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What Does Empathy and Understanding Look Like Across Communication Divides?

Non-Speaking Autism as a Challenge to Practical Theology

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Abstract

In qualitative research, researchers and participants must understand each other. In hermeneutics, empathy is typically presented as the road to that understanding. In this article, we ask what empathy is and how empathy can contribute to the knowledge needed for practical theology. We also consider empathy between people who communicate in very different ways, such as when a non-speaking autistic person communicates with a speaking non-autistic person. By drawing on insights from philosophy, counseling, and social sciences and by discussing markers of linguistic and non-linguistic empathy, we work towards a theological account of empathy that is practically relevant in research and other situations.

Keywords

autism – practical theology – empathy – non-speaking – understanding – double empathy problem

1 Introduction

Empathy is often assumed to be a prerequisite for understanding and, therefore, forms part of the work of practical theology. But what does empathy look like between people who communicate in very different ways, including without speech? In a recent project, we (two speaking, non-autistic researchers) undertook a qualitative research investigation into how non-speaking autistic people experience church and Christian worship.¹ Most work of this kind has been with people who could articulate their thoughts in the discussion. However, more recently, we have sought to focus our research on non-speaking autistic people, a group significantly underrepresented in qualitative research, including practical theology.²

John Swinton and Harriet Mowat write that the ‘aim of practical theology is ... not simply to understand the world but also to change it.’³ This agenda is both ambitious and risky because change affects different people differently.⁴ As such, change is never neutral, and it is important to understand what change is needed or desirable from others’ perspectives.⁵ This is especially true when researching oppressed and marginalized groups, in this case, non-speaking autistic people, who have often been overlooked or even excluded from research into church practices. Researchers who can speak cannot presume to know what is good for those who cannot because the life experience of non-speaking people is so significantly different from that of speaking, non-autistic researchers. Therefore, to revise Swinton and Mowat’s claim, to change the world, practical theologians must also consider how they can understand it.

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- 1 In line with the preference of a majority of people on the autism spectrum, at least in the United Kingdom, where the authors are based, we will use identity first (i.e., ‘autistic person’) instead of person-first (i.e., ‘person with autism’) language. e.g., Kristen Bottema-Beutel et al., ‘Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers,’ *Autism in Adulthood* 3, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 18–29, <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0014>; Lorcan Kenny et al., ‘Which Terms Should Be Used to Describe Autism? Perspectives from the UK Autism Community,’ *Autism* 20, no. 4 (May 2016): 442–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315588200>.
 - 2 Non-speaking’ is a term that represents a diverse group of people who do not rely on speech as their primary way of communicating. Some can use a limited spoken vocabulary, others use spelling boards or word-signing systems such as Makaton, and others cannot communicate in words.
 - 3 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 27.
 - 4 Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 6.
 - 5 Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains, Studies in Practical Theology* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 204.

In hermeneutics, the field of inquiry that studies the concept and process of understanding, empathy is typically presented as the road to understanding experience, with spoken language often assumed to be the vehicle by which we travel there.⁶ However, very different accounts of empathy emerge across the various fields of inquiry, such as philosophy, counseling, and social sciences, and little from those accounts can be applied to interpersonal relations between speaking and non-speaking people. Therefore, in this paper, we will consider some of those different accounts (sections 2-4), working towards an account of empathy fitting the practical theology task. As part of the discussion, we will examine some of the methodological questions that arise regarding empathy when speaking, non-autistic researchers want to 'understand' the communication of participants who cannot represent their thoughts in spoken words or who find the use of words difficult (sections 5-6). Given Swinton and Mowat's suggestion, that one of practical theology's tasks is pointing out inauthentic practices of the church,⁷ we will also discuss how these considerations of empathy and understanding help to realize the church's vocation to be the 'body of Christ' wherein every member has a place and is valued (section 7).

Two examples from this research project illustrate the problem of empathy and understanding well. First, in my (Leon's) recent work in Singapore, I asked autistic people to take a camera to church and take pictures of anything during and after the worship service they wanted to show me. I gave their parents my interview questions and asked them to interview their child (in some cases, they were already adults but were living at home) and record that interview. These autistic people had limited speech and some preferred writing. I watched the recordings beforehand and then interviewed the autistic people myself as well, using the pictures as a starting point. Some participants did not seem very engaged when measured by conventional standards. For example, there was minimal eye contact, and the conversation consisted of short responses, sometimes in writing. Talking about feelings, experiences, or abstract concepts seemed impossible, and the conversation was very different from those I would usually have with interviewees. However, as we argue in this paper, the participants expressed their willingness to participate in the research, albeit in ways different from those we are used to.

The second example highlights that even though standard research methods make participation in research difficult for non-speaking autistic people,

6 Ruthellen H. Josselson and Amia Lieblich, *Interpreting Experience: The Narrative Study of Lives* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Incorporated, 1995), p. 36.

7 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 25.

we found that the participants in our study wanted to communicate with us and be part of our work. I (Henna) recently interviewed a young man who cannot speak but can spell words, letter by letter, on an alphabet board. The process was slow and very tiring for him. We took several breaks during the interview. He got up and left repeatedly, sometimes in the middle of a word or sentence. But he declined any suggestion that we terminate the interview – he kept coming back and was determined to keep going. Towards the end, when asked the ‘golden question’ of, ‘Is there anything else you want to tell me today?’ the young man, who was exhausted, still responded, ‘I’m so happy to be a part of this.’

These two examples highlight the practical concerns of the discussions to follow as we now move to developing a theoretical account of empathy in practical theology.

2 What is Empathy?

Given the normative place of the Bible in the Christian tradition, this seems to be the natural place for practical theologians to start looking for an account of empathy. However, there is no particular biblical cognate for the word empathy. Even so, we will argue that the concept of empathy (to use the original word coined by 20th-century German phenomenology, *Einfühlung* – into-feeling)⁸ captures well some of the ideas expressed in the Pauline discourse of Romans 12 and elsewhere:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly.⁹

For the early phenomenologists, *Einfühlung* represented the idea of totally suspending oneself by means of ‘bracketing’ oneself in order to enter the lifeworld and perspective of another.¹⁰ This idea is reflected in the famous metaphor of ‘getting inside someone else’s skin.’

However, as the ideas of these early phenomenologists were developed into what we now call *hermeneutic* phenomenology, it was proposed that such brack-

8 Zimri S. Yassen and Adriana E. Foster, ‘What Is Empathy?’ in *Teaching Empathy in Healthcare: Building a New Core Competency*, ed., Adrian E. Foster and Zimri S. Yassen (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), p. 4.

9 Romans 12:15-16. NRSV.

10 Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (Washington: ICS, 1989), p. 6.

eting of oneself is not truly possible.¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer stated: ‘...we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning to the whole of our meanings or ourselves in relation to it.’¹² As such, Gadamer objected to any account of empathy in which the other person can be perceived as an ‘object’ that is now transcendently ‘understood’ by a neutral or invisible observer.¹³ Thus, in Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology, empathy emerges as a *dialogical process* by which two parties can create understanding between them (a fusion of horizons) through interpersonal dialogue.¹⁴ Understanding is a shared agreement between two (or more) parties regarding the observed phenomenon or experience.¹⁵

In addition to creating shared understanding, Gadamer also credits the empathetic process with giving each person a sense of existing. Gadamer states that our consciousness of being alive comes from a back-and-forth movement between self-assertion and self-reflection, which is a conversation.¹⁶ Philosopher and theologian Martin Buber, who was trained in the same school of German hermeneutics as Gadamer (the *Verstehen* school founded by Schleiermacher and Dilthey), came to a similar conclusion in his famous work *I and Thou*. In Buber’s thought, humans are constituted by and for relationships with others. This is because we are created by and for a relationship with God:

That you need God more than anything; you know at all times in your heart. But don’t you know also that God needs you – in the fulness of his eternity, you? How would man exist if God did not need him, and how would you exist?¹⁷

In other writings, Buber describes this process of bringing each other into being using eucharistic imagery: ‘It is from one man to another that the heavenly bread of self-being is passed.’¹⁸ The impact is that, by interacting with other

11 Hermeneutic Phenomenology is the methodological approach described by Gadamer and frequently adopted as the foundational approach to qualitative research in Practical Theology. See Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, pp. 105–9.

12 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Revised (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 281.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 303.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

17 Martin Buber, *I and Thou by Martin Buber: A New Translation with a Prologue ‘I and You’ and Notes*, trans. Kaufmann, Walter (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970), p. 130.

18 Martin Buber, *Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy: Essays, Letters and Dialogues*, ed. Judith Agassi (Syracuse, USA: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 16.

people and extending ourselves into ‘the between’ spaces that occur between ourselves and our interlocutors, we gain not only an understanding of the other person but also an understanding of ourselves—and each of us is in part shaped and constituted by those interactions.

