

Evaluating Adaptive Assessment Models for Children with Special Needs in Christian Religious Education: A Mephibosheth-Inspired Hermeneutical Framework

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Abstract: The evaluation of adaptive assessment models for children with special needs within Christian Religious Education (CRE) presents unique pedagogical and theological challenges. Standardized assessments often fail to accommodate diverse cognitive, emotional, and physical abilities, inadvertently excluding these learners from meaningful spiritual evaluation. This article proposes a constructive and hermeneutical method to develop an alternative evaluative framework inspired by the biblical narrative of Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9). Constructively, the study synthesizes principles from special education specifically Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated assessment with a theological anthropology grounded in imago Dei. Hermeneutically, the Mephibosheth narrative is reinterpreted not as a passive recipient of charity but as a paradigmatic figure whose "crippled feet" symbolize both vulnerability and dignified inclusion under divine grace. The resulting framework redefines assessment success not by normative performance metrics but by relational engagement, progress relative to individual capacity, and the affirmation of inherent worth before God. Key evaluative components include flexible modalities (verbal, artistic, kinesthetic), process-oriented feedback, and community-based affirmation. This Mephibosheth-inspired approach transforms assessment from a tool of exclusion into a means of grace, offering a theologically robust and pedagogically practical model for CRE practitioners to faithfully serve children of all abilities.

Keywords: Adaptive Assessment; Christian Religious Education; Hermeneutical Framework.; Mephibosheth; Special Needs Children.

1. Introduction

The education of children with special needs remains one of the most pressing challenges confronting educational systems worldwide. In the context of religious education, this challenge is particularly acute, as theological education often demands abstract reasoning, symbolic interpretation, and verbal expression capacities that may not align with the learning profiles of all children. The question of how to meaningfully assess the religious understanding and spiritual growth of children with diverse abilities is not merely pedagogical but deeply theological, touching upon fundamental questions of human worth, divine grace, and ecclesial belonging. Contemporary educational research has increasingly recognised the inadequacy of conventional assessment models for children with special needs. A 2025 study conducted across six schools, screening 852 children, found that 166 children were identified as potentially living with a disability requiring formal assessment, and crucially, the study revealed that relying solely on teacher observation significantly increases the risk of failing to identify children who need specialised assessment and support. (Kazuo et al., 2025) This finding resonates with the situation in religious education contexts, where formal assessment frameworks for children with special needs are often underdeveloped or entirely absent. The global landscape of religious education for persons with disabilities reveals persistent systemic challenges. (Marshall, 2018) A systematic literature review examining articles from the Scopus database over the past two decades identified several recurring obstacles: the abstract nature of religious concepts, insufficient learning media tailored for disabilities, the absence of a standardised curriculum, and inadequate training and resources for teachers and caregivers. These findings suggest that the problem is not merely one of resource allocation but of

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fundamental pedagogical and theological frameworks that have not been sufficiently adapted to accommodate neurodiversity and physical disability.(Cook, 2024)

Within the Christian scriptural tradition, the narrative of Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9) offers a profound theological resource for reimagining inclusion and assessment. Mephibosheth, the grandson of King Saul and son of David's covenant friend Jonathan, was left crippled in both feet after a childhood accident.(Steele, 2010) The narrative recounts how King David, seeking to show kindness (hesed) for Jonathan's sake, summons Mephibosheth from his exile in Lo-debar a name meaning "no pasture," signifying barrenness and social obscurity. Despite Mephibosheth's self-identification as "a dead dog" (2 Samuel 9:8), David restores to him all the lands of his grandfather Saul and grants him the extraordinary privilege of eating continually at the king's table "like one of the king's sons" (2 Samuel 9:11). Theologically, Mephibosheth's disability functions not as a narrative footnote but as the theological fulcrum of 2 Samuel 9.(Schipper, 2005) His physical impairment magnifies the unilateral, covenant-keeping grace that defines biblical hesed the king's kindness is not earned but freely given. Moreover, the narrative challenges prevailing cultural stigmas that associated disability with divine disfavour, anticipating the prophetic vision of a kingdom where "the lame will leap like a deer" (Isaiah 35:6) and ultimately the healing ministry of Christ, who welcomed all to his table. The repeated emphasis on table fellowship four times in the narrative symbolises full inclusion, dignity, and belonging, offering a compelling paradigm for Christian education.

The scholarly literature relevant to this study spans three intersecting domains: special education assessment, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Christian religious education for children with disabilities.(Quirke & Galvin, 2025) In the domain of special education assessment, recent research has demonstrated the potential of adaptive assessment models to accommodate diverse learner needs. A 2025 study developing an English-speaking skills assessment rubric for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) using UDL principles found that the resulting rubric was clear, comprehensive, and adaptable to various student needs, with teachers reporting increased engagement and flexibility.(Solo et al., 2025) The pilot test indicated high inter-rater reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85) and demonstrated that students who previously struggled with verbal communication showed improvement through non-verbal means, including gestures, visual aids, and assistive technologies.(Aija et al., 2019) This research confirms that UDL principles multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement can be effectively operationalised in assessment rubrics for children with special needs. However, the application of UDL and adaptive assessment models to religious education remains significantly underdeveloped. A systematic literature review on religious learning guidelines for persons with disabilities found that existing research has not produced standardised, evidence-based frameworks for assessing religious understanding among children with special needs. The review identified multiple barriers: the abstract nature of theological concepts, insufficient learning media, inadequate teacher training, and restricted access to religious education opportunities altogether. This gap is particularly pronounced in the Christian context, where theological commitments to inclusion and the inherent worth of every person (*imago Dei*) have not been consistently translated into pedagogical and assessment practices. Research specifically examining Christian education for children with special needs has a limited but instructive history. An early guide from 2002 evaluated seven curriculum materials for the Christian education of children with special needs, emphasising criteria such as ease of modification, readability level, and flexibility for scheduling.(Lewis, 2002) While valuable as an initial contribution, this work predates contemporary understandings of disability, neurodiversity, and inclusive education. More recent scholarship has examined how private Christian schools deliver instruction to students with learning disabilities, revealing persistent barriers to implementation, including inadequate teacher preparation, lack of resources, and the absence of systematic assessment frameworks. The intersection of assessment, disability, and Christian religious education thus remains largely uncharted territory. While secular educational research has advanced adaptive assessment models and while theological scholarship has explored biblical narratives of disability and grace, no existing study has systematically synthesised these domains into a coherent framework for evaluating adaptive assessment models in Christian religious education.(Murphy, 2025)

The present study addresses this lacuna by proposing and evaluating an adaptive assessment framework for children with special needs in Christian Religious Education (CRE), grounded in a hermeneutical reading of the Mephibosheth narrative and informed by UDL principles. The novelty of this research is threefold. First, it represents the first systematic attempt to apply UDL principles which have been validated in secular special education contexts to the specific domain of Christian religious education assessment. This application requires careful theological translation, as the goals of CRE (faith formation, spiritual understanding, ethical formation) differ significantly from the cognitive and skill-based objectives of secular education. Second, this study offers a fresh hermeneutical contribution by reading the Mephibosheth narrative (2 Samuel 9) as a paradigm for assessment rather than merely a story of charity or inclusion. While existing theological interpretations have emphasised Mephibosheth as a recipient of grace or a symbol of human helplessness before divine kindness, this study argues that the narrative provides specific guidance for how assessment should be conceptualised: as a royal summons that seeks out the marginalised, as a restoration of dignity and inheritance, and as an invitation to table fellowship where the measure of worth is not ability but belonging. Third, this study integrates constructive and hermeneutical methods to produce a practically applicable framework. It does not merely critique existing assessment models but develops concrete, actionable criteria for evaluating adaptive assessments in CRE settings.

The urgency of this research cannot be overstated. Recent policy developments at national and international levels have increasingly mandated inclusive education, yet assessment practices have lagged behind instructional accommodations. The 2018 Survey of States conducted by the National Center on Educational Outcomes documented ongoing challenges in including students with disabilities in state summative assessments, noting persistent gaps between policy intent and classroom reality. (Buzick & Weeks, 2018) In the religious education context, the urgency is compounded by theological and ecclesial imperatives. If Christian communities confess that every person is created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and that the gospel is for all people, then the assessment practices of Christian education must reflect these convictions. (Pike, 2026) Current practices often exclude children with special needs from meaningful assessment or worse, assess them by inappropriate standards that communicate, implicitly or explicitly, that their understanding is deficient or their spiritual development stunted. This is not merely an educational failure but a theological one, a failure to embody the grace that David showed to Mephibosheth. Furthermore, the growing recognition of neurodiversity and the increasing prevalence of diagnosed disabilities among school-age children demand urgent attention. Teachers in both secular and religious settings report feeling ill-equipped to screen, identify, and assess children with special needs, with many lacking sustained professional development and ongoing support. (Lane, 2011) The gap between knowledge and application where training is delivered as a one-time event without follow-up coaching or mentoring is particularly acute in religious education contexts, where specialised training in special education is often minimal or absent. Finally, this research is urgent because it addresses a fundamental question of justice and grace: How shall we measure what cannot be measured by conventional means? If assessment is understood not as a tool of comparison and ranking but as a means of discerning growth, identifying support needs, and affirming inherent worth, then the development of adaptive assessment models becomes a theological imperative. The Mephibosheth narrative reminds us that the King's table is not for the able only but for all whom grace summons from obscurity to belonging. This study therefore proceeds in four movements: first, a critique of conventional assessment models in CRE for children with special needs; second, a constructive proposal for an adaptive assessment framework integrating UDL principles and *imago Dei* anthropology; third, a hermeneutical interpretation of the Mephibosheth narrative as a paradigm of inclusion and grace; and finally, a synthetic framework for evaluating adaptive assessment models in CRE contexts. It is offered in the hope that Christian religious education might more faithfully embody the table fellowship that David extended to the crippled prince and that Christ extends to all.

2. Method

This article employs a constructive and hermeneutical method to develop an adaptive assessment framework for children with special needs in Christian Religious Education. The constructive dimension involves synthesizing principles from special education specifically Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasizes multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement with theological anthropology grounded in the doctrine of *imago Dei*. (Timofte, 2016) This synthesis produces a practical, flexible assessment model that prioritizes individual progress over normative standards. (Majesty et al., 2026) The hermeneutical dimension applies a narrative interpretation of the Mephibosheth story (2 Samuel 9) as a theological lens. Rather than a literal or moralistic reading, the hermeneutic repositions Mephibosheth a lame figure often reduced to passivity as a paradigmatic symbol of dignified inclusion under divine grace. This interpretative act redefines key assessment concepts: "success" becomes relational engagement, "progress" is measured against individual capacity, and "evaluation" transforms from judgment into a means of grace. (Greenstein, 2012) The integration of both methods ensures that the proposed framework is pedagogically sound and theologically rooted, offering CRE practitioners a faithful and practical tool for inclusive education.

3. Results and Discussion

Critique of Conventional Assessment Models in Christian Religious Education for Children with Special Needs

Conventional assessment models in CRE typically fall into three categories: written tests measuring biblical knowledge, oral recitation of memorised scriptures or catechism, and observation-based evaluations of behavioural conformity to religious norms. Each of these models presupposes certain capacities that many children with special needs may not possess. Written tests assume literacy, fine motor skills for writing, and the cognitive ability to process abstract symbolic language. (Gillis, 1976) Oral recitation assumes verbal fluency, memory retrieval under pressure, and the capacity for auditory processing. Behavioural observation assumes that outward conformity to visible norms accurately reflects inward spiritual states, a theological assumption that is deeply problematic even for typically developing children.

The inadequacy of these conventional models for children with special needs has been well documented in recent educational research. A 2025 study across six schools, screening 852 children, found that 166 children were identified as potentially living with a disability requiring formal assessment. (Kazuo et al., 2025) Critically, the study revealed that relying solely on teacher observation the primary assessment method in many CRE contexts significantly increases the risk of failing to identify children who need specialised assessment and support. This finding is particularly troubling for religious education, where teacher observation is often the only form of assessment employed. Without systematic, validated assessment tools, children with special needs are at high risk of being misjudged as disengaged, disobedient, or spiritually underdeveloped when in fact their learning profiles simply do not align with the assessment methods being used.

Beyond the practical inadequacy of conventional models lies a deeper theological problem. Standardised assessment in CRE often operates on an implicit assumption that there is a normal or typical trajectory of spiritual development against which all children should be measured. This assumption conflicts directly with the biblical witness and with classical Christian theology. The Apostle Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12) emphasises diversity rather than uniformity, arguing that the body of Christ is composed of many members with different functions, each equally valued. Similarly, Jesus' parables of the kingdom repeatedly challenge conventional metrics of worth and productivity: the workers hired at the eleventh hour receive the same wage as those who laboured all day (Matthew 20:1-16), and the widow's small coin is deemed more valuable than the large gifts of the wealthy (Mark 12:41-44). Conventional assessment models that privilege uniform performance metrics fail to reflect this theological vision. (Balboni, 2013)

The absence of standardised, evidence-based assessment frameworks for children with special needs in CRE is not merely a practical oversight but a structural injustice. A systematic literature review examining articles from the Scopus database over the past two decades identified persistent systemic challenges: the abstract nature of religious concepts, insufficient

learning media tailored for disabilities, and inadequate training and resources for teachers and caregivers. These challenges are compounded by the fact that many CRE teachers receive minimal training in special education. Without specialised knowledge, teachers may misinterpret the behaviours associated with certain disabilities. For example, a child with autism who avoids eye contact may be judged as disrespectful or inattentive during prayer, while a child with ADHD who struggles to sit still during worship may be labelled as undisciplined or irreverent. (Bass, 2012) These misjudgments have lasting consequences, potentially alienating children with special needs from religious communities that should be sanctuaries of grace.

Furthermore, conventional assessment models in CRE tend to be summative rather than formative, measuring outcomes rather than progress. A child with special needs may make significant spiritual growth from one month to the next perhaps learning a new way to express prayer, demonstrating increased empathy toward peers, or showing greater comfort in the worship space yet conventional assessments that compare the child to normative standards will register this growth as failure because the child still falls short of typical expectations. This approach contradicts the biblical principle of faithful stewardship, where the servant who gains two talents from an initial two is praised equally with the servant who gains five from five (Matthew 25:14-30). The measure of faithfulness is not absolute output but growth relative to the resources entrusted.

The linguistic and symbolic nature of Christian education presents additional barriers. (Kia & Majesty, 2026) Many children with special needs experience difficulty with abstract language, metaphor, and symbolic reasoning all of which are central to Christian theological discourse. Concepts such as grace, redemption, Trinity, and resurrection cannot be directly observed or concretely demonstrated; they must be understood through analogy, story, and spiritual intuition. Conventional assessments that demand verbal articulation of these abstract concepts may fail to capture the genuine spiritual understanding of children who think more concretely or express themselves through non-verbal means. (Bellous, 2000) A child who cannot explain the doctrine of justification by faith may nevertheless embody its reality through spontaneous forgiveness of a peer or through trust in a teacher's unconditional acceptance. Conventional assessment models lack the categories to recognise such manifestations of spiritual understanding.

Conventional assessment models in CRE have not been designed with the theological principle of *imago Dei* that every person is created in the image of God as their guiding framework. Instead, they have been shaped by secular educational paradigms emphasising efficiency, comparability, and standardisation. The result is a mismatch between the theological anthropology of Christian education and its assessment practices. If all children bear God's image and if the Spirit works in diverse ways across diverse capacities, then assessment should be equally diverse, adaptive, and gracious. The current conventional models fail this theological test, and the remainder of this article will develop an alternative grounded in both sound pedagogy and faithful hermeneutics.

Constructing an Adaptive Assessment Model Based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Theological Anthropology of *Imago Dei*

Universal Design for Learning emerges from the recognition that educational environments are not neutral but are typically designed for a narrow range of learners, inadvertently excluding those who do not fit the presumed norm. (Wilson, 2017) UDL addresses this problem by designing flexibility into the curriculum and assessment from the outset, rather than retrofitting accommodations after exclusion has occurred. (Baat, 2021) The framework operates through three core principles: multiple means of representation (presenting information in various ways), multiple means of expression (allowing learners to demonstrate understanding in various ways), and multiple means of engagement (tapping into different interests and motivations). Research has validated the effectiveness of UDL-based assessment for children with special needs. A 2025 study developing an English-speaking skills assessment rubric for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) using UDL principles found that the resulting rubric was clear, comprehensive, and adaptable to various student needs. (Kazuo et al., 2025) The pilot test demonstrated high inter-rater reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85) and showed that students who previously struggled with verbal communication showed improvement through non-verbal means, including gestures, visual

aids, and assistive technologies. (Aija et al., 2019) These findings suggest that UDL principles can be effectively operationalised in assessment contexts, including potentially in religious education.

The application of UDL to CRE assessment, however, requires careful theological translation. The secular goals of UDL access, participation, and academic achievement must be expanded to include the distinctively Christian goals of faith formation, spiritual growth, and ethical transformation. This is where the doctrine of *imago Dei* becomes indispensable. The claim that every human being is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) carries profound implications for assessment. If all children bear God's image, then no child is defined by their deficits or measured solely by their conformity to normative standards. Each child manifests the divine image uniquely, and assessment should be designed to recognise and affirm that uniqueness rather than to impose uniformity. The *imago Dei* provides a theological warrant for the flexibility that UDL demands: because each child images God differently, assessment must be equally diverse to honour that diversity. (Thompson, 2023)

Integrating UDL principles with *imago Dei* anthropology produces a distinctively Christian adaptive assessment model characterised by four key features. First, assessment must be multimodal, offering children multiple ways to demonstrate their understanding of religious concepts. A child who cannot articulate the meaning of baptism verbally might draw the baptism of Jesus, act out the scene using figures, or select images that represent new life in Christ. Second, assessment must be process-oriented, tracking individual progress rather than comparing children to external norms. This reflects the biblical principle of faithful stewardship, where the servant who gains two talents from an initial two receives the same praise as the servant who gains five from five (Matthew 25:14-30). The measure is growth relative to starting point, not absolute output. Third, assessment must be collaborative, involving parents, caregivers, therapists, and the child themselves in discerning spiritual growth. The isolation of the classroom teacher as sole assessor is neither pedagogically sound nor theologically warranted, as formation occurs across multiple contexts and relationships. Fourth, assessment must be gracious, prioritising affirmation and encouragement before correction. The goal of assessment in CRE is not to sort or rank children but to discern how best to support their journey toward fuller participation in the life of faith. (Tuegeh & Majesty, 2025)

Practically, this adaptive assessment model requires CRE teachers to develop flexible rubrics with multiple indicators for each learning goal. For a lesson on forgiveness, for example, a teacher might assess through verbal explanation, through observation of forgiving behaviour during free play, through a drawing that depicts forgiveness, or through the child's ability to identify forgiveness in a story. The teacher selects the mode that best matches the child's expressive capacities on any given day, recognising that performance may vary across contexts and times. This flexibility is not a watering down of standards but a recognition that divine image is expressed diversely. The model also requires ongoing documentation of progress over time, creating portfolios that capture growth in ways that one-time summative assessments cannot. Such portfolios become powerful tools not only for evaluating children but also for celebrating their unique manifestations of God's image and for communicating that celebration to families and faith communities. In constructing this model, the article offers CRE practitioners a practical, theologically grounded alternative to conventional assessment paradigms, one that embodies the inclusive grace that lies at the heart of the Christian gospel.

