

Accountability as the Ground of Human Flourishing

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Abstract

This article argues that human flourishing is grounded in relationships of mutual judgement according to which we live and grow as characters in the stories of others. More specifically, it will make a theological case that true human flourishing emerges in a world governed by the judgement of the triune God who creates us to find fulfilment in Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, according to the will of the Father. In so doing, it contends that human flourishing is both grounded in and brought about by relationships of accountability.

Keywords

Accountability, flourishing, narrative, slavery, participation in Christ, body of Christ, judgement, authority

Introduction

As you read this article, I stand as someone about to be judged. This is because you, the reader, carry certain expectations about who I should be in my role as a writer. There are stylistic expectations: were my sentences overly long and filled with punctuation errors, you would probably judge me as inelegant. There could be theological expectations: you may be a heresy hunter, on the lookout for anyone who might be slipping away from a perceived orthodoxy. There may be social expectations: you could be a culture warrior on the lookout for anything that might be construed as culturally insensitive. And there could even be aesthetic expectations: were I to use the font comic sans, the appearance of my words would likely convey a certain naivete towards academic decorum.

So, it would be possible for you to get to the end of this article and to have formed an account of me as someone who is, at least in certain respects, inelegant, heretical, prejudicial, and/or naive. Were this to happen, it would be fair to say that, on some level, you

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couldn't help but hold me in lower esteem. In anticipation of your judgement, I experience a sense of pressure. Why is this? It is because I care about your perception of me. I care about trying to meet at least some of your expectations as to who I should be in my role as a writer. Indeed, this means I could come to base my judgement of myself on your judgement of me. My account of myself could become shaped by your account of me. Were this to happen, there would be a part of me that belongs to you, that is, a part of me would be a product of your judgement.

In drawing attention to this dynamic, my intention is not to discourage you from being judgemental. Rather, I am simply pointing out a dynamic that is pervasive in society, a dynamic that is one of the most significant factors in shaping our lives and, indeed, our sense of flourishing. All the time, whether we like it or not, most of us are making judgements about others, while others are making judgements about us. And as this happens, we grow and develop in response to the judgement of others, while others grow and develop in response to our judgements of them. We can also frame this dynamic in narrative terms. We grow and develop as characters in the narratives of others: narratives that others believe and construct about the world, about what it means to be human, about how to flourish and find fulfilment, about how we should and should not act, and about what our goals should and should not be.

In highlighting this dynamic, there is one thing we need to be clear about from the outset: this dynamic can become a very serious problem. Historically, the human race has had a terrible track record when it comes to judging the value and dignity of others. Those with the worst track record include wealthy, British, Christian, straight, abled, white men (like myself), whose judgements have a long history of dehumanising and marginalising those of different races, religions, nationalities, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, and so on. We see the defectiveness of human judgement, for example, in the history of slavery, European colonisation, the minimisation of women, suicide amongst the LGBTQIA + community,^{/fn1/c} 1 and the high abortion rates of children with Downs Syndrome.² This list could go on and on. In narrative terms, many of the world's greatest atrocities have been the result of persons finding themselves caught up in hideous narratives authored by evil minds: slaves in the stories of slaveowners; Jews in the stories Nazis tell themselves; indigenous peoples in the stories of European colonisers. In stories such as these, persons are deemed to be inferior in certain crucial and often essential ways, according to a particular story that is told about what it means to be human and, often, about what it means to flourish.

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1. See Cody J. Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide, and the Souls of Queer Folk* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).
 2. See Hyunkyung Choi, Marcia Van Riper, and Suzanne Thoyre, 'Decision Making Following a Prenatal Diagnosis of Down Syndrome: An Integrative Review', *Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health* 57.2 (2012), pp. 156–64. As one reviewer pointed out, there are some who would debate whether these examples are indicative of defective human judgement. I would see this as a problem, but I shall leave it up to readers to make their own assessment about the aptness of these examples.

On a more minor level, the judgementality that characterises society is one of the chief reasons that so many people struggle with mental health issues, such as anxiety, insecurity, and impostor syndrome. So often our judgement communicates or is, at least, perceived to communicate the message ‘you do not belong here’, ‘you are not good enough to be one of us’.

At the same time, we also need to be clear that our participation in a world of judgement, our participation in the stories of others, is a major feature of how society functions. Furthermore, we must also be clear that the judgement of others is vital to the flourishing of society. It is human judgement that leads us to recognise the equal dignity of all persons in their particularity. It is human judgement that helps us to notice when others are struggling and in need of help. It is human judgement that mobilises us to be communities characterised by mutual love, support, and flourishing. And it is stories of faith, hope, and love that undergird a commitment to facilitate true human flourishing—the flourishing that characterises us when we excel in our role(s) in this world. Without the judgement and without the meaningful narratives of others—such as parents, teachers, doctors, pastors—none of us would be able to flourish in the way we do. Without judgement, and without the stories we tell to make sense of the world, society would be characterised by disinterest. Caught up in a world of neutrality and indifference, we would be incapable of valuing and relating meaningfully to others.

The aim of this article will be to make the case, albeit cautiously, that human flourishing is grounded in relationships of mutual judgement according to which we live and grow as characters in the stories of others. It shall conclude by arguing that true human flourishing emerges in a world governed by the judgement of the triune God who creates us to find fulfilment in Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, according to the will of the Father. In making this case, I shall contend that human flourishing is both grounded in and brought about by what I shall call ‘relationships of accountability’.

Relationships of Accountability

What do I mean by a relationship of accountability? ‘Accountability’ is one of those words that is too often thrown around without much thought into what it means. Consequently, it has grown to take on a variety of meanings. For the purposes of this article, however, let me propose a specific definition for this word. This definition draws upon the understanding that accountability involves two parties—the *accountor* (the one to whom one is accountable) and the *accountee* (the one who is accountable).³

Accountability (between persons): the condition of someone (the accountee) standing in relation to another (the accountor) who has an authority to judge relevant aspects of who the accountee is and should be relative to their role in a shared project; a project that characterises the relationship

3. These terms have been used previously by Harald Bergsteiner and Gayle C. Avery, ‘Responsibility and Accountability: Towards an Integrative Process Model’, *International Business and Economics Research Journal* 2.2 (2003), pp. 31–40.

between the accountant and the accountee and their roles within it, but which is specifically oriented towards an end(s) that is proper to the accountee.⁴

If we apply our definition of accountability to a teacher–student relationship, we can say that a student (*qua* accountee) is accountable to a teacher (*qua* accountant) insofar as the teacher has legitimate authority to judge relevant aspects of who the student is and should be relative to the shared project of education, which is oriented towards the student’s learning goals. Or we can also say that the teacher (*qua* accountee) is accountable to the student (*qua* accountant) insofar as the student has legitimate authority to judge relevant aspects of who a teacher is and should be relative to the shared project of educating, which helps the teacher to achieve their teaching goals.⁵ In this relationship, neither party has a neutral account of who the other should be. When the student seeks to learn from the teacher, it is normally out of a perception that the teacher has an epistemic authority to make constructive judgements about who they are and should be with respect to their learning. Also, when the teacher is receptive to feedback from the student, it is because they trust that the student has an epistemic authority to make constructive judgements about who the teacher is and should be in their role.

What gives a person the legitimate authority to judge another person? In a relationship of accountability, the accountant has legitimate authority if they have the ability to make good and proper judgements about who the accountee is and should be in their role in a shared project. Such authority could be practical: an authority to make certain demands that serve an accountee’s flourishing (e.g., a parent’s authority to send their child to bed). It could be epistemic, grounded in a superior knowledge that can support an accountee’s flourishing (e.g., the teacher’s knowledge of how well a student understands a topic). Or it could be both (e.g., a teacher has a practical authority to demand that a student does their homework, and an epistemic authority to judge the student’s performance in their homework).

There are, however, challenges when it comes to working out whether an accountant possesses *legitimate* authority in relationship to an accountee. When it comes to practical authority, it will not always be clear what demands the accountant can legitimately make of the accountee. As such, careful reflection is needed on what an accountant with practical authority can legitimately demand from an accountee. And such reflection should be shaped by a commitment to ensuring that the accountant’s authority serves the accountee’s role within a shared project. Also, in the case of epistemic authority, it can whether the accountant genuinely knows what is best for the accountee, especially if they have not spent much time together be difficult to work out.

Consequently, in the context of a relationship between the teacher and the student, it can be important for a teacher not to assume authority too quickly, since they may not know what is best for a student until they have spent time assessing a particular student’s

4. This is a slightly revised version of the definition I proposed in my article, ‘The Virtue of Accountability’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34.3 (2021), pp. 307–15.

5. For an excellent example of this, see Andrew Picard and Jordyn Rapana, ‘Let Justice Roll Down’ in this volume.

educational needs. Nonetheless, appropriate teaching will require the teacher to take a view on what is good or bad for the student. If the teacher were to avoid forming and offering opinions about the student, perhaps out of a concern to avoid being paternalistic, it would generally be much harder for the student to make good judgements about what is best for them—indeed, this could well lead the student to make bad judgements when it comes to their learning. That the teacher takes their own specific view on aspects of who the student is and should be is, therefore, a vital part of education. So, rather than teachers striving to be unopinionated, it is reasonable to think it is better for teachers to try to think carefully and critically about how best to assess a particular student in service of a specific student's goals.

If an accountor does not think carefully and critically about the nature and limits of their particular authority, it becomes easy for them to abuse their specific roles. For example, there are many respects in which a teacher *qua* teacher does not have legitimate authority to make judgements about a student *qua* student, and vice versa. On the one hand, the teacher should not judge the student based on an account of the student as someone who can learn anything quickly, who cannot have a voice on controversial topics, or who must strictly conform to the teacher's preconceived notions of students. On the other hand, the student should not judge the teacher based on an account of that teacher as someone who knows everything, who should be at their beck and call, or who has no right to assess them when it comes to their education. In recognising the bilateral nature of the teacher–student relationship here, it is hopefully clear that accountability can and often should involve reciprocity between the accountor and the accountee. Accountability does not necessarily entail a strictly paternalistic or, indeed, authoritarian relationship which could easily become abusively controlling and degrading.

A Narrative View of Accountability

Another way to think about accountability is in narrative terms, which we have already touched upon. Those of us who are able are committed to meaningful narratives about the world, which provide us with a basis for making sense of events, understanding their purpose and value, and making judgements about events or possible events in the world. We hold to narratives about why certain things happen or don't happen, and about how things should or shouldn't happen. And these narratives shape our understanding of what it means to flourish. We shall elaborate on what we mean by human flourishing in the next section. But first, we should clarify how we are thinking about narrative and consider a couple of examples that can help us to become clearer about this narrative approach to accountability.

In his article, 'The Metaphysics of the Narrative Self', Michael Rea offers the following helpful characterisation of a narrative, which we shall adopt:

A narrative ... is a *narratively structured representation* of a state of affairs or a sequence of events. A narratively structured representation is a representation whose content is unified by an interpretation (tacit or explicit) that orders the various components of the representation in such a way as to highlight their significance in relation to some particular collection of interests (often but not always the interests of the storyteller, the protagonist, or the expected audience),

or to identify causal or explanatory relations among those components that are salient in relation to some collection of interests, or both.⁶

In short, a narrative is a coherent interpretation of events or possible events, which meaningfully connects them in a way that draws attention to their significance relative to some purpose.

To apply this view of narrative to our discussion of accountability, let us consider an example. Suppose you are a budding coffee connoisseur, committed to a certain story about what is involved in being a good coffee maker. Under these circumstances, were I to tell you a story about how I can make an excellent coffee by heaping instant Nescafé into cold water with milk, and then chucking it in the microwave for three minutes, you would almost certainly start to judge me according to your counterstory about what it means to make a good cup of coffee. According to your counterstory, I would likely be viewed as a character who is clueless when it comes to making coffee—the last person you’d ask to make you a cup. But perhaps, I could also be judged as someone who would stand to benefit from being taught about coffee beans, the best ways to heat water and milk, what equipment I should use, and for how long I should use it. So, based on your counterstory, I could be judged as a character in a way that might enable me to grow and excel as a coffee maker.

Now whether or not you are a coffee connoisseur, you will have certain abilities to make legitimate judgements about various things people do according to particular narratives you believe about the world—judgements that you believe are good and proper judgements. Such a narrative could be a moral narrative about what is involved in being a just and righteous human being. You may hold to narratives about what is involved in being healthy, about what is involved in being knowledgeable on a particular issue, or about what is involved in being a good friend or, perhaps, a good Christian. And according to these narratives, you will bring expectations to your relationships with others, according to which you will judge them, and in so doing, treat them as a character in your particular narrative. Again, it is in this way that we relate meaningfully to others—as characters in narratives that we believe about the world. We never relate meaningfully to people from beyond our narrativizing minds.

6. Michael Rea, ‘The Metaphysics of the Narrative Self’, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 8.4 (2022), p. 587, emphasis in original. As Rea acknowledges, his use of narrative here also aligns with Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 97. Another helpful account of narrative is offered by Helena de Bres in ‘Narrative and Meaning in Life’, *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 15.5 (2018), pp. 545–71. Here she highlights the key features of a narrative as follows: ‘[narratives] have a *diachronic* character: they present the unfolding of events over time (though not necessarily in strict temporal order). They display *connections* (usually, but not always, causal) between the events depicted. Their parts exhibit a certain *continuity* or *coherence* (so that any “micro narratives” present are integrated into a broader narrative). They focus on *agency*: the motivations of agents and the nature and consequences of their actions. And they aim to communicate *significance*: they offer an interpretation of events, from a certain perspective, designed to elicit understanding in an audience’ (p. 547, emphasis in original).

If we think for a moment about the various people (or characters) in our lives, we should quite easily be able to recognise that we are constantly making judgements about them according to narratives we believe about the world. In black and white terms, the status of our friends and enemies is based on our assessment of whether they are good characters or bad characters—heroes or villains—judged according to your narratives. To summarise, when we hold others accountable, we judge them as characters in the narratives we believe about the world. When we hold them to account, we hold them to an account of who we think they are and who we think they should be according to our own narratives.

There is one more concept that requires clarification before we turn to our theological reflection, and that is the concept of human flourishing.

Human Flourishing

Like accountability, human flourishing is another term that is used in a variety of ways. The specific definition of human flourishing we shall employ is one that connects with the view of accountability we have considered. It is also one that may be quite provocative—for reasons that shall be discussed.

So, I propose that we think about human flourishing as the condition of a human succeeding in their role as a character in a true and good story told by whoever is capable of telling such a story. For example, a coffee maker flourishes when they succeed in their role as a coffee maker in a true and good story about coffeemaking told by a coffee connoisseur who is appropriately qualified to tell such a story. Or, to take a broader example, a person flourishes morally when they succeed in their role as a moral being in a true and good moral narrative that is told by a moral authority who is able to tell such a story.

Why might such a view be provocative? In many views of human flourishing, especially contemporary secular views, there is a strong emphasis on individual autonomy according to which we are free to be whoever we want to be, to flourish however we want to flourish—at least, so long as we don't get in the way of anyone else's libertarian pursuit of life and happiness. On such a view, human flourishing becomes about *my* self-expression, *my* self-fulfilment, *my* self-realisation, *my* self-satisfaction—it is about me fulfilling my role as a character in *my* story. More than anyone, *I* know what is best for me. Therefore, *I* am the one who should define who *I* am and how *I* should flourish; first and foremost, *I* am my own project. Such a view follows in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant who responds to the question 'what is enlightenment?' by writing:

*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!*⁷

7. Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 1.

In the wake of Kant, Charles Taylor comments that a perception has emerged that '[t]he fully significant life is the one which is self-chosen'.⁸ And, as Alan Bloom notes, the essence of the human self has come to be treated as 'indefinable, unlimited, creative, known only by its deeds; in short like God, of whom it is the impious mirror image. Above all, it is individual, unique; it is me.'⁹

In contrast to views of flourishing that prioritise a radical individual autonomy, the view we are proposing affirms that while I certainly have an autonomous role to play in determining what it means for me to flourish in particular ways, the stories of others have an even more fundamental and determinative role to play in defining my flourishing. This is particularly true theologically. Before God, each of us must ultimately come to learn what it means to flourish according to God's story of the world, as this is communicated through Scripture and the church community, past and present. Ultimately, to understand the meaning of our lives, we must learn about who we are in the context of God's story of the world, as this is told to us by our sisters and brothers in Christ (past and present). However, before we delve into the theological implication of our view of accountability, let us think further about why this view of flourishing can become problematic.

As we considered at the beginning of this article, human history is haunted by persons making bad judgements about the value and dignity of others in ways that generate horrific forms of abuse and exploitation. What is more, too often fictional narratives are constructed to justify such bad judgements—to explain why a person's experience of abuse and exploitation is 'for their own good'.¹⁰

One area in which this danger is particularly evident is in the history of slavery. Throughout the history of the world, including today, persons of power have enslaved others in ways that are abusive and exploitative—all the while telling themselves, and others, stories about how slavery is for the good of those who are enslaved. Many paternalistic stories have been told about how slavery can serve the flourishing of the enslaved by providing them with shelter, protection, sustenance, a faithful community—or generally, a level of flourishing they would not otherwise have.¹¹ What is more, such stories have too often been told by Christians. We find such a view in the thought of many influential Christian theologians, such as

8. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 383.

9. Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1987), p. 173.

10. The connection of this phrase with abusive paternalistic relationships is documented in Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, trans. H. and H. Hannum (New York: Noonday Press, 1990).

11. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between paternalism and slavery, see Howard McGary, 'Paternalism and Slavery', in Howard McGary and Bill E. Lawson, *Between Slavery and Freedom* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 16–34.

Thomas Aquinas,¹² George Whitfield,¹³ and Jonathan Edwards.¹⁴ There is clearly more to say here, and we could list endless examples of how persons of power have exploited others in the name of their flourishing. But the basic point to highlight for our purposes is that the belief that we can know what is best for someone, better than they can know for themselves, can be and has been a profoundly dangerous belief. For example, when the wrong person holds to such a belief, and does so in a position of power, citizens suffer under authoritarians, partners under abusive partners, and offenders under misguided judiciaries.

Given such dangers, why risk advancing the view of accountability and flourishing that I have put forward? First, there is one thing that we need to be unambiguously clear about. In the horrific relationships we have mentioned, the problem is not strictly that an individual is being judged as a character in the story of *another*. The problem is not primarily that *another's* judgement is playing a role in defining an individual's flourishing. So where does the problem lie? The core problem is that persons are being judged as characters in false and evil narratives, and are being abused, exploited, and marginalised on the basis of those narratives. The problem, therefore, is not primarily the *otherness* of the storyteller (that an *other* is judging me according to their story). The problem concerns the fact that the wrong story is being held.

One way to highlight this point is by recognising that it is not only others who judge us as characters in narratives that are evil and false. It is not only others who abuse us, exploit us, and marginalise us on the basis of a confused story about our flourishing. We do this to ourselves all the time. So many of the mental health struggles that people experience, which lead to depression, self-harm, and suicide, are the result of individuals judging themselves as characters in their own evil fictions about the world—fictions that lead them to dehumanise themselves. The heart of the problem, therefore, does not concern who is judging me—whether I am judging me or whether you are judging me. Rather, the problem concerns whether I am being judged according to a narrative that is good or evil, true or false, that respects or disrespects the value and dignity of the person who is being judged.

As we have been considering, the fact that others judge us according to their own stories is very often vital for helping us to understand our value and dignity, and for helping us to succeed in our particular roles. This is because, so often, others have greater and more positive insights into our lives than we have for ourselves. As we have seen, it is not difficult to demonstrate this point when we think generally about

12. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd edn (1920; New Advent online edition, 2017), II-II.189, II-II.57.

13. Alan Galloway, 'The Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism: George Whitefield, the Bryan Family, and the Great Awakening in the South', *Journal of Southern History* 53.3 (1987), pp. 369–94; Stephen Stein, 'George Whitefield on Slavery: Some New Evidence', *Church History* 42.2 (1973), pp. 243–56; Thomas Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 188–203.

14. Kenneth Minkema, 'Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade', *William and Mary Quarterly* 54.4 (1997), pp. 823–34; Kenneth Minkema, 'Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery', *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4 (2002), pp. 23–59.

many of the relationships that make up human society (e.g., student–teacher and parent–child relationships). However, this point becomes especially apparent when we think about our lives before God. As the apostle Paul makes clear in his writings, we are not our own; we belong to God.¹⁵ It is ultimately God who authors and reveals the true and good story about the world and who we are within it. On a fundamental level, therefore, we need to learn who we have been created and defined to be as characters in God’s story of creation. To know who we truly are, we need to know *whose* we truly are, and this means that we need to come to know ourselves as we are known by God.

Another point to stress here is that it is also a part of God’s story that we are created to be defined as characters in the true stories of one another, to be persons defined in community. Throughout Scripture, we are given a highly relational account of human flourishing according to which we help each other to flourish by teaching one another about who we are as characters in God’s story of creation. We do not discover who we are as beloved children of God in and of ourselves, but only by participating in covenant communities wherein we interpret each other and hold one another accountable as children of God. We see this throughout both the history of Israel and in the life of the church. Before God, therefore, our flourishing emerges in loving relationships of mutual interdependence with other humans. I flourish by helping you to learn what it means to be a child of God, and thus to be my sister or brother in Christ, and you flourish by helping me to know what it means to be a child of God, and thus to be your sister or brother in Christ. In this respect, we are created to be our sisters’ and brothers’ keepers.

Participating in God’s Story

Given the limitations of this article, I can offer only a snapshot into how we might think about the relationship between accountability and flourishing within God’s story of creation. There are of course many different ways to spin this story. However, following the apostle Paul, we shall construe the story of creation as a story that is first and foremost about *Jesus Christ*, a story that has its end in Jesus Christ such that to understand who we are, we must together seek to interpret our place and belonging to God within Christ’s narrative and kingdom. As Paul famously puts it in his letter to the Colossians, Jesus Christ is the one in, through, and for whom ‘all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers ... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together’ (Col. 1:16-17). The gravity of Paul’s point is captured well by David Fergusson when he writes: ‘the world was made so that Christ might be born’.¹⁶

What does this mean for humanity? It means that if we are to begin to embrace the true account of who we are, and therefore understand what it truly means to flourish, we must judge one another as persons who have been elected to be children of God in Christ (Eph. 1:4-5). It is according to who we are as children of God in Christ that God judges us, and

15. See, for example, 1 Cor. 6:19-20.

16. David Fergusson, ‘Creation’, in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 77.

so it must be according to who we are as children of God in Christ that we must judge ourselves.

Is there any other theological reason that we should frame God's story of creation Christologically, other than because the apostle Paul says so? It is because, most fundamentally, God's story is a trinitarian story that derives from both the Father who loves the Son, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, and which derives from the Son who loves the Father, in the communion of the Holy Spirit; the story of creation is derivative from this. To be clear, this is not to suggest that God is a story. Rather, it is to affirm that, in and through creation, a derivative story unfolds that serves to bear witness to the triune life and economy—that declares the glory and triune love of God. It is according to this story, and to the one in whom this story finds its fulfilment (Jesus Christ), that we can come to understand the true character of humanity—the true account of what humanity is and should be.

In sum, to understand what it means to be accountable to God, we must understand that we are accountable to God in Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, according to the will of the Father. That we are to know one another, and, therefore, judge one another according to who we are in Christ can be difficult to understand. So, to try to understand this further, let us briefly say something about what it might mean to experience accountability in Christ.

Experiencing Accountability in Christ

How might we construe the experience of accountability to God in Christ? The first thing to make clear is that we cannot provide a universally applicable account of what it is like for each and every person to experience accountability to God in Christ. That experience will be particular to each person depending on the unique role(s) they are called to play in the world—the unique role(s) that will be influenced by numerous social, environmental, psychological, physical, cultural, and other factors. For our present purposes, therefore, we shall be deliberately vague about how we think about this experience. This will leave plenty of room for a wide variety of experiences of what it means to be accountable in Christ.

Broadly speaking, then, how might we think about this experience? In trinitarian terms, we experience accountability to God by the Spirit judging and preparing our hearts, thereby transforming our desires so our lives might embody an account of Christ—or, to paraphrase Paul, so we might become 'a letter of Christ' sent by God (the Father) 'to be known and read by all' (2 Cor. 3:2-3). This happens in and through the life of the church wherein we gather together to share in practices that conform us to the image of Christ so that, by the power of the Spirit, we can begin to reflect the glory of the Lord into the world (2 Cor. 3:18).¹⁷ What we see here is that, for Paul, our flourishing is not found through our participating in a story that finds its end in *our* glory and perfection, but by participating in a story that has its end in *Christ's* glory and perfection. The church's end is to exist and serve as the body of Christ.

17. For further discussion of this point in relation to the ecclesial practice of baptism, see my article, 'A Baptismal Theology of Accountability', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34.3 (2021), pp. 336–46.

Indeed, when Paul describes how ‘each of us will be accountable to God’ (Rom. 14:12), he writes:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. (Rom. 12:7-9)

So, for Paul, human flourishing is found under the lordship of Christ, in belonging to Christ. This is experienced in and through the life of the church, wherein we are elevated into the most intimate of relationships (union) with Christ, by the power of the Spirit, according to the will of the Father. Within the church, we hold one another accountable as brothers and sisters in Christ, and, by the grace of God, build up one another as the children of God we are in Christ. It is here that we experience the life of Christ, by the revelatory power of the Spirit, in a way that transforms us into representatives of Christ—into persons who embody an account of Christ and thereby find fulfilment as characters in God’s story of creation.

One of the biblical metaphors that can help us to imagine this communal experience of accountability to God is that of light. Within the church, the Spirit shines the light of Christ through the community onto others in a way that enlightens them to see who they are and who they should be before God. For Paul, this light shines into the darkness of our lives, exposing who we are, so we might grow to become children of light, bearing the fruit of goodness, righteousness, and truth (Eph. 5:8-13). Similarly, for John, this shining of light constitutes a form of judgement, but not one that serves to condemn; rather, it is one that saves (Jn 3:17-20). By coming into the light, we can experience the truth of God so that we can see plainly both who we are and who we must become in the sight of God (Jn 3:21). Consequently, we become enlightened to what it means for us to flourish.

Conclusion

This article has put forward a way to think about human flourishing according to a narrative view of accountability. Specifically, we proposed that human flourishing can be construed as the condition of someone excelling in a true and good story told by whoever is capable of telling such a story. One of the features of this view is that it challenges accounts of flourishing that over-emphasise the role that individual autonomy plays in defining what it means to flourish. The motivation for embracing this feature was a recognition that the stories of others (as well as our own stories) can and often do have a more critical role to play in determining our flourishing. While we considered some ways in which this point generally applies to the everyday functioning of society, we also argued that it is especially pertinent when thinking about our lives before God. This is because, first and foremost, God creates us to live as characters in God’s story of creation. Ultimately, therefore, we are called to understand our flourishing by discovering and embracing our roles as characters in God’s story.

In the final sections of this article, I applied this view of flourishing to the apostle Paul’s Christocentric interpretation of God’s story of creation. According to Paul, God

does not leave us to find fulfilment in and of ourselves. Rather, God brings about the fulfilment of creation in and through Jesus Christ. On Paul's view, therefore, true human flourishing is derived from Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, human flourishing is not a condition we can achieve or create for ourselves. Rather, it is one that is secured for us by the grace of God, and which we can experience by being drawn to share in the triune life of God. For us today, this flourishing is experienced concretely by participating in the life of the church, the body of Christ. It is here that we come to conform to Christ and discover the joy and fulfilment that stems from this participation.


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