

# A Baptismal Theology of Accountability

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## Abstract

This article addresses the question of what it means to be accountable to God based on a baptismal theology that we find in the New Testament. It argues that various passages in the New Testament lead us to the view that we are accountable to God in Christ. Such a view is not straightforward, and so much of this article will be spent unpacking what this could mean. To do so, I elaborate on what it means for God to create humanity to find fulfilment in and through Christ. This leads me to argue that humans experience fulfilment in and through the body of Christ into which baptism initiates a person. It is by participating and finding belonging in the life of the Church that humans can begin to discover what it means to be accountable to God in Christ, and, in so doing, form the virtue of accountability.

## Keywords

accountability, apostle Paul, baptism, church, Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, narrative, virtue

## Introduction

As social creatures, our lives develop in communities that inform our accounts of who we are based on a community's account of our place in the world. Some of these accounts are true, some are false; some are good, and some are bad. Whatever the case may be, by receiving these accounts and living into them, we come to embody accounts that others have of us, albeit in our own unique ways. And when these accounts give our lives aim and meaning, which we embrace, we become characters in the narratives of others. Not only do others interpret who we are according to their narratives; and not only are we shaped by the guiding influence of their narratives; but, to a certain extent, we come to interpret ourselves according to their narratives. This happens because, generally, we care deeply about how others judge us relative to certain aspects of our lives. Consequently, the judgement of others has a major impact on how we think about ourselves; their

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insights oblige us to interpret ourselves in particular ways and take our lives in a particular direction. This phenomenon is indicative of the fact that our lives are characterised by what I shall refer to as ‘accountability’. What do I mean by ‘accountability’? In the introduction to this symposium, I proposed the following definition of accountability, which I shall reiterate here.

*Accountability (between persons):* the condition of someone standing before another who has authority to judge aspects of who that person is and should be in their role in a shared project: a project that characterises the relationship between the two parties and their roles within it, but which is specifically oriented towards a goal(s) of and/or for the one who is accountable.

To help us understand this concept of accountability, let me briefly put it in the context of an example that is relevant to this article. According to my definition, we can say that a congregant is accountable to a pastor insofar as the pastor has legitimate authority to judge aspects of who the congregant is and should be relative to the shared project of discipleship, as it serves the faith goals of the congregant within the church. Or we could also say that the pastor is accountable to the congregant insofar as the congregant has legitimate authority to judge aspects of who the pastor is and should be relative to the shared project of pastoring, as it serves the pastor’s goal of offering teaching that is suitable for the Church. In these relationships of accountability, the relative authority figure’s account of the other serves to define aspects of how the other understands themselves and their goals—assuming that the other embraces the relationship of accountability.

Based on this view of accountability, this article addresses the question of what it means to be accountable to God, according to certain aspects of the baptismal theology that we find in the New Testament—looking briefly at the Gospel of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism, and then focusing on the apostle Paul’s theology of baptism. I argue that various passages in the New Testament lead us to the view that we should understand our accountability to God as being in Christ. This view is not straightforward, and so much of this article will be spent unpacking what this could mean. To do so, I elaborate on what it means for God to create humanity to find fulfilment in and through the person of Christ, in whom God established union with humanity. This will also lead me to argue that humans experience fulfilment in and through the body of Christ into which they are initiated by baptism. It is by participating and finding belonging in the life of the Church that humans can begin to discover what it means to be accountable to God in Christ, and, in so doing, form the virtue of accountability.

## **The Baptism of Jesus and the New Story of Repentance**

The Gospel of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism begins with John the Baptist travelling throughout the land offering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John is calling people to repent and be baptised in an event that will turn their lives around. For John, baptism mediates God’s forgiveness to people, purifies them, and initiates them into a new way of life that bears good fruit—a life characterised by good actions. As such, baptism prepares them for the coming of the Lord and, specifically, the Lord’s judgement. To bring a sense of urgency to the narrative he is preaching, John

makes it clear that the Lord's judgement is something to be feared. With loaded exhortations, he warns the crowds that if they do not turn their lives around, the Lord will cut them down as wood for the fire or as chaff that would burn with unquenchable fire.

What happens when Jesus arrives on the scene? What unