism spectrum. However, this literature review will specifically cover the challenges which those on the autism spectrum face, the strengths which those with ASD exhibit, and some notes which can be made in regard to counseling those on the autism spectrum from the biblical and the secular world. Each of these categories will be discussed according to relevant literature in order to present initial research and findings from other capable authors in this field. May the reader understand that, in addition to the specific categories noted and addressed according to current literature, the literature expounded upon will also be partially critiqued and synthesized. That is, the literature on autism and biblical counseling is to be intentionally linked together, as well as critiqued briefly and minorly according to its strengths and weaknesses. Certain works and authors will offer more than others, or even have more advantages in some details than others. All of this is to be brought out through an effective view of the literature at hand. Further and finally, it is important to read and understand the following works as a synthesis rather than a summary. Each work is woven together with others in order to provide a well-rounded view of the subject matter.

### **Challenges Faced by ASD Individuals**

Individuals that have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder experience a variety of daily challenges. These challenges can span a wide range of areas, including emotions, behavior, communication and social skills, sensory issues, and dietary issues. While it can be easy to

disregard emotions, they are nonetheless important, and even crucial, in understanding the individual with ASD. In fact, in a doctoral study entitled *Autism Spectrum Disorder and the First Years of Life*, Chawarska and Volkmar note that, because emotions are important to shape social and cognitive development, they have become more important in recent years as ASD studies have been conducted.<sup>14</sup> Further, it may be rightfully said that God maintains His goodness in the midst of challenges, but this does not eradicate them.<sup>15</sup>

Grant Macaskill, chair of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, connected his studies about the church to his research on autism. He writes that “[Those with autism] may not perceive an emotional or affective state to be present in another person because they do not pick up on body language or facial expressions.”<sup>16</sup> Macaskill notes in the same breath an emotional perception challenge as well as a social challenge of ASD individuals. Others are less specific as to what emotional challenges take place in those with ASD, but simply agree that persons with autism can, at times, seem to experience either too much emotion or none at all.<sup>17</sup> Chawarska and Volkmar seem to be correct in their assertions, but they add a secular element which Macaskill does not include in his work. That is, Macaskill derives his points from a biblical perspective, understanding emotions as God has created them. Bustion, cited a moment ago, acts in the same way. Chawarska and Volkmar approach emotions scientifically, however, which can be helpful, but more so hindering.

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<sup>14</sup> Katarzyna Chawarska and Fred Volkmar, *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the First Years of Life: Research, Assessment, and Treatment*. (New York: Guilford Publications, 2020), 66.

<sup>15</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 28.

<sup>16</sup> Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, Baylor University Press, 2019), 19.

<sup>17</sup> Olivia Bustion, “Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, (2017): 671.



Others still note that some emotions, such as aggression and anger, can be more present in those with autism, while other emotions may seem nonexistent.<sup>18</sup> On this, Harris writes, “Many people who have autism find that their moods fluctuate and that some days, they can’t cope with things. This can lead to frustration, or at times even violent behavior where they may lash out at themselves or others.”<sup>19</sup> In the *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-V*, noted is the fact that ASD individuals can often exhibit a small range of emotions.<sup>20</sup> Further, if one is to look at the emotional challenges of ASD individuals from a biblical perspective, it is important to note that man is not to blindly follow his feelings—his feelings are to be a part of the way God communicates to Him.<sup>21</sup> Seemingly, here, it would seem that a common theme emerges through the works of Harris and Scazzero which agrees with the *DSM-V*: Namely, this theme is that those with ASD experience a wide range of emotions. While any of these three works (particularly Scazzero’s) could discuss autism and the emotions more, they nonetheless address the subject in a plausible way. These things being the case, it stands to reason that those students in Christian education on the autism spectrum are in need of help managing their emotions from a biblical perspective.

In the realm of emotions, it is important to note that individuals with ASD often have a diagnosis of either anxiety or depression. Anxiety and depression are commonly experienced in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder because of the very nature of the disorder. That is,

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<sup>18</sup> “Autism Spectrum Disorder-Proquest” “Autism Spectrum Disorder - Proquest,” accessed November 13, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2086209559>, 511.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, Olivia, *Understanding & Managing Autism in Children: The Ultimate Guide to Autism in Girls and Boys*. (Independently Published, 2021), 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 48.

life situations which occur daily, such as eating, attending school, or going to work can be stressful for the individual with ASD.<sup>22</sup> In fact, from early ages, anxiety can be observed in individuals with ASD, specifically in regard to social interaction.<sup>23</sup> Nye and Bass do an excellent job in addressing anxiety and depression in those with ASD, although Bass could do so in a more detailed manner. Nye tends to approach this topic in a scholarly and complex way, therefore shedding more light on this issue. While anxiety and depression are faced by many people, both Christian and non-Christian, it is important to remember that these feelings are often heavier for those with autism. Sometimes, sensory issues and social interactions may lie at the heart of anxiety and depression. Often, however, it is the uncertainty of everyday life which causes those on the spectrum to struggle.<sup>24</sup> Further, many individuals with autism fear social interactions because they have difficulty gaining acceptance by others, and they are often seen as unusual. Finally, it is important to note that, at times, those individuals with ASD struggling with depression and anxiety may demonstrate the effects in their behavior as well.

In regard to behavior, a couple of things are important to remember. First, all human beings have a tendency to sin, known as a sin nature. This sin nature is not dealt with until Jesus comes into a person's life. Therefore, a certain amount of what one would consider misbehavior is a result of the sin nature in neurotypical individuals as well as individuals with ASD.

However, individuals with ASD still experience behavioral challenges, either because of their

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Bass, *Parenting a Child with Autism: A Modern Guide to Understand and Raise Your ASD Child to Success* (Independently Published: 2022), 97.

<sup>23</sup> Cheryl Nye, *Taming Autism: Rewiring the Brain to Relieve Symptoms and Save Lives* (Los Angeles: Child Stress Center, 2020), 75.

<sup>24</sup> Barry Prizant and Tom Fields-Meyer, *Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism* (London: Souvenir Press, 2019), 207.

struggle to regulate their emotions, or because of their misunderstanding of what is appropriate behavior and what is not. Further, sometimes the behavior of individuals with ASD may not be wrong, but unusual, and therefore is something which needs to be addressed. Conner supports this thought well when she states that ASD students' behavior can become problematic when the student is engaging in repetitive, difficult behavior.<sup>25</sup> Another behavior of individuals with ASD, which is generally viewed as unusual, is self-stimulation. Self-stimulation is the ASD individual's way of regulating their emotions and dealing with their environment, and can consist of any kind of repetitive movement or sounds.<sup>26</sup> A second type of behavior to be considered are what many call "meltdowns". Meltdowns appear outwardly to be tantrums and, while misbehaviors, are a result of ASD individuals' attempts to regulate their emotions. These behaviors, again, are not necessarily problematic, but they are unusual, causing challenges, and especially social challenges. Dr. Brenda Myles writes specifically regarding the gravitation which many ASD individuals have toward these "meltdowns," even noting the different stages of the events. She notes that meltdowns typically consist of three stages: the rumbling stage, the rage stage, and the recovery stage.<sup>27</sup> While the sources on the previous page from Prizant, Fields-Meyer, and Conner speak to autistic behavior, no other work does the concept of the meltdown justice quite like than of Dr. Myles's.

In the rumbling stage, evidence begins to appear that alludes to a meltdown, yet is subtle to the untrained eye. Body language begins to change, and the individual may appear a bit more

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<sup>25</sup> Dawn Conner, *Supporting Children with Autism in the Primary Classroom* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 66.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Brenda Myles, *Autism and Difficult Moments: Practical Solutions for Reducing Meltdowns*. (Arlington: Future Horizons, 2016), 15-26.

tense or irritable. In other words, the individuals may not seem to “be themselves”. Next is the rage stage in which an ASD individual will act seemingly irrationally, impulsively, emotionally, and even explosively. This is the most difficult part of the meltdown to help the individual out of, and is the most difficult moment for an ASD individual to attempt to regulate themselves. Once this stage has passed, one will move on to what is known as the recovery stage. In this stage, the individual begins to recover from the meltdown, and may begin to apologize, deny their anger, go to sleep, or enter into their own fantasies. At this point, the ASD individual has calmed down and is now recovering from the emotional energy which they have previously exerted. The meltdown is one of the most common behavioral challenges of the person with autism, and is a clear indicator of both the sin nature and an underlying issue which has caused this behavior. Therefore, a proper understanding of challenges faced by ASD individuals observed through the lens of the biblical counseling perspective is key to helping in these cases.

Those with autism will also gravitate towards heavily repetitive and restrictive behaviors, which may, at times, appear as misbehaviors, but are their attempts to enjoy and make sense of the world around them.<sup>28</sup> As with the meltdowns, certain aspects of the sin nature are present. That is, repetitive and restrictive behaviors, as well as routines, may sometimes be used by the autistic as ways of controlling the world around them. Scripture makes it clear that control ultimately belongs to God, and that His people should not worry about their future (Matt. 6:34). However, aside from this presence of the sin nature, as previously mentioned, those with ASD actually enjoy routines and repetitive behaviors. They respond better to situations, as well as the behaviors of others, when they are able to easily predict what will happen. This can be quite the

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<sup>28</sup> Tomoya Hirota and Bryan King. “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, (2023): 329.

challenge in an unpredictable world, but is yet a key characteristic in diagnosing the disorder.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it is almost unnecessary to state the ways in which this gravitation toward routine could present a challenge in the daily life of an ASD individual. Imagine a world in which your deepest desire is to follow the same routine each day, speak to the same people, complete the same tasks, and eat the same foods. However, at the same time, compare these desires to the reality of the unpredictable world which humans call home. This being established, it is no wonder that the autistic find themselves so uncomfortable in basic daily scenarios.

Speaking once more on autistic behaviors, Naoki Higashida provides some insight in *The Reason I Jump*. Providing a brief narrative on autistic behavior, he writes: ““How many times do I have to tell you?”” Us people with autism hear that all the time.”<sup>30</sup> The idea communicated here is, again, that autistic individuals often engage in what is perceived as misbehaviors, or, at least problematic behaviors. Higashinda does an excellent job of bringing together ideas from several sources and creating an effective work from an ASD student’s perspective, particularly speaking to communication deficits and misbehaviors. While a sin nature comes into play in these scenarios (as previously mentioned) it is important to understand that ASD individuals behave in ways that are not rebellious, but are simply abnormal. The reality is that many autistic persons desire to be functioning members of society, to fit in, and to follow the rules placed before them. However, they do not always understand these rules or the reasons which they are in place.

Safety is another challenge which many on the autism spectrum face. Admittedly, this is a challenge which is not discussed often, and it is also a challenge which is not necessarily solvable from a biblical counseling perspective. However, it is important to discuss in order that

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<sup>30</sup> Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism* (New York: Random House, 2017), 14.

these individuals be understood well. Ken Siri, in *101 Tips for the Parents of Boys with Autism*, notes that it can be a challenge to keep children and adolescents with autism safe because many of them tend to wander.<sup>31</sup> This truth is not meant to be an insult to those of the spectrum, but rather, a clear insight that demonstrates the way things are for many of these individuals and their loved ones. The fact is that many on the spectrum view the world in a simpler way, which can be beautiful and breathtaking, but also dangerous. Siri notes that his son with autism has actually wandered before, and became lost once in New York City.<sup>32</sup> This is not intended by the ASD individual to cause concern or worry for those whom they love. However, those on the spectrum often do not pay attention to their surroundings the same way as neurotypicals, and may easily become separated and lost from their loved ones in a crowded setting. Therefore, it is important to understand safety as a lesser-known but serious challenge which ASD individuals often face.

Communication and social skills can be another challenge which ASD individuals face daily. From communication itself, to the ability to understand others, this can be difficult terrain to navigate. In regard to difficulty in communication, Chapman writes that negative body language can include such things as a desire to leave the room, a refusal to make eye contact, and looking nervous and pale.<sup>33</sup> Communication can prove to be more difficult for those on the spectrum who have difficulty speaking or have no ability to speak at all. For example, if a

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<sup>31</sup>Ken Siri, *101 Tips for the Parents of Boys with Autism: The Most Crucial Things You Need to Know about Diagnosis, Doctors, Schools, Taxes, Vaccinations, Babysitters, Treatment, Food, Self-Care, and More*. (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2015), 94.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>33</sup> Gary Chapman and D.M. Freed, *Discovering the Five Love Languages at School* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2015), 150.

nonverbal individual with autism is experiencing pain, they may only be able to communicate this pain through negative changes in behavior, such as acting out, withdrawing themselves, or crying. For verbal ASD individuals who simply struggle to communicate and understand the communication of others, misunderstandings can be common. This is difficult because, “unfortunately, misunderstandings can also lead to embarrassing or painful situations, even when there was no intention for harm.”<sup>34</sup> When enough misunderstandings or awkward situations occur in their attempted social interactions, those on the autism spectrum may find themselves withdrawing, even entering stages of depression and anxiety. At the risk of being redundant, the challenges faced by the autistic are the very reason why they struggle often with depression and anxiety. After all, something as simple as a greeting can be difficult for an ASD individual, as it requires eye contact, likely physical contact, and facial expressions. ASD individuals in particular desire to avoid eye contact, as it can be quite uncomfortable and, in some cases, even painful.<sup>35</sup> In short, those with ASD have to consider more seriously the very communication methods to which many do not attribute a second thought. Chapman seems to capture this thought better than Sicile-Kara, but the two authors have demonstrated value and expertise in this area nonetheless.

Another communication deficit which is common among the autistic community is that of literal thinking and misunderstandings of figurative language. In *10 Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew*, Ellen Notbohm details the issues which many ASD individuals face interpreting figurative speech. She notes well that many idioms, puns, nuances, inferences,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>35</sup> Chantal Sicile-Kara, *Autism Spectrum Disorder: The Complete Guide to Understanding Autism* (New York: Perigee Books, 2014), 54.

metaphors, allusions, and forms of sarcasm are lost in the mind of the autistic individual.<sup>36</sup>

Imagine a world in which the language was your own but not your own at the same time. All ASD individuals speak some form of world language, be it English, Spanish, German, or anything in between. However, especially in English, when figurative language is used, it may seem foreign to the autistic community. Therefore, this challenge is a further example of the ways in which language and communication may prove difficult for those on the spectrum. Communicating well and effectively with these individuals takes time and energy which many people are either unwilling to give or do not know is necessary to give.

Sensory issues may be exhibited by individuals with autism spectrum disorder in a variety of ways. Each of these challenges display themselves according to one of the five senses: sight, taste, touch, smell, and hearing. These challenges can be as simple as a neurotypical person's struggle with an itchy sweater, but can also be more complex. Some individuals with ASD struggle with the sensations of their clothing, and may need, for example, to wear sweat pants instead of jeans. However, others may struggle with sensitivities to lights or loud noises, which can cause great distress in the midst of public places or events. Zachary Chapman, an autistic individual writing on his own experiences, notes that, in high school, the fire alarm going off caused him great distress, and he shudders to think of its loud noise, even in the present.<sup>37</sup> Further, it is important to note that sensory issues in individuals with ASD are not developed as a result of defiance or desire for special treatment. While their mental abilities may remain intact, ASD individuals do not always fully recognize sensory data in the correct or typical ways others

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<sup>36</sup> Ellen Notbohm, *10 Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew* (Arlington: Future Horizons, 2019), 45.

<sup>37</sup> Zachary Chapman, *The Gospel and Autism: Living as God Intended with a Unique Wiring*. (Moorsville: LuLu Press, Inc., 2020), 32.



do. Temple Grandin, one of the world's leading experts on autism, explains: "[Autistic] children have what is called *sensory agnosia*. These individuals fail to recognize incoming sensory data, yet their primary sensory functions are intact and they have no general mental impairment."<sup>38</sup> Additionally, it is important to understand that, may times, what is considered a meltdown in an ASD individual is caused by dysregulation due to sensory issues. Therefore, the control, understanding of, and harnessing of the senses remains a significant and valid challenge to ASD individuals. Chapman and Grandin, being autistic themselves, seemingly speak to these issues better than any current author on the topic. Grandin offers a detailed account of these issues, while Chapman speaks in a simple and readable manner detailing personal experience.

Further challenges for those on the spectrum, and particularly for adolescents, involves that of sexuality and gender. Now, may the reader allow for clarity: this research in no way advocates for or supports the world's affirmation of multiple genders or gender alterations. However, this is still an important challenge which autistic individuals face, and one which must be addressed. The reality is that many autistic males exhibit more feminine qualities, not because they are attempting to switch genders, but because they are far more sensitive than their neurotypical peers. Girls with autism, on the other hand, may remain feminine but often exhibit more of a "tomboy" appearance.<sup>39</sup> This is not intended to be an insult, but it is often simply the appearance which these individuals have. Due to this factor, it can be hard for girls and women with autism to fit in with their peers, especially throughout childhood and puberty. Therefore, it may be rightfully stated that autism has an effect, and presents a challenge, regarding male and

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<sup>38</sup> Temple Grandin and Debra Moore, *Navigating Autism: 9 Mindsets for Helping Kids on the Spectrum*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 117.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Hendrickx, *Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015), 152.

female sexuality and gender understanding, especially during the adolescent years. As a final word on this subject, as well as Hendrickx's work, it may be stated that hers is one of the few studies which details this issue of gender and sexuality struggles in ASD individuals. This point is both commendable for Hendrickx and tragic for other authors who have missed this opportunity for research and discussion.

An additional challenge which is typically faced by those on the spectrum is that of dietary issues. That is, both children and adults with a diagnosis of autism have been known to experience poor gut health, as well as an increased sensitivity to certain types of foods. Even this challenge is worth noting in this context, for an autistic student may need extra time in the restroom or increased dietary restrictions at school as a result of these issues. Dietician and doctor Elizabeth Strickland provides an exhaustive list of the types of nutritional issues which a person on the spectrum may face: poor diet, nutritional deficiencies, feeding problems, food allergies, food intolerances, chemical sensitivities, gastrointestinal disorders, exposures to neurotoxins, frequent illnesses and infections, and negative drug and nutrient interactions.<sup>40</sup>

Poor diet involves consuming foods which are not healthy or nutritional for the individual. Many times, ASD individuals struggle to keep healthy diets because of sensory issues or aversions to certain kinds of foods.<sup>41</sup> While Kim could provide greater detail, a combined study of hers and Strickland's works gets the point across. Therefore, it can be difficult for an ASD individual to maintain physical health, which in turn affects the mind. An aversion to certain types of food may also cause nutritional deficiencies, as an autistic person may find it

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Strickland, *The 10-Step Nutrition Plan to Help Treat Your Child's Autism, Asperger's, or ADHD*. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>41</sup> Cynthia Kim, *I Think I Might be Autistic: A Guide to Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnosis and Self-Discovery for Adults*. (Mountainview: Narrow Gauge, 2013), 22.

difficult to consume all the nutrients necessary for their own health. These types of sensory issues may also result in feeding problems, especially for young children. These children may experience difficulty in feeding, or may not always want to be fed in the proper times or in the proper ways. In these cases, forcing proper nutrients or proper feeding times may be detrimental and distressing to an autistic child's mental health. Food allergies are issues which plague many of the world's people, and especially American culture. However, due to the poor gut health which may accompany a diagnosis of autism, food allergies are common.<sup>42</sup> This may come in the form of a simple dairy allergy or develop into something more significant such as a gluten intolerance. This is the sort of issue which would be present under the listed category of food intolerances.

Chemical sensitivities may also be present in ASD individuals, and this refers to the use of certain chemicals in the foods they consume. While some chemicals may present little risk, if any, to neurotypicals, those with autism may experience increased sensitivity to these chemicals. Gastrointestinal disorders are also more prevalent in those with autism, which may come in several forms. Further, those with autism are more susceptible to neurotoxin exposure as they eat and experience food, which may cause great difficulty in their diets. Ken Siri posits that there is a great connection, scientifically speaking, between the gut and the brain. Therefore, when one of these things is unhealthy or is more susceptible to issues, so the other may be as well.<sup>43</sup> These things being established, it is understandable that the final categories in the list of nutritional issues are those of frequent illnesses and negative food and drug interactions. Each of these noted

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 1.

issues seemingly builds upon the other and contributes to the poor gut health which is so often experienced as a challenge among autistic individuals.

Moving away from dietary issues, one of the most well-known challenges which those on the spectrum face is the ability to use executive functioning skills. Bernier, Carlson, and Whipple have composed a work which explicitly states examples of executive functioning in quite the helpful manner. However, autism specialist Victoria Boone will offer the reader some truth on the subject as well. Executive functioning skills include a variety of abilities, but specifically relates to working memory, set skills, and impulse control.<sup>44</sup> This is a fixed definition, although new discoveries are being made each year regarding the ways executive functioning works and effects all people. Some aspects of the definition themselves have been mentioned already, or could be mentioned in more detail moving forward. That is, it is clear that those with autism experience a heightened sense of memory. On the other hand, set skills and impulse control are more challenging. Impulse control may be defined as the ability to control one's impulses to speak or to act in certain ways. This aspect of executive functioning shows itself the most in conversation with others. If one is speaking with another, an example of correctly functioning impulse control would be the ability to refrain from interrupting. However, as Boone has pointed out, this skill is generally lacking in the ASD community and therefore provides yet another example of a communication deficit.<sup>45</sup>

Individuals with ASD also face the challenge of feeling inadequate. While a later challenge may be noted regarding the way that others may view ASD individuals, a challenge is

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<sup>44</sup> Annie Bernier, Stephanie Carlson and Natasha Whipple, "From External Regulation to Self-Regulation: Early Parenting Precursors of Young Children's Executive Functioning," *Child Development* (2010), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Victoria Boone, *Positive Parenting for Autism: Powerful Strategies to Help Your Child Overcome Challenges and Thrive* (Emeryville: Althea Press, 2018), 82.

also present in the way in which these individuals view themselves. Many autistic persons, and students especially, feel the need to try and mask their autism in order to conform to the expectations and normalcy in the neurotypical world. Masking involves the attempt to disguise symptoms of autism in order to fit in among one's peers, and may even be denied the service of a diagnosis while deeply believing they are autistic.<sup>46</sup> Much in the same way that any person may be tempted to try and fit in with a crowd, these autistic individuals do what they can to make themselves feel adequate and accepted. Often, masking autism is an exhausting act, and it drains much emotional, and even physical energy from the person performing this action. Not all autistic individuals will feel the need to or even understand how to mask. However, those that do often suffer in silence. Therefore, it may be rightfully stated that feelings of inadequacy leading to masking is a heavy challenge which many ASD individuals face daily. Set skills in executive functioning includes a wider array of challenges for the autistic community. That is, the category of set skills, in executive functioning, includes a wide variety of abilities necessary to function well in the surrounding world. Set skills include abilities such as planning, organization, flexibility (which has been discussed), time management, and several others. In short, executive functioning may be understood, in many ways, to be descriptive of almost all of the challenges discussed in this section. Each challenge presents its own unique set of definitions and difficulties, but executive functioning as a whole is one of the biggest categories of challenges which those on the spectrum face.

A final challenge accompanying the previous one which those on the spectrum may face is the challenge of others' perceptions of them. This is a challenge which may fall under the category of social and communication difficulties, but is simultaneously a challenge which

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<sup>46</sup> Devon Price, *Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity* (New York: Harmony Books, 2022), 53.

deserves its own section. Even those who may be considered the most godly of Christians sometimes unintentionally present themselves as prejudiced against the autistic community. This is not something which is intended, but it is nonetheless a regular occurrence all over the world. Sometimes, because those with autism are different than neurotypicals, they may be treated differently or thought of as less valuable than others, even if this is in a subconscious manner. Of course, this type of prejudice or oversight pales in comparison to those believers who are not actively pursuing a relationship with God, or those who do not identify with Christ at all. This flawed way of viewing the autistic community does not extend to all Christians or non-Christians. However, it is clear that those with autism experience more challenges socially than others. Often, this is not only because those with autism struggle to relate to others. Many times, it is because others do not care to try and relate to them. While not a recent work, author Frank Peretti details his own life experiences with a physical disability, noting that others' relations to him, being harsh, unkind, and lacking understanding, wounded his spirit in a way from which he did not recover until well into his adult life.<sup>47</sup> *New York Times* bestseller Eric Garcia, in a more recent work, comments on the damage that a flawed perspective and treatment of the autistic community can inflict. He notes that "the problem with [accounts of those with autism] is that they paint autism as tragic, which it's not...Autistic people do not need someone to decide if their lives are worth living; they need loving parents who will not inflict harm on them no matter what."<sup>48</sup> The second half of his comment specifically mentions parents, but the concept is clearly present: autistic persons, like any other, need love and support from others in their lives

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<sup>47</sup> Frank Peretti, *The Wounded Spirit* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 89.

<sup>48</sup> Eric Garcia, *We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2021), 14-15.

in order to succeed. Unfortunately, as is also the case with many neurotypicals, they do not always receive the love and support of which they are in need, whether at home or otherwise.

### Strengths of ASD Individuals

While those on the autism spectrum face a variety of daily challenges, they also display a variety of strengths which ought not be overlooked. In fact, if one is truly observant, they will be able to see that many ASD individuals display unique strengths and abilities which neurotypicals are incapable of displaying. ASD individuals can be unique examples of the beauty of God's creation and gifts to His creation, as they, too, were made in His image. Therefore, it is worth noting the strengths which those on the autism spectrum often exhibit from the biblical and secular perspective.<sup>49</sup> Macaskill's writings expound upon this assertion. Made Cunningham.

Speaking from the biblical perspective, Macaskill offers some insight on the strengths of ASD individuals:

[The struggles of autistic people] are manifestations of weakness, where that weakness is understood in terms of one's constitution: the flesh. By recognizing that the gospel is for the weak and it operates by uniting the weakness of human flesh to the absolute potency of divine strength, we see our weakness recontextualized. It is no longer the last word that defines the possibilities of our lives, but is placed within a bigger sentence that informs its real significance. Within this, the weakness is not simply overridden or left behind, but redeemed and transfigured; God's potency works in and through our weakness, and this participatory quality is vital to the reality of its effects.<sup>50</sup>

Macaskill is of the opinion that, although those on the autism spectrum face unique daily challenges, they actually display God's power in the weaknesses that they show. Just as the Apostle Paul notes in 1 Corinthians, it is not for the strong and mighty to be used of God (1 Cor

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<sup>49</sup> Ali Cunningham, *Counseling Adults with Autism: A Comprehensive Toolkit*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2020), 17.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-194.

1:27). Rather, it is the weak, despised, and even challenged, individuals and things of this world who are to be used for God's glorious purposes. Therefore, it is completely plausible to suggest that those on the autism spectrum show a greater amount of God's power, or at least a different perspective on that power, in the challenges which they face on a daily basis. Those weaknesses displayed can be redeemed and altered by God to reflect His glory.

Alarmingly, the *DSM-V*, nor its abbreviated *Desk Reference Guide*, which was utilized earlier in this review, does not mention the strengths of those on the autism spectrum. While this author understands the purpose of the *DSM-V* as primarily diagnostic, it remains tragic that no strengths of those on the spectrum are mentioned. This is an admitted weakness of the excellent resource. The autism spectrum is mostly depicted as a negative, challenging entity in these works. Further, this is an unfortunate reflection on the way in which much of the secular world views those on autism spectrum. Certainly, there are those secular sources which view autism in a positive light, but many, unfortunately, promote a negative, sorrowful tone in regard to ASD. Another work may be mentioned here, the very title describing the negative tone with which autism is often viewed: *Emotional Healing for Parents with Autism: The Journey You Never Expected to Take*. In this work, author Sara Intonato describes the journey of realizing her child was autistic, and the path to healing and learning how to care for him, especially in regard to emotions, physical health, and diet.<sup>51</sup> This author does not wish to communicate that no grief would be appropriate in finding that one's child has autism. Certainly, tears may be shed on this matter, as each parent, in an ideal scenario, desires the best possible outcome for his or her child's life. However, it is apparent that this author and this work tends to gravitate towards the

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<sup>51</sup> Sara Intonato, *Emotional Healing for Parents with Autism: The Journey You Never Expected to Take* (New York: Game Changer Publishing, 2023), 199.



idea that autism is a negative diagnosis. However, much evidence exists to the contrary that, perhaps autism is a result of the Fall of man, but it is not necessarily always a negative presence in one's life. Intonato unfortunately follows an alarming pattern set forth by the *DSM-V*'s silence on autism's strengths.

This negative, sorrowful tone, however, is not present in Gary Chapman's *Sharing Love Abundantly in Special Needs Families*. This work discusses a variety of disorders and disabilities within family units, including autism. Chapman discusses the idea of discovering the love languages of special needs children, including those with autism spectrum disorder. Noted in the book is the idea that those with special needs and disorders respond more fully to life, and enjoy living more, when their "love tanks" are consistently filled by those around them.<sup>52</sup> This speaks directly to the strengths of autism, noting that an autistic individual is capable of enjoying life, and even enjoying life more than a neurotypical, due to their simplistic mindsets, when they are consistently shown love and support by those who care about them, specifically in their own families.

A couple of other reliable sources note the strengths of those with ASD. Those with ASD often have sensory issues because they process sensory data differently, are unable to process this data properly, or because they have a heightened awareness of this data. Although this can be challenging, those with ASD are able to overcome these challenges.<sup>53</sup> Bass notes that those with ASD, although challenged by senses, also experience information through their senses more fully than neurotypicals.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, a challenge, once again, becomes a strength. To provide a

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<sup>52</sup> Chapman, Gary. *Sharing Love Abundantly in Special Needs Families: The Five Love Languages for Children Raising Parents with Disabilities*. (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2019), 153.

<sup>53</sup> Will Hutcherson and Chinwe Williams, *Seen: Healing Despair and Anxiety in Kids and Teens through the Power of Connection*, (Cummings: Parent Cue, 2021), 83.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

few examples, those with ASD have the capability of experiencing colors in a deeper way, the ability to greatly enjoy food flavors and textures, and to be more enamored with the simplicity of things such as light displays. Each of these examples provides important points regarding the strengths of autism. The first of these points is simply that, although autistic individuals have weaknesses and challenges, these difficulties can actually prove (for the Christian) to show the power of God in their lives. The second point on these strengths is simply that those with autism can often, if not indefinitely, experience life in a fuller way than neurotypical individuals, therefore rendering the entire disorder as a strength rather than a weakness. Those with autism absolutely have challenges to which people in their lives ought to be sensitive, and ought to help them overcome. However, neurotypical individuals must also take care not to look down upon those with a diagnosis of ASD or think of them as having a limited or sorrowful existence. This attitude could not be farther from the truth about the experiences of those on the autism spectrum.

Another area of strength for those on the autism spectrum is found in the memory. That is, ASD individuals typically have the ability to remember concepts learned or experiences in greater detail than neurotypicals. This often serves these individuals well and, although they may experience learning challenges, once they learn a concept, it is rarely forgotten. Temple Grandin once again contributes to the conversation, admitting her affinity and skill for creating architectural drawings. She notes holding great skill in these types of drawings because of her ability to walk around a yard or plot of land and to commit every detail, even the smallest, to memory—her brain storing these details the same way a computer might.<sup>55</sup> Actually, Grandin is

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<sup>55</sup> Temple Grandin and Richard Panek, *The Autistic Brain: Helping Different Kinds of Minds Succeed* (New York: Mariner Books, 2014), 11.

one of the leading advocates for ASD individuals today, and one of her greatest tools for advocacy is the success she has had as an autistic person. She demonstrates by example the truths the Macaskill notes regarding the strengths, value, and beauty of those on the spectrum. Each person with autism, depending on the disorder's severity, has the ability to remember concepts well. This often makes these individuals reliable workplace employees, as they are able to complete tasks well based upon memory, completing the same task with almost one hundred percent accuracy thousands of times.

Another excellent example, this time in history, has been provided of an autistic person with astounding memory skills. *New York Times* bestselling author Steve Silberman speaks of famous Austrian psychiatrist Leo Kanner, whose father Abraham was likely autistic. This man is recognized little in the pages of history compared to his son, but it was posited by those around him that he was an encyclopedia filled with knowledge that he could quote rather easily.<sup>56</sup> This father, displaying heavy evidence of autism spectrum disorder, raised a son who was pivotal in more ways than one to modern psychiatry. Once again, not only does this demonstrate those with ASD as having a strength, it exhibits a strength which many neurotypical individuals understandably would covet.

An additional noteworthy strength of the autistic community is their typical affinity toward repetition and routine.<sup>57</sup> While this concept has been previously mentioned as a challenge faced by ASD individuals, it may also present itself as a strength. In answering the question "Are repetitive behaviors bad?" authors Henderson, Wayland, and White state it best: "Generally, no.

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<sup>56</sup> Steve Silberman, *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*. (New York: Avery, 2015), 142.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

...repetitive behaviors can be helpful, problematic, or neutral, depending on the situation.”<sup>58</sup> That is, autistic individuals have the ability to follow the same routine for days, weeks, months, and even years. This makes them excellent candidates for hire in company positions that may seem monotonous to some. An ASD individual may be able to complete the same task daily with the same accuracy five years into the job as much as on day one. Further, an autistic person may consume the same food often without growing tired of the dish. This is a strength and beauty, for the same foods of which neurotypicals tire are exciting and stir an attitude of gratefulness each time they are consumed for the autistic community. Further, autistic persons have the ability and discipline to stick to a routine well where many neurotypicals cannot. This means that those with autism, when committing to something, are quite dependable and will almost always do what is necessary in whatever scenario (school, work, personal life, etc.) in a timely manner. Of course, one must rightfully account for the level of severity of the disorder in an individual, but it is important to note that this is a strength often displayed by these individuals.

Doctors Sally Ozonoff, Geraldine Dawson, and James McPartland collaborated on an excellent informative work, *A Parent’s Guide to High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder*. This piece of literature provides much needed discussion on how to raise those with ASD, and is far more detailed than Bass’s work on the topic. In this work, the authors dedicate a section specifically to strengths, which is not unlike the present section. One of the strengths which they mention is that of passion and conviction. They note specifically, in the realm of parenting, that parents often mourn their children’s single-mindedness in relation to certain topics.<sup>59</sup> However,

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<sup>58</sup> Donna Henderson, Sarah Wayland, and Jamell White, *Is This Autism: A Guide for Clinicians and Everyone Else* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 110.

<sup>59</sup> Sally Ozonoff, Geraldine Dawson, and James McPartland, *A Parent’s Guide to High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder: How to Meet the Challenges and Help Your Child Thrive*, (New York: The Guildford Press, 2015), 128.

what seems to be a weakness or challenge may also manifest itself as a strength. That is, due to the deep passion and conviction which those on the spectrum typically feel for certain topics, they often have the ability to study and advocate for certain issues beyond the desires of neurotypicals. An autistic person heavily preoccupied with animals, for example, may be able to efficaciously serve the animal kingdom and care for animals in need (depending on the career or extracurricular path of choice). On the other hand, an autistic person who is passionate about God and His Word may serve as an unstoppable force for expanding His kingdom. These are just two examples of the ways in which this strength of autistic individuals could effectively impact the world around them.

These three authors present another strength, this time relating specifically to children and adolescents on the spectrum (and particularly high-functioning ones as well). That is, high-functioning autistic children and adolescents (specifically that age group involved in this study) may find themselves experiencing a higher level of compatibility with adults.<sup>60</sup> This is largely due to the fact that, while seemingly immature in some areas, ASD students are typically well beyond their peers in other areas. Therefore, it is highly probable that these individuals will be able to relate to adults better, as well as find greater levels of comfort with adults. While this strength can also be a challenge as far as relating to peers, it may present itself as an aid to autistic students, as they will usually feel better understood and accepted by adults. This being the case, it is important to note that adults' understanding of autistic persons is crucial to their encouragement, growth, and success.

Several different strengths have been mentioned as being displayed by the autistic community. However, this researcher believes it is important to not only note these strengths and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 132.

their potential benefits, but also to list and discuss some specific examples of people in the modern world who have displayed these strengths. Temple Grandin has been noted as one of the most famous autistic persons who displays great strength. However, many others who are lesser-known have had great success stories. For the purposes of this research, four of these individuals and their stories will be shared.

Autism advocate, speaker, and author Kerry Magro compiled a volume of such stories known as *Autistics on Autism*. This compilation is part of her success story as an autistic person, but she includes her story in more detail in the book's first section. Magro noted, for example, that she was unable to speak until two-and-a-half years of age, being diagnosed with autism shortly thereafter.<sup>61</sup> She often experienced great sensory issues as a child, and was a victim of bullying for most of her life. Once she grew old enough, she was able to attend college, which is a dream many thought would never come true. Due to her inability to find a scholarship for autistic individuals, today, she has founded KFM Making a Difference in order to help other students.<sup>62</sup> Kerry now finds great success as a public speaker and advocate for autism, having earned an Ed.D in Educational Technology Leadership from New Jersey City University.

A second success story from an autistic individual would be that of David Ketron. David was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, which is a higher-functioning form of autism, at the age of nine.<sup>63</sup> Ketron's is a more humble success story. That is, he may not have a prominent

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<sup>61</sup> Kerry Magro, "Kerry's Story: What to Do When People Say You Can't Do Something," *Autistics on Autism: Stories You Need to Hear About What Helped Them While Growing Up and Pursuing Their Dreams*, edited by Kerry Magro. (Independently Published, 2022), 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> David Ketron, "David K's Story: When I Realized that Autism Is My Superpower," *Autistics on Autism: Stories You Need to Hear About What Helped Them While Growing Up and Pursuing Their Dreams*, edited by Kerry Magro. (Independently Published, 2022), 87..

place in the world of authorship or public speaking, but he has been able to gain a higher education despite the challenges with which he is presented. Further, as his section of the volume explains, he has found success in his observation of autism as an ability rather than an inability. Ketron is able to use his autism to view the world around him differently than others, and this in turn, in what he identifies as his “superpower.”

A third success story which is noteworthy is that of Eric P. (he decided against revealing his last name in his writing). Due to his autism diagnosis, Eric had an interesting condition known as *hyperlexia*. Hyperlexia is a special ability to enjoy numbers and letters in unique ways, putting them together and understanding them better than the average neurotypical.<sup>64</sup> Due to this ability and the reshaping of the way in which he viewed it, Eric was able to find great success in several areas, including theater acting and the ability to learn well in school. Overall, while presenting some social challenges, autism was able to serve Eric in more ways than it hindered him.

While various others of these astounding individuals could be mentioned, one more will be shared. That is the story of Lauren R. (again, this author apparently declined to provide her full name). Lauren R., like Ketron and Eric, has a smaller, yet significant, success story with autism. As with others, she received her diagnosis early in life and faced many of the challenges which have been detailed in this literature review. However, despite the challenges which she faced, she continued to move forward, eventually winning the AVID Positive Attitude Award at the end of her Junior year of high school.<sup>65</sup> At the time of her writing, a short while ago, Lauren

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<sup>64</sup> Eric P. “Eric P.’s Story: Hyperlexia---My Love for Letters and Numbers, and How It Changed My Life,” *Autistics on Autism: Stories You Need to Hear About What Helped Them While Growing Up and Pursuing Their Dreams*, edited by Kerry Magro. (Independently Published, 2022), 289.

<sup>65</sup> Lauren R., “Lauren R.’s Story: ‘I Have Autism and I Am Pursuing a Degree to Help Students with Special Needs,’” *Autistics on Autism: Stories You Need to Hear About What Helped Them While Growing Up and Pursuing Their Dreams*, edited by Kerry Magro. (Independently Published, 2022), 296.

was pursuing a college degree which would allow her to work with and serve individuals with disorders and disabilities. Instead of allowing autism to define her, Lauren chose to use her gift to better understand others and pursue a degree along those lines.

Having discussed, rather exhaustively, the strengths of ASD individuals, it is now necessary to address the topic of counseling those with autism. In other words, explored further will be literature addressing this topic, and whether sufficient research has been completed in this area. After all, both topics must be addressed to properly saturate this author's own research in the most recent designs and concepts available. Therefore, plowing ahead, the reader may now turn his attention to the topic of counseling in regard to those who are on the spectrum.

### Counseling and the Autism Spectrum

Admittedly, it seems as though little has been written in regard to counseling those on the autism spectrum, especially from a biblical perspective. Several types of therapies for those on the autism spectrum may be noted, but these therapies, while helpful, do not capture the essence of the counseling process. While one may address the challenges of ASD individuals with biblical counseling techniques, little literature about this thought exists. Even the *Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (while a little out of date for this particular review) does not address Autism Spectrum Disorder despite its claim that Christian counseling is a worldwide phenomenon.<sup>66</sup> Further, while some Cognitive Behavioral Treatments for autism have been explored, these studies have limitations and are not necessarily connected with biblical

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<sup>66</sup> Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins. *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling: An Indispensable Tool for Helping People with Their Problems*. (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 11.



counseling.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to provide a review of the literature which does exist regarding counseling and the autism spectrum.

One of the most important concepts to grasp in relation to counseling those on the autism spectrum is that these individuals most often need help in the area of emotional intelligence. As previously mentioned, emotional issues are a large part of the challenges which those on the autism spectrum face, and emotional issues, if ignored, can severely impact one's mental health in a negative way.<sup>68</sup> Another important point to note, mostly as a preliminary, to counseling those on the autism spectrum is that their families and other loved ones are crucial to their journey, and are quite helpful to the counselor.<sup>69</sup> A third important insight regarding counseling the ASD individual is that it is important for the counselor to build a good relationship with this individual.<sup>70</sup> Building this relationship will help the ASD individual feel more comfortable and willing to share their challenges with the counselor.

At the risk of being redundant, it is important to emphasize the lack of literature on counseling those with ASD, and especially from a biblical perspective. The points mentioned above are excellent places to begin in regard to counseling those with ASD, but they are also excellent places to begin with the majority of individuals seeking counseling. Therefore, it is apparent that a gap exists in the literature on ASD and biblical counseling, and one in which further research is necessary.

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<sup>67</sup> Jeffrey Wood, Philip Kendall, Karen Wood, Connor Kerns, Michael Seltzer, Brent Small, Adam Lewin and Eric Storch. "Cognitive Behavioral Treatments for Anxiety in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder." *JAMA Psychiatry*, 2020, 70.

<sup>68</sup> Katherine Paxton and Irene Estay. *Counseling People on the Autism Spectrum: A Practical Manual* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2007), 15.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>70</sup> Vicki Enns, *Counseling Insights: Practical Strategies for Helping Others with Grief, Trauma, Anxiety, and More* (Winnipeg: Achieve Publishing, 2018), 16.

In the following section, some theological foundations will be revealed. These foundations are, like any foundation, essential for the research to progress moving forward. Further, while both theological and theoretical foundations will be explored, it is important to understand that the most important foundations for this project will be theological in nature. That is, if it cannot be shown Scripturally the reasons that counseling is necessary, or the ways in which God's Word relates to this project, then all the research is unnecessary. As with all things in the Christian life, a theological foundation must be laid in order to help the reader understand the spiritual significance of this research. Therefore, the time has come for an effective and detailed biblical foundation for the project at hand to be laid.

### **Theological Foundations**

In regard to this research project, it is important to understand that various truths in Scripture point to the need for biblical counseling, and even biblical counseling for those on the Autism Spectrum. While God's Word never explicitly states that His people are to counsel students on the spectrum, there are themes throughout the Bible which point to the need for a greater understanding on how to counsel, as well as to building a greater relationship, with these individuals. Therefore, it is the purpose of this section to develop a theological foundation, based on Scripture, for biblically counseling those on the Autism Spectrum. In fact, a case will not only be made for counseling these individuals, but a case will also be made for the need to learn how to counsel these individuals well. In order to make a proper case for each element of this thesis project, several points will be explored. First, a proper and biblical view of those in the ASD community will be discussed. Second, it will be demonstrated that biblical counseling, in a general sense, is supported by Scripture. Third, the truth that believers are to assist those on the spectrum according to Scripture will be expounded upon. Third and finally, the need to learn and

further one's knowledge regarding the spectrum and biblical counseling techniques in order to counsel ASD individuals will be explored.

The most important passage which much be noted and expounded upon in this section is found in the first book of the Bible. That is, in providing a proper biblical view of those on the autism spectrum, one must first turn to Genesis. In the first chapter, detailed is the account of God's creation of man. However, God does not merely create men and women. He creates mankind in His own image (Gen. 1:26-27). In other words, God creates mankind in such a way that men and women are reflections of Him. This means that people reflect God in the ways that they are physically made, the ways they functionally act, and in the relationships which they are able to have. Due to the Fall of man, in which Adam chose to sin, one may state rightfully that the image of God is distorted, but not lost. In other words, everything about man, due to his fallen nature, is corrupted to an extent. Nonetheless, God's image is still present within him. One could make a case for autism being a result of the Fall, and one could make a case for this not being a result of the Fall. Either way, that is not really the issue. The issue is whether one can rightfully state that those on the spectrum reflect God's image. The answer to this inquiry is a resounding "Yes." Those on the autism spectrum reflect God's image just as much as those with Attention Deficit Disorder, those with Schizophrenia, or those with missing limbs. God has created all men equally with the ability to reflect Him. An implication of this truth, therefore, is that all men have intrinsic value simply because God desired it so. Therefore, a proper view of those with autism is that they deserve the same respect and dignity, as well as opportunities for spiritual care and counseling, that all other people deserve.

A great example of the way those with disorders and disabilities should be viewed and treated is found a few Old Testament books later, in the account of a man named Mephibosheth.

Mephibosheth considers useless, as he is a lame man unable to contribute to society (2 Sam. 9:8). However, David offers Mephibosheth a place of prominence and honor at his table, and treats him with great kindness and respect (2 Sam. 9:7). While David offered kindness to Mephibosheth on behalf of another, it is still important to see the treatment here. David could have ignored Mephibosheth or cast him away from the presence of the palace. However, due to his proper and respectful view of Mephibosheth, David offered kindness to a man with a physical disability. How much more, then, should believers offer love, kindness, service, and respect to those with learning and mental disorders and deficits?

An additional point of view for those on the autism spectrum has already been detailed, but may be noted again. This is the view put forth by the Apostle Paul in his letter to Corinth, noting that God uses the “underdogs” of this world to bring Himself greater honor and glory (1 Cor. 1:27). The autistic community is not to be looked down upon, but it is clear that individuals with disorders and disabilities are often considered “underdogs” by the world. However, due to their intrinsic value as image-bearers, as well as the truth displayed in this passage, it is clear that honor and glory toward God can shine brightly through those with ASD, and these individuals ought to be held in high esteem.

One of the first supports for biblical counseling which one may find in Scripture is that of Deuteronomy 6. This verse records the words of Moses, on behalf of the Lord, commanding God’s people to teach His Law to their children, and to do so throughout their entire life (Deut 6:7). Every opportunity these Israelite parents were given, they taught their children what was right in the sight of God, and specifically trained them to memorize the revelation which God had given them up until that point.<sup>71</sup> While this passage speaks to the direct teaching of truths

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Pfeiffer and Everett Harrison, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 165.

from God's Word, and does not address contemporary biblical counseling techniques, it does show the importance which is placed on knowing, understanding, and applying the Word of God. Biblical counseling, with its techniques and methods, seeks to do this very thing—to use the Word of God to penetrate and change the heart of the one being counseled. Methods may differ, but the desired outcome is the same as in Deuteronomy chapter 6: to take the Word of God and teach it to the people of God so that they may better reflect the character of God.

Two verses which may be rightfully added to the conversation are Proverbs 3:5-6. This passage instructs the reader to trust the Lord with everything in them, and He will in turn provide guidance and straighten their paths (Prov. 3:5-6). What is the job of the biblical counselor but to provide guidance according to the things God has said? If wisdom is to be offered and paths are to be straightened in the lives of God's people, then His Word, and the presentation thereof, is essential. This presentation may come in the form of teaching and preaching, as well as personal Bible study and prayer. However, this researcher believes that the presentation of the Word, the guarding of it, the pointing to it, may be provided by the biblical counselor. God's people may be led and guided to trust in the Lord wholeheartedly, and their paths may be straightened through the increased understanding of the Word, which is guided by the counselor.

