**Finding Accommodation**

**Spirituality and People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities**

Good morning and thank you for allowing me to be with you at this wonderful conference. This morning I want us to think together about the spirituality of people with profound intellectual disabilities. I’ll explain why that is the case in a few moments. I’m using the word ‘spirituality’ – hugely difficult to define – in the sense of spiritual experience – a meaningful, life-giving, on-going relationship with God. I’m largely speaking within a Christian theological framework but some of the background of what I want to explore has roots in theologies that are found within the Jewish tradition.

Here’s the issue I want us to think about:

**severely mentally handicapped people are denied the very substance of a rational productive existence...Such an existence gives no real opportunity for inner spiritual growth, or the nourishment of the human spirit, both of which are important when coming to terms with the meaning of Christianity. It gives no real opportunity to experience the joy of seeking a lifetime relationship with the Almighty, because concepts involved are complicated and require a level of awareness which the profoundly mentally handicapped do not have. [[1]](#footnote-1)**

While the tone of this comment by eminent UK Professor of nursing, Peter Birchenall, who is widely read on the subject of intellectual disability, seems particularly disturbing, the reality that the negative perspective he is raising is a very real one, even within **academic and church** circles where views on the spiritual experience of people whose intellectual disabilities are profound remain somewhat hazy and ambiguous.

**SLIDE TO ‘QUESTIONS’**

As a teacher and researcher in this area, I’m also very interested in the **kind of questions that are being asked about people with intellectual disabilities.** There are a lot of practically theological questions, of course: how do we promote **inclusion**, being at the heart of these. And there are some questions about theological **anthropology**. Importantly, in the face of social and cultural values that would deny their intrinsic human-ness and even their right to exist, some are focused on articulating a theological basis on which to assert the **fullness of the humanity of persons who have profound intellectual disabilities**. This is important work, given trends within so-called liberal., tolerant societies that increasingly promote ambiguity about the value of a life that is deemed to be beyond parameters of conformity to what Tom Reynolds describes as the ‘cult of normalcy.’

Others are asking what people with profound intellectual disabilities can teach us about what it means to be human. Indeed, in recent years there has been a great deal of emphasis on what they can teach us across a range of issues – some argue that they have a particular calling to be a kind of **prophetic sign**, pointing others to the importance of **vulnerability** and **community**, thus illuminating an authentic Christian **ecclesiology**. These are all important issues. But I am concerned that if we get stuck in these kinds of questions there is always a danger that we might inadvertently begin to adopt what David Palin calls **“a contributory theory of human worth”** where someone is valued for what she contributes to others rather than simply for who she is without regard to anything she can offer. Inadvertently, and with the best of intentions, we can promote the value of people who have intellectual disabilities in a way that forces them into a role of being educators of those of us who aren’t perceived to be intellectually disabled.

Importantly, other questions are emerging more strongly – and not just from academic theology but from families and ministry practitioners in particular. I’m very interested in the **dialogue between the academy and the Church** - in Queen’s University in Belfast, where I come from – which is in Northern Ireland and really is a lovely place to live, both geographically and socially, and is where Game of Thrones and the new Star Wars movie are filmed (just in case all you’ve heard of it are the negative narratives of the past), we have recently established a ***Centre for Intellectual Disability Theology and Ministry*** to work with academics, students, researchers, churches, families and individuals. Since interest in the Centre has developed, and we are increasingly invited to go and speak with groups of churches and faith communities, I meet many parents whose theological baggage has created real anxiety about the capacity of their child, who has profound intellectual disabilities, to encounter God or in the language of the Reformed Christian tradition – to be ‘saved’ at all.

I am very interested in developing thinking on this area.

**SLIDE TO IQ spectrum**

Before we go any further, I want to briefly clarify who I’m referring to when I talk about people with profound intellectual disabilities and in doing so I acknowledge some tensions here:

IQ spectrum – LABELS/GENERALISING/SPEAKING

I should say that my interest in the wold of intellectual disability did not come out of the blue. I am the mother of a beautiful young woman – Rebecca who has profound intellectual and physical disabilities.

**SLIDE TO REBECCA** Here she is…

Rebecca has opened my eyes to what is truly important in life and faith. Yet responses from both within and beyond my own evangelical tradition to the possibility of her having a spiritual life of her own are largely ambivalent if not completely sceptical. I, and many others in a similar position, often find myself involved in faith conversations in which doubts as to Rebecca’s capacity to encounter God hang in the air. Traditional intentional steps in the Christian perspective on the establishment and development of a human person’s relationship with God – cognitive responses of confession, repentance, expression of belief in Christ as the way to God - are inaccessible to Rebecca, as they are to others like her.

**SLIDE TO MORRIS**

Wayne Morris articulates the issue here very well: “**what is assumed…in practice, however much we might wish to redefine what faith is, is that in order to be saved, a person will normally have language and the intellectual capacities to learn a set of beliefs and make choices and decisions about them; what is assumed is able-bodied normativity.”**[[2]](#footnote-2)

**SLIDE TO BIBLE**

And, let’s face it, the biblical text itself is enormously problematic for the same reasons. Again Morris explains that **“the role and significance [of the Bible] is increasingly perceived by many ordinary Christians as the benchmark for how to live and what to believe,”[[3]](#footnote-3) and this, to some extent, contributes to the assumptions that those with little or no access to the text might be perceived as “less Christian.”[[4]](#footnote-4)** I’m not denying the infinite riches embedded and inherent in the verbal revelation of God. Psalm 119, for example, makes evident the source of life, wisdom, strength, freedom, right-living that can be found in engaging with what God has said.

I am not denying, either, that the centrality of the spoken word at or around the introductory point to the Christian faith, as well as in obedient Christian living, is clearly presented within the text itself. **The Apostle Paul, for example, states that “faith comes by hearing the message and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”[[5]](#footnote-5)** Christ himself continually emphasises to his followers the imperative of acting in accordance with his Father’s verbally-expressed commands, just as he, the self- identified Son of God does, in fulfilling the mission for which He came to earth.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps it’s not surprising then that discussions of the spiritual experience of people with profound and complex intellectual disabilities often have to contend with those who are committed to the absolute necessity of engagement with the text. John Swinton highlights the same difficulty, in terms of the purported problem of “offering the Word to those who have no words.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

It seems obvious, then, that any suggestion that without apprehension of the words, no fruitful revelation or communication by God is possible, is a matter of enormous importance for us. If intellectual reflection on language-based sources were to be an indispensable part of how a human being might meaningfully encounter God, then for people with profound and complex intellectual disabilities there would be little hope for such encounters. Yet, as Wayne Morris again makes clear, this is the situation with which they are confronted, since “the mechanism by which salvation is realized according to this tradition excludes, in practice, the person with dementia, mental illness, or profound learning disability from even the possibility of participation in the future kingdom of heaven.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

**SLIDE TO POSITIVE RESPONSES**

There are a number of **potentially positive responses here**, emerging from the broader Christian faith tradition. Some highlight the importance of **prevenient grace** that is the origin of every human being’s encounter with God. Others hold to the significance of **baptism** as the entry point to life with God. For some, arguments about the ‘**age of understanding’ or ‘age of discretion’** (more commonly used in relation to infants who die before having any opportunity to assent to or refuse God’s offer of salvation) dominate the debate. While there are important principles here, it’s significant, that in many of *these* discussions, the focus is on the ***eternal security*** of people with profound intellectual disabilities – it’s more about a visa into the next life than a present, on-going, developing life-giving experience of God. So there might be some hope of people with intellectual disabilities being welcomed into heaven but **what about their spiritual experience in the here and now?** This possibility is rarely discussed and by some, adamantly refuted.

**SLIDE TO BIRCHENALL**

Back to Birchenall’s comment though:

**severely mentally handicapped people are denied the very substance of a rational productive existence...Such an existence gives no real opportunity for inner spiritual growth, or the nourishment of the human spirit, both of which are important when coming to terms with the meaning of Christianity. It gives no real opportunity to experience the joy of seeking a lifetime relationship with the Almighty, because concepts involved are complicated and require a level of awareness which the profoundly mentally handicapped do not have. [[9]](#footnote-9)**

Rationality and cognitive ability are adjudged to be the indispensable elements of a life-giving relationship with God. Are there alternative theological answers to this question?

**SLIDE TO ANOTHER RESPONSE - EMPIRICAL**

Some practical theologians have tackled the issue by means of **empirical research**. Their attempts to identify spiritual experience by ***observing*** those with profound intellectual disabilities or speaking to those who care from them, and reflecting on what they notice are, on a less scientifically-constructed basis, mirrored in anecdotal evidence in the wider literature. Here we find hints at specific reactions of individuals with profound intellectual disabilities who can’t articulate their own experience, when they are present during some kind of communal worship. Some, for example, are recorded as becoming silent when the community falls silent, others are recorded as joining joyfully and noisily with the rest of the congregation when praise is being sung, for example. I am not casting doubt on the fact that there may be a great deal of authenticity in the description and interpretation of these experiences. But I think there is a problem here in using these reports as the basis of theological insight. This concerns me for a number of reasons, but not least the logical one in that ***some people*** with profound intellectual disabilities ***are quiet*** during quiet worship or vocal during times of speech and song, while ***others*** are ***quite the opposite***. And even those who are sometimes quiet at what are deemed appropriate moments, are not quiet on other occasions.

I think this raises some not insignificant questions for academic practical theology in this field. ***I wonder if we are in danger of perhaps over- elevating the anecdote*** when it comes to the search for information we naturally, even desperately, want to discover about the possibility of a person with a profound intellectual disability’s capacity to engage with God in a life-giving way**.** But we need to be careful that the sources on which we make theological assertions are supported by rigorous criteria for validating the conclusions that we present.

**SLIDE TO ANOTHER LENS**

I’d like to propose **another lens** through which we might examine this issue –one that moves us beyond the hope of a ***positive eternal destination*** for people with profound intellectual disabilities towards an ***engagement with their relationship with God here and now* –** what Urs Von Balthasar describes in terms of an ***ever intensifying relationship with God***[[10]](#footnote-10)**.** This lens is what the history of Christian and Jewish theology calls the doctrine of ***divine accommodation.***I want to suggest that, while there are a number of ways of understanding this word, the theological understanding has potential to illuminate it in diverse ways that pertain specifically to people with intellectual disabilities.

**SLIDE TO ACCOMMODATION**

**Accommodation – a word with a number of meanings**

1. The provision of a room or lodgings
2. The process of adapting or adjusting to someone or something

**SLIDE TO PHOTOS ACCOMMODATION**

When it comes to **the first meaning,** accommodation takes shape in a vast array of forms, and buildings. At conferences like this I find myself back in student accommodation – feeling very old. But to be honest my preferred accommodation, when it comes to being away from home looks something a bit more like this. **HOTEL**

Here I differ hugely from my sister. Judith’s idea of great holiday accommodation looks like this…**TENT.** I have to say that, having participated in the first conference of the European Society of for the Study of Theology and Disability, organised by Hans Reinders, I think my sister has something in common with Hans here. It’s the only conference I’ve ever been to where, on arrival late at night I was led by torchlight to the delegates’ accommodation – a row of one-man tents in a field in a lovely area of the Netherlands. I should also highlight that it was a very illuminating experience – as Hans reminded us, we were offered just a tiny glimpse into what it might be like to live as a person with intellectual disabilities in residential accommodation and have to wait in line to use the bathroom every morning.

When it comes to our faith communities, the truth is that for many years the accommodation and the quality of the welcome we have offered to people with profound intellectual disabilities has been much more of the one-star variety than of the five-star. And that’s if we have offered them a place to be at all!

**NO VACANCIES SIGN** All too often they and their families have met with what is effectively a ‘no vacancies’ sign at the door of our churches.

And when we think beyond the logistical and practical nature of the accommodation they have been afforded, I want to propose that ***the theological space we have given them has also often been deficient.*** So my aim today is not to offer any practical or should I say logistical suggestions about how we minister to people with profound intellectual disabilities. My hope is that if we are theologically open and creative in terms of our own thinking about their spiritual experience, this will inevitably and perhaps radically transform something about ***the way we are*** with them.

**SLIDE TO PRINCIPLES OF ACCOMMODATION**

So, it’s in the second meaning of the word - the process of adapting or adjusting to someone or something – that we begin to understand the relevance of the theology of divine accommodation. The concept has, as Stephen Benin comments, “blown… through the nooks and crannies of almost countless [theological] works, [both Jewish and Christian] and an examination of each work would fill volumes.”[[11]](#footnote-11) **The doctrine has four sequential principles:**

1. God is infinite
2. God created human beings to be in loving relationship with himself
3. These human beings are finite and are therefore incapable of apprehending the infinite God – there is, from the human side, an unbridgeable gap between them and God.
4. Because God loves us, in order to bridge this gap, He accommodates His Self-revelation to what human beings are capable of apprehending of Him.