Around the same time that Buber was reflecting on these phenomena from a theological and philosophical point of view, the field of therapeutic psychology was also contemplating empathy as the field began moving away from the psychoanalytic model (commonly associated with Freud) wherein the ‘expert’ psychologist dispassionately listens to and analyses the inner world of a patient. Carl Rogers was one psychologist who began to attend to the fact that therapy often proved more effective when there was a good client-patient rapport. A significant dialogue between Buber and Carl Rogers (also with Jung) built bridges between philosophy, theology, and psychotherapy.¹⁹ Ultimately, the suggestion that our sense of self emerges and is subsequently shaped by dialogue with others became a cornerstone of person-centered therapy.²⁰ In his work, Rogers emphasized empathy as a nonjudgmental ‘way of being’ between therapist and client, a way of being that is not simply ‘active listening’ (although it does include this).²¹

So, from Gadamer’s philosophy, Buber’s theology, and Rogers’ model of person-centered therapy, slightly different accounts of empathy emerge. However, each account coalesces around a dialogical process. Empathy points to a way of being with another person – creating an open, shared, and non-judgemental space into which a sense of self can be safely projected and explored. This open space might be described as a ‘shared world’ – a place where understanding can be (to a certain degree) assumed – as will be discussed later in this paper. This shared world is created by a ‘dialogical process,’ but a ‘dialogical process’ is not necessarily the same as a simple ‘dialogue.’ Indeed, between speaking and non-speaking people, it often cannot be. Moreover, understanding between autistic and non-autistic people (whether speaking or not) is further complicated by the ‘double empathy problem,’ to which we now turn.

19 Martin Buber, *Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy: Essays, Letters and Dialogues*, p. xi. Martin Buber and Carl R. Rogers, *The Martin Buber – Carl Rogers Dialogue: A New Transcript with Commentary*, ed. Rob Anderson, SUNY Series in Speech Communication (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997).

20 Sheila Haugh and Tony eds. Merry, *Rogers’ Therapeutic Conditions: Evolution, Theory and Practice – Empathy Volume 2*, *Rogers’ Therapeutic Conditions: Evolution, Theory and Practice* (Monmouth: PCCS Books Ltd, 2001), pp. 86–98.

21 Haugh and Merry, p. 64.

3 The Double Empathy Problem

In 2012 Damian Milton first proposed his theory of the Double Empathy Problem, and it has now been widely adopted as a good account of what hinders relations across neurotypes. The concept of a double empathy problem is also beginning to be explored concerning race relations and colonialism.²² We suggest it could be relevant to any communication or research across cultural or social boundaries. Milton summarises the double empathy problem as follows:

The ‘double empathy problem’: a disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors which becomes more marked the wider the disjuncture in dispositional perceptions of the lifeworld ...²³

In the above quote, by using terminology such as ‘social actors’ and ‘lifeworld,’ Milton positions his theory within the phenomenological discussion referred to above, i.e., that the ‘self’ is created and curated through intersubjectivity.²⁴ However, for a non-academic audience, he also explains it this way:

Simply put, the theory of the double empathy problem suggests that when people with very different experiences of the world interact with one another, they will struggle to empathize with each other. This is likely to be exacerbated through differences in language use and comprehension.²⁵

It is important to note that one of the reasons Milton developed this theory was that he wished to separate the idea of ‘empathy’ from the concept of ‘theory of mind.’ This was a significant move to make because, for decades, autistic people had been misconstrued as not having empathy, by which it was meant that they could not infer the mental states of others (Theory of Mind) and might not respond emotionally to something like hearing another

22 Carolyn Pedwell, ‘De-colonising Empathy: Thinking Affect Transnationally,’ *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 1, no. 1 (31 January 2016), <https://doi.org/10.53007/SJGC.2016.V1.I1.p.51>.

23 Damian E. M. Milton, ‘On the Ontological Status of Autism: The “Double Empathy Problem,”’ *Disability & Society* 27, no. 6 (1 October 2012): p. 884, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008>.

24 Damian E. M. Milton, ‘Embodied Sociality and the Conditioned Relativism of Dispositional Diversity,’ *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies* 1, no. 3 (2014): pp. 1–7.

25 Go to <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/double-empathy>.

person share sad/happy news.²⁶ This is empathy as defined by the popular phenomenological account of ‘being in someone else’s skin.’ However, it is now known that autistic people *do* infer the mental states of others and experience emotional responses.²⁷ The previous misconception had arisen for two reasons. The first was simply due to inappropriate research methods, such as asking autistic people to ascribe motives and emotional states to non-human subjects, including geometric shapes on a computer screen.²⁸ The second lies at the heart of the Double Empathy Problem: while autistic people do experience the same emotional responses as non-autistic people, they may express those responses and engage in dialogue differently, for example, by using different patterns of eye contact, voice-intonation, conversational to-and-fro, word choices or body language.²⁹