An excellent piece of Scripture to observe in a discussion regarding biblical counseling is that of Proverbs 11. The author notes here that, without guidance, a person or group of people will fail, but in the presence of wise counselors they are safe (Prov 11:14). Some of the surrounding verses of this passage provide the context of leadership, and specifically, the leadership of Israel.<sup>72</sup> However, one can draw an interesting truth here that the writer intends to

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<sup>72</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2007), 1093.

communicate: the wisdom of multiple people is better than the wisdom of only one person. Therefore, while the message is not necessarily aimed toward contemporary biblical counseling, there is an intention of the author to communicate that wisdom from others is better than a lack of guidance. Another verse in support of biblical counseling, just a few pages over, that is found in Scripture is Proverbs 20, which states that the purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out (Prov 20:5). While this verse does not explicitly speak to counseling individuals according to the Word of God, it does state that the heart of a man is obscure and difficult to understand—yet, a man of wisdom will draw it out. In other words, this “man of understanding” will seek to understand what is going on, either in his own heart or in the heart of another. Commentator Sid Buzzel, in speaking of this verse, notes that a wise counselor can aid a person in an understanding of his true motives.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, it is clear, at least from this verse, that wise counsel is something which is both desirable and helpful.

A supporting point on biblical counseling which is closer to the contemporary era is that of the Great Commission. That is, in a couple of places, but specifically Matthew 28, one finds the command of Jesus to the Twelve, and all who would follow, to make disciples of every nation, teaching them the things which He has commanded, and baptizing them in the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:18-20). This is a short passage which helps one to observe discipleship clearly. That is, Matthew 28 reveals that the purpose of discipleship, specifically in Christianity, is to teach others about God's Word, and to teach others how to be more like Jesus. Dr. Adam McClendon notes that the Christian life is one of constant tension in

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<sup>73</sup> Sid Buzzel, “Proverbs,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. By John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1983), 948.

which an understanding of Christ's teachings through discipleship is essential.<sup>74</sup> Further, this passage is included by Matthew as a demonstration that Christ is the victorious King and is worthy to be followed.<sup>75</sup> If one is to follow Christ, he will undoubtedly need the influence of godly individuals throughout his life in order to persevere. Paul, for example, not only guided others, but allowed himself to be aided by them, as in the case of Timothy and Epaphroditus (Phil 2:19-30). If this pair helped meet Paul's physical needs, why would it be expected that he never helped meet their spiritual needs, or *vice versa*? After all, it is clear that these two operated out of a deep love for Paul which would have most certainly extended beyond the meeting of physical needs. Having built a foundation, according to God's Word, for generalized biblical counseling, it is now necessary to discuss Scripture's support of both helping those on the spectrum through biblical counseling and continuing learning in order to help ASD individuals. These passages will not all be shared in order of where they appear, but this is a purposeful technique to display the weaving of these concepts throughout the Word of God.

In several places, the Bible points to the responsibility of Christians to help those in need. If then, it can be rightfully said, based on the following observations, that Christians are to help those who are in need, those who are disabled, or any similar people group, then a case will be rightfully made for biblically counseling those on the spectrum, as well as furthering learning for educators regarding these techniques. The first verse which this author would note on this issue is in Psalm 41. This verse states, quite simply, that the one who considers the poor or the weak people groups will be cared for by God (Ps 41:1). Since David wrote this psalm, it is not difficult

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<sup>74</sup> Adam McClendon, *Paul's Spirituality in Galatians: A Critique of Contemporary Christian Spiritualities* (Eugene: Wioe & Stock, 2015), 75.

<sup>75</sup> Jerry Hullinger, *New Testament Life and Belief: A Study of History, Culture, and Meaning* (Winston-Salem: Piedmont International University, 2014), 226.

to imagine what he had in mind. That is, according to the great minister Matthew Henry, in all David's difficulties, and amongst all his enemies, there were, undeniably, individuals which he met periodically who treated him well, and who did not turn him away.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, David understood the idea of caring for those who either had less materially or were struggling in other ways. David also understood that this was an act which was pleasing in the sight of God. He further understood the idea of operating out of a deep love for God, an idea upon which Paul would later expound.<sup>77</sup> Logically speaking, training students on the Autism Spectrum, and furthering one's education on this training, aligns, in this case, with Scripture's view on helping those who are in need.

A second noteworthy passage, which has been mentioned elsewhere in this project, is that of 1 Corinthians 1. Noted quite explicitly here is that God uses the weak and foolish things of this world to bring Him honor and glory (1 Cor 1:27). While this author does not seek to insult the ASD community by referring to them as weak or foolish, the reality is that autism is a disability. If autism is a disability, then God has the power to work in and through the ASD community for His honor and glory.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, for believers to turn their back on this group of individuals would be shameful. If the ASD community can be helped in regard to achieving their goals and bringing glory to God, then help may come through believers. Biblical counseling is just one of the various avenues through which this help may come.

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<sup>76</sup> Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1951), 390.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 228.

<sup>78</sup> Chambers, Oswald, *Spiritual Maturity: Principles of Spiritual Growth for Every Believer* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1994), 51.



In a continuing study, another verse to point out is in Galatians 6, in which the Apostle Paul states explicitly that believers are to help carry each others' loads (Gal 6:2). While this verse is written in the context of helping others' out of sin, there is certainly grounds here for Christians helping each other with their general difficulties in this life. The language in this passage speaks to the gentle restoration of a dislocated bone.<sup>79</sup> If believers are to be gentle in all areas with one another, it is logical to assume that they ought to be gentle with the ASD community. Fourth, Paul writes once more in 1 Thessalonians that Christians are to help the weak (1 Thess 5:14). This is a simple statement, but it is important to observe in regard to this study. Paul is stating once more that Christians are to help those who are in need, to help those who are struggling, and to help those who are disabled—a description which characterizes the ASD community. If then, the ASD community is to be helped, one avenue through which this help may come is biblical counseling—and therefore, further training in biblical counseling techniques is necessary.

An additional passage may be noted in regard to biblical counseling, which is found in the Gospel of Mark. As in other place, Jesus notes here the greatest of the commandments which God has given His people: that is, to love the Lord with all of the heart, soul, and mind, and to love others the same as oneself (Mk. 12:30-31). This passage specifically notes that several parts of the human being exist. That is, a human being is one who is able to believe intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. This idea supports the biblical counseling model to be used in this thesis, which notes that people are complex beings with beliefs and feelings below the surface of what they show to others. Even apologists Josh Chatraw and Mark Allen make this connection

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<sup>79</sup> Clinton Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Volume 3: Romans to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 293.

when they assert that, in evangelism, the whole person must be appealed to for the sake of the gospel.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, if people are composed of more parts than may initially appear, it may be deduced that a biblical counselor is necessary at times to help individuals understand themselves better.

One lengthier passage which may be used to support the role of counsel in the Christian world is found in the book of Exodus. Here, Moses receives wisdom from his father-in-law, Jethro, on the way that God's people should be governed (Ex. 18:1-27). Moses, in this passage, is governing God's people alone, and Jethro notes that Moses ought to recruit some help. Several applications may be derived from this passage's interpretation. God had allowed Moses to act as a judge in order to solve disputes among His people. In this role, Moses was not a biblical counselor in the modern sense, but he does provide wise counsel to the people of God. Further, Jethro advises Moses regarding why his current methods were flawed and the ways in which they might be fixed. Therefore, a clear case may be made from this passage that God's wisdom is needed in people's lives, and sometimes He uses others to communicate this wisdom. This may not always be in the form of a biblical counselor, but the avenue of biblical counseling is certainly one way this wisdom may be communicated. In other words, God is a God of wisdom, and He desires for his people to act wisely. Therefore, it may be said that one way this can happen is through the guidance of a biblical counselor.

In perhaps what is one of the most obvious passages for use on this subject, Jesus speaks to His disciples about His coming departure from this earth (Jn. 14:1-31). Here, Christ promises His followers that He will send them a Helper to guide them once He has departed from this

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<sup>80</sup> Josh Chatraw and Mark Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross: An Introduction to Christian Witness*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 175.

world. While He does not necessarily mention that this Helper, the Holy Spirit, will serve as a Counselor, it may be logically inferred that this is the case. Once more, He is not a Counselor in the modern sense of the world, but He does serve as. Guide for God's people, and is therefore a reflection of the type of help which sometimes may be provided by the biblical counselor. In other words, God knows that His people need guidance, and there is a provision for that guidance in the form of the Holy Spirit. Working with the Spirit, and seeking to be a reflection of Christ, biblical counseling may be both pursued and provided.

A pivotal verse to mention in this section may point once again to some truths established from Matthew 28. That is, the prophet Isaiah mentions some specific names of Jesus is predicting His birth in Israel. Specifically noted is the fact, among other things, that one may consider Christ his Counselor (Isa. 9:6). What else could one say but that this passage refers to the fact that God, and specifically Christ, can be trusted to walk with His people and listen intently to their problems, even leading them through this life to solve or cope with these problems? Warren Wiersbe once again enters the conversation, establishing that Christ here, as Counselor, has the wisdom to rule justly.<sup>81</sup> This is a valid interpretation, of course, but an application is once more that Christ has the wise ability to provide spiritual counsel and healing for those who are in need. If Christ Himself is, in a sense, a Counselor, ought not His people to pursue a role of counseling others according to His truths?

Returning once more to the Psalms, it is important to understand that David directly considers the Word of God to be His guide in life. That is, David sees the revelation of God to this point in history as a "lamp to his feet, and a light to his path" (Ps. 119:105). This may not be a direct reference to a biblical counseling scenario in a 21<sup>st</sup> century church office, but is a

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 1162.

testimony to the fact that God's Word is to be the guiding force in the life of the Christian (of course, accompanied by the Holy Spirit and the Christian community). If this is the case, it is not at all far-fetched to see biblical counseling (or counseling fueled by the Bible) a viable option for those in need of help. Along those same lines, consider again David's word in the very first Psalm, that believers are not to "walk in the counsel of the ungodly" (Ps. 1:1). Clear here is an understanding that a counsel, or advisement, from the people of this world and the wickedness of one's culture that ought to be avoided by God's people. If this is the case, it stands to reason that a good and godly counsel also exists, one which can be used by the biblical counselor to point others to the truths which God has revealed in His Word. One may trace this theme of the Word becoming the counsel for God's people into the New Testament.

As this section begins to draw to a close, a several other biblical truths on counseling from the New Testament may be mentioned: 1) the Bible was written for the counsel of believers, 2) part of the ministry of pastors seems to be counseling their flocks, and 3) exhortation is said to be the responsibility of the church. In Romans, the Apostle Paul notes that all of the Bible which had been written up to that point in history was meant to teach and encourage the saints (Rom. 5:4). This is an important truth, as it demonstrates the fact that God's Word is, again, meant to be the driving force and guide in the Christian life. This continues to lay a foundation for the position of the biblical counselor, using the Word of God to encourage and teach His people. In 1 Thessalonians, the Paul again mentions the fact that the church should care for their pastors and teachers, and he mentions these pastors and teachers as being those who admonish, or counsel, them (1 Thess. 5:12). While this is a minor comment, it offers support for the place of biblical counseling in the Christian community. Finally, as has been alluded to already in a discussion of Galatians 6, it is the clear responsibility of the church to exhort each of

its members (Rom. 12:8). This means, simply put, that each member of Christ's church is to support, encourage, guide, and build one another up. These are all actions which are involved in biblical counseling. Therefore, this is once more a teaching from the Word of God which alludes to the importance of biblical counseling, especially in the believing community of God's people.

One may observe and understand, based on the presentation in this section, that God is a God of wisdom, counsel, and guidance. This has been pulled from multiple passages of Scripture, not necessarily in a chronological fashion, but in an understandable way no less. He desires deeply that His people pursue His wisdom and guidance for their lives, and that these things are pursued according to the truths espoused in His Word. While many of these passages provide inferred applications, it could not be more clear that biblical counseling is a helpful and necessary practice. This being the case, it is now necessary to proceed into a discourse regarding the theoretical foundations leading to the practice of this research project.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Having built a theological foundation for the research which is to take place, it is now necessary to observe the research of others in the area of biblical counseling to understand how this practice has occurred in the past, and now occurs in the present. This author can confess confidently that no specific research has been done up to this point regarding biblical counseling techniques in relation to those on the spectrum. Therefore, a unique perspective will be brought to the table regarding this research process. However, despite this point, it is still important to understand what others have observed, from a biblical perspective, regarding autism, as well as biblical counseling techniques for those with disabilities or disorders. These things being established, it is now necessary to first discuss some research on biblical counseling techniques which have been utilized with individuals diagnosed with disorders and disabilities.

To begin with, in the realm of understanding people, Crabb made incredible progress. He desired so intently to counsel individuals according to God's Word, he not only researched whether God's Word was all-sufficient for counsel, but also researched the basic needs of people to which each issue they have relates: personal needs, rational needs, volitional needs, and emotional needs.<sup>82</sup> While Crabb did not specifically speak to the needs of individuals with autism, he did contend that each of these four needs shows up in one area or another in every person's life. Therefore, Crabb's pivotal research in biblical counseling makes progress in the field of this project, because it implies that ASD individuals are also personal, rational, volitional, and emotional beings. While these needs may exhibit themselves in various ways in ASD individuals which differ from neurotypicals, they have these needs nonetheless. Further, progress was made by Crabb in an understanding that Scripture is, in fact, sufficient for counsel. This was not merely Crabb's discovery, however, as the Apostle Paul speaks of this himself (2 Tim 3:16). Therefore, prior to this author's research, Scripture has been found to be sufficient to utilize in biblical counseling. Further, all individuals, neurotypical or not, have certain needs which manifest themselves in different ways. Rick Van Warren shares this truth heavily as he recounts the narrative of life experiences with his son. Van Warren indicates that his son had certain needs which he pursued in the wrong areas.<sup>83</sup>

Research has also been done, prior to this thesis project, regarding biblical counseling and what may be considered certain disabilities, challenges, or disorders. Doctors Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins, who have conducted pivotal research in the fields of psychology and biblical

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<sup>82</sup>Larry Crabb, *Understanding People: Why We Long for Relationship*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 107-190.

<sup>83</sup>Rick Van Warren, *On Pills and Needles: The Relentless Fight to Save My Son from Opioid Addiction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), 18.

counseling, include their takes on mental disorders in their *Quick-Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling*. They discuss both the definition of mental disorders, as well as counseling techniques which could be helpful in treating mental disorders. Specifically for these disorders, techniques range from support groups to medical help.<sup>84</sup> While ASD is not characterized as a mental disorder, it is noteworthy that Clinton and Hawkins address biblical counseling in regard to individuals whose brains function differently than others. However, Clinton and Hawkins also discuss issues in biblical counseling such as anxiety and depression, which are two struggles that, as has been noted, various individuals on the autism spectrum face. Therefore, it seems that, in similar fashion to Crabb, research is done by Clinton and Hawkins which could be indirectly useful in biblically counseling those on the spectrum.

Scazzero's work is particularly instrumental in biblical counseling. In fact, his entire work is based upon the fact that persons experience issues and affinities towards certain sins due to issues below the surface in their hearts and minds.<sup>85</sup> He bases these thoughts on the "iceberg model" (a figure will later be presented in the research detailing this concept) which notes that people only exhibit about ten percent of themselves to others. The rest of their emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and struggles are kept below the surface and are only revealed when they begin to address them, either on their own or through the help and guidance of a biblical counselor.

Another particularly pivotal work was an unusual choice for this subject. Chatraw and Allen, previously mentioned apologists and authors of *Apologetics at the Cross*, mention several underlying parts of each person which ought to be considered in the process of evangelism.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling: 40 Topics, Spiritual Insights & Easy-to-Use Steps*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 166.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

While these men do not mention biblical counseling either directly and indirectly, they do make an excellent point in that people are complex and diverse beings with many internal occurrences. This truth may be transitioned into the biblical counseling discussion, as the job of the biblical counselor is to draw out and discover these intrinsic concepts.

One piece of literature which is particularly thought-provoking in regard to prior research is Paxton and Estay's work, *Counselling People on the Autism Spectrum*. In this work, a secular counseling perspective is taken on Autism Spectrum Disorder. In fact, this work is one of the most eye-opening pieces of research on the subject, because it discusses a modified form of cognitive behavioral therapy (a popular counseling technique), and the way in which one might use this approach to counsel ASD individuals according to their various and unique needs. Paxton and Estay draw near to a junction of ASD and biblical counseling, but still miss the mark. Admittedly, and at the risk of being redundant, much literature exists on research completed regarding ASD individuals, as well as biblical counseling methods. However, these two concepts are rarely, if ever, placed together, and it seems that this is the unique point at which the research project at hand intends to address.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this section, various aspects of the project have been both presented and discussed. The problem to be addressed in this thesis is that special education teachers at Salem Baptist Christian School do not have training in biblical counseling techniques for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This problem, noted in the first chapter, elicits a purpose for the project at hand: to provide training in biblical counseling techniques for students with ASD to the SBCS special education teachers. This author believes that the purpose for this project, of adhered to, will solve the presented problem. In chapter two, a review of literature was presented



in which the challenges which ASD individuals face was noted. These challenges include those relating to emotions, behavior, communication and social issues, and sensory issues. However, strengths were also noted which have the ability to bring glory to God through the disability. Noted in the latter sections of chapter two was the fact that, while some work has been done in researching counseling those on the spectrum, very little, if any, work has been done in regard to biblically counseling those on the spectrum.

Further, in the “Theological Framework”, it was established that Scripture points to aiding those who are in need and weak, and even those who, arguably, are different. Therefore, helping individuals with ASD through whatever necessary avenue, including biblical counseling, is necessary and pleasing to God. As a theoretical framework was built, it was established that research has been completed regarding biblical counseling, and research has been completed in regard to secular counseling techniques with ASD individuals. However, little to no research has been completed regarding biblically counseling individuals with ASD. These things being established, it stands to reason that the thesis statement for this project is relevant, and stands up well to scrutiny. In fact, the thesis seems to be necessary, and a viable solution to the presented problem. That is, if training in biblical counseling techniques is provided for SBCS special education teachers, then they will be able to better serve their ASD students. After all, it has been established by researchers that biblical counseling techniques are helpful, and individuals with ASD experience a unique set of challenges which they need help to overcome. Therefore, it is logical to assert that counseling techniques saturated in the Word of God is a viable option for help.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

While information has been provided thus far regarding the ministry context for research and the literature used, no information has been given regarding the method of research. The section at hand is to be dedicated to the proposed intervention designed, so that the reader may gain a better perspective of the research taking place. If the proposed method is not followed carefully and meticulously, the research will not be successful. This is not to say that the research project at hand could not be completed differently, but rather that the proposed method will become an already existing recipe for success in conducting the research. Some alterations will most certainly be made, but the major foundations of the intervention design must remain in place. Further, it is important to understand that both the intervention design and the implementation of the research are both key parts to the research. The research process must be followed by conducting an effective intervention which will seek to prove the thesis's validity. The intervention design will include the proposed method and processes of gathering data. This design will remain theoretical until its implementation, when the blueprint laid out will be followed. Some changes may be made, but the design is created to be the framework according to which the research operates. The implementation will detail the actual process of the research, the ways in which data was gathered, and the reality of the number of participants involved. The intervention design is the way, in short, the process is desired to occur. These things in mind, it is now necessary to describe the intervention design.

## Intervention Design

The first part of the intervention design will involve the choosing of participants. Choosing participants for this intervention should not prove to be difficult. Eight teachers (both classroom teachers and occupational therapists) are employed in the special education department at SBCS. Each of these teachers will be chosen as potential participants in the research. An additional point to make here is in relation to the students. Students will not be direct research participants, as not data will be collected from them other than by way of observation in the ways they respond to teachers. While this author has no control over whether a teacher accepts or declines, it is important to note that the planned participation will include all eight educators. These educators are all Caucasian, middle class females, and therefore cause, unintentionally, some research limitations. Nonetheless, it is important to note these details in order to understand group demographics. Out of the teachers which participate, three will be chosen for later classroom observations (Lindsey Aertker, Molly Myers, and Susie Bianco). These observations will be discussed as this section progresses. The teachers will be chosen based on their experience in the classroom, and they have the most current classroom experience.

Next, regarding the participants, the rationale for choosing these individuals must be shared. Due to the limited number of teachers in Salem's special education department, the rationale for choosing these individuals is simply that, the more teachers involved, the better. At the risk of redundancy, eight teachers make up the team in this department, and all these teachers have been chosen to participate. Each of these teachers will be pivotal, as they hold different roles which will provide various insights. As mentioned in the "Definitions" section of Chapter One, these participants will include both classroom teachers and therapists, who will represent various perspectives as they interact with students moving forward.

The next step, once participants have been chosen, is to inform the participants of the study at hand and gain their consent (see Appendix D). The first group which will need to be informed about this study is both the Discovery Center director, Alyssa Watkins, and the eight teachers in the Discovery department: Lindsey Aertker, Molly Myers, Susie Bianco, Angie Clement, Ruth Lakey, Michelle Hendley, Krystal Ayers, and Ashley Link. Mrs. Watkins will need to be informed because she must be aware of what is occurring in her own department. To conduct a research project of this magnitude without her awareness and consent would be unethical. Upon IRB approval, a meeting will be called after school between the author and these nine individuals. During this meeting, the research project will be presented to Mrs. Watkins and the teachers.

Since the project at hand is mainly about the teachers' involvement in the lives of students, and the students will remain anonymous, it does not seem necessary to inform the parents or the students that the project is taking place. This researcher discussed the issue with his faculty mentor, and has taken the appropriate steps in submitting this project to the Institutional Review Board. The research will not be conducted behind the student's backs, and no data will be gathered from them other than observations of how teachers have changed in their interactions with them.

At the risk of being redundant, post-IRB approval, the project and research will be presented to Mrs. Watkins and the teachers. That is, the teachers, already being aware of this author's identity and role at the school, will be presented, briefly, with the problem, purpose statement, and thesis statement involved in this study. Further, the rationale behind a request for their participation, as well as the rationale for the project, will be presented. Assuming their agreement to participate, they will be provided letters of consent to sign (see Appendix D). Then,

they will be informed that the plan is to meet via Zoom over the summer to be provided with training. The goal for this summer meeting, or potentially multiple summer meetings, will be to train teachers in basic biblical counseling techniques so that, when they return in the fall, they will be ready to engage in the research process with their students. After the meeting with Mrs. Watkins and the teachers, the next step will be to keep in regular contact with them via group texting, even into the early summer months, to remind them of the upcoming project as well as to provide any updates. A Zoom meeting will be scheduled during the late summer months, likely around mid-July, to provide training for the upcoming research.

During the summer, hopefully only one Zoom meeting will be necessary for training. The teachers will be reminded of the upcoming meeting, as well as invited to this meeting. Mrs. Watkins will be invited to the meeting as well, although it is not believed that her presence is a requirement. During the meeting, a PowerPoint presentation regarding the information will be shared with the participants. The training will begin by this author's admittance that, while he has done the research regarding Autism Spectrum Disorder, he understands that Mrs. Watkins and the other teachers have as well. These educators have more field experience with the autism spectrum, even though this author has conducted solid research. Therefore, it will be important to maintain a balance between a presentation regarding ASD and an insulting of the educators' intelligence. Believed is the idea that, if this presentation is entered into with humility, it will be received well. The presentation will continue by reviewing some basic facts about autism. These facts will consist of basic definitions (covered in the "Definitions" portion of Chapter Two), as well as the challenges which are faced by students with ASD. Planned is to share these challenges, not in a degrading manner, but rather in a way that shows the need for helping ASD students overcome these challenges. The challenges to be shared are 1) understanding emotions,

2) anxiety and depression, 3) meltdowns, 4) self-stimulation, 5) repetition restriction, 6) understanding figurative language, 7) communicating feelings, 8) sensory issues, 9) issues understanding gender and sexuality, 10) safety, 11) diet, and 12) the way others view these individuals. Assuming the design's similarity to the implementation, this list will be noted again in the "Implementation" section. However, it is important to list them here, for this should help the reader understand the detail with which the design has been considered.

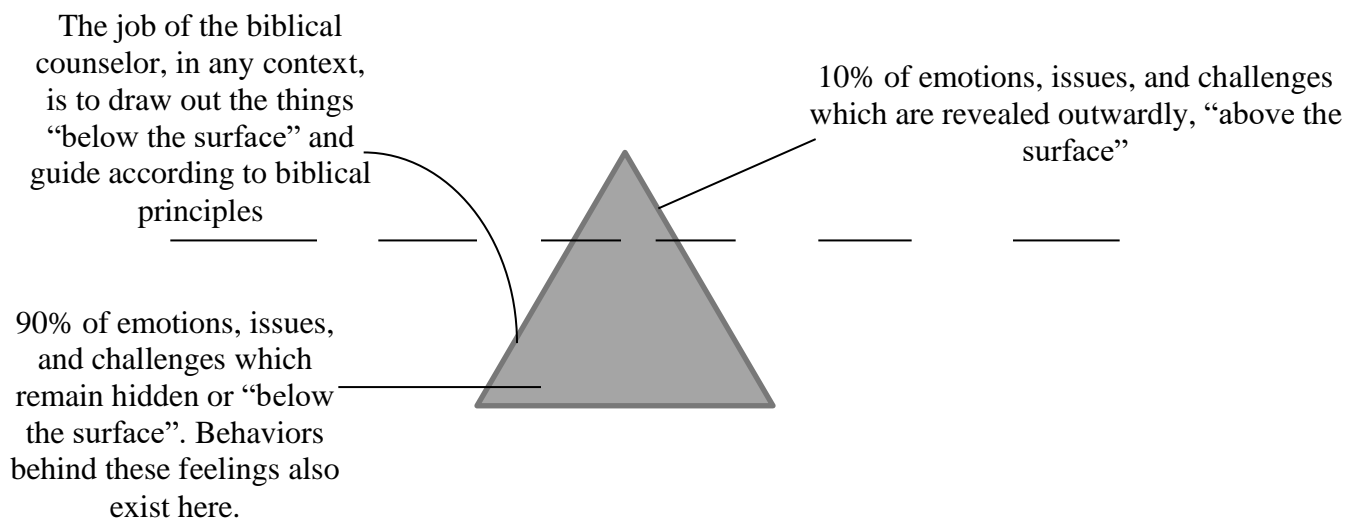
Next, the presentation will discuss the concept of biblical counseling as defined earlier in this project. Biblical counseling will be presented according to the models of Peter Scazzero and Larry Crabb. Both Crabb and Scazzero, previously mentioned, understand biblical counseling as a way to counsel individuals according to biblical truth, understanding that there is depth to human emotions and behavior. This model is further supported by the work of John Eldredge, who notes many people's operation out of emotional pain which they have endured.<sup>87</sup> In other words, as each individual has difficult feelings and behavior, based on events in their lives, which are processed differently. Crabb calls these set patterns, and the things which individuals often desire to keep hidden, the "worm in the apple".<sup>88</sup> Understanding humanity in this way helps one see them as God made them, and to comprehend how sin has tainted their views. Taken a step further, this view helps one to understand the challenges and difficulties faced by individuals considering the teachings of Scripture. Thus, if people are understood well, they may be better guided in the teachings of Scripture, because Scripture can be used to speak to the deepest parts of their lives. While other biblical counseling models have been shared by other

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<sup>87</sup> Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 23.

<sup>88</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off: Breaking Free from Rules and Performance*, (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2002), 41.

authors, the chosen model for this project is seemingly the most effective. This process may be demonstrated in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: The Biblical Counseling Process**

Once a review of ASD and a discussion regarding the perspective of the biblical counselor have taken place, a combination of these two views will be shared. That is, the teachers will be presented with the idea that, if they understand their ASD students from the perspective of a biblical counselor, they will be better able to respond to the challenges of those students when they show themselves in the classroom. If this is the case, the logical outcome would be that the teachers will grow in their relationships with their ASD students. Further, the outcome would be that the students improve in their ability to handle their challenges, and that the teacher/student relationships in this area of Salem will improve. Further and finally, shared with the teachers will be the Great Commission (Matt 8:18-20). The application, in this case, will be that, if Jesus commands His people to make disciples, then Christian educators should seek to make disciples of their students. One way to do this is by better understanding their students

from the perspective of biblical counseling, which takes the Word of God and seeks to guide individuals in such a way that they grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus—which is a form of discipleship. At the end of the presentation, the teachers will be given the opportunity to ask questions, prayer will occur, information of a second future meeting will be provided, and they will be dismissed.

A second meeting with these teachers will occur after school in August, at the beginning of the new school year. At this meeting, the presentation and information shared at the prior meeting will be reviewed. Next, a discussion will occur with the teachers in which the assessment tools for the efficacy of the research will be presented. Further, as these tools are presented, the teachers will be informed regarding how they are to conduct their research. The first tool which will be presented to the teachers will be a survey in the form of a Likert scale. This survey will consist of two parts, the second part of which will be used at the end of the research process. The first part will consist of statements which will lead the teachers to think about the current state of their relationships with their ASD students. That is, the statements will require answers in the form of ratings, using the previous school year's experiences, about interactions with these students. One example of a statement to be used is "I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors." Further statements, along with the scale itself, are pictured in Table 3.1. The second part of the Likert scale will be the same as the first, but will be taken at the end of the research period, in order to see if any positive or negative changes have taken place. The reasoning behind this survey is to help both this author and the teachers see a picture of the current state of their relationships with their ASD students. If the teachers are able to make this clear observation, it will help them see that some improvements need to be made. Believed is the idea that, if this author's research plan is



implemented and followed, a change will take place in interactions between SBCS special education teachers and ASD students. In short, the teachers' participation in this survey at the beginning of the research will win them not only to the research process, but also to a more permanent change in their interactions with ASD students.

Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.				
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.				
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.				
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.				
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.				
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.				
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.				
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.				

**Table 3.1: Likert Scale: Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire**

The second tool to be used in the research process is a reflective journal. Each teacher will be asked, in a journal provided for them, to record their significant interactions with their ASD students over the research period. Certain prompts will be provided for them to use in these

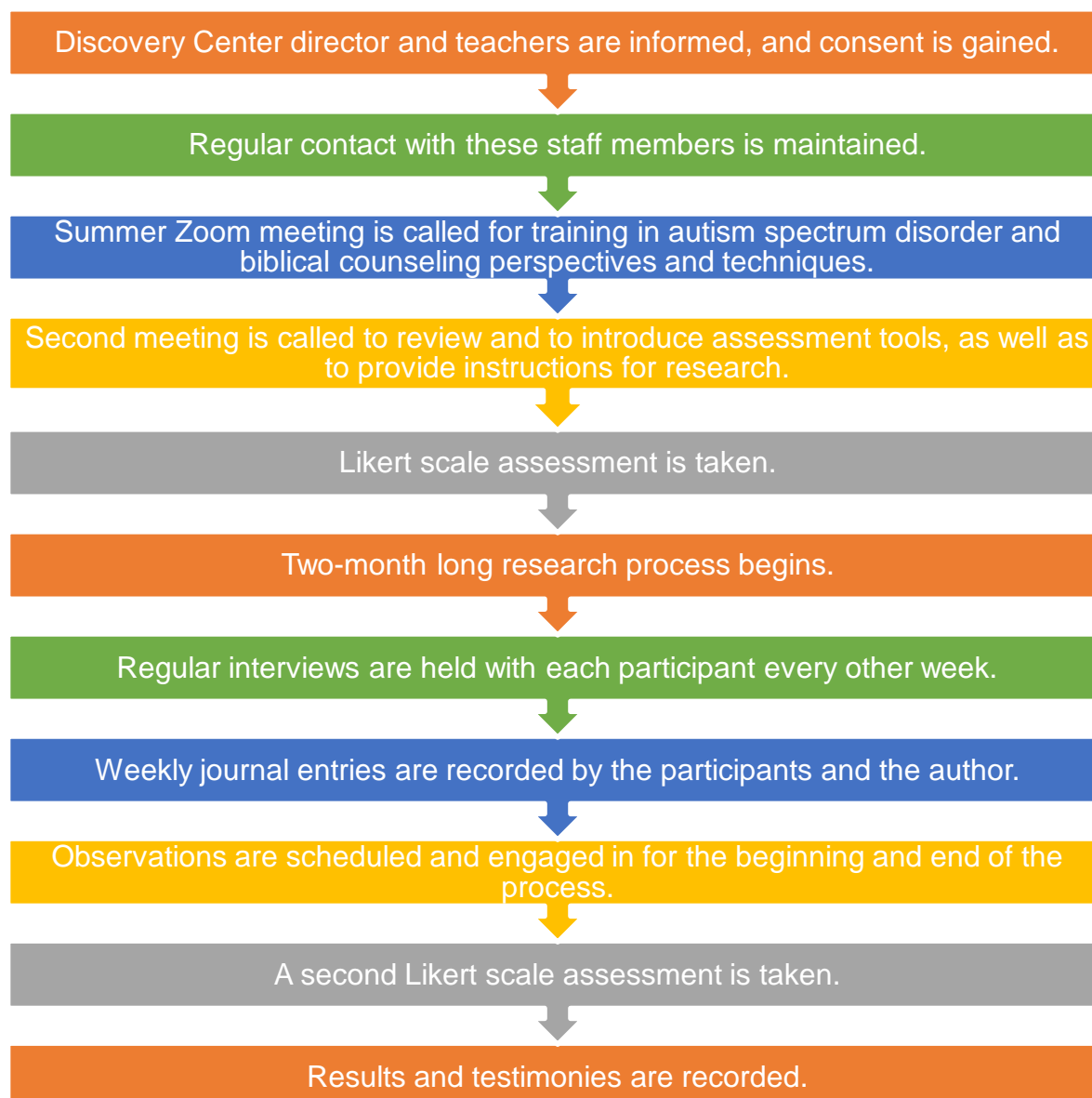
journal entries. The prompts will read as follows: 1) Name the student with which you interacted, 2) describe briefly the interaction you had with your student, 3) briefly describe, if possible, how your new perspective regarding biblical counseling affected your interaction with, or ability to help, your student, and 4) briefly describe whether or not there was a challenge you were able to help the student overcome as a result of your training. Admittedly, it is difficult to measure efficacy with the use of reflective journals. However, they will still prove to be helpful in making progress, because the teachers will be able to record their personal growth throughout the research process.

The third tool for assessment which will be used in this research project will be interviews. Interviews will be conducted every other week throughout the process, and these interviews will take place face-to-face between this author and the participating teachers. The questions asked in the interviews will be the same each time for each person (see Appendix B). The goal will be to measure efficacy by asking specific questions about student and teacher interactions and progress. Over the course of the project, one will be able to observe, based on either differing answers or replicated answers to these inquiries, whether teacher interactions with ASD students have positively changed as a result of their new knowledge. In other words, the teachers, now having a greater understanding of what is happening in the minds of their students, and the way in which they may guide these students biblically, will improve in their relationships with these students—and this improvement will be reflected in the interview answers.

The fourth tool for assessment will be observations. This is why, as noted earlier, there will be a smaller group of three teachers chosen for participation. All eight teachers will participate regarding the surveys, interviews, and reflective journal entries. However, only three

will participate in observations. During the course of the interview process, certain dates and times will be chosen and agreed upon between this author and the three teachers during which their classes may be observed. The observations will be conducted in order to measure the progress regarding teachers' interactions with their ASD students based on the training that they have had. In these observations, sought after will be key points such as 1) the way in which the teacher is implementing biblical counseling techniques as they interact with and teach their ASD students, 2) the ASD students' behavior in the classroom, 3) the length and tone (positive or negative) of the teacher's interactions with their ASD students, and 4) whether or not teachers are able to, knowing what is happening in the hearts and minds of their students, help them with any challenges they may be facing. One observation for each of the three chosen teachers must be conducted near the beginning of the research process in order to record initial results. Near the end of the process, these observations must reoccur in order to find whether there were any noticeable changes.

The research process itself will be conducted over a period of two months. If one were to include the initial informing of the students and parents, then the research process will take place between five and six months. However, narrowing this process to the period during which teachers and students interact, two months is the goal. This interaction, and the records which are kept and maintained, will begin in August of the present year and end in October. After the process is over, the teachers will be asked to fill out the Likert scale survey once more, as well as to provide testimonies regarding their experiences throughout this process. The testimonies will aid this author in a determination of how this research process could have been better, but also will help in an understanding of right steps which were taken. Further, testimonies may serve to solidify any results which have been reached at this point.



**Figure 2: Steps of the Research Process**

The design of this intervention process is included in order to provide the reader with a greater understanding of the research which is taking place. The efficacy of the process will be measured through regular observation and the research tools which have been provided above. The expected and desired outcome of this research project is twofold. First, the expected outcome is that the teachers in the special education department at SBCS will gain a greater

knowledge and understanding of biblical counseling techniques, and the ways in which these techniques may be used to better spiritually care for their students with autism. The second piece of the expected outcome is that the relationships between these teachers and their students with autism will improve, and therefore, the behavior and ability to handle challenges in these ASD individuals will be positively affected. As this section draws to a close, it is believed that an important note to make is that of the future. That is, this research may be conducted, but it is important to understand the way in which it may benefit the school and other ministries in the future.

If this research process is conducted thoroughly, it could be groundbreaking in autism research. That is, if special education teachers at SBCS are trained in biblical counseling techniques, and are therefore able to understand their ASD students better, their interactions with these students should improve. Assuming this is the result, the research at hand could pave the way for a more advanced type of education at SBCS and elsewhere. That is, if this program is implemented and continued, the school has the potential to advertise a special education department with teachers who have an advanced and rivaled biblical understanding of their students with autism. Further, the research has the potential to spread into general education classrooms where higher-functioning ASD students are present. Therefore, Salem, and other ministries, have the potential to continue and replicate this research in order to offer a higher level of education and spiritual care for ASD students—something which is contingent on the biblical counseling training which will take place for teachers. Teachers, and specifically Salem’s special education teachers, will be able to understand the reasons that their students with autism behave the way they do, and will be better equipped to address their challenges from a biblical perspective. Once more, it may be stated that the research tools mentioned in this section

will be used to understand whether or not these teachers are able to improve their interactions with and ability to care for their ASD students. As a final note, it should be stated that, at the completion of this section, the IRB has approved the design (see Appendix I for IRB approval). These things being established, it is now necessary to transition into the implementation of this intervention design.

### **Implementation of the Intervention Design**

Not only must the intervention design be discussed, but also the implementation of that design. The implementation is the most crucial part of the process, for if action is not taken, the research is not accomplished. In the section that follows, the implementation of the intervention design will be described, and the triangulation process will be discussed. The various research methods will also be noted, and the reality of the accomplishments will be listed. That is, the intervention design, based on circumstances outside of this author's control, may have needed minor adjustments. These did not affect negatively the design, but are worth noting. Further, the rationale behind the implementation sequence will be discussed. Each of these details ought to provide a well-rounded understanding of the implementation of the intervention.

The rationale for the implementation sequence of events, as well as the implementation generally, is partially reflected in the previous section. That is, the implementation is based upon the steps mentioned in Figure 2. However, reasons exist for the choosing of the process laid out in Figure 2. The first step for this intervention was to inform the potential participants and to gain the consent of those who would be involved. This step was first due to the logical reason that, if no consent was gained, or if potential participants did not fully understand that process for which they were signing up, the research itself would crumble. The second step, maintaining

regular contact with potential participants, was essential in order to remind them regularly about the upcoming research, as well as to provide scheduling updates. The next two steps in the figure were altered, but were nonetheless those steps which followed the maintenance of regular contact. Only one meeting was held in this next step, and it was the training session. The research tools had been presented in the previous meeting while gaining consent of participants. However, the tools were mentioned again here, and a brief refresher regarding the research process to come was noted. Following this training session (which is to be detailed in the following pages), it was important that the Likert scales were used.

The rationale behind placing Likert scale surveys at this point in the process was to measure participants' current feelings toward their ASD students, as well as their perceptions of their current relationships with these students. This survey served as a partial foundation for the research process, because the hope was that it demonstrate, in the end, progress which was made from the beginning. Following the Likert scales, the more complex research process began, during which interviews were held and journal entries were kept. Observations were also scheduled during this time, as well as took place. The rationale behind these steps' location in the process was simply that the tools needed to be used during the research process. Further, the tools needed regular activity during the research process in order to yield any effective or significant results. Finally, the second round of Likert scales were given, intended to measure whether or not progress had been made according to the educator's perceptions. Logically, testimonies and results were then recorded by this researcher.

While it is not the intention of this researcher to seem repetitive or redundant, it is important for the reader to understand the logical thinking which took place is paving the way for the steps of the research. In other words, while the implementation of the intervention will be

described in more detail in the following section, it is important to understand that certain elements of the process occurred in a logical order. Reasons existed for the playing out of the steps of the process which ought not to be overlooked. Having established those reasons (many of them simply following logical order), it is now necessary to describe the research process in greater detail.

The intervention design began in the summer 2023, on June 1<sup>st</sup>. An interest meeting was held to determine which educators in the special education department would participate, and which ones would decide against it. Mrs. Watkins, the Discovery Center director, was invited to participate in this meeting (and was present). A presentation was given with an accompanying PowerPoint discussing the reasons for the project, as well as the thesis for the project. The presentation opened with this researcher sharing his heart and story regarding those on the autism spectrum. That is, as a child, this author found himself observing others with disorders and disabilities, but never fully understanding them. Additionally, those on the spectrum with whom this author interacted seemed to be enigmas. Some felt sympathy towards them, while others enjoyed their time with them, and others still saw them as less valuable than themselves. Therefore, part of the rationale for this research project was for this author to grow in an understanding of those on the spectrum, followed by a sharing of this newfound understanding. If all people are made in God's image, then this means they deserve respect, as well as to receive the same level of spiritual care as others. All of these details of this researcher's personal life were shared to help the potential participants understand the passion felt for this project. Further explained was the implementation designed, and participants were given the IRB letter of intent to observe. Questions were allowed, but no one spoke up. Without much hesitation, those who attended the meeting proceeded to sign and turn in their letters of intent. The following



individuals from Salem's special education department decided to participate: Lindsey Aertker, Molly Myers, Susie Bianco, Angie Clement, Ruth Lakey, and Michele Hendley. Each of these individuals seemed excited about the project, and were informed that a meeting would be necessary in order that they be trained on autism and biblical counseling. This meeting, at the time, was on a date yet to be determined, although assumed to be closer to the beginning of the next school year.

As the time for the 2023-2024 school year to begin grew closer, a plan was put into place for the training session. The session was to be conducted once, and was to take place on August 29<sup>th</sup>. All the participants were contacted and agreed to meet at this time. They were provided fill-in-the-blank handouts to complete as this author trained them with the help of a PowerPoint presentation. This presentation included the most recent research on Autism Spectrum Disorder (including its definition, challenges, and beauty). The same definition mentioned in Chapter One was shared, but was simplified as well. The presentation also included the most recent definitions and recent regarding biblical counseling techniques. Specifically mentioned were the works of Scazzero and Crabb highlighted in Chapter Two's Literature Review. The biblical counseling techniques were then demonstrated, hypothetically, as being able to help those who have a diagnosis of ASD. That is, the presentation discussed the fact that each person has emotions, thoughts, and issues beneath the surface, and therefore needs help drawing those things out and dealing with them. If this is the case with neurotypicals, the presentation noted that it must be much more so with ASD individuals. The presentation then noted several techniques of biblical counseling, including questions, using the iceberg model, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Questions were detailed as tools to use in the drawing out of emotions and issues. That is, if one can ask strategic questions, they may receive answers which may help a person better understand

themselves. The iceberg model as detailed by Scazzero accompanies this idea of questions, as the point is to draw out themes in a person's life which are "underneath the surface". Cognitive Behavior Therapy, in a simplified form, involves journaling one's emotions, thoughts, and issues in order to make them more visible. This is a form of counseling which comes highly recommended, and can be employed with biblical concepts. All of this was designed to train the participants in such a way that they were better prepared to spiritually care for their ASD students in their classrooms and offices.

Another point of discussion during the training session involved the ways in which God views those on the spectrum. Specifically noted is the fact that those with disorders and disabilities are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and therefore have intrinsic value. This means that these individuals ought to be treated with the dignity and respect which they so rightfully deserve. ASD individuals, like the rest of humanity, reflect God substantially, functionally, and relationally. Therefore, they have just as much potential to bring glory to God as others. An additional point which was mentioned was that highlighted by Macaskill, also noted in the "Literature Review". That is, according to 1 Corinthians 1:27, God uses the unlikely things and people of this world to bring himself honor and glory. This means that, although no less value should be assigned to ASD individuals, they should be seen as unique persons who are designed to bring God glory in unique ways. In other words, what the world sometimes views as foolish or less valuable, God views with the most value.

Some challenges which those on the spectrum faced were also mentioned in the presentation. In fact, this was one of the most crucial points of the presentation, as the participants would be attempting to help their ASD students better overcome these challenges. Specifically noted from the Literature Review (and admittedly, not exhaustively listed in the

PowerPoint), were the behavioral, social, and emotional challenges which those on the spectrum faced. These challenges included 1) understanding emotions, 2) anxiety and depression, 3) meltdowns, 4) self-stimulation, 5) repetition restriction, 6) understanding figurative language, 7) communicating feelings, 8) sensory issues, 9) issues understanding gender and sexuality, 10) safety, 11) diet, and 12) the way others view these individuals. Each of these points drew on specific sources from the literature review. Olivia Bustion, for example, was directly mentioned in the notes on autism, depression, and anxiety. Scazzero was cited in regard to understanding emotions, as was Crabb. Each of these points was designed to weave an understanding of the current literature on autism, but also the current facts, in order to give these participants' a well-rounded understanding of the issues at hand. Specific points were also noted on ASD students' creation in the image of God.

The strengths of those with autism spectrum disorder was also chronicled, helping the participants further understand the value of their students. Strengths included 1) strong memory abilities, 2) a unique view of the world, and 3) high compatibility with adults. While this list of strengths is significantly smaller than the list of weaknesses, this researcher pointed out that these strengths are of such magnitude that they far outweigh the weaknesses mentioned. This does not mean that challenges or weaknesses should be disregarded—however, it does mean that if the ASD community can be helped in coping with and overcoming these challenges, they will be stronger and more glorifying to God with their lives.

Finally mentioned in the presentation were three concepts. First, the small representation of the autistic community in biblical counseling literature was mentioned as alarming. However, this was also used as a point of inspiration for the participants. That is, if little to no research has been completed in this area, that means that the project at hand could be viewed as pioneering in

nature. Therefore, no end exists for the potential of the project at hand (if stewarded well by this author and others in the field). The second point of finality mentioned in this presentation were the goals of the research. While noting the overall thesis, three measurable goals were also provided for the participants to grasp: 1) to improve student behavior, 2) to improve participants' behavior to spiritually care for them, and 3) to prove that biblical counseling can be used to help ASD individuals. Each of these goals were important, as they provided specific points of support for the thesis. Further, in the interest of synthesis, these goals were intended to draw from information in the "Literature Review", and to venture further than this information was able. The third concept which concluded the presentation was, simply, the process of research to be followed. This was to include, as has been notes, Likert scale surveys post-training, followed by regular interviews and journal entries, followed by classroom observations, followed by concluding Likert scale surveys. Each participant left this meeting seemingly excited about their futures in the classroom over the next couple of months.

From this point forward, the research had officially begun. The original timeline for the intervention was two to two-and-a-half months. While this time needed to be adjusted slightly, the intervention remained feasible within two months. That is, the process officially began on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023, and ended on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Therefore, it was well within the necessary time frame. In the weeks to follow, several research tools were used in order to both gather and measure data. Triangulation, which is a research method that cross-checks the process through multiple methods, was crucial during this project.<sup>89</sup> The four tools which were used to gather and measure data were surveys, interviews, journal entries, and classroom observations. The Likert scale survey (see Figure 3.1) was provided at the beginning of the process, on August 26<sup>th</sup>, and

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<sup>89</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*, (Eugene: Stock Publishers, 2011), 179.

the participants were asked to fill it out within the week. These surveys were returned promptly, and provided some excellent information which will be discussed at another point. Each participant agreed to participate in the survey, with none declining.