Peter Van Bemmelin provides a helpful definition of the theory: **“God, in His Self-revelation to humanity, accommodates Himself to the mental and spiritual capacity of human beings so that they can come to know Him, learn to trust Him and ultimately love Him.”[[12]](#footnote-12)** Benin too describes accommodation as **“divinity adapting itself and making itself comprehensible to humanity in human terms. It is the adaptation and the adjustment of the transcendent to the mundane.”**[[13]](#footnote-13)

**SLIDE TO OUTSIDE THEOLOGY**

The roots of the theory and the use of the term can be found both within and outside of the biblical tradition. Van Bemmelin locates the term within the rhetorical tradition of the ancient Romans who **“used the word [accommodation]...in rhetoric to express the idea that an orator would adapt himself to his audience in his choice of words, gestures and emotions so that he could move their hearts and persuade their minds in whatever direction he wanted.”**[[14]](#footnote-14) This is a model of what the infinite God does when He reveals Himself to human beings.

Within the canon, the theory of accommodation is most easily visible in biblical hermeneutics – it’s used to explain not only

potential discrepancies within the text but also

differences between what God asks of humans in one period and context and what He expects in another – the shift from the obligations in the Old Testament to those in the New, for example.

Interestingly, for this discussion, the doctrine of divine accommodation also explains the fact that ***God chooses to use human language at all***. In Medieval theology it was expressed in the Latin phrase, *Scriptura humane loquitor*[[15]](#footnote-15): “theology…stoops to speak the language of ordinary men."[[16]](#footnote-16)

And it’s important to note that it’s not only in Scripture that we find God accommodating Himself to human beings but, as Young comments, everything from the created order to the incarnation itself is part of God adapting all that He is and could express of Himself to the level of human beings’ capacity to grasp Him. She underlines the historical provenance of this understanding: “**the Church Fathers recognized that God accommodated the divine word to the human level not only in the incarnation, but also in the human language of the Scriptures, which necessarily used types and symbols to speak of what transcends everything in the created order.”**[[17]](#footnote-17)

I’d like us to look at a few expressions of the theory of divine accommodation from across the faith tradition so that we can explore its relevance to our subject - the spiritual experience of people with profound intellectual disabilities.

The roots of Christian theology’s use of the theory of accommodation go as far back as the Early Church Fathers - Justin Martyr (c.103-165)[[18]](#footnote-18), Origen (c.184–253)[[19]](#footnote-19), Gregory of Nazanius (c.329-390),[[20]](#footnote-20) Gregory of Nyssa (c.330-395)[[21]](#footnote-21) and John Chrysostom, (c.347-407)[[22]](#footnote-22) among them.

**SLIDE TO AUGUSTINE**

As far as God choosing to use human language and human authors as an act of accommodation, Augustine’s (354-430) comment on John chapter one highlights the fundamental issue here: there is a huge gap between what there is for us to know of God and what our finite minds can take on board. In this instance, Augustine is explaining that there is a gap between all that the incarnation is and means and what we as human beings can understand:

**John spoke of the matter not as it is, but even he, only as he was able…it was a man that spoke of God. Inspired indeed by God, but still a man. Because he was a man he said something; if he had not been inspired he would have said nothing. But because he was a man inspired, he spoke not the whole, but what a man could, he spoke**.[[23]](#footnote-23)

**SLIDE TO EZEKIEL**

In one of the principal texts cited to substantiate the idea of accommodation as progressive revelation, ***Ezekiel 20***, God declaims the unfaithfulness of His people following their escape from Egypt and how they turned aside from His specific instructions on whose fulfilment His continued favour was to be contingent. Conversely, however, for the most part, the regulations which God ordained in this period were not portrayed as obligations whose burdensome nature would be punitive in relation to the disobedience of the people of Israel, but as opportunities to find renewed relationship and life, notwithstanding their misconduct: **“I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, by which, the person who obeys them shall live. Moreover, also I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between us, so they would know that I the Lord made them holy.”** (11-12)

The fact that this text stresses the ‘goodness’ of God’s laws, makes it perhaps more remarkable that, a little later in this narrative, God speaks what might be perceived as the extraordinary words, **“I gave them other statutes that were not good and laws through which they could not live; I defiled them through their gifts – the sacrifice of every firstborn – that I might fill them with horror so that they would know that I am the Lord.”** (24-25) In a dramatic instance of his accommodated revelation, God’s response to his people’s disobedience involves giving them commands and obligations which would *not* lead to life. Bowen describes these commands as God’s **“shock therapy to move Israel out of their persistent rebelliousness.”**[[24]](#footnote-24) By drastically confounding and disturbing his people in order that they might in the end be enabled to see who he is, God demonstrates the importance he attaches to a life-changing revelation of himself in the human context. In contrast to the thrust of its earlier part,[[25]](#footnote-25) **“the fact that God gave ‘not good’ laws, suggests that God’s reputation is not after all, the over-riding concern.”**[[26]](#footnote-26)