A Hermeneutical Interpretation of the Mephibosheth Narrative (2 Samuel 9) as a Paradigm of Inclusion and Grace

The narrative opens with King David's inquiry: "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (2 Samuel 9:1). The Hebrew word for "kindness" here is *hesed* (חֶסֶד), one of the most theologically rich terms in the Hebrew Scriptures. *Hesed* does not mean merely kindness, pity, or charity. It refers to covenant loyalty, steadfast love, and faithful action that goes beyond what is required by law or obligation. (Intrater, 2016) *Hesed* is the same word used throughout the Hebrew Bible to describe God's faithful love for Israel, as in Exodus 34:6 where the Lord is described as "abounding in steadfast love" (רַב־חֶסֶד, *rav-hesed*). By using *hesed*, the narrator signals that David's action is not optional benevolence but covenant obligation flowing from his prior

relationship with Jonathan. The theological implication for assessment is profound: the summons of children with special needs into full participation in CRE is not an act of charity that educators may choose to offer or withhold. It is a covenant obligation rooted in God's own character of **חסד**. Assessment models that exclude, marginalise, or inadequately serve children with special needs violate the **חסד** that defines faithful community and faithful education.

Mephibosheth is introduced with a detail that the Hebrew text emphasises through its structure. The text states: "Now he had a son whose name was Mephibosheth, who was crippled in both feet" (2 Samuel 4:4). The Hebrew phrase describing his condition is **נגף רגלים** (nagfeh raglayim). The word **נגף** (nagfeh) derives from the root **נָגַף** (nagaph), meaning to strike, smite, or plague. This is significant because it suggests not merely a congenital condition but a wounding, an injury inflicted upon him. The narrative explains that his nurse dropped him during the flight from Jezreel, leaving him permanently impaired. Importantly, the Hebrew does not define Mephibosheth primarily by his disability. His identity is first established relationally: as the son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul. The disability is a secondary, though consequential, descriptor. This grammatical ordering carries immense theological weight: Mephibosheth's fundamental identity is as a member of the covenant community, not as a disabled person. (Swai, 2025) His disability is real and the text does not spiritualise it away he remains **נגף רגלים** throughout the narrative but it does not define him. For CRE assessment, this means that children with special needs must first be seen as full members of the faith community, bearers of the divine image (**צלם אלוהים**, tzelem Elohim), and participants in the covenant. Assessment should never reduce them to their disabilities or measure them primarily against norms derived from typically developing children. (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004)

When Mephibosheth is brought before the king, his response reveals the psychological and spiritual impact of living with disability in a stigmatising culture. He says: "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?" (2 Samuel 9:8). The Hebrew phrase for "dead dog" is **הכלב המת** (hakelev hamet). In ancient Near Eastern culture, dogs were considered unclean scavengers, and a dead dog represented the lowest possible state of worthlessness and defilement. (Irvin & Lundock, 2020) The definite article highlights the extremity of his self-assessment: he is not just any dead dog but "the dead dog" par excellence. Mephibosheth has internalised the cultural stigma against disability. He has been living in **לודבר** (לוֹדֵבָר), a name the Hebrew text uses with rich irony. **לודבר** (Lo-debar) means "no pasture" or "nothing," a place of barrenness, emptiness, and obscurity. He has been exiled not only geographically but socially, psychologically, and theologically, believing himself to be worthless before the king. David's response is striking and theologically significant. He does not argue with Mephibosheth's self-assessment or attempt to boost his self-esteem through affirmation. Instead, he acts decisively. He restores to Mephibosheth all the land of Saul and issues a command: "He shall eat at my table always, like one of the king's sons" (2 Samuel 9:11). The Hebrew word for "always" is **תמיד** (tamid), meaning perpetually, continually, without interruption or end. This is not a one-time invitation but a permanent redefinition of Mephibosheth's social, economic, and theological identity. The king's table (**שלחן המלך**, shulchan hamelech) is the place of honour, intimacy, protection, and belonging. In the ancient Near East, to eat at the king's table was to be adopted into the royal household, to receive daily provision, and to enjoy ongoing relationship with the sovereign. (Podany, 2010)