Following the survey, the educators were allowed to work for a week. Their work was not interfered with in any way. However, the following week, an email was sent out about times for first-level interviews. Responses were sent to this email and interview times were scheduled. While it was difficult to work around busy schedules to conduct interviews, each person was able to find time. Following these interviews, another email was sent out regarding journal entries. Explicitly discussed at the interest meeting was the fact that participants would have to record weekly journal entries of interactions with ASD students. Each participant was willing to record these entries, although some were turned in later than expected, were turned in digitally, or were recorded. Nonetheless, journal entries were received for the intervention time period. Most individuals, after the first week, turned in their journal entries every other week during the months of September and October.

As the process continued, more interviews were conducted every other week. At times, the scheduling of these interviews was messy, and some participants did not always schedule an interview on time. However, many were conducted, and much data was gathered from both the first-level and second-level interview questions. As the implementation intervention began to draw to a close, this author conducted classroom observations. These observations were scheduled with the classroom teachers in the special education department, and took place for about fifteen minutes at the time. Mrs. Myers was observed first, Mrs. Aertker was observed second, and Mrs. Bianco was observed last. These observations were designed to glean information from the interactions these teachers had with their ASD students. This way, not only

was data gathered based on the information reported, but this author also had the opportunity to view the interactions for himself. Observations were originally designated, in the design, to take place twice. However, this author, considering both the time line and the schedules of the participants, found it helpful and more than sufficient to conduct one round of observations.

Once the observations were finished, final data was collected through interviews and journal entries. Some of these journal entries were recorded either verbally or digitally. This was a deviation from the intervention design, but it did not affect the research negatively. Actually, this was a positive point of change, because it allowed the participants to record journal entries in an easier fashion. Lastly, the same Likert scale administered to the participants at the beginning of the process was provided at the end of the process. The goal with this tool was to determine whether any significant changes occurred in the answers of the survey from the beginning of the project to the end of the project. Once these scales were completed and turned in, the implementation of the intervention design had concluded. The most prominent changes to the intervention design over the course of the implementation included fewer interviews and fewer journal entries. Interviews were conducted at least three times throughout the process for each participant, and participants provided as many journal entries as possible. These were not necessarily negative points, however. This researcher found that interviews did not need to be conducted quite as often as previously thought, and this same point related to the journal entries. That is, if interviews and journal entries had occurred as often as previously mentioned, much information would have been redundant and the participants would have been tasked with more responsibility than they were able to handle at this time. However, as a result of this change, the interviews and journal entries began to show an upward trend in change regarding interactions with ASD students. Therefore, while information was not recorded through these tools as often

as planned, this emerged as a positive point for the research. In order to demonstrate the alterations made between the intervention design and implementation, one may view Figure 3 below. Figure 3 bears a striking resemblance to Figure 2, with the changes being in bold print.



**Figure 3: Modified Research Process Steps**

A final point of discussion may be made on the analysis of the results to be recorded in Chapter Four. In other words, it is important to establish the ways in which the tools mentioned

will be merged to form a cohesive understanding of the results, and therefore subsequent implications and applications. Once more, it is important to establish that the tools used to gather data were Likert scale surveys, regular interviews, journal entries, and classroom observations. Using these tools individually to gather data was, of course, essential to the project. However, it is the blending of the results according to the tools which provide clarity as to success and application. The Likert scales, used at the beginning and end of the study, were observed last by this researcher. That is, the tools which constituted the heart of the study (interviews, entries, and observations) were observed first. This way, the results from the surveys were observed in light of the other tools, rather than *vice versa*. However, once results were gathered and measured from these tools, the Likerts for each person were brought together, side-by-side, in order to observe any changing data.

Interviews were recorded by this researcher in real time, with answers being meticulously recorded in written fashion. Each of these interviews revealed common theme and ideas to be explored in Chapter Four. However, as far as data analysis, the interview results were placed side by side in order to observe common themes and changing data among both individuals and their peers. These common themes and points of progress were noted and recorded. Once data analysis for interviews was complete, a transition into journal entries was necessary.

All journal entries, in similar fashion to the surveys and interviews, were grouped together. Whether these entries were recorded verbally, in written form, or digitally had no bearing on the grouping. Each entry was grouped with its counterparts according to the individual who recorded it. Following this grouping, the entries themselves were examined in detail, with this researcher attempting to understand the data which was given. Each entry was also compared and contrasted with others in order to gain a full perspective of the accounts



provided. Common themes and ideas began to emerge (which corresponded with earlier ideas in the project) and were recorded. Upon completing analysis of journal entries, the data from classroom observations was examined.

Each of the classroom observations provided data which was recorded in the form of personal notes by this author. Three sets of notes were created for the three distinct observations. When analyzing the data, the observation notes were compared and contrasted, with notes made on the ways in which they were similar and different. Further analysis considered the growth of participants based on the actions and scenarios observed, as well as common themes which were expected and unexpected. Once analysis of the data gathered from tools was complete, the data could be analyzed in a more cohesive manner. That is, the data from each tool was gathered and observed, but the data needed to be compared and contrasted between tools, and common ideas and revelations were necessary to record. Once the data from all tools was gathered, analyzed piece-by-piece, and analyzed as a whole, results and findings became clearer so as to chronicle them in Chapter Four. Further, the groupings were now established, resulting in a detailed recording which could be created with ease.

### **Conclusion**

The intervention design and the implementation of the intervention design are the most important parts of the research process. Without these two pieces, everything discussed in Chapters One and Two remains either theoretical or research which is in the hands of others. The intervention design was fairly similar to the implementation, although alterations were made which are important to understand. Not all proposed participants in the intervention design were recruited for the actual process. Sufficient participants were recruited, but it was not the original number proposed. This researcher was apprehensive about this change at the beginning, but

found that the research was not negatively affected by this point. Further, data was not recorded as often as originally proposed. That is, interviews and journal entries were not recorded as often as thought. However, this seemed to be a positive point, because it allowed for the participants to practice their training for longer increments, as well as prevented redundant information from regularly emerging. Therefore, while minor alterations were made to the intervention during implementation, these were not changes which affected the research's efficacy, nor were they changes which caused the intervention to evolve into a different entity altogether.

The implementation of the intervention, while differing slightly from the original, used several important tools in order to gather data and results. Specific steps and plans were followed in order to ensure that the right kinds of results were gathered, as well as to ensure that research was properly conducted. Additionally discussed in detail was the rationale behind the sequencing of steps in the implementation. This is a subtle but important point which discusses logical reasons that the steps occurred in their order.

Points of the implementation were also described as referring back to the Literature and Theological Foundations sections of Chapter Two, Further grounding the research which took place. An account of the data analysis of each tool was included in the "Implementation" section, further cementing the foundations of the whole research process. Each detail was shared, not only to give an account of the events which took place, but also to establish the basis for a well-rounded fourth chapter and conclusion to this thesis. Without the implementation of the intervention, no results would emerge. Without the emergence of results, no subsequent implications and applications would follow. The intervention and the implementation having been detailed and recorded, it is now necessary to turn attention to the results. The results are in no way the only important point of the study, but they are part of the purpose for which the study

has been conducted. That is, the results will provide important insights on the effects of the research process itself, and will allow for a clear picture for applications moving forward.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the section at hand is to help the reader understand the results of the study. The results are important to share in order to prove the efficacy of the research, as well as to help the reader better understand the effects a study such as this could have in another ministry context. The results of the intervention design and implementation from the previous chapter will be shared in a basic manner. However, these results will also be communicated through the use of details and graphics. The exhibition of the results in this manner will help one understand the efficacy and value of this study, as well as its purpose. Although some expected results have already been established elsewhere, it is in this section that these are discussed in one place.

As a result of this research process, several results are expected. First, it is expected that the special education teachers at SBCS will have gained a greater knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of their students on the autism spectrum and the challenges which they face. Second, it is expected that, as a result of the training which the teachers will undergo, their interactions with ASD students will become more positive, and the challenges which their students face will be able to be overcome with spiritual guidance. That is, if the teachers understand better what is occurring in the minds and hearts of their students from a biblical perspective, their interactions with these students will be characterized by grace, understanding, and even spiritual guidance. A third expected result is that the ASD students at SBCS, being more fully accepted and understood, will improve in their behavior and ability to regulate themselves emotionally. Believed is the fact that great improvement to the established problem

can be reached through this research process, and some of the above projected results are evidence of this belief's validity.

As the chapter progresses, specific results based upon the use of specific research tools in the intervention design will be presented. First, the Likert Scale survey results will be noted. These results will provide some insights from both the initial surveys which the participants filled in and the final survey which was filled in. Second, interview results will be noted. The interviews consisted of several rounds and different sets of questions, which will be further discussed in this section. The interview results, in the opinion of this author, yielded some of the most promising and progressive data. Following interview results, classroom observation data will be recorded. This data is based upon three classroom observations between teachers and students. The final notes from the research will be recorded in the "Journal Entries" section. This involves data gathered from the participants' regular recording of journal entries regarding their interactions with students. All of these results will be displayed in a systematic fashion in order that their implications and applications may be expounded upon in Chapter Five.

### **Likert Scale Survey Results**

The first round of data was gathered through the Likert scales surveys. These surveys were designed in a way that would provide this research with initial information following the training session, as well as closing information following the research process. The surveys asked specific questions which pointed to the strengths and weaknesses which the educators observed in themselves as they interacted with their students on the spectrum. In both the initial surveys which were provided and the final surveys, each participant exhibited unique results.

Classroom teacher Lindsey Aertker showed promising results in the initial survey which followed the training session. She answered each question in the most positive way,

demonstrating that she had both prior knowledge and gained knowledge from the training session which contributed to her confidence in interactions with ASD students and in her abilities to counsel ASD students. She seemed to understand well the “iceberg” concept as it related to biblical counseling and to autism, and was eager to move further into the school year with these things in mind. This being established, it is important to also review her results in the post-research survey. These results were quite similar, if not identical to the first. These two surveys demonstrate that Mrs. Aertker felt the utmost confidence from her education and the training session which began this study, and therefore support the thesis of the project at hand. Her Likert scale results can be viewed in Appendix F.

Miss Myers, the second of the classroom teachers, showed similar results both initially and finally in the research process to Mrs. Aertker. Her scales did show some growth, but not much. Following the initial training session, Miss, Myers felt confident in her understanding and abilities to interact with and spiritually care for students on the spectrum. Further, in her final survey, she echoed the same unwavering confidence. This seemed to support the thesis well, as her confidence was better established from the initial training session, as well as further solidified through the research process. Her results may be viewed by the reader in Appendix F.

The third classroom teacher, Susie Bianco, showed some of the most promising results of all the participants. Following the training session, her survey answers indicated that she was not confident in spiritually caring for, understanding, or interacting with her students on the spectrum. A later interview would provide clarity that, after some time interacting with ASD students, she sometimes felt frustrated.<sup>90</sup> The message this communicated was that, while Bianco understood the information provided in training, as a first-year teacher, she did not have much

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<sup>90</sup> Susie Bianco, interview by author, North Carolina, September 7, 2023.

experience initially with ASD students. However, as she began to traverse the school year and apply the techniques presented to her in training, she grew in confidence. This can be displayed in the data recorded in her final survey, which may be viewed in Appendix F. Bianco did not reach the highest level of confidence by the end of the research process, but her interactions and abilities to provide spiritual care for her ASD students moved upward in a positive trend.

Angie Clement and Michele Hendley, two of the three therapists, both felt confident initially and finally in the process as displayed by their survey answers. Their surveys may be observed in Appendix F. The third therapist, however, Ruth Lakey, moved from a severe lack of confidence to moderate confidence over the course of the study. Displayed in Appendix P, Miss Lakey's survey results indicate the validity of the thesis. That is, her training in biblical counseling techniques increased the positive nature of her interactions with students on the spectrum, as well as her abilities to spiritually care for these students.

### **Interview Results**

Over the course of the study, each participant was interviewed three times. The first two interviews consisted of level one interview questions, while the last interviews consisted of level two questions. The first interviews were decidedly level one questions due to the fact that these questions dealt more with the progress of the study. The level two questions began to shape the appearance of the study's results. Therefore, to properly record the results of the study, it is necessary to begin with the results of the level one interviews.

The first question in level one is: In the past two weeks, in what ways have you interacted with your students with Autism Spectrum Disorder? The results varied somewhat for the first interview, although some similarities could be marked. One teacher, for example, noted that her interactions included teaching students and helping them through grief (one of the high school

students at Salem recently passed away from cancer).<sup>91</sup> Two other educators, who were Discovery Center therapists, noted that their interactions with students consisted of their therapy sessions.<sup>92</sup> Another therapist mentioned that they had not yet interacted greatly with students on the spectrum, with their interactions consisting of seeing them in the cafeteria or in the hallways.<sup>93</sup> Overall, the consensus of this first question, in the first interview, was that teachers interacted with students in exactly the ways one might expect. However, one difference was found in the fact that a classroom teacher was able to help her students through some grief (this will be elaborated upon in the section on journal entries). This teacher was able to help this student identify his feelings (by asking him questions), and to therefore bring out what was underneath the surface of his mind. This is a direct parallel to the practice Scazzero mentioned, described in the “Literature Review” section of Chapter Two.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, a theme emerged early on in the research which found its origins in the discussed literature

In the second level one interview, the answers to this question were similar for some, yet different for others. Two of the therapists, for example, noted that their interactions with students with autism had consisted of their seventy-minute therapy sessions.<sup>95</sup> The classroom teachers answered that they had interacted with their students in the classroom, but seem to have a consensus on a common theme: building relationships. True is the notion that building relationships with students is key in the realms of education and counseling, and these teachers began to show initiative in doing so. In fact, this theme may be traced back to the concept and

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<sup>91</sup> Lindsey Aertker, interview by the author, North Carolina, September 27, 2023.

<sup>92</sup> Angie Clement, interview by the author, North Carolina, September 27, 2023.

<sup>93</sup> Michele Hendley, interview by the author, North Carolina, September 27, 2023.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



importance of discipleship in counseling, described in the “Theological Foundations” section of Chapter Two. The third therapist, in this interview, admittedly did not have many interactions with students on the spectrum at this point, and therefore could not offer much information. This leads to the second question.

The second level one interview question is: What emotions do you typically feel, in the classroom or otherwise, when you interact with your students on the spectrum? In the initial interview, two of the three therapists stated that they felt a level of apprehension when interacting with students on the spectrum.<sup>96</sup> One of the three classroom teachers noted that she felt the same way.<sup>97</sup> This is an important point to note, as it pairs directly with a challenge that many ASD individuals often face: others’ perceptions of them.<sup>98</sup> This is not to state that the participants began this study with the same negative perception that many others have regarding ASD individuals. Nonetheless, those on the spectrum may sometimes be misunderstood, which can cause apprehension in interacting with them. This is a form of issue regarding others’ perceptions of these individuals. Therefore, an expected idea emerged with this second interview question. However, the remaining three participants (a therapist and two classroom teachers) mentioned feeling joy when interacting with autistic students.<sup>99</sup> In the second interview with this same question, all participants but one noted feeling joy when interacting with students on the spectrum, with some noting a greater level of patience due to an increased understanding of those students.

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<sup>96</sup> Ruth Lakey, interview by the author, North Carolina, September 26, 2023.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

Question three can be stated as follows: What parts of the biblical counseling perspective and techniques which were taught to you do you remember? Do you need to be refreshed? Through the answers to this question emerged a common theme that the educators remembered much of the session. Only one noted that a refresher could be helpful, with the rest recalling common ideas from the training session such as patience, the perspectives of autistic students, and the importance of continuing to support their challenges with biblical truths. The same question in the interview to follow would produce the same results. The fourth question for the level at hand is: Do you find your interactions with ASD students to be more positive with an increased understanding of their challenges? The answers to this inquiry, in both interviews, brought into the research the concepts of patience and positivity. That is, not one participant believes that their interactions with students have declined in quality as a result of this study. If anything, several have noted that this study has increased their patience, and therefore the quality of their interactions with students on the spectrum. The accompanying question, question five, echoed this inquiry: Do you find yourself becoming more patient with the misbehaviors of your autistic students as a result of this process? The answer to this question, from all participants, was a resounding “Yes.”<sup>100</sup>

The sixth question brought about various answers to be explored: What have you begun to discover about yourself in your role as an educator as a result of this process? Two themes emerged as a result of this question in both interviews. Educators believed that they were being watched by their students and therefore discovered that they needed to grow their patience with these students.<sup>101</sup> Others discovered that it was necessary to build deeper relationships and to

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Molly Myers, interview by the author, North Carolina, September 26, 2023.

find unique ways to connect with their students.<sup>102</sup> Overall, what these teachers and therapists seemed to discover about themselves was that they were capable of more patience and compassion for their students on the autism spectrum than they had previously realized. Further, it seemed that their patience had grown as a direct result of the training which they had undergone at the beginning of this process. A teacher even mentioned that she had begun to further discover her role as a Christlike example in the classroom. This is a point which Christians often understand, but remains difficult to grasp at times.<sup>103</sup>

The seventh question was posed next: What is one challenge which you see below the surface in each of your ASD students? Two therapists noted that their students struggled with patience and feelings of inadequacy.<sup>104</sup> Teachers mentioned that students with autism sometimes have difficulty empathizing with others, as well as with patience.<sup>105</sup> This is a direct point of comparison with the communication deficits and meltdown issues mentioned in the “Literature Review.” A third therapist stated that students on the spectrum often have difficulty using the knowledge of God they have gained in their minds to change their hearts.<sup>106</sup> Each of these concepts may be considered general themes or, what some have described as overall “snapshots” of the occurrences in the minds of the ASD students.<sup>107</sup> Both interviews, in relation to this question, yielded nearly the same results. However, this remains a valuable question to have posed twice, because it demonstrated a common and ongoing theme of spiritual challenges which

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<sup>103</sup> Tim Challies, *Set an Example* (Toronto: Cruciform Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Michele Hendley, interview by the author, North Carolina, September 27, 2023.

<sup>107</sup> Philip Henry and Gene Sale, “Snapshots,” *The Christian Therapist’s Notebook: Homework, Handouts, and Activities for Use in Christian Counseling*, ed. by Philip Henry, Lori Figueroa, and David Miller, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), 31.

are faced by the ASD students at Salem. The eighth question builds upon the seventh: Based on your answer to the previous question, how would you approach biblical care and counseling for those students? One of the answers to this question, in an early interview, showed great progress. The teacher mentioned that, in order to approach biblical care and counseling for her students, she would need to ask questions and coerce them to talk about their feelings.<sup>108</sup> This teacher echoed the same statement in a later interview, which indicates that she held on to the material. However, therapists and other classroom teachers discussed the idea of encouraging their students with biblical truths, as well as helping them reach below the surface to discuss the challenges which they were facing. Once the eighth and final question was explored in the level one interviews, the next step was to gather the data through level two interview questions.

Level two interviews, while only conducted once for each participant, were more than sufficient to provide some valid and promising results. The first question posed in the level two interview was: In what specific ways has your perspective on the autism spectrum shifted during this process? The majority of participants did not shift their perspective on autism much during the process. That is, while they have learned new ways to provide spiritual care for those on the spectrum, autism as a whole has not changed in their eyes. However, a couple of participants did notice that they developed greater joy in their interactions with students on the spectrum.<sup>109</sup> The second question posed in these interviews was: Would you say that, as a result of this study, you feel better equipped to handle challenges and guide your ASD students spiritually? Why or why not? All participants answered this question with a resounding “Yes,” with a common theme of having developed more patience as a result of increased understanding. These results display a

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

truth which is typical in many situations. That is, as Larry Crabb notes, when one person understands another on a deeper level, their interactions are bound to improve.<sup>110</sup>

The third question in this interview may be stated as follows: As the end of this study draws near, how will you use the knowledge which you have gained moving forward? One therapist mentioned the concept of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and desires that the students she works with begin to and continue to journal to help regulate emotions.<sup>111</sup> Another educator, a classroom teacher, intends to use the knowledge she gained to help her maintain an active mindset (that is, a mindset that is actively remembering the challenges which ASD students face and the ways in which she may provide forms of biblical counseling for them).<sup>112</sup> Other participants continued to echo these themes, as well as to make mention of intentionally showing love to these students. The fourth second level interview question was: At this point in the study, what specific changes have you noticed in your interactions with ASD students, either internally or externally? Every educator noted that they had become more patient and understanding of their students with autism, and were therefore able to empathize with them, and to better spiritually care for them. In other words, because they understood the biblical counseling perspective and techniques.

Fifth, this researcher asked: How has this study thus far improved your abilities as a Christian special educator? Again, then idea of patience emerged as the dust settled from this inquiry. These participants could not seem to echo enough the ways in which this study had grown their patience. That is, once ASD students' challenges and needs were made clear, and

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<sup>110</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Marriage Builder: Creating True Oneness to Transform Your Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 87.

<sup>111</sup> Angie Clement, interview by the author, North Carolina, October 11, 2023.

techniques were presented to counsel these students in small segments, patience, compassion, and positive interactions with these students flourished in Salem's Discover Center like never before. One classroom teacher provided, however, a more unique answer to question five. She noted that the study at hand had improved her abilities because it provided her with a clearer picture of the difference between misbehaviors caused by ASD and misbehaviors caused by students' sin natures.<sup>113</sup> Sixth, the following question was posed: Have you developed any questions or techniques on your own to help your ASD students based on the knowledge you have gained? The majority of participants answered this question in the negative, but they did seem to feel better equipped to develop these questions and techniques moving forward. They certainly seemed hopeful about the future and began to desire the provision of increased aid through the techniques which had been discussed.

The seventh second level interview question was: What challenges have you found during this process that you face as an educator of ASD individuals? One of the classroom teachers noted that a challenge of hers was remembering not to require eye contact from her ASD students.<sup>114</sup> That is, ASD students typically find eye contact uncomfortable, and if one is to be successful in their interactions with these students, they must allow conversations accompanied with eye contact to remain optional.<sup>115</sup> Another challenge which was noted was the idea of being able to empathize with ASD students. Remembering the different challenges and issues which are faced in the minds of ASD students is key if one is to have any hope of caring for them spiritually. A third common challenge was that of feeling inadequate.<sup>116</sup> Although these

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<sup>113</sup> Linsley Aertker, interview by the author, North Carolina, October 11, 2023.

<sup>114</sup> Molly Myers, interview by the author, North Carolina, October 26, 2023.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

educators began to feel better equipped to handle their students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, as well as to counsel them, they still struggled with feelings of inadequacy, even while knowing that the Lord would ultimately equip them to use the tools and knowledge they had gained as a result of this study. The eighth and final question in the second level interviews was: Based on your answer to the above question and the training you have had throughout this process, how can you counsel yourself in overcoming those challenges? The major theme in answering this question, amongst all the participants, was to use the training and the tools that had been provided to them in order to overcome these challenges. Seeking wisdom from the Lord, as well as continuing to ask questions in order to determine the emotions in the hearts of their students, these educators were able to counsel themselves moving forward.

As the interviews were conducted, and specifically, as the results began to merge, some prominent themes of progress began to make themselves known. One of the largest positive results from these interviews was that the educators grew in patience for their students with autism. This, in turn, allowed them to slow down, consider the options that were necessary and the tools that had been provided, and gave them the ability to counsel their ASD students with a better understanding of them. These practices are characteristic of the type of respect necessary in a believer's interactions with others.<sup>117</sup> Another positive result was that, on some level, the educators seemed to remember the tools which had been given them, as well as the biblical counseling perspective. Some indicated that a refresher would have been helpful, and that is something which ought to be considered in a duplication of this study. However, most techniques and perspectives were remembered, allowing for a beautiful and positive blend of ASD and biblical counseling understanding and practice. A third positive result of these interviews was

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<sup>117</sup> Henry Cloud and John Townsend. *Boundaries: When to Say Yes How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 263.

that, overall, the educators seemed to have grown in the confidence in handling students with autism spectrum disorder in a Christlike way. This is in direct support to secular author and teacher Ron Clark's assertions regarding classroom management. He notes well that, regardless of the student, when teachers begin to understand their students in a deeper way, confidence in classroom management will grow.<sup>118</sup> This researcher believes that the study at hand, based on the interview evidence alone, helped these participants reach this result.