I think that such a picture of the extent to which God will accommodate himself to human ways and waywardness in time and context supports the idea that he will allow no obstacle to persist in preventing the apprehension of his revelation by human beings. For people with profound intellectual disabilities then, an inability to engage cognitively with the words of the gospel, which some hold to be indispensable, cannot be construed as an obstacle. **The point is this – whether a relationship between God and human beings is possible has nothing to do with their capacity to encounter God or to understand words or propositions about Him. The diversity and particularity of God’s modes of accommodation tells us everything we need to know about God’s capacity and determination to encounter them.**

**SLIDE TO CALVIN**

**John Calvin** is one of the most vocal exponents of the importance of the doctrine accommodation. Ford Lewis Battles explains that **“[f]or Calvin, the understanding of God’s accommodation to the limits and needs of the human condition was a central feature of the interpretation of Scripture and of the entire range of his theological work.”**[[27]](#footnote-27) He contextualises Calvin’s position within the tradition of classical rhetoric in which **“the verb *accommodare* is widely found in the Latin rhetoricians in the same sense of fitting, adapting, adjusting language, of building a speech-bridge between the matter of discourse and the intended audience.”**[[28]](#footnote-28)

Here is just one statement that crystallises Calvin’s perspective. Here he refers specifically to God’s response to the deficiencies of the human comprehension:

**For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression do not so much express what kind of a being God is as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In so doing He must, of course, stoop far below His proper height.”**[[29]](#footnote-29)

This is perhaps the central metaphor of the theory of accommodation: it describes it in the sense of God stooping to the level of human beings in the way in which an adult stoops to the level of a child. The underlying principle here is pivotal to this lens on the spirituality of people with profound intellectual disabilities - divine revelation is ***always attuned to the capacities of its particular recipients to apprehend it.***

**SLIDE TO ANTHROPOMORPHIC**

There has been a large focus on the use of the theory of accommodation to explain the significant degree of biblical **anthropomorphic and corporeal depictions of God**[[30]](#footnote-30) The theory is here used to reconcile the dissonance between God’s using anthropomorphic language to describe Himself and one of the core messages of the text - the intrinsic difference in the essence and being of God from that of the human beings he created. Fairburn emphasises that the Church Fathers explained “Scripture…as accommodating itself to men’s infirmities or habits when it speaks of God as possessing human parts and passions.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Furthermore, accommodation offers a response to the specific problem raised by the cultural context in which the text was written. In this context, an anthropomorphic depiction of God seemed, in a largely pagan culture, to demean the status of a divine being.[[32]](#footnote-32) This use of anthropomorphism was consistent with the first of Gregory of Nazanzius’s hermeneutical principles, namely that **“[s]ome things that do not occur in reality are mentioned in the Holy Writ…God has neither human emotions nor acts in human ways even though Scripture says he does. He has no body in any normal sense. Such things are apparently ascribed to him but they do not exist.”**[[33]](#footnote-33)

Seisenberger insists that “**it is a well-considered design that the Holy Scripture speaks of God as of a being resembling man, and ascribes to him a face, eyes, ears…This is done out of consideration for man’s power of comprehension.”**[[34]](#footnote-34) There is, Norris comments, **“a human *need* for mental pictures, for bodily analogies.”**[[35]](#footnote-35) We need to ask, then: if God provides the mental pictures because they are helpful for some human beings to apprehend him, why wouldn’t He do what people with profound intellectual disabilities need to experience Him too?

**SLIDE TO GREGORY**

Gregory of Nyssa focuses on the motivation for divine accommodation - the love of God:

**We account for God’s willingness to admit men to communion with Himself by His love towards mankind. But since that which is by nature finite cannot rise above its prescribed limits or lay hold upon the Superior Nature of the Most High, on this account, He, bringing His power, so full of love for humanity down to the level of human weakness, [*hemeteron asthenes*].[[36]](#footnote-36)**

In this sense, accommodation is presented both as a ***tool*** for revelation and a depiction of the ***extent of God’s loving desire*** for self-disclosure and relationship. If this understanding reflects a tenable explanation of what is occurring when accommodation is identifiable ***within*** the biblical text, then it seems legitimate to ask whether God’s activity of accommodative self-disclosure should be ***confined within*** the text. Might God, out of the reservoirs of the same love that motivated his accommodative communication found ***within*** the biblical text, be assumed to continue to engage in such accommodative action in ways that ***are proportionate to the capacity of other potential recipients*** of His revelation? If this were to be the case, we might ask ***in what ways and to what extent He might do so***? Is there any evidence from which to conclude that, at some point on this continuum or spectrum of human capacity, the adaptation process has, will or must come to an end?