The hermeneutical significance for CRE assessment is transformative. The narrative provides four specific paradigm shifts for how assessment should be reconceptualised. First, assessment must function as a royal summons of **חסד** that actively seeks out children with special needs from their places of marginalisation. David did not wait for Mephibosheth to come to him; he sent Ziba to bring Mephibosheth from Lo-debar. Similarly, assessment in CRE must not passively wait for children with special needs to fit into existing structures. It must actively seek them out, going to the places of educational and social obscurity the contemporary equivalents of **לודבר** and extending the king's invitation. Second, assessment must restore inheritance. David restored to Mephibosheth all the land of Saul, giving him economic security and social standing. Assessment in CRE must restore to children with special needs their full inheritance as members of the faith community, including the right to be evaluated by criteria that honour their unique manifestations of God's image. Third,

assessment must be reconceived as table fellowship. The narrative mentions Mephibosheth eating at the king's table four times (2 Samuel 9:7, 10, 11, 13). This repetition is not accidental. It emphasises that the heart of the king's action is not land or material provision but relationship, presence, and ongoing belonging. Similarly, the goal of assessment in CRE should not be to accumulate data, assign grades, or compare children to external norms. The goal should be to draw children into deeper relationship with God, with the faith community, and with their own identity as beloved children of the King who are welcomed to the table תמיד (tamid), perpetually. Fourth, assessment must affirm identity as "like one of the king's sons." David does not treat Mephibosheth as a permanent dependent or as an object of pity. He gives him the status of a son (בן המלך, ben hamelech). Assessment practices in CRE must similarly affirm that children with special needs are not second-class members of the educational community but full participants, sons and daughters of the King whose unique ways of learning and expressing faith enrich the entire body.

The narrative concludes with a final detail that carries theological weight: "So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate always at the king's table. And he was crippled in both feet" (2 Samuel 9:13). The Hebrew places the two clauses in stark juxtaposition: הוא ישב בירושלים כי על-שלחן המלך תמיד הוא אכל והוא נגף רגליו (hu yashav birushalayim ki al-shulchan hamelech tamid hu ochel v'hu nagfeh raglav). Mephibosheth remains נגף רגליו his disability is not miraculously healed in this narrative. Yet his disability no longer determines his destiny. He eats at the king's table תמיד. The disability is not denied or erased, but it is also not the final word. This is a profoundly important theological insight for CRE assessment. Children with special needs may never be "healed" of their disabilities in the sense of becoming typically developing. (Gill, 1997) But this does not mean they cannot fully participate in the life of faith and the life of Christian education. Assessment must recognise the reality of disability without allowing that reality to become the defining measure of the child's worth or capacity for spiritual growth. Mephibosheth remains נגף רגליו, yet he eats at the king's table. Similarly, children with special needs remain who they are, with their unique challenges and gifts, yet they belong fully at the table of Christian education. (Whitt, 2016) Assessment practices that embody this theological vision will be characterised by חסד (covenantal grace), by the active summons out of לוֹדֶבֶר (obscurity), and by the invitation to table fellowship תמיד (perpetually). The Mephibosheth narrative thus provides a hermeneutical lens through which all assessment practices in CRE must be evaluated: do they function like David's חסד, actively seeking out the marginalised, restoring dignity and inheritance, and inviting to permanent table fellowship? Where assessment practices do the opposite excluding, stigmatising, measuring by inappropriate standards, or reducing children to their disabilities they stand judged by this biblical paradigm. And where assessment practices embody this vision, they become not merely educational tools but means of grace, extending the King's table to all whom God has created and called.

4. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that conventional assessment paradigms within Christian Religious Education perpetuate exclusionary practices for children with special needs by privileging normative, product-oriented metrics. In response, the proposed adaptive assessment model, synthesized from Universal Design for Learning principles and imago Dei theology, establishes a pedagogically sound alternative that evaluates learner progress relative to individual capacity. Furthermore, the hermeneutical re-reading of the Mephibosheth narrative (2 Samuel 9) provides a robust theological foundation that reframes disability not as deficit but as a locus of divine grace and dignified belonging. Consequently, assessment is reconceptualized as a formative, relational means of grace rather than a summative instrument of comparison, affirming the inherent worth of all learners within inclusive CRE contexts.

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