Milton argues that language is already limited as a medium for communicating the felt experience of one person to another because ‘much meaning gets lost in translation.’³⁰ Empathy is further impaired if the interlocutors use body language, intonation, and turn-taking differently – they simply have to work harder to communicate and build a shared understanding. In this regard, impaired empathy is two-way, a ‘double’ problem: non-autistic people will find it more difficult to empathize with autistic people just as much as autistic people will find it more difficult to empathize with non-autistic people because empathy emerges from how social interactions take place and is not merely an internal, cognitive process (i.e., a theory about somebody else’s mind).³¹ By separating empathy from the theory of mind, it becomes possible to see that the double empathy ‘problem’ is not insurmountable: sometimes, empathy is

26 Morton Ann Gernsbacher and Melanie Yergeau, ‘Empirical Failures of the Claim That Autistic People Lack a Theory of Mind,’ *Archives of Scientific Psychology* 7, no. 1 (9 December 2019): pp. 102–18, <https://doi.org/10.1037/arc0000067>.

27 Olga Bogdashina, *Autism and the Edges of the Known World: Sensitivities, Language and Constructed Reality* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2010), pp. 143–44.

28 Rajesh K. Kana et al., ‘Aberrant Functioning of the Theory-of-Mind Network in Children and Adolescents with Autism,’ *Molecular Autism* 6, no. 1 (27 October 2015): p. 59, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-015-0052-x>.

29 Jill Boucher, *Autism Spectrum Disorder: Characteristics, Causes, and Practical Issues*, 2nd Edition (London: SAGE, 2017), p. 38.

30 Milton, ‘Embodied Sociality and the Conditioned Relativism of Dispositional Diversity,’ p. 4.

31 Indeed, Milton suggests that autistic people may actually be better at empathizing than non-autistic people, as they have had a lifetime of being socialized among those with whom empathizing goes against their natural disposition—Milton, ‘On the Ontological Status of Autism: The Double Empathy Problem,’ p. 886.

powerful, even between people from very different lifeworlds, because of the quality of the interaction between them.³²

4 Linguistic Empathy Markers

The quality of interaction between individuals is difficult to measure. Contemporary scholarship in psychology, medicine, and the social sciences has tried to develop the concept of empathy into something tangible that can be measured and even taught to practitioners. For example, Foster and Yaseen, in *Teaching Empathy in Healthcare*, suggest seven ways in which, when observing a video conversation (between a clinician and a patient), the empathy process can be identified as taking place.³³ These are, with regards to both parties:

- Verbal response, i.e., *mm, yeah, ah, I see...*
- Body posturing, i.e., *sitting up, open body language...*
- Mirroring, i.e., *copying the facial expressions and body posture of interlocutor.*
- Perception checking, i.e., *So, are you saying you were angry about that?*
- Validation, i.e., *Yes, that does sound upsetting...*
- Self-disclosure, i.e., *I know what you mean. I find that annoying too...*
- Active listening (including all of the above).

This list of empathy markers is developed for a scenario where video footage can be analyzed to gauge body language alongside verbal responses. One psychotherapist, Barbara Temaner Brodley, suggests how empathy can be gauged when analyzing only the transcript of a conversation. She looks for:

- Words or phrases expressing emotion or feelings.
- Phrases with vivid or evocative qualities, i.e., swearing or figures of speech.
- Responses (from the practitioner) that speak for the client, particularly in the 1st or 3rd person, i.e., therapist to client 'Jane': *So, Jane is thinking about what she wants to make of her life?*
- Therapist references to self, i.e., *Oh, I see. Or, Are you telling me that...?*
- Therapist responses that represent the client's self-agency: *You think you could be calmer in these situations?*³⁴

32 Although Milton does not observe the link, this is the same conclusion Rogers came to in his person-centered psychoanalytic theory. Haugh and Merry, *Rogers' Therapeutic Conditions: Evolution, Theory and Practice – Empathy Volume 2*, p. 13.

33 Yassen and Foster, 'What Is Empathy?', p. 10.

34 Haugh and Merry, *Rogers' Therapeutic Conditions: Evolution: Theory and Practice – Empathy Volume, 2*, p. 23.

While both of these lists make some useful observations about empathy, as autism researchers, we have found that we run across some difficulties when applying them to our work. Research into pragmatics demonstrates that autistic people may be likely to use verbal response, body posturing (especially eye contact), and mirroring differently to non-autistic people.³⁵ Also, perception checking, validation and self-disclosure might be inhibited by factors such as differences between autistic and non-autistic use (particularly with regard to naming emotions),³⁶ and differences in patterns of conversational turn-taking.³⁷ Added to that, underlying both lists is the presumption that both parties can (and wish to) use spoken conversation as the primary means to engage in the empathy process. This, as we have established, is not the case for all autistic people. What empathy markers do we look for with people who use little to no spoken language at all? By attending to non-linguistic or pre-linguistic markers of empathy, can we further illuminate the empathy process in ways that might also be applicable where conversation partners do not rely on spoken language?