A final excurses to make in the present section is that of common themes which support the "Literature Review" section. Some of these themes have been woven into the fabric of the interview results, while others remain yet to be noted. However, it is important to dedicate some time to specific points of support regarding the concepts presented by other authors and professionals in Chapter Two. The first of these themes was the fact that apprehension was felt at the outset of the project regarding participants' interactions with ASD students. As previously mentioned, this ties nicely with the challenge faced by ASD students regarding others' perceptions of them. That is, at times, others' misunderstandings of ASD individuals presents a barrier in their interactions with them.<sup>119</sup> The positive of this discovery in the interview process, however, is that the participants sought to overcome these challenges and this apprehension (and ultimately did).

A second point tying to the "Literature Review" is that of emotions and feelings occurring in the minds of students "below the surface."<sup>120</sup> This, of course, means that feelings and issues are happening in the minds of individuals that they do not always recognize.

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<sup>118</sup> Ron Clark, *The Essential 55: An Award-Winning Educator's Rules for Discovering the Successful Student in Every Child* (New York: Hachette Books, 2019), 144.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



Interviews demonstrated what this researcher expected based upon Scazzero and Crabb's works. Further points emerged which were initially presented in the "Literature Review", specifically in regard to challenges. That is, communication deficits were noted in interviews. One specific mention of these deficits involved a participant's newfound understanding that eye contact is difficult for the ASD individual.<sup>121</sup> This, in fact, was directly referenced by Cheryl Chawarska in her detailed work on autism.<sup>122</sup> A fourth point of relation to the "Literature Review" involved viewing those with autism as being made in the image of God.<sup>123</sup> That is, as participants continued through the research process, it seems that a greater understanding and appreciation of the truth which they already knew (that those on the spectrum display great value and beauty as image-bearers of God) began to shine brighter in their hearts. This, in turn, allowed them to have more positive interactions with their students moving forward. Having discussed the interview details and results, this leads to a transition into the next set of results: those which were produced through classroom observations.

### **Observations**

The classroom observations took place within the last few weeks of the research process. Only three observations were necessary, as the department employs three classroom teachers. Dates and times were discussed with teachers beforehand, and this researcher committed to entering the classrooms, with as little disruption as possible, for ten to fifteen minutes to observe. The first observation took place during an afternoon social studies class, consisting of about ten

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<sup>121</sup> Molly Myers, interview by the author, North Carolina, October 19, 2023.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

or more high school students. At least three of these students, ranging from ages 14 to 17, had an official diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The class began with the teacher having fun with her students. That is, they made small talk, told jokes, and ultimately displayed a relationship-building environment characteristic of the one described in training. The teacher supplied fill-in-the-blank notes for all of her students, which was particularly accommodating for those on the spectrum. She also allowed a couple of ASD students to use fidget toys. This demonstrated well her understanding of the needs of ASD students to fidget as they learn. In turn, this demonstrated her comprehension of the differences in which ASD students think, and therefore showed that she was capable of potentially counseling these students. She also asked specific questions to students on the spectrum in order to increase their participation, and taught social skills in small increments to one ASD student in particular. This final observation brought to a close the first classroom observation.

The second classroom observation took place during a middle school social studies class. Several students in this class had a diagnosis of autism, and their ages ranged from 11-13. Initial observations demonstrated, like the first teacher, that this teacher understood the differing needs of ASD students. That is, this teacher allowed her students to play with fidget toys, and to bounce on rubber seating designed for special education. This teacher also provided visual instructions for the assignment at hand, let students who needed to stand and walk around do so, used groups for teaching on different levels, and did not hold her students to unrealistic expectations. While specific spiritual care and counseling was not observed during this time period, all the evidences of being able to successfully do so were displayed.

The third classroom observation took place during a middle school math class. Several students in this class had a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, and their ages ranged from

11-13. This classroom teacher showed some growth based on her initial Likert scale survey. First, she allowed students to walk around as needed. While she did ask these students to sit more than once, she did not necessarily enforce this request. Therefore, it would seem that this teacher, although somewhat distracted by these students, has begun to understand that allowing them this opportunity is the best thing for them. Further, this teacher places her students on the spectrum in different stations at times for their benefits, and provides the class with repetitive instructions as needed.

A couple of themes emerged which were present in the “Literature Review” of Chapter Two. One of these themes was that of treating ASD students with dignity, as well as understanding the differences in the ways they think and view the world.<sup>124</sup> That is, the splitting up of ASD students into different groups in the math class, for example, shows the participant’s increased understanding that these students think and learn differently, and therefore may need specific instruction directed toward them at their level. This same concept was present in the classroom which allowed students to use fidget toys and move around the room as needed. A second theme was that of, again, building relationships. This was an important theme regarding biblical counseling in the “Theological Foundations” section. In fact, not only is much of biblical counseling dependent on building relationships, but biblical counseling cannot properly take place without building relationships. Therefore, these participants seemed to understand well the opportunity for building relationships in the classroom, and capitalized on this opportunity in order to lay an effective foundation for biblical counseling.

The results from the classroom observations were not as definitive in the realm of linking autism and biblical counseling. This is due to the fact that observation times had limitations, as

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<sup>124</sup>Ibid., 142.

well as the teachers were observed instructing on certain materials. However, based on the ways in which the ASD students were treated and understood in these classrooms, it can be safely deduced that growth occurred, and that these teachers demonstrated ample understanding of their ASD students which could be used in a biblical counseling and spiritual care setting. Further, the way in which these ASD students were treated suggests that these teachers rightly understood the biblical counseling perspective promoted in training (namely, that these students have emotions and challenges beneath the surface in their hearts and minds). The final tool's results are now to be discussed, which are the journal entries recorded by the educators.

### **Journal Entry Results**

Over the course of the research process, multiple journal entries were recorded by each participant chronicling their interactions with students on the spectrum. These entries were recorded in a variety of formats, including handwritten entries, digital entries, and voice recordings. Some of these journal entries involve negative outcomes, but the majority of them hold a theme of overwhelming positivity, and therefore can be used to prove the effectiveness of the research at hand.

Classroom teacher Lindsey Aertker provided a great deal of insight with her journal entries describing interactions with ASD middle school students. One such entry described a conversation which she held with a student who was affected by the death of a peer who was diagnosed with cancer. This student indicated that he was sad because his friend passed away, just as his grandpa had. Mrs. Aertker stated that she asked this student questions to clarify and explore his feelings, comforted him, and supported his difficult feelings with biblical truths that heaven would be a wonderful place. This seemed to help the student regulate his emotions, and allowed him to continue the journey through the school day.

A second journal entry was provided by Mrs. Aertker in relation to an ASD high school student. This high school student arrived in her class every other day after lunch, and decidedly needed to use the restroom. The teacher noticed that he was away from class for far too long, and that this student was carrying his phone with him to the restroom. Understanding his desire to check his phone (as well as his autistic obsession with a Youtube channel), she allowed him to use the restroom while on a timer. Mrs. Aertker found that, when this student knew a timer was running, he spent far less time in the restroom than before. While she was not engaging in biblical counseling for this student, it can be demonstrated that, based on her knowledge of below-surface occurrences in the autistic mind, this teacher was able to find a helpful solution to the issue. Further, Mrs. Aertker displayed a unique teaching technique for this student not unlike that promoted by experienced instructor Dave Burgess. In his work, Burgess encourages the reader to find ways to reach students which may be considered unordinary.<sup>125</sup> Mrs. Aertker exhibited an understanding of the fact that her students on the spectrum may need to be instructed and communicated with in ways often considered unordinary by others.

A third journal entry from Mrs. Aertker relates to a middle school student with autism. A stuffed frog is kept in Aertker's classroom which the students may play with from time to time. On this particular day, Mrs. Aertker was sitting at her desk, and the student had an idea. He picked up the stuffed frog, snuck behind his teacher, and placed the frog on her head. The student began to laugh and told Mrs. Aertker confidently that she had been "frogged". This interaction demonstrates the comfort from relationship building that Mrs. Aertker has fostered in her classroom, and demonstrates well her ability to understand and care for her students on the spectrum, allowing these students to be themselves.

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<sup>125</sup> Dave Burgess, *Teach Like a Pirate: Increase Student Engagement, Boost Your Creativity, and Transform Your Life as an Educator* (San Diego: Dave Burgess Consulting, 2012), 55.

Mrs. Aertker generously recorded a fourth and final journal entry, in which she detailed an interaction with a high school student. This particular student was quite distraught following lunch, because he had not been able to eat. This student only eats certain foods, and due to an absence of his preferred foods at lunch, was not able to eat. In order to help this student both calm and regulate themselves, Mrs. Aertker worked quickly to find a food that this student would enjoy. She also allowed this student to eat this particular meal in class. Ultimately, biblical counseling was not needed in this situation, but a better understanding of autism allowed for a more positive and meaningful interaction, which opened the door for counseling in the future.

The second classroom teacher, Miss Bianco, provided several insightful journal entries. She noted, for example, an account of middle school student on the spectrum laughing excessively at a movie that his peers were only mildly amused with. This was not a negative behavior by any means, but it does provide an example of the unique ways in which the minds of ASD students work. Additionally, two other middle school students were mentioned in this participant's journal entries. These entries designated that the students involved were quite intelligent and capable of growth in the teacher's eyes. However, also expressed in these entries was the struggle for these students to effectively communicate the emotions which they felt and the concepts which they had learned. The most prominent theme in this Miss Bianco's concise journal entries was that students on the spectrum feel emotions deeply, and clearly need the loving guidance from a biblical perspective on the ways in which these emotions should be handled.

Third classroom teacher Miss Myers provided some insightful journal entries as well. One in particular is perhaps more noteworthy than the others. She records an incident in which a high school ASD student misunderstood the material she was teaching. Due to this

misunderstanding, the student attempted to correct her. She engaged in a conversation with the student in order to clarify the misunderstanding, and the student expressed his need to take a “calming moment”. This involved the student taking a moment to regulate themselves before proceeding with the remainder of the conversation. Once this moment had passed, the misunderstanding was able to be clarified. This is a significant interaction because, although no biblical counseling took place, an understanding of the biblical counseling perspective and challenges of ASD students due to the training session was displayed by the teacher. This participant also recorded a separate high school student’s improvement in attitude and enjoyment of class based on consistent effort made by the special education department’s teachers. Due to the training which took place, it would seem that the interactions between the teachers and this student improved because of an increased understanding of that student from a biblical perspective.

Therapists also provided some interesting and insightful journal entries. Mrs. Clement, for example, recorded a journal entry in which she directly incorporated biblical counseling techniques into her therapy session. She noted, to the ASD student, the importance of working hard in therapy, as well as in life in general. She utilized the Apostle Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians, stating that all things ought to be done for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). She noted to the student that she understood he faced challenges, and specifically, challenges which were unique to him as an individual. However, she echoed the Scripture’s words and noted that he could overcome these challenges. Mrs. Clement, in this instance, clearly demonstrated her knowledge and understanding of autism in relation to biblical counseling. While Mrs. Clement offered multiple journal entries, it is important to note that each of these entries echoed similar stories. However, one journal entry is prominent among all others. She noted one instance in

which the student focused well and worked hard throughout the entire session. Clement noted that no biblical counseling techniques were utilized in this session because much material was necessary to cover. Therefore, the question may be posed, what was special about this session? This session was special because the focus of the student in the face of much challenging material to be covered demonstrates some sort of growth and results. Clement noted that she had specifically been praying for this student to increase in their focus and abilities. This researcher believes that her implementation of biblical counseling techniques and perspectives, as well as her fervent prayer, led this student to a level of growth.

Therapist Ruth Lakey provided journal entries which were fairly similar to Mrs. Clement's. that is, while Lakey did not follow the exact style and pattern of Clement in interacting with her therapy students, the interactions recorded did take place in therapy sessions with an ASD individual. Miss Lakey did not have a plethora of interactions with ASD students, but did have enough to record insightful entries. Noted in the entries was the journey from meeting with the student for the first time, to a decline in the student's attitude, to a persistence in continuing to meet with the student, to a final upward trend in the student's attitude. Overall, it would seem that, according to Lakey, the student made progress in their attitude and overall resolve to do well in regular therapy.

Michele Hendley provided journal entries as well. These entries were mainly focused on small conversations held between her and students in the cafeteria, hallways, and at student drop-off in the mornings. Therefore, opportunities did not greatly present themselves to implement biblical counseling techniques in her case. However, she was a more experienced educator than others on the team, and was nonetheless able to offer excellent insights through other research tools. The overarching theme from her journal entries was the compassionate character of the



ASD students with which she interacted. In other words, the students with which she interacted displayed significant spiritual qualities. These students mostly are in need of guidance regarding the ways in which their Christian actions can be sharpened and become more intentional (guidance that a teacher stepping into the role of biblical counselor could partially provide). However, displaying compassion, and even love, on a more regular basis, is a significant step for these students, as love is the distinguishing mark of a Christian.<sup>126</sup>

Of all the research tools and materials, the journal entries display common themes present in the “Literature Review” more than any others. The themes present include 1) the struggles of ASD individuals to identify and regulate emotions, 2) dietary challenges often faced by those on the spectrum, 3) the importance of building relationships in biblical counseling, 4) the differences in the ways those on the spectrum think, 5) communication deficits of those on the spectrum, and 6) the correct ways to biblically counsel someone according to the models proposed by Scazzero and Crabb. Mrs. Aertker directly referred to helping a student through the grieving process. Her experience and the scenario described speaks to thoughts echoed by the *DSM-V* regarding autism and emotional limitations.<sup>127</sup> Aertker likewise presents a journal entry which presents the dietary challenges of a student, noting that this particular ASD individual can only eat certain things. This restriction is one detailed, among others, in the works of Strickland and Cynthia presented in Chapter Two.<sup>128</sup> Points three and six can be paired together as falling under “Theological Foundations” These two points have emerged quite a bit over the process, and emphasize the important biblical themes of discipleship and relationship building (which, at

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<sup>126</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 14.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

the risk of redundancy, are also mentioned by Scazzero and Crabb). Point five is scattered throughout Chapter Two's "Literature Review" but is specifically discussed in a couple of works. *The Reason I Jump*, for example, chronicles the communication deficits and misunderstandings which often accompany the members of the autism community.<sup>129</sup>

The journal entries are helpful in discerning the differences in the daily interactions which each of these participants had with their ASD students. Overall, as one peruses these entries, common themes emerge of spiritual guidance from teachers to students, resilience of these students, and increased positive interactions with these students based on the training which took place at the beginning of this process. Therefore, the journal entries seemingly support once again that the training session which took place for these teachers increased the positive interactions which they had with their ASD students, as well as increased their abilities to care spiritually for these students.

### **Conclusion**

This section examines the tools which formed the backbone of this research process. These tools included Likert scale surveys, regular interviews, classroom observations, and journal entries. Time and again, each of these tools and the data they gathered seem to point to evidence for the initial thesis. That is, if training in biblical counseling techniques is provided for SBCS special education teachers, then they will be better able to serve their ASD students. The students in the classrooms and offices of these educators seem to have been better served, and especially spiritually, as their attitudes and abilities to interact positively with the participants increased. Additionally, a position of synthesis with Chapter Two's "Literature Review" and "Theological Foundations" was defined and expounded upon, therefore designating

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 14.

connections between current literature on the subject matter and the research which has taken place. Overall, the research results point to the validity of the thesis and partially prove the necessity of this experiment. The research results are merely one piece of the puzzle, however, if these results are shared, but no application is made, there is no ultimate purpose in the research. Therefore, the following section will need to be dedicated to a thorough discussion of implications and applications of the research, in order that the results may produce lasting change moving forward.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

### Introduction

The purpose of this DMIN action research project was to provide training in biblical counseling techniques for students with ASD to the SBCS special education teachers. Having conducted the research, it is crucial that, not only must results be shared, but conclusions must be reached based upon these results. The hope in doing so was that, if training in biblical counseling techniques is provided for SBCS special education teachers, then they will be better able to serve their ASD students. Further, it is important to recognize the way in which current trends in ministry related to this topic may be challenged as a result of the project. Several projected results were shared in Chapter Four, and it is in Chapter Five that one may be able to see the reality and effects of those results. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly share conclusions which may be made based on the projected results from Chapter Four.

If the student/teacher relationships are affected positively as a result of this study, it is important to note that this may have great consequences in Christian education. That is, if any sort of progress is made in the special education department regarding ASD students and counseling, this will need to be considered and incorporated into other aspects of Salem, and incorporated into other Christian schools. Current ministry trends regarding Autism Spectrum Disorder are barely in existence. Therefore, more literature and research on this topic is necessary in the Christian world. This author believes that, as the research process has unfolded, decisions have been made, and results have been reached, other members of the Christian community, specifically in Christian education, ought to be made aware.

Upon finding the results of this project and drawing conclusions, one must speculate regarding the next steps. Other than publishing the research at hand, this author intends to

implement this training program (with the permission of the necessary individuals) into general education classrooms. That is, other students on the spectrum, and even neurotypicals, exist in general education classrooms at SBCS, and are in need of teachers who understand them well through the lens of a biblical counselor, in order that spiritual guidance might be provided, and their challenges may be overcome. Further and finally, it is intended that the special education teachers at SBCS, having observed the efficacy of their training, continue to use resources to remind themselves of and study further in the areas of autism and biblical counseling. These things being established, it is now necessary to turn to the research implications for this project.

As mentioned earlier in this project, the tools used to gather data and record results were Likert scales surveys, interviews, journal entries, and observations. These tools having been established, it is necessary to explore the results and the data gathered from each of them in an organized manner. Further, the reader will continue to observe here the ways in which both the implications and applications of this research project refer to the literature which was reviewed in Chapter Two.

### **Research Implications**

Throughout this research process, certain implications have shown themselves and must be explored in order to gain a thorough understanding of the results. The truths which have been implied as a result of the research may be listed as follows: 1) biblical counseling has a place in the classroom, 2) a positive correlation between training in autism and biblical counseling and efficacy in these areas, 3) a positive correlation between autism and biblical counseling, 4) the necessity of repetition of this experiment in a general education classroom, 5) a necessity for schools to provide in-house training on autism and other disorders, 6) a need for biblical counseling according to the iceberg model, and 7) ASD students are capable of spiritual growth.

These four implications will be discussed in the pages that follow in order to transition well into applications of this study.

The first implication of the research process is that biblical counseling has a place in the classroom. While, admittedly, this may only be applicable for the Christian school classroom, it is nonetheless an implication which ought not to be overlooked. The results of this study, simply put, suggest that Christian school teachers have the ability to counsel their students according to counsel their students according to biblical truths. In fact, one may rightfully state that Christian school teachers, in today's culture more than ever, have the *responsibility* to counsel their students according to biblical truths (at the appropriate times and in the appropriate manners). This is an implication which can apply itself to both the neurotypical student and the ASD student, as the Christian's responsibility to disciple others is entertained by the Lord Jesus and various others.<sup>130</sup> The inquiry may then be posed that, if Christian school teachers have the ability and the responsibility to counsel their students biblically, how do they do this? This research project partially answers this inquiry. While specifically dealt with is the idea of counseling students on the spectrum, universal biblical counseling techniques are presented in Chapter Two which can apply to all people at all times. Therefore, it is important to understand, based on the results recorded in the previous chapter, that biblical counseling can play a role in both the special and general education classrooms. Further and finally, in regard to this implication, one may see that its roots were established in the "Theological Foundations" of Chapter Two. Much of that section dealt with the biblical importance of counseling, and it therefore may be understood that counseling can be important in a classroom setting. If one is to

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<sup>130</sup> Bruce Ware, *Big Truths for Young Hearts: Teaching and Learning the Greatness of God*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 73.

train students from a Christian perspective, then at times, some forms of guidance or counsel may take place. Therefore, the points asserted in Chapter Two on the importance and necessity of biblical counseling have found their way into this Chapter Five implication.

The second implication for discussion is that a positive correlation exists between training and efficacy. This is a more obvious implication with which most would agree prior to this study. After all, it is the Bible which echoes this truth the loudest (one example being the writer of Proverbs encouraging the reader to “train up a child in the way he should go, that when he is old he will not depart from it”) (Prov. 22:6). Of course, the writer in Proverbs knows that this will not always be the case, but in God’s wisdom, understands that training ideally results in positive actions. Therefore, it is not a stretch to state that if one is trained, regardless of the field, this training should positively correlate with effective results. Therefore, the basic idea of this project’s thesis is once more supported, that if special education teachers are trained in biblical counseling techniques, they will be able to care for their students better spiritually. This researcher actually established this point in Chapter Two. That is, regarding the section on meltdowns, it was noted that if these incidents and the feelings causing them are rightfully understood, one may be able to help an ASD individual manage them.<sup>131</sup> Once more, it can be said that training is the torch which lights the path to efficacy. This being established, it is necessary to move to the third implication.

The third implication of the results in Chapter Four is that there exists a positive correlation between Autism Spectrum Disorder and biblical counseling. This is perhaps the most profound and important implication of the entire research study. After all, if no positive

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<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 16.

correlation between these two concepts exists, then there has been no growth or positive results from this study. However, this is not the case. As has been seen through the Likert surveys, interviews, journal entries, and observations, the educators' newfound abilities to counsel those on the spectrum and point them to biblical truths has led them to greater success in their classrooms and therapy sessions. Therefore, a clear positive correlation exists between these two concepts, paving the way for further research to be completed in this area. Further, it is important to understand that this point aligns, in some ways, with other research that has been conducted regarding the human mind. While Doctors Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves do not directly discuss the autism spectrum, they do make a point of noting that human behavior increases positively when the elements of the mind are rightly understood.<sup>132</sup> Further, it has been a part of the main thesis statement, and therefore hypothesis of this author that a positive correlation exists between autism and biblical counseling. This was a point that was noted rather explicitly in both Chapters One and Two.

The fourth implication of this action research project is that the experiment could be repeated in a general education classroom. If the previous implication was the most significant, this implication is in second place. Many times, high-functioning students with autism, or in rare cases, lower-functioning ASD students, traverse education in the general classroom, among many neurotypical peers. This being the case, it is important that this experiment be repeated with general education classroom teachers in order that they better understand their ASD students and are able to care for them spiritually. Further, the repetition of this experiment in a general education classroom could potentially open the door for these teachers to better care for

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<sup>132</sup> *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* (Sand Diego: TalentSmart EQ, 2009), 91.



all of their students spiritually. The research which has been conducted here could be the gateway to equipping teachers to also become biblical counselors, deepening their relationship with all students and therefore increasing the efficacy of their education. Consider, for example, the success story of ASD author Kerry Magro noted in the “Literature Review.” She was able to find success partially by perseverance, and partially through the help of others.<sup>133</sup> If ASD individuals can find success as members of society through the help and care of others, it stands to reason that students in a general education setting could as well.

The fifth implication of this study is that schools, and Christian schools in particular, ought to provide some form of in-house training in regard to students with autism and other disorders. This researcher noticed a significant difference in some educators due to the training provided. Even those educators who were not significantly affected were at least affected in a minimal way. If this training was effective for special education teachers, who entered this project with some foreknowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorder, how much more effective could the training be for teachers in the general education classroom? An implication may be found here which is nothing short of revolutionary. After all, an important element of the Christian life is that of radical faith in Christ which calls one to do extraordinary things of service to others.<sup>134</sup> What an incredible testimony to the Christian faith is Christian educators gained the ability to serve their students on the spectrum in this way. Each student, whether autistic or not, has been made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). This was an essential point made in the “Theological

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>134</sup> David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (New York: Multnomah Books, 2010), 161.

Foundations” section of Chapter Two, and it may be recalled here to further establish this implication, and even a subsequent application.

Sixth, the research at hand implies a need and an importance of approaching biblical counseling through the iceberg model as established from the beginning of this project. As has been previously noted, the style and perspective on biblical counseling through which this author approached the project is the iceberg model. The iceberg model is a style of biblical counseling which understands that each person has emotions and driving forces underneath the surfaces of their actions which cause them behave in the ways in which they do. Further, these occurrences underneath the surface of their hearts cause them to gravitate and make willing choices to commit certain sins against God. This model has now proven to be affective to a degree in the spiritual care of ASD students. This being the case, an implication is made that the iceberg model of biblical counseling ought to be used in favor to others, such as the *nouthetic* counseling model.<sup>135</sup> Other research could and should be completed in this area, but an implication has been made here which ought not to be ignored.

Seventh, the research here implies a need and importance for Christian schools throughout the world to engage the autistic and special needs communities. This point will be explored further in the “Applications” section, but it is also important to identify here. The research demonstrates the care which Christian school special educators are capable of providing to their students, and specifically those students with a diagnosis of autism. This implication is, again, important, because it will lead into a crucial application of similar proportions in the pages to follow. Engaging with the special needs community is an important point which should be

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<sup>135</sup> Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Casebook: Applying the Principles of Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 4.

made for any Christian organization, as well as with any Christian as an individual. As has been previously noted by Grant Macaskill, the ASD community deserves the same love and respect from others that God has already given to them Himself.<sup>136</sup>

Eighth, the results chronicled in Chapter Four imply that students with autism are capable of spiritual growth. Actually, the implication could be broadened to state that ASD individuals in general are capable of spiritual growth. This is significant because it has often been stated that students with disorders and disabilities tend to avoid growth.<sup>137</sup> Of course, the level and rate of growth is dependent on the severity of the autism symptoms, but it is nonetheless correct to ascertain that those with autism are able to grow spiritually. Previously, little research or conversation has occurred regarding this issue, and it is the opinion of this researcher that this is the case because it has been largely unknown whether the autistic community can truly grow spiritually. However, this research proves that, in some capacity, individuals on the spectrum have the ability to make progress in their spiritual lives and journeys. In fact, the reader may recall several success stories which were shared in Chapter Two, including one in which an ASD individual became quite the functioning member of society due to personal growth.<sup>138</sup> If individuals with ASD can grow in the ways mentioned in that work, there is no reason why they cannot experience great spiritual growth, becoming more of who God created them to be.

The section to follow will deal specifically with applications which build from the implications of the research results. The applications will discuss the ways in which this research could affect others' actions moving forward, and is therefore a pivotal piece of the puzzle of

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 193-194.

<sup>137</sup> Lynda Hunt, *Fish in a Tree* (New York: Puffin Books, 2015), 185.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 289.

progress for the autistic community as it relates to this research. Therefore, it is necessary to proceed with optimism, understanding better the ways in which the research can apply to the general public, the autistic community, Christians, and special educators.

### **Research Applications**

As is the case with research implications, some applications must also be made which should affect not only this researcher or the reader, but larger people groups such as employees of the education system, the Church, and the general public. These applications are that 1) individuals with disorders and disabilities need to be provided with opportunities to receive biblical counseling, 2) teachers must further recognize the depth of their role in students' lives, 3) those with autism ought to be given more opportunities to study the Bible on their level, 4) this experiment's potential efficacy in the general education classroom, 5) that the Church must seek to become all things to those who need Christ or call themselves His disciples. An explanation of these points is necessary, and therefore will be provided moving forward, and 6) that the autistic community is capable of growing spiritually, and therefore ought to be pushed in this direction by the neurotypical believing community.

If one is to apply the results of the research at hand, then it must become clear that individuals with disorders and disabilities need to be provided with opportunities to receive biblical counseling. Various counseling practices exist and have been established to provide purposeful and helpful counseling which points individuals to God and His Word. However, few, if any of these institutions offer tailored biblical counseling to those with disorders or disabilities, and especially to those with Autism Spectrum Disorder. These ideas were noted back in Chapter

Two's section on counseling those with ASD. That is, while institutions may have trained counselors on staff, it is rare to find those who are able to understand the mind of someone on the spectrum, and who can also guide this person to a greater understanding of what God desires for their lives. This is a reality which needs to change, and this researcher believes that this study could be the beginning of this change.

The second application of this study is that teachers must begin to further realize the depths of their roles in the lives of students. The teachers in the special education department at Salem seem to have a healthy grasp on this reality, but it is clear that before this project, they were less informed in this role than they are in the present. That is, teachers are much more than just government-mandated employees who fill time with activities and learning. Rather, particularly in Christian education, teachers and therapists alike play the roles of disciplinarians, educators, caretakers, and, if understood correctly, counselors. Klaus Issler echoes these truths when he mentions the essential nature of community and mentorship in the Christian life.<sup>139</sup> A teacher must rightly understand these things if he or she is to be effective and successful for the glory of God and for the sake of the student. Further, if this is the case for neurotypical student-teacher relationships, how much more so is it the case for ASD student-neurotypical teacher relationships? The effect of a good teacher on the life of a student is immeasurable—imagine if a teacher should have the opportunity to have the effect of a biblical educator and counselor. Overall, the importance of a teacher's impact on the life of a student cannot be understated, and

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<sup>139</sup>Klaus Issler, *Living into the Life of Jesus: The Formation of Christian Character* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 108.

this is a notion which serves as an echo of Chapman's assertions in shared in the "Literature Review."<sup>140</sup>

The third application of this study is that students with autism ought to be provided with more opportunities to study the Bible on their level. As the research continued, the educators involved became increasingly aware that, just as they had to teach ASD students academic truths in a way they could understand, so they had to guide them with biblical truths in an understandable way. Students on the spectrum generally are not provided the opportunities to learn biblical truth on their level unless they are part of a school which teaches the Bible. Even then, this truth may or may not be on their level, depending on whether they are allowed to be a part of a special education program. Therefore, it would seemingly be a plausible application to call both Christian schools and local churches alike to provide opportunities for those on the spectrum to learn the Bible on their level. After all, one of the principle roles and responsibilities of the Christian body is that of encouragement to learn the things which God has spoken of in His Word.<sup>141</sup> Further and finally, this point ties nicely to the application that more opportunities ought to be provided for those on the spectrum to receive biblical counseling. Temple Grandin perhaps states it best when she notes that those on the spectrum interpret sensory data differently than neurotypicals (a point noted earlier in this work).<sup>142</sup> In other words, those with ASD ultimately see the world differently, and therefore should be provided, in Christian communities, with opportunities to read and study Scripture on their levels.

The fourth application is the repeated thought that this experiment can and should be

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>141</sup> Larry Crabb, *Encouragement: The Unexpected Power of Building Others Up* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 157.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 117.

completed again in a general education classroom which holds students on the spectrum. This application may be linked nicely to statements already made in Chapter Two.<sup>143</sup> An excellent way to apply this study to the field of education is the train teachers in general education, who typically have no training on Autism Spectrum Disorder, regarding this disorder and biblical counseling. Therefore, these teachers would potentially have an increased ability to care for these ASD students, as well as increased positive interactions with these students.

A fifth application of this research is that neurotypicals, and especially neurotypical Christians, should not expect autistic persons to mask their symptoms. While few, if any, researchers would suggest neurotypicals' desire for masking, it is clear that the treatment of the autistic community sometimes inadvertently communicates this desire. ASD children, adolescents, and adults, are uniquely created beings who should not have to hide the symptoms of their disorders. These individuals, of course, need help in understanding themselves, regulating themselves, and making the journey throughout this world. However, autistic persons should be allowed to forge their own identities (according to God's plan for their lives, should they choose to follow Him). Autism is not a disorder which has to be hidden, nor is it a disorder which defines a person. Rather, a person should have the opportunity to define autism. At the risk of redundancy, Devon Price notes the unhealthy mental state that often accompanies the masking of autism.<sup>144</sup>

A sixth application of the research is that more Christian schools ought to find ways to consider and serve the autistic and special needs community. Salem is not a perfect school, but the very existence of its Discovery Center, accompanied by the participants' willingness to

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 193-194.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 53.

engage in this study, demonstrates a clear desire to serve the large community of students with learning and social differences. This has made Salem quite the popular school, and certainly sets it apart from other Christian schools in the surrounding areas. Clear from this research is that, regardless of other takeaways, more formal Christian education is needed for those on the autism spectrum, as well as for those with other disorders and disabilities. A strong need presents itself here, not only in American culture, but in the surrounding world. While this application will accompany the sixth one in a number of ways, it is important to list this fifth one as a distinctly important point for Christian school education. Heavy exploration into this possibility and idea ought to come about as a result of this research, even if it is as simple as further research in order to reach more foundational applications. At the risk of redundancy, both this application and the next may serve as echoes of assertions already shared by Macaskill back in Chapter Two<sup>145</sup>

A seventh and final application of this research project is the idea that the Church must become all things to those who seek to know Christ or call themselves Christ's disciples. The Apostle Paul is the originator of this thought, as he notes well in his letter to the Corinthian church that he has become all things to all people in order to reach them for the sake of Christ (1 Cor. 9:22). While Paul is not suggesting here that Christians should engage in sin to relate to others, he is suggesting that we seek to understand them in such a way that we are able to effectively lead them to Christ and disciple them. Similarly, Christian educators and the Church as a whole should seek to understand Autism Spectrum Disorder, along with other disorders and disabilities for that matter, in order to reach those with a diagnosis for the sake of the gospel and of Christian living.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 193-194.



Admittedly, application seven is a bit derivative of application six. Clearly, it has been proven in this study that the autistic community is able to make progress in multiple areas. Their emotional regulation is able to improve, their challenges are able to be more easily overcome, and, finally, their spiritual lives and relationships with God are able to grow. This being the case, the neurotypical believing community ought to come alongside those with autism and help them to grow spiritually. This concept may manifest itself in different ways in the future, but it is important to recognize this sixth application in relation to the study in order that a gateway may be provided moving forward.

### **Research Limitations**

While research limitations were discussed earlier in this project, these limitations were noted before the research process began. Therefore, these were projected limitations which were expected to be a part of the project. However, having completed the research, a few certain limitations have exhibited themselves which are important to consider. Therefore, the next paragraphs will be dedicated to discussing these limitations: 1) time, 2) age range, 4) SBCS as its own unique entity, and 4) limited research at the outset of the project.

Time is perhaps the most deciding factor in all human history. That is, God is on the throne, but human beings are limited by time in a way that He is not. Therefore, time has played a role as a limitation of this research process in several ways. First, it is important to understand that the research process itself could only be conducted for a short period of time. Potentially, more results would have been yielded either positively or negatively if the research had been conducted longer. However, one must consider the research that was able to be completed with the allotted time. A second way in which time was a limiting factor is found in classroom

observations. That is, classroom observations were completed in a sufficient amount of time, but not a lengthy amount of time. Had this research had the ability to remain longer in each classroom, different or more results might have been exhibited. Nonetheless, time was provided and used to the best possible ability of this researcher. Having noted the limitation of time, it is necessary to move into the factor of age range.

The age range of students who were in classrooms during this project was from 13-18 years of age. While this is an opportune time for biblical counseling to take place in the life of a student, the research is admittedly limited because students exist below this age range. Therefore, this research cannot speak in a complete manner to ASD students' response to biblical counseling techniques before the age of thirteen. This study also cannot speak, therefore, to the interactions between students of that age range and their teachers. A hypothesis can be established, and perhaps even a theory ascertained, but concrete results may not be provided at this time.

A third limitation of the research after its conduction is that of Salem Baptist Christian School existing as its own entity. That is, SBCS is an individual school with certain teachers and certain students. Therefore, even if it is highly likely that this research will yield the same results elsewhere, it must be considered that various factors could play into the research in different institutions. These things being established, it is simply important to remember that this research has only been conducted at one Christian school at this time, and therefore is shown to be limited in this way.

Fourth, a limitation exists in the amount of research which was completed on Autism Spectrum Disorder prior to this project. This is not to say the Literature Review is incomplete or lacks sufficiency (the most recent and prominent research was provided). Rather, it is a statement that, at this time, limited research concerning Autism Spectrum Disorder exists; there is less

research in this area than in others. Further, until now, little to no research has been conducted in the realm of autism's relationship to biblical counseling. Therefore, while the project is sufficient and effective, it is standing on its own as a crossover between two fields: special education and biblical counseling. Therefore, it is nearly unnecessary to state the obvious limitations in relation to this point. Applications in mind, the reader may now turn attention to the potential for further research in this field.

Fifth, it is important to understand the limitation of perspectives. That is, the participants in the research provided important and honest perspectives about the results. Further, this research has observed progress in the attitudes of teachers and their abilities to care for their students on the spectrum. However, students were not directly involved in this project, meaning that they were not interviewed, and results from their perspective were not necessarily recorded. Observed results which implied their perspectives were recorded, but the students, simply due to the design of this process, were not verbally inquired as to their feelings about their teachers following this process. Again, progress seemed to be made, but a simple limitation is that students were not verbally required to share their perspective. This is not necessarily a negative, as student actions spoke louder than words as teachers grew in their abilities to spiritually care for them. However, it is a limitation which must be noted and might be addressed in future research if this experiment is replicated.

### **Further Research**

Further research is important to discuss, as a project can often elicit more questions and answers. Various concepts have been clearly defined, and results have been provided which can be definitive in some ways. However, a few ideas emerged in this study which would suggest

that further research is necessary. The points of further research in this field may be listed as follows: 1) training of teachers in biblical counseling and autism in general education settings, 2) the continued understanding of challenges and thought processes of ASD individuals, 3) the exploration of multiple training sessions in the potential repetition of this experiment, 4) the role of biblical counseling in a school setting, and 5) the relationship between autism and the universal Church.

As previously mentioned, an excellent application of the research findings at hand is that general education teachers with ASD students be trained in biblical counseling techniques (or be trained in biblical counseling as a standalone practice). The research process has thus proved that a positive correlation, and even a need, exists between teachers, biblical counseling, and the abilities of these teachers to better serve students. However, much research remains to be completed in this field. This research could include experiments in other contexts, with more age groups, or other disorders. Whatever the case, it is crucial to understand that the research which has been completed here is intentionally pioneering.

A second area of further research is that of challenges faced by ASD, as well as ASD students' mental abilities. While a sufficient Literature Review of current research has been provided, much remains to be learned about autism. Only in the modern era has autism been so extensively discussed and understood. Therefore, it is necessary to further one's research, in whatever capacity, regarding the knowledge of the way autism manifests itself in the human brain. Perhaps challenges faced or helpful techniques in and for these individuals are on the horizon, if only further experiments would be conducted.

Third, the possibility and value of multiple training sessions in the potential repetition of this experiment ought to be explored. That is, the training session which launched this research

project proved to be effective in gaining positive results. However, one can not help but wonder the ways in which these results could be enhanced if later participants in this repeated experiment were offered more than one training session, or a refresher regarding the initial training session. Therefore, this author would heavily advocate for the experiment chronicled here to be repeated with the opportunity for multiple training sessions regarding autism and biblical counseling.

Fourth, the role of biblical counseling in a school setting, and more specifically in a Christian school setting, ought to elicit further research. In other words, it has been made clear in this project that a positive correlation exists between autism and biblical counseling in regard to students. Therefore, it would be important to discern, in future research, whether or not this positive correlation exists for the majority of students, neurotypical or not, and the more permanent place of biblical counseling in the educational setting.

Fifth, more research needs to be conducted regarding the spiritual state of the ASD individual's mind. That is, certain implications can be made from this research, specifically that ASD individuals are capable of spiritual growth. Further, one may also rightfully assert that ASD individuals are made in the image of God yet affected by a sin nature as the rest of mankind. However, a serious lack of research exists in the Christian world regarding ASD and other disorders. Therefore, this author would love to see more research conducted on the spiritual lives of those with autism (of course, specifically relating to Christianity).

Sixth and finally, more research must be conducted on the relationship between autism and the universal Church. That is, while some research has been done, more needs to emerge specifically addressing autism and Christianity, autistic Christians, and the ways in which both neurotypical Christians and autistic Christians ought to interact with one another. This particular

topic could be pivotal to better understanding God’s plan for the Church in the present, as well as leading the autistic community as a whole to a greater understanding of the way in which they are viewed by their Creator. Volumes could be written on this particular application, as it is important that the Church steps up and serves the needs found in the world to the best of its ability. Crabb once again, in a different volume, echoes this truth when he calls Christian men in particular to “move beyond Adam’s silence” and be examples for Christ in the world He has created.<sup>146</sup> While this work speaks to specific issues in the home, it is important to understand that it is supportive of the same assertion which is communicated here: that the Church must take responsibility to reach every person, great and small, with the Gospel of Jesus and true Christian discipleship, be it in the form of biblical counseling or otherwise. Counselors Rob Green and Steve Viars also assert the truths presented by Crabb, specifically noting that there is a place which ought to be made for biblical counseling in the local church.<sup>147</sup> Depending on the contexts in which various local churches find themselves, they may have the opportunity, drawing from this research, to “double their ministries for God.”<sup>148</sup>

The entirety of the project at hand has focused on merging biblical counseling perspectives and research regarding Autism Spectrum Disorder. These concepts were combined in the pursuit of a thesis which stated that if training in biblical counseling techniques is provided for SBCS special education teachers, then they will be better able to serve their ASD students. Research was conducted using multiple tools in a triangulation format, designed to recruit and

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<sup>146</sup> Larry Crabb, *Men of Courage: God’s Call to Move Beyond the Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 35.

<sup>147</sup> Rob Green and Steve Viars, “The Biblical Counseling Ministry of the Local Church,” *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, ed. by James MacDonald, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2013), 255.

<sup>148</sup> Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015.

work with participants in the specific context that is the upper school Discovery Center at Salem Baptist Christian School. As the research was conducted and results were provided, various conclusions could be drawn including implications of the research, applications of the research, and further points of research that derive themselves from the present discussion. The ultimate result, in the opinion of this researcher, proved the thesis on a smaller scale and opened the door for more research to be completed in this field. Much remains to be done regarding Christian special education and biblical counseling. However, both the reader and this author may remain positive and open regarding the future in these fields individually, as well as these fields in a combined sense. The research at hand has begun what could be a pivotal movement of study and discussion on these topics for years to come. However, as experienced pastor Kent Hughes notes, one must be careful to measure success according to biblical standards.<sup>149</sup> This research yields promising academic and even scientific results regarding the autism spectrum, but a Christian worldview is at play here in which teachers have become more successful in spiritual care through biblical principles

### **Conclusion**

While it is not the intention of this researcher to require the reader to examine a lengthy conclusion, the major aspects of this study ought to be repeated so as to provide closure. However, a reminder of the progress made in this study is an important provision. The study began with a humble discussion of the ministry context of the research. This ministry context described the history of Salem Baptist Christian School, its location, and several other important matters. Chapter One ventured forth to discuss other key issues inlaying the foundation of the research. These key issues included the problem presented, the purpose of the study, basic

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<sup>149</sup> Kent and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Your Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 31.

assumptions, definitions, limitations and delimitations, and the thesis statement. The problem presented was that special education teachers at Salem did not properly understand how to spiritually care for their ASD students. The purpose was to provide this training and to observe the ways in which it affected these educators' interactions with their autistic students. Finally, in closing Chapter One, the thesis was provided, stating that if training in biblical counseling techniques is provided for SBCS special education teachers, then they will be better able to serve their ASD students. This provided an intriguing point on which to transition into the Literature Review.

Chapter Two was dedicated to a review of the most current and the most important literature on the topics with which this research addressed. These topics included Autism Spectrum Disorder (its definitions, challenges, strengths, etc.) and biblical counseling techniques (different types of biblical counseling, the type to be utilized in this research, and the techniques themselves). Following these discussions, two more pieces of the foundation began in Chapter One were added: theological and theoretical foundations. Theological foundations were quite important, as they detailed the ways in which this research was important and valuable spiritually speaking. Further, the theological foundations further supported the rationale behind the project. The theoretical foundations reviewed literature regarding biblical counseling, and the ways in which this literature, interwoven with God's Word, supported the necessity of the research. The Literature Review having been conducted, it was now time to move into Chapter Three.

Chapter Three held within its pages a couple of key parts to the research: the research design (that which was projected to take place) and the research design implementation (that which actually took place). Of course, without this chapter, progress would have halted, as this was the "action" part of the action research project. The design itself and the implementation will



not be restated in their entirety. However, it is important to note that this chapter included important elements of the research such as the tools to be used, the participants to be recruited, and several other important factors. The tools to be used, in particular, were Likert scale surveys, regular interviews, classroom observations, and journal entries (all building upon learned information in the initial training session). Following Chapter Three, the results were shared.

Chapter Four, in short, records the results of the research process. Divided into subsections for each research tool, this fourth chapter intends to effectively communicate the results from the Likert scales, the observations, interviews, and journal entries. This results were further expounded upon in Chapter Five, but were provided for the reader to objectively view in this chapter. Chapter Five discusses the implications and the applications of the research project, which will not be reiterated here. However, it is important to understand that the results in Chapters Four and Five demonstrate a key truth: that progress was made regarding the thesis. Some progress was minimal, and some participants demonstrated further progress than others. However, the thesis was ultimately proven, that if training in biblical counseling techniques is provided for SBCS special education teachers, then they will be better able to serve their ASD students. May the reader engage with this research in the way they see fit. Some may simply be informed. Others may be intrigued. Others will continue to carry the research forward, repeating this experiment, adjusting this experiment, continuing to pave the way for the biblical counselor, the ASD individual, and the relationship between both of these individuals and God's Church in the future.

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## APPENDIX A

Table 1: LIKERT SCALE: DISCOVERY CENTER TEACHER SURVEY

Discovery Center Teacher Survey	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.				
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.				
I understand well, in light of biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.				
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.				
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.				
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.				
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.				
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.				

## APPENDIX B

Table 2: DISCOVERY CENTER TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level One Interview Questions</b> (for use during the first two interviews)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level Two Interview Questions</b> (for use during the next two interviews)</p>
<p>In the past two weeks, in what ways have you interacted with your students with autism spectrum disorder?</p>	<p>In what specific ways has your perspective on the autism spectrum shifted during this process?</p>
<p>What emotions do you typically feel when you interact, in the classroom or otherwise, with your students on the spectrum?</p>	<p>Would you say that, as a result of this study, you feel better equipped to handle challenges and guide your ASD students spiritually? Why or why not?</p>
<p>What parts of the biblical counseling perspective and techniques which were taught to you do you remember? Do you need to be refreshed?</p>	<p>As the end of this study draws near, how will you use the knowledge which you have gained moving forward?</p>
<p>Do you find your interactions with ASD students to be more positive with an increased understanding of their challenges?</p>	<p>At this point in the study, what specific changes have you noticed in your interactions with ASD students, either internally or externally?</p>

<p>Do you find yourself becoming more patient with the misbehaviors of your autistic students as a result of this process?</p>	<p>How has this study thus far improved your abilities as a Christian special educator?</p>
<p>What have you begun to discover about yourself in your role as a teacher as a result of this process?</p>	<p>Have you developed any questions or techniques on your own to help your ASD students based on the knowledge you have gained?</p>
<p>What is one spiritual challenge which you can see below the surface in each of your ASD students?</p>	<p>What challenges have you found during this process that you face as an educator of ASD individuals?</p>
<p>Based on your answer to the previous question, how would you approach spiritual care and counseling for those students?</p>	<p>Based on your answer to the above question and the training you have had throughout this process, how can you counsel yourself in overcoming those challenges?</p>

## APPENDIX C

### STAFF LETTER OF CONSENT

#### Consent

**Title of the Project:** A Study on the Effects of Biblical Counseling Techniques on Teacher Relationships with Students with Autism

**Principal Investigator:** Matthew McNeill, Doctoral Candidate, John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be either a student, ages 12-18, with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder enrolled in Salem Baptist Christian School's special education program, or the teacher of one such student. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to observe the effects on special education teachers that a knowledge of biblical counseling techniques in relation to students with autism has.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a Likert scale questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study. This questionnaire may take 5-7 minutes to fill out, and will be completed initially, and once more after 2-3 months.
2. Participate in regular interviews regarding the way in which student interactions have changed as a result of the new knowledge and training given.