Gregory’s perspective goes even further. He presents the view that the metaphor for understanding God’s accommodative action should not only encompass the ***use of simpler language*** than might be the case but be extended to include the idea of God not using comprehensible language at all:

**SLIDE TO GREGORY**

**so the Divine power...though exalted far above our nature and inaccessible to all approach, like a tender mother who joins in the inarticulate utterances of her babe, gives to our human nature what it is capable of receiving and thus in the various manifestations of God to man he both adapts Himself to man and speaks in human language and assumes wrath and pity and such-like emotions so that through feelings corresponding to our own infantile life, might be led as by the hand, and lay hold of the Divine nature by means of words which His foresight has given.[[37]](#footnote-37)**

So his metaphor depicts God communicating by non-linguistic means, like the mother or father of a newborn infant, stooping below or, perhaps in the context of this research, *beyond* the level of verbal expression.

**SLIDE TO FATHER AND BABY**

A father channels his deepest emotion to his baby in such a form that the infant will be capable of grasping what he is communicating, namely her love for her child. ***Not only does he lower the level*** or depart from the natural vehicle of his own speech; she takes up the ***baby’s own mode of self-expression***; she adopts the precise ‘non-verbal’ sounds and gestures which are the infant’s sole options for expressing him/herself. There is nothing ambiguous about what is occurring in this encounter; anyone witnessing the scene will understand what is passing between father and baby – a ***non-lingusitic, but no less comprehensible***, immediate, or intimate, communication of love.

Fundamentally, the significance of such a depiction of God’s accommodative self-disclosure lies primarily in the idea that what might be described as God’s chosen *accommodative range* – the degree to which he will adapt his ways of being and communicating – ***is not limited to what can be accomplished by the simplification or ‘watering-down’ of complex theological concepts.*** God does not simply ‘take the edge off’ the more complex aspects of his being in order to disclose himself to those He has made and with whom He would be in relationship. Rather, he does ***what needs to be done*** and moreover, what is ***instinctively to be done***, in order to reveal himself and his love. So His approaches to human beings can also involve ***communicating without recognisable words at all***, to those for whom words have no power to convey meaning. Moreover, such revelation, given without the use of verbal expression might even seem, like a mother’s babbling with her infant, to be ***somehow more immediate and unconfined than anything words can embrace***, however powerfully they are utilised. Gregory’s explanation of God’s range of accommodation suggests that God will use whatever form of communication is necessary to bridge the gap between himself and any human being’s ability to apprehend Him.

**SLIDE TO ‘SO WHAT ARE WE SAYING?**

God, in His very being, is a communicating God, desirous of relationship with every human

The fact that God accommodates himself at all, and the manner in which he does so, reveal a number of profound insights into his desire for human beings to encounter him.

***First,*** there is flexibility in God’s manner of perpetrating the accommodated self-disclosure. ***Second***, accommodation is intrinsically an act of divine condescension to the level on which human beings live and experience the reality of their own lives. God continually demonstrates his willingness to stoop to the level of those to whom he is seeking to reveal himself.

***Third***, God’s accommodation evidences the intensity of and complete commitment to achieving desire for communication and relationship with human beings.

***Fourth***, understandings of accommodation through biblical anthropomorphism are particularly indicative of God’s desire for relationship and offer a non-linguistic analogy of how God might communicate himself to human beings. Finally, the fundamental aim of accommodation is relational communication between God and human beings. ***Words are not the exclusive means*** by which this communication occurs. Words are merely ***signs and pointers to a reality which is behind and transcends the means of its expression*** – the person Jesus Christ who is the greatest accommodation to humanity’s inability to apprehend God.

Returning to **Swain’s comment that “communication, theologically understood is never less than an exchange of words,”**[[38]](#footnote-38) the counter-question that might be posed is whether a ***non-verbal*** encounter with God should inevitably be perceived as **less than words**. Does the absence of words inherently mean a lesser degree of revelation than that which might be achieved by linguistic means? Cannot God be encountered personally, either before or apart from their utterance? The substantial theological scholarship which perceives verbal expression and cognitive appropriation of truth to be essential for apprehending God creates tensions in relation to the view that for some, words or the lack of them do not have the last word.

**SLIDE TO WHERE ON THE IQ SPECTRUM DOES GOD’S ACCOMMODATION STOP?**

**SLIDE TO STARTING WITH THE WRONG QUESTION**

**SLIDE TO STARTING WITH THE WRONG QUESTION**

The gap between what I have the capacity to understand of the things of God and what Rebecca can understand of the things of God is miniscule in comparison to what I can understand and cannot understand of the things of God.

I can establish a relationship of love with Rebecca, despite our inability to communicate in traditional ways – how much more able is God to do the same?

What, then, might be the appropriate ‘vocabulary’[[39]](#footnote-39) for persons who do not apprehend verbal communication? Whatever it is, it cannot be beyond the capacity of God. For Calvin, as McKim comments, ***human capacity was the key concept*** in the discussion of accommodation.[[40]](#footnote-40) It is, in part, the theory of accommodation that informs us that human capacity is not the determinant issue in the divine-human relationship. Those who argue for the indispensability of words, and the intelligence to understand and respond to them, are in danger of ***underestimating the degree of UNIVERSAL human incapacity*** when it comes to understanding God.

**SLIDE TO THE INFINITENESS OF OUR IGNORANCE**

Battles is adamant on this point: **“We try to measure God’s immeasurableness by our small measure. But it is God who knows the incalculable difference in measure between His infinity and our finiteness, and accordingly accommodates the one to the other in the way in which he reveals Himself to us.”**[[41]](#footnote-41)

Ultimately, it is not human incapacity in any form that matters, but God’s infinite capacity to accommodate his revelation to it. It would, then, be inappropriate to attempt to restrict the depth of this mystery in a way that supports a view that the revelation might be inaccessible to some of those created human beings, simply as a consequence of their lack of linguistic ability. Sparks warns that **“We are wise to hesitate before we say what God can and cannot do.”**[[42]](#footnote-42) As Baillie emphatically argues, **“We must not limit the competence of God by saying that He *cannot* reveal His will to stocks and stones.”**[[43]](#footnote-43)

**SLIDE TO CONTRAST GOD’S ACCOMMODATION WITH OURS**

If we return to the earlier definition of accommodation – making room for, offering hospitality to - and think about it alongside with what we’ve just been thinking about, we find there is a marked distinction between God’s accommodation to us and ours to people with profound intellectual disabilities. God’s to us is a top-down accommodation. In this sense it is essentially different from any accommodation we make to people who do not use our ways of expressing their spiritual lives. Yes, we will be accommodating/hospitable. But part of this means recognising that God’s accommodation to them is **not dependent on us** - which might mean we look at the whole question in a different way. Because these issues **aren’t only practical and they aren’t only attitudinal – they are also theological and so appropriate accommodation involves a degree of theological respect that might sometimes be missing here.**

We go to great lengths in the search for empirical evidence of spiritual engagement - is it possible that we might at times exercise an unhealthy inquisitiveness into the heart of other people who neither can not need to persuade us that God is within them? Are over-intellectualised, over-cognitively-dependent believers prone to lose sight of

the hiddenness of the mysterious ways of God?

**SLIDE TO HUMILITY IN THE ACADEMY**

For me this is an issue of the humility of the academy. Again commenting on the Nazanzian view, Norris underlines this point: **“Intellectual activities may lead us part of the way; they may even point to God’s existence, but God’s essence is beyond our powers of expression. Enfleshed human beings do not have the capacity to grasp God’s nature except in faithful acceptance of the mystery.”**[[44]](#footnote-44)

Knowing what we do know of God, sometimes we need to just embrace the mystery of what we don’t. In this case, the fact that we cannot identify precisely how God might conduct a life-giving relationship with people with profound intellectual disabilities, does not mean that it is not taking place.

**SLIDE TO RUTHERFORD**

Rutherford’s lyrical writing expresses the same thought: “**The world is immense, constructed on no plan or theory which the intellect of man may grasp. The transcendent is everywhere. This is the burden of every verse. Sufficient of insufficient there is nothing more…God is great, we do not know his ways.”**[[45]](#footnote-45)

I find the words of leading UK Practical Theologian, Stephen Pattison very challenging here. The activist mind-set is commonly expressed in the phrase, “don’t just stand there, do something.” Pattison issues a radically converse call: He says: “don’t just do something, stand there.”

I want to end by reading Psalm 131: **My heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty. I do not concern myself with things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul. Like a weaned child with its mother, I have quieted my soul. O, Israel, put your trust in the Lord.”**

1. Peter Birchenall and Mary Birchenall, “Caring for Mentally Handicapped People: The community and the church”, *The Professional Nurse,* 1, no. 6 (1986) 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Morris, “Transforming Able-Bodied Normativity,” 236-237 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wayne Morris, “Does the Church Need the Bible? Reflections on the Experiences of Disabled People,” in *Education, Religion and Society: Essays in Honour of John M. Hull,* ed. Dennis Bates, Gloria Durka and Friedrich Schweitzer, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 166 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Morris, “Does the Church Need the Bible,” 167 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rom.10:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See John. 15:10: “If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in His love.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Swinton, “Restoring the Image: Spirituality, Faith and Intellectual Disability,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 36, no. 1, (1997), 22, accessed August 2, 2011, http//:jstor.org.stable.27511088 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Morris, “Transforming Able-Bodied Normativity,” 236-37 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Birchenall and Mary Birchenall, “Caring for Mentally Handicapped People: The community and the church”, *The Professional Nurse,* 1, no. 6 (1986) 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory,* vol.4, *The Action,* trans. Graham Harrison, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994)*,* 373-383 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Peter Van Bemmelin, “Divine Accommodation in Revelation and Scripture,” *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 9, nos. 1-2 (1998), 221, accessed October 9, 2011, http://www.atsjats.org/publication\_file.php?pub\_id=176&journal=1&type=pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Van Bemmelin, “Revelation and Scripture,”221 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Funkenstein cites as an example of the usage of the phrase, the work of Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Harry Wolfson “Extradeical and Intradeical Interpretations of Platonic Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 1 (Jan-Mar 1961), 3, accessed October 28, 2011, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2707871 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Young, *God’s Presence*, 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Justin’s argument that the “task of accommodation was to compose an apologia for Christian non-observance of Torah” is most comprehensively recorded in his Dialogue with Trypho, cited in Benin, *Footprints,* 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See below, pages 138-139. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See below, page 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See below page 139 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See below page 137-138 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 1.1 *(NPNF* 1 7:7) cited in Sparks, *God’s Word*, 246 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Nancy Bowen, *Ezekiel,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid.,115 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid.,117 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ford Lewis Battles, “God was Accommodating Himself to Human Incapacity” in *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*,ed. Donald McKim, (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998), 21-42, 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Battles “God was Accommodating,”22 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol.1,trans. Henry Beveridge, (Edinburgh, Calvin Translation Society, 1844) 263-64 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. These are numerous and recurrent, particularly throughout the Old Testament canon. See Numbers 11:23 “the arm of the Lord”; Isaiah 37:17 “open your eyes, Lord, and see”; Psalm 34:17 “the Lord’s ears are attentive to my cry” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Patrick Fairburn, “True and False Accommodation; or the Influence that Should be Allowed to Prevailing Modes of Thought in Fashioning the Views and Utterances of the Sacred Writers” in *Hermeneutics Manual,* (Philadelphia: Smith, English and Co., 1859), 107, accessed August 11, 2013, http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted\_hildebrandt/digitalcourses/mathewson\_hermeneutics/mathewson\_hermenetucis\_texts/fairbairn\_patrick\_hermeneutical\_manual\_files/fairbairn\_patrick\_hermeneutical\_manual.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See above, 124-126, esp. Middleton, *Liberating Image.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Lionel Wickham and Frederick Williams, eds. and trans. With an Introduction by Frederick Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazanzien*, (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 204 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Michael Seisenberger, *Practical Handbook for the Study of the Bible* (New York: Wagner, 1911), 466, quoted in Ramm, *Protestant*, 100-101 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Norris, *Fullness to Reasoning,* 204 (emphasis mine) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Eusthathium de sancta trinitae* (EUS), F Mueller, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera,* Vol.3.1 (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 1048-49 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Gregory of Nyssa, *Answer to Euonimus’ Second Book, NPNF* 2 5:292, quoted in Sparks, *God’s Word,* 238and Benin, *Footprints,* 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See above, page 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See above, page 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Battles, “God was Accommodating,”35 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Sparks, *God’s Word,* 253 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Baillie, *Knowledge,* 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Norris, *Fullness to Reasoning,* 112 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Mark Rutherford, *Mark Rutherford’s Deliverance* (London: Trubner and Co.,1885), 196-198 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)