5 Non-Linguistic Empathy Markers

Autism specialist Phoebe Caldwell developed a technique called Intensive Interaction, which is designed to communicate with non-speaking autistic people. The springboard for her approach was her realization that the stimming patterns of some autistic people, such as tapping surfaces, humming, rubbing surfaces, etc., are a kind of self-talk. They are a language through which an autistic person communicates with themselves about their presence in the world.

Intensive Interaction has three stages. First, Caldwell observes the person to identify their language. Second, she imitates that language, which tends to get the autistic person's attention—they think, 'Hey—that's my sound (or

35 Sng, Cheong Ying, Carter, Mark, and Stephenson, Jennifer, 'A Systematic Review of the Comparative Pragmatic Differences in Conversational Skills of Individuals with Autism,' *Austin and Developmental Language Impairments*, 3 (2018), pp. 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396941518803806>.

36 Olga Bogdashina, *Autism and the Edges of the Known World: Sensitivities, Language, and Constructed Reality*, p. 140.

37 Ono Nobutaka, et al., 'Quantification of Speech and Synchrony in the Conversation of Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder,' *PloS One*, 14/12 (2019): e0225377-e0225377, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225377>.

rhythm), but I did not make it.³⁸ A back-and-forth dialogue ensues, where both parties copy each other. To give one example from Caldwell's practice:

A child comes into a sensory center. Normally, she either wanders around looking at the lights or lies on a waterbed next to the entrance with a pillow over her head. She does not engage with support staff. When I come, she is on the mattress with her head at the far end under the cushion. I stand outside the door and watch. She kicks the mattress, and I tap the rhythm on the wall. She then sweeps her feet across the mattress, which makes a different sound. I make a similar sound by rubbing the wall. She alternates one sound with another which builds into a fast, interactive game. Gradually, she lifts her pillow, and her head comes round to see what I am doing. We can see that she is smiling.³⁹

Reflecting on these first two stages, Rowan Williams observes how this shows that communication and language, in their simplest forms, are not necessarily about passing on information but about establishing a world in common.⁴⁰ This, we would argue, might be likened to 'the between' space proposed by Buber, in which the 'world' is 'created' (in that it is given communicable form) by the dialogical process that takes place between two people.⁴¹ By paying shared attention to the 'world' as perceived by the child who focuses her attention on creating a rhythm, Caldwell is able not only to *enter* that child's world but to *extend it into something she can share*—the girl's kicks and Caldwell's taps create a shared rhythm, a 'between' place of exchange and interaction that they can both understand. They create a world in common.

In the third stage of Intensive Interaction, once imitation as a back-and-forth pattern has been established, Caldwell begins to play. She will introduce a variation in the pattern of sound or rhythm – a 'surprise' or 'whoops factor,' if things are going well, elicits a laugh from her interlocutor.

[A child who is blind, deaf, and autistic.] He holds a piece of sheet foam in his hands with circular holes cut into it and runs his fingers around the

38 Phoebe Caldwell, *Finding You Finding Me: Using Intensive Interaction to Get in Touch with People Whose Severe Learning Disabilities Are Combined with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), p. 115.

39 Caldwell, p. 105.

40 Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.99.

41 Martin Buber and Ronald Gregor Smith, *Between Man and Man*, Routledge Classics (London: New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 235.

holes. This is how he talks to himself, giving himself tactile feedback, the pattern of which is a circle. Each time he makes a sound, I make a circular movement on his arm. He starts to laugh, especially when I reverse the direction, feeding in the circle pattern he recognizes but containing the element of surprise, anticlockwise to clockwise.⁴²

Caldwell observes that laughter and surprise are, biologically speaking, a mild form of fear.⁴³ She, therefore, posits that humor and *play* are the first steps in forming trusting bonds with others,⁴⁴ and there is, certainly, significant data that suggests that humor and empathy are positively correlated.⁴⁵ Caldwell's identification of play and trust is significant, as it brings us back to Gadamer, who devoted a substantial portion of *Truth and Method* to the discussion of play.⁴⁶ For Gadamer, play and conversation are tightly related concepts: both are dialogical processes through which we can grow a sense of self and the dialogue partners can come to a common understanding.⁴⁷

Caldwell does not discuss empathy theoretically. However, from our analysis of her work, we propose that some 'empathy markers' can be identified, even when there is a complete absence of words. The markers of empathy in these scenarios would therefore be attention, imitation, and willingness to play. Empathy is about showing that you have observed another person's 'self' (attention), that you are validating that 'self' (imitation), and that you are invested in allowing more of that other 'self' to emerge and grow (play).

Held within the willingness to play is also a fourth and final marker—a willingness to be vulnerable—sometimes uncomfortably so! As an experienced practitioner deeply embedded in empathetic relations with her clients, Caldwell herself takes this largely for granted—much as a parent will think nothing of imitating the 'baby talk' of their infant. But it is rather different when interacting with an older child or an adult – in order to imitate and engage in Intensive Interaction, practitioners may have to engage in a behavior that feels like 'baby-talk' or seems to compromise one's personal space or dignity. Some of Caldwell's practice has included mimicking heavy breathing, grunts,

42 Phoebe Caldwell, *Finding You Finding Me: Using Intensive Interaction to Get in Touch with People Whose Severe Learning Disabilities Are Combined with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, p. 109.

43 Caldwell, p. 125.

44 Caldwell, p. 109.

45 W.P. Hampes, 'Relation between Humor and Empathic Concern,' *Psychological Reports* 88, no. 1 (2001): pp. 241–44.

46 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 106.

47 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 109.

or allowing an autistic person to stroke her face or stare very deeply and intently into one's eyes.⁴⁸ While these practices may feel uncomfortable within the norms of a non-autistic lifeworld (and may need to be carefully risk assessed from a safeguarding point of view), Caldwell demonstrates that they can play an essential role in showing a willingness to create a shared space that reflects somebody else's lifeworld and realm of experience.

I (Henna) had first-hand experience of this when accompanying one participant, Carlos, for the day.⁴⁹ During the first couple of hours at his home, I observed that Carlos liked to repeatedly sing short snippets of familiar tunes or simple sequences of notes, often turning his face towards walls or other hard surfaces as he did so. I wondered if this was because Carlos enjoyed hearing his sound resonating back to him. His mother often repeated the songs and tunes back to him, and sometimes, she initiated new tunes, which Carlos would then repeat in a call-and-response 'game.' Eventually, partway through the day, I surprised Carlos (and his mother!) by repeating one of Carlos' short tunes back to him before his mother could do so. Everybody laughed, just as in the scenarios described by Caldwell above, and an increased sense of trust became palpable because I was willing to join in. For the rest of the day, I was part of the 'game.' Each time Carlos introduced a new tune or sequence, I could tell he was waiting on me, curious to see if I would repeat it or even introduce a little tune of my own. From this, I understood that Carlos likes social interaction – even though the interaction may look (and sound) a little different for him as a non-speaking person. We had created a world in common or a shared understanding.

6 Empathy Markers and a 'World in Common'

Above, we have considered two types of empathy markers – those that occur in a spoken exchange and those that might arise in interactions between speaking and non-speaking people. When considered together, it is possible to show that one unified picture of empathy emerges. The table below shows how the two types of empathy markers (which we might call linguistic and prelinguistic) can be mapped onto each other. In the conclusion of this paper, we will illustrate these with an example from our research.

48 Caldwell, Phoebe, *Finding You Finding Me: Using Intensive Interaction to Get in Touch with People Whose Severe Learning Disabilities Are Combined with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, p. 107.

49 All names have been changed for anonymity.

TABLE 1 Linguistic and Prelinguistic Markers of Empathy

| Intensive Interaction | Attention | Imitation | Being Vulnerable | Play |
|-----------------------|---------------------|---|--------------------|-----------------|
| Foster and Yaseen | Verbal Response | | | |
| | Mirroring | | | |
| | Body Posturing | | | |
| | Perception Checking | | | |
| | | Validation | | |
| | | Self-disclosure | | |
| Brodley | Active Listening | | | |
| | | | Emotions/ Feelings | |
| | | | | Swearing/ Idiom |
| | | 1 st /3 rd Person Responses that Speak for the Client | | |
| | | Therapists' References to Self. | | |
| | | Responses that Represent Client's Self Agency | | |

Arguably, there are not two different sets of markers here, so much as that the spoken markers of empathy are a verbal (or body language) representation of a pre-verbal attitude or way of being with others. Indeed, it is notable that ‘body posturing’ and ‘mirroring’ appear on Foster and Yaseen’s list – it is well established that even speaking people use non-speaking markers of empathy. However, it should be noted that patterns of body language (such as posture and eye contact) can sometimes be different between autistic and non-autistic people. Empathy, whether observed in its linguistic or non-linguistic forms, creates a world in common.

7 Theological Empathy

At the beginning of the paper, we said that empathy was important for understanding what kind of change practical theologians should seek to make, taking into account different perspectives, including those members of the Christian community who often find themselves marginalized. However, for this to be accomplished, it is necessary to have a clear account of empathy is, in order for us as practical theologians to know what we are looking for. When seeking a theological account of empathy, Scripture would seem to be the natural starting point. However, given that the word ‘empathy’ has no direct correlate term in Scripture, our discussion led us to philosophical and psychological accounts of empathy first, and from there, we looked at linguistic and non-linguistic empathy markers as indicators of understanding. These discussions made clear that empathy is a dialogical process (with or without words) in which the dialogue partners create a world in common. With that, we are in a good place to look at the concept of empathy leading to a shared world in Scripture.

We start with another claim that emerged, which is that this shared world is vital for a sense of ‘self.’ In Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, we see that Paul also expresses that our sense of self is in part constituted by our connections to others.⁵⁰ In Romans 12:1-4, we find both bodies (plural) and a body (singular):

50 We also note that these two passages recur frequently in disability theology and the emerging field of autism theology. See Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019), pp. 94–95; Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), pp. 221–24, esp. p. 221; Armand Léon Van Ommen and Tophér Endress, ‘Reframing Liturgical Theology through the Lens of Autism: A Qualitative Study of Autistic Experiences of Worship,’ *Studia Liturgica* 52, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00393207221111573>.

Verse 1(a): I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your **bodies** as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...

Verse 5: ...so we, who are many, are **one body** in Christ, and individually we are **members** of one another.

This discussion of being members of one another is made in the context of gifts, illustrating that all members have gifts. In his exegesis of Paul's use of this same metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12, Brian Brock argues compellingly that these gifts are not contained within individual members of the body but are given by the Spirit in moments of communicative action (messages) between members of the body.

The body of Christ *is* a circulator of divine gifts, and if there is such a body it is because each member serves in a temporally extended manner the giving of the Trinitarian God to the church via each member.⁵¹

Developing this line of thought, Brock draws out two implications to this discussion. Firstly, the individual is more than simply the individual—they are members extended into one another, with the Spirit acting like the electric pulse communicating from one nerve synapse to another.⁵² Secondly, this establishes an imperative to effectively communicate between all members: 'Enacted works of service must not only benefit the body but must be continually circulating for there to be a body at all.'⁵³ The members of the body are constitutive of the body and, thereby, of each other. We use the word 'imperative' here deliberately. While Brock's focus is on connection constituted by acts of service and the exercise of spiritual gifts, we suggest that Paul's line of thought can also be taken to include connection through empathetic relations – such connection is not only desirable but imperative 'for there to be a body at all.'

In the 1 Corinthians passage, Paul's body metaphor concludes: 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.'⁵⁴ This is a precursor to 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's famous and

51 Brian Brock, 'Theologizing Inclusion: 1 Corinthians 12 and the Politics of the Body of Christ,' *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 15, no. 4 (1 October 2011): p. 360, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2011.620389>. See also Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, pp. 221–24, esp. p. 221.

52 Brock, 'Theologizing Inclusion: 1 Corinthians 12 and the Politics of the Body of Christ,' p. 359.

53 Brock, p. 360.

54 1 Corinthians 12:26.

challenging treatise on love. In a similar way, the use of the body metaphor in Romans 12 follows a similar pattern to that of 1 Corinthians, with the discussion of the body (Romans 12:4-5) leading to a discussion of gifts given by God (Romans 12:6-8), which is likewise immediately followed by an exhortation to love (Romans 12:9): Romans 12:9 and 21 forms an *inclusio* on the subject of what is evil and what is good:

Romans 12:9: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

Romans 12:21: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Within that *inclusio*, Paul lists a string of imperatives, including the ones already mentioned in this paper and the following verses:⁵⁵

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.⁵⁶

Interestingly, although translated as imperatives here, the verbs in verse 15 are infinitives followed by participles (in English, we could render this literally as rejoicing with the rejoicing, weeping with the weeping). In the NRSV translation above, the imperatival sense has been carried over (rightly perhaps) from the imperative verb ('bless') in the preceding verse. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Paul has switched to using the infinitive, verbal forms, which (like the participles paired with them) can emphasize the continuous nature of an action.⁵⁷ Hence, one reading of this verse could be that Paul intends to emphasize that these actions are matter-of-fact, repeated and/or progressive.

Secondly, 'live in harmony with one another' in verse 16 is, of necessity, a paraphrase of the Greek, which renders poorly into English. The text says: '*to auto eis allēlous phronountes*' – which renders literally as 'the same thing into one another *thinking*.' We could also argue that it is 'the same thing into one

55 These exhortations in Romans 12:9 are interesting grammatically. They are primarily participles standing alone, where one usually expects a finite verb to govern the participles or for all the verbs to appear in the imperative. There is much discussion over the import of this. Jeffrey Lamp, for example, reads it as an attempt by Paul to create a sense of appeal while maintaining a pastoral tone of voice. See, Lamp, Jeffrey Lamp, 'An Alternative Explanation for The Alleged 'Imperatival' Participles of Romans 12:9-21,' *Tyndale Bulletin* 61, no. 2 (2010): pp. 311-316.

56 Romans 12:15-16.

57 Black, David Alan, *It's Still Greek to Me: An Easy-to-Understand Guide to Intermediate Greek* (Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), p. 119.

another *feeling*, bearing in mind the weeping and rejoicing of verse 15. This seems to resonate with the German phenomenologists' concept of *Einfühlung* or 'into-feeling,' where this whole discussion began – empathy is not simply to know about another person's experience cognitively but to realize it at an affective level. Furthermore, this resonates with our framing of empathy as creating a world in common.

In conclusion, what account of empathy emerges for practical theology? We find that empathy is imperatival, both for the emergence of the individual's sense of self and for the emergence of the body of Christ as a living organism of interconnected members. The body of Christ is naturally a place where the members share a world (or body) in common. Whereas the popular understanding of empathy may be strongly related to feelings, likely evoked by the situation someone finds themselves in, Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 stipulate that empathy is not an option to choose or decline freely but an imperative for the believers. While certainly an affective way of being with others, this affect does not depend on one's mood but can, apparently, be demanded. Moreover, while empathy is an important part of a therapeutic relationship (as we have seen with Rogers above and will discuss further below), a biblical understanding of empathy leads to an enduring presence with each other as fellow members of the same body, together creating a shared world.

8 Conclusion

'The aim of practical theology is ... not simply to understand the world but to also change it,' according to Swinton and Mowat.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, change needs to start with understanding the world of the other. We have seen that the double empathy problem between speaking and non-speaking people complexifies understanding the other. Based on the premise that empathy is the road to understanding another person's experience, we have considered what empathy is. Empathy can be developed and discerned, even when there is a significant barrier in language, lifeworld, and realm of experience. It can contribute to the kind of understanding needed for the task of practical theology.

The picture of empathy that has emerged highlights the creation of a world in common, in which both linguistic and non-linguistic markers – when cautiously considered – can indicate the quality of interaction. Where we show attention, imitation, a willingness to be vulnerable, and a willingness to play (the

58 Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, p. 27.

four non-linguistic markers of empathy that we have observed), empathetic connections can be forged that lead to new understanding. Importantly, these four markers of empathy fit well with the account given in Romans 12:5, where we are primed to anticipate both laughter and tears as we connect deeply as members of the body, regardless of their status:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. The same thing into one another feeling: do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.

In this account of empathy, the shared world that the dialogue partners create leads to an expansion of each other's worlds, in which joys and sorrows are shared, and in turn, these joys and sorrows become a constitutive part of the shared world. Thus, the members of the body of Christ are connected to each other as the hands and feet of a body are connected. Therefore, in a practical-theological account of empathy, it is imperative to be intentional and seek to overcome the double empathy problem that often exists between autistic and non-autistic and between speaking and non-speaking members of the body to be or become the body of Christ more authentically.

In closing, we reflect on one more example from our research of how we have observed the above principles. In one church I visited, I (Léon) experienced one of my interviewees, See Huan, whom I interviewed on Friday, come up to me after the church service on Sunday. He said nothing and stood next to me, showing attentiveness (body posture, self-agency). I'll admit that I found it hard to know what to say other than greeting See Huan by name (verbal response, active listening), but I turned towards him (body posturing, validation), and after a while, he went somewhere else.

To many, this may seem like a brief and insignificant exchange, but afterwards, the pastor, who had also been present at the interview, commented that this was a remarkable and very significant act on See Huan's part, as he would not usually approach someone like that. Arguably, his attentiveness was a sign of empathy (including emotions/feelings, even if visibly unexpressed)—an indication of a desire to communicate and have that communication understood.

The Sunday after, the church said goodbye to me as it was my last Sunday with them, and according to their practice, they asked someone to pray for me. Pastor David asked See Huan, who said a short prayer. The fact that he did want to do this was special, not just for me but also for the congregation, as See Huan had never spoken before in front of the congregation. Again, it seemed a sign of empathy and, we may say, an embodiment of Romans 12:5. Something about our connection meant that he was willing to be vulnerable and to allow a new aspect of his 'self' to emerge – a spiritual gift for the building up of the whole body, the Church.