3. Record, based on prompts, regular entries regarding student interactions in a provided reflective journal.
4. Intentionally and regularly pay close attention to interactions with students who have a diagnosis of autism.

#### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include: 1) learning more about the way people think, 2) gaining a greater understanding of the way in which individuals may be counseled biblically, 3) growing in your interactions and ability to spiritually care for students with autism, and 4) growing your abilities as a Christian special educator.

Benefits to society include: 1) the ability to repeat this research process for the above benefits elsewhere, 2) a greater understanding of autism in relation to counseling, 3) a greater appreciation for autism spectrum disorder and understanding of the disorder in Christian circles.

#### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be [used in future research studies or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer, as well as in a secure file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Matthew McNeill. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, [name], at [email].

### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

### Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

---

Printed Subject Name

---

Signature & Date

## APPENDIX D

## PERMISSION LETTER

May 10, 2023

Mrs. Susie Cole  
Discovery Center Director  
Salem Baptist Christian School  
429 South Broad Street  
Winston-Salem, NC  
27101

Dear Mrs. Cole,

As a graduate student in the John J. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for Doctorate of Ministry degree. The title of my research project is A Study on the Effects of Biblical Counseling Techniques on Teacher Relationships with Students with Autism and the purpose of my research is to observe the effects on special education teachers that a knowledge of biblical counseling techniques in relation to students with autism has.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in the Discovery Center at Salem Baptist Christian School, to contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study, and to access and utilize student/staff test data/records/etc.

Participants will be asked to complete the attached survey, participate in reflective journal entries, participate in interviews, and be observed in the classroom. The data will be used to assess whether or not their training in biblical counseling related to Autism Spectrum Disorder has improved their interactions with and ability to spiritually care for the students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to [REDACTED] A permission request template has been provided for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Matthew McNeill  
Campus Ministries  
MS/HS Teacher

### Likert Scale Survey to be Attached to above Email

Discovery Center Teacher Survey	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.				
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.				
I understand well, in light of biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.				
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.				
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.				
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.				
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.				
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.				



### Permission Response Letter Template to be Attached to above Email

[Please provide this document on official letterhead or copy and paste into an email. Permission response letters/emails should be returned to you, the researcher, and not the IRB. Upon receipt of documentation of permission, please attach it to your Cayuse application and return your application to the IRB.]

[Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Company]

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

[Address 3]

Dear [Researcher's Name]:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled [Title of Research Proposal], [I/we] have decided to grant you permission to [Select the appropriate phrase:] [access our membership list/contact our faculty/staff/other and invite them to participate in your study]—OR—[conduct your study at [name of district/school/church/etc.]]—OR—[receive and utilize [name/description of archival data] for your research study]—OR—[other].

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

Retain, delete, modify, or add to the below options as applicable to your study.

[[I/We] will provide our membership list to [your name], and [your name] may use the list to contact our members to invite them to participate in [his/her] research study.

[[I/We] grant permission for [your name] to contact [description of potential participants] to invite them to participate in [his/her] research study.]

[[I/We] will not provide potential participant information to [your name], but we agree to [[send/provide] [his/her] study information to [description of potential participants] on [his/her] behalf.]

[If you are requesting archival data, retain the option listed below that is applicable to your study and remove the option that is not applicable.]

[The requested data **WILL BE STRIPPED** of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

[The requested data **WILL NOT BE STRIPPED** of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

[Retain the below option if desired.]

[[I/We] are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.]

Sincerely,

[Official's Name]

[Official's Title]

[Official's Company/Organization]

## APPENDIX E

### STAFF VERBAL RECRUITMENT

#### **Verbal Recruitment for Special Education Teachers**

Hello Potential Participant,

As a student in the John J. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate of Ministry degree. The purpose of my research is to observe the effects on special education teachers that a knowledge of biblical counseling techniques in relation to students with autism. If you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Staff participants, if willing, will be asked to:

1. Participate in a Likert scale questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study. This questionnaire may take 5-7 minutes to fill out, and will be completed initially, and once more after 2-3 months.
2. Participate in regular interviews regarding the way in which student interactions have changed as a result of the new knowledge and training given.
3. Record, based on prompts, regular entries regarding student interactions in a provided reflective journal.
4. Intentionally and regularly pay close attention to interactions with students who have a diagnosis of autism.

Student participants, if willing, will be asked to:

1. Attend school daily and participate in their classes as they normally would. Students will not be asked to do much. Their interactions with their teachers will be observed and recorded from time to time over a period of about two months.

It should take approximately 2 months to complete the procedures listed. Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

Would you like to participate or allow your student to participate? Yes? Great, would you mind completing this survey and returning it by handing it to me? No? I understand. Thank you for your time.

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Because participation is anonymous, you do not need to sign and return the consent document unless you would prefer to do so. After you have read the consent form, please complete and return the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

## APPENDIX F

### PARTICIPANT LIKERT SCALE SURVEY RESULTS

Therapist Ruth Lakey's Initial Survey Results



Likert Scale: Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire

Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.			✓	
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.		✓		
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.				✓
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.		✓		
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.		✓		
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.			✓	
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.				✓
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.			✓	

Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.		X		
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.		X		
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.		X		
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.		X		
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.			X	
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.			X	
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.		X		
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.		X		

If you could, please  
return either today  
or Mon.  
Thanks!  
- Matthew


Therapist Angie Clement's Intial Survey Results



Likert Scale: Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire

Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.		✓		
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.	✓			
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.		✓		
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.	✓			
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.		✓		
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.				✓
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.		✓		
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.		✓		

Therapist Angie Clement's Final Survey Results

  
**Discovery Center  
Teacher Questionnaire**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*If you could, please  
 return either today  
 or Mon.  
 Thanks!  
 - Matthew*





## Likert Scale: Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire

Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.		✓		
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.		✓		
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.			✓	
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.		✓		
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.		✓		
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.		✓		
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.			✓	
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.		✓		

## Therapist Michele Hendley's Final Survey Results

Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.			X		
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.			X		
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.				X	
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.			X		
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.			X		
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.				X	
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.					X
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.			X		

If you could, please  
 return either today  
 or Mon.  
 Thanks!  
 -Michele


## Classroom Teacher Susie Bianco's Initial Survey Results



Likert Scale: Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire

Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.				/
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.		/		
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.				/
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.				/
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.			/	
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.			/	
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.				/
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.			/	

Classroom Teacher Susie Bianco's Final Survey Results



Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.	/			
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.		/		
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.		/		
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.		/		
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.				/
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.				/
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.		/		
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.		/		

*If you could, please  
return either today  
or Mon.  
Thanks!  
- Matthe*



Classroom Teacher Molly Myers's Initial Survey Results

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.	✓			
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.	✓			
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.	✓			
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.	✓			
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.				✓
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.				✓
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.	✓			
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.	✓			

Table 3.1: Likert Scale: Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire



Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.	X			
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.	X			
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.	X			
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.	X			
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.			X	
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.				X
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.		X		
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.		X		

If you could, please  
 return either today  
 or Mon.  
 Thanks!  
 - Matthew

Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.	X			
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.	X			
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.	X			
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.	X			
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.				X
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.				X
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.	X			
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.	X			

Classroom Teacher Lindsey Aerker's final Survey Results

Discovery Center Teacher Questionnaire		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel confident in my ability to provide spiritual care for my students with autism.	X				
I feel confident that I handle most of my interactions with students on the spectrum in an understanding way.	X				
I understand well, considering biblical principles, the way that my students with autism think.	X				
I feel that I understand people and the reasons behind their behavior well.	X				
I often feel that I do not understand why my student is engaging in certain behaviors.					X
I do not build relationships with my students on the spectrum well.					X
I understand biblical counseling techniques and am able to use these techniques to help my students with autism.	X				
I feel confident in my ability to understand and handle the misbehaviors of my students with autism.	X				

## APPENDIX G

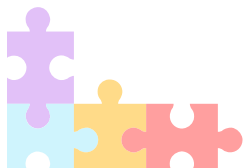
## TRAINING POWERPOINT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS



Training Slide 1



## Autism and Biblical Counseling



Training Slide 1 is nothing more than a captivating title page to interest the participant.

Training Slide 2



## Contents of this Session



<b>The Autism Spectrum</b>	Definitions, challenges, resources
<b>Biblical Counseling</b>	Definitions, techniques, resources
<b>Autism and Biblical Counseling</b>	Why collaborate?
<b>Research Methods</b>	The processes and expectations for this research project
<b>Questions</b>	Q&A
<b>Consent</b>	Signing letters of consent to participate in the research



Training Slide 2 is designed to give the trainee an overview of the contents of the session at hand. This helps the trainee begin to see the direction in which the training session is headed, as well as helps them not to become overwhelmed concerning the length of the session.



# Introduction

My Heart and My Story

Training Slide 3, while displaying little information, is a slide designed for this researcher to discuss his dealings in life with ASD individuals, and the heart and interest behind the research at hand.

## Training Slide 4



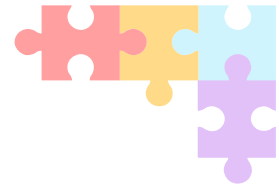
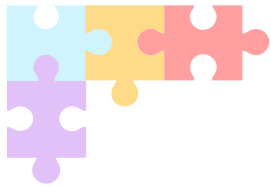
01

# The Autism Spectrum

Definitions, Beauty, and Challenges

Training Slide 4 introduces the trainee to a discussion on the definitions involved with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the beauty displayed by those on the spectrum, and the challenges faced by ASD individuals.

## Training Slide 5



“God has made each of us unique and different.  
Our goal is the same: union with God in Christ,  
transformation into His image, and the freeing of  
our hearts from anything that stands in the way of  
Christ living in and through us.”

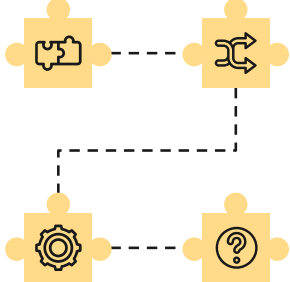
--Peter Scazzero

—**Peter Scazzero**



This slide displays a quote which has been pivotal since the beginning of the research process.

That is, that each individual, including those with autism, has been uniquely made by God.



## Autism and its Challenges

### Social

“Other behaviors [of people with ASD] that are odd and repetitively done can also be included as stereotypical.”  
--Katherine Paxton and Irene Estay

### Emotional

“According to the absent self theory, autistic persons have trouble introspecting, experiencing emotions, and reminiscing.”  
--Olivia Bustion

### Behavioral

“There are certain behavioral tendencies that go with [autism]. Persons with autism often find eye contact difficult, or their eye contact is seen by others as ‘unnatural’: they may hold eye contact for longer than is usually appropriate...”  
-Grant Macaskill

This slide is meant to display current research findings on autism and the challenges which those with a diagnosis face.



# Autism and its Challenges



## Anxiety

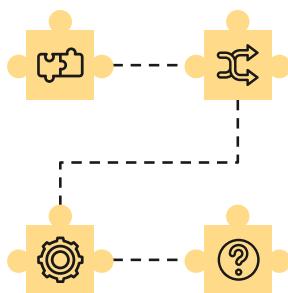
"Facing such rejection at church, and reasoning 'that social skills are more valued in Christian circles than others', some forum-members cope by trying to pass as non-autistic at church."

--Grant Macaskill

## Depression

"What causes so much stress for autistic people also induces stress for parents: uncertainty."

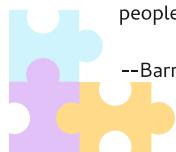
--Barry Prizant and Tom Fields-Meyer



## Sensory Issues

"Oh, my, even writing [about loud noises] makes me quiver. I remember being completely traumatized by [the fire drill]. It was then that I first discovered I had a fear of loud noises."

--Zachary Chapman



Slide 6 is designed to continue discussing the underlying challenges which those on the autism spectrum face daily.

## Training Slide 8

# God and Autism



“God has made each of us unique and different. Our goal is the same: union with God in Christ, transformation into His image, and the freeing of our hearts from anything that stands in the way of Christ living in and through us.”

--Peter Scazzero



## 1 Corinthians 1:27 ESV

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;



This slide is composed in order to display the way in which God views those with Autism Spectrum Disorder.





## Strengths of Autism



### **Chapman says:**

"I've learned how to use autistic is not a burden God made me the way I am for a reason, and I'm grateful. I've learned how to use autism to my advantage when it comes to my real life."



### **Vormer says:**

"A lot of people understand that autistic people can be hyper-focused and detail oriented, but few understand what a huge advantage this can be on the job. It it enables us to get a lot of work done and often without any errors."



### **Bustion says:**

"Autistic persons represent a wide range of intellectual abilities as well as ability to communicate in oral and written forms."



Slide 9 displays the unique strengths which those on the spectrum generally display.

Training Slide 10



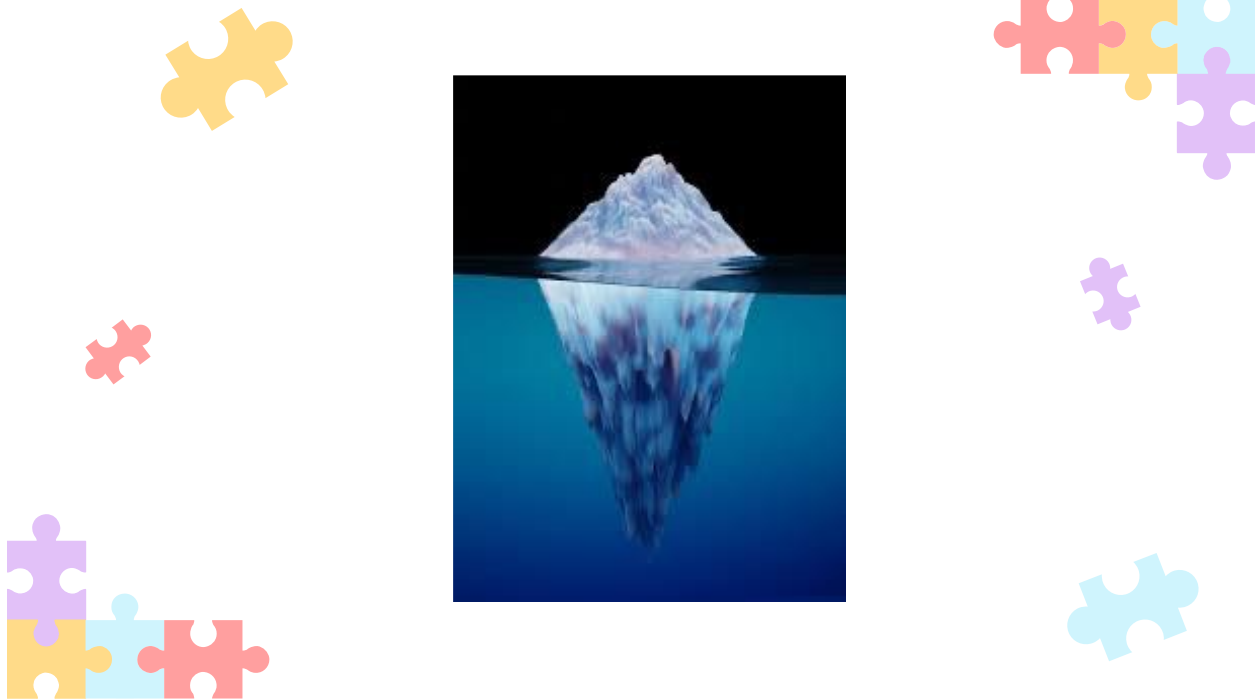
02

## Biblical Counseling

Definitions and Techniques

Slide 10 introduces the training section discussing the definitions and techniques regarding biblical counseling.

## Training Slide 11



Slide 11 displays a picture of an iceberg, spurring a discussion on the iceberg model of biblical counseling and the ways in which this model relates to those with Autism Spectrum Disorder and the challenges which they face.



## Definition

Techniques which are utilized by the biblical counselor to advise the individual being counseled according to the Word of God, as well as to help that individual understand him or herself better.



Slide 12 defines the phrase *biblical counseling techniques*.

## Training Slide 13



## Biblical Basis



### **Deuteronomy 6:7**

You shall teach them diligently to your children. And shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

### **Proverbs 20:5**

The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.

### **Proverbs 11:14**

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.

### **Matthew 28:18-20**

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."



Slide 13 provides biblical support for counseling.

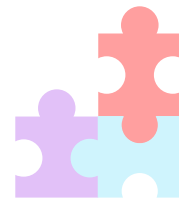
Training Slide 14

# Techniques

**Questions**

**CBT**

**Discipleship**



Slide 14 displays several common and efficacious biblical counseling techniques which this researcher discussed with participants. These techniques were also noted to be usable with those on the spectrum.

Training Slide 15

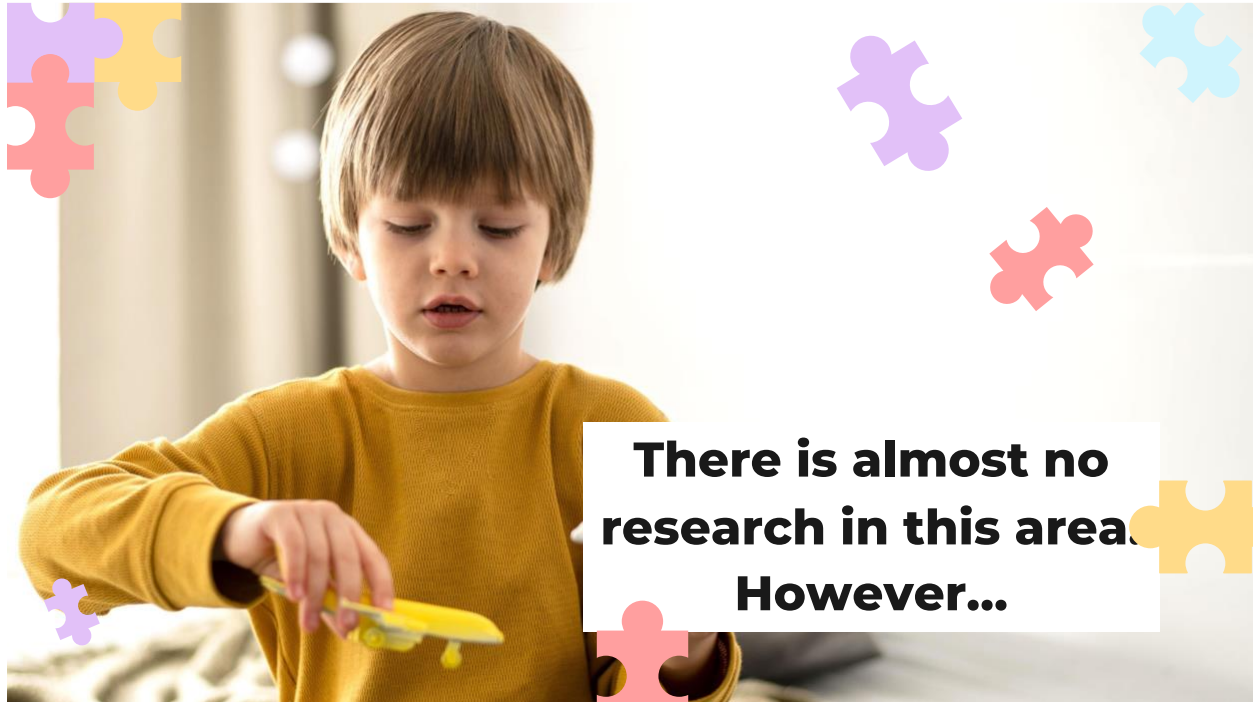


**03**

## **Autism and Biblical Counseling**

Slide 15 introduces the concept of combining autism and biblical counseling.

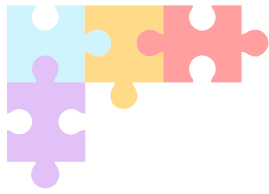
## Training Slide 16



This slide makes clear the importance of the research Project at hand while also hinting at the slides to come.



## Training Slide 17



If Biblical Counseling is designed to draw out what's going on underneath the surface, and if those with autism have more going on beneath the surface than many neurotypicals, then why is research not being done in this area?



This slide provides a thought-provoking question which is designed to help the participant understand the importance of the study which is taking place.



Slide 19 displays the three main goals of the research at hand.



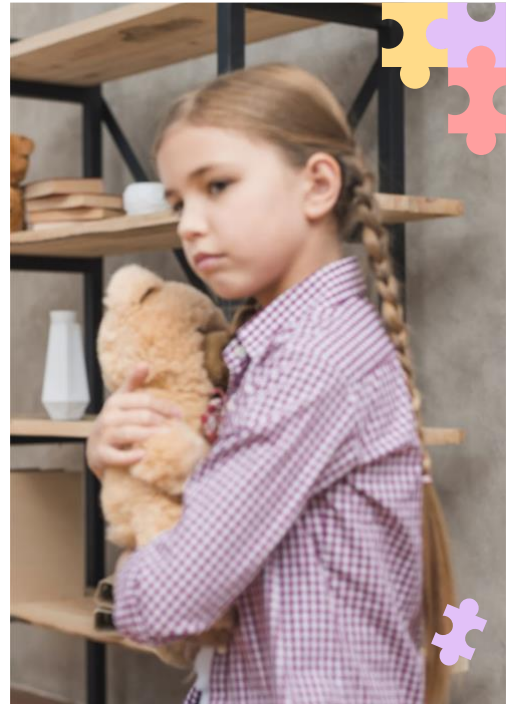
Slide 20 discusses the research tolos which Will be used in the study.

## Training Slide 21



## Special reminders

- You can do this!
- I am here to support you.
- If we're not as successful as we'd like to be, this is okay!



Training Slide 21 displays special reminders and points of encouragement to the participants to inspire them as they move forward with the research process.

## APPENDIX H

## FILL-IN-THE-BLANK HANDOUT FOR PARTICIPANT TRAINING

## The Autism Spectrum

## Definitions, Beauty, and Challenges

- Those on the autism spectrum face a variety of challenges every day, including those that are \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ in nature.
- These challenges may also exhibit themselves in the forms of \_\_\_\_\_, depression, and \_\_\_\_\_ issues.
- These challenges cause those on the spectrum to often feel tired, overwhelmed, and frustrated, leading to misbehaviors and misunderstandings.

## God and Autism

“God has made each of us unique and different. Our goal is the same: union with God in Christ, transformation into His image, and the freeing of our hearts from anything that stands in the way of Christ living in and through us.”

--Peter Scazzero

- 1 Corinthians 1:27 is a key verse that explains how God feels about those with autism.
- Autism does not have to be a \_\_\_\_\_ to the individual or others.
- Other disorders and issues seem to be more readily accepted in a \_\_\_\_\_ setting than autism—this should not be true.

## Biblical Counseling

- **Definition:** Techniques which are utilized by the biblical counselor to advise the individual being counseled according to the Word of God, as well as to help that individual understand him or herself better.

- A number of verses point to the importance of biblical counseling (Deut. 6:7, Prov. 11:14, Prov. 11:5, Matt. 28:18-20).
- Biblical counseling techniques include several methods such as \_\_\_\_\_ < cognitive behavioral therapy, and \_\_\_\_\_.

### Autism and Biblical Counseling

If Biblical Counseling is designed to draw out what's going on underneath the surface, and if those with autism have more going on beneath the surface than many neurotypicals, then why is research not being done in this area?

### Our Goals

- Improve student Behavior.
- Improve your ability to care for your students.
- Prove that biblical counseling can be used to help them.

### What Are We Doing?

- Likert Scale Survey
- Weekly Journal Entries
- Interviews
- Observations
- Likert Scale Survey

### Special Reminders

- You can do this!
- I am here to support you.
- If we're not as successful as we think we should be, it's okay!

## IRB APPROVAL LETTER

**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 1, 2023

Matthew McNeill  
Scott Edgar

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY22-23-1418 A Study on the Effects of Biblical Counseling Techniques on Teacher Relationships with Students with Autism

Dear Matthew McNeill and Scott Edgar,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds that your study does not meet the definition of human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your project is not considered human subjects research because it will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46.102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application. Any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. **If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word *research* with the word *project* throughout both documents.**

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair*  
**Research Ethics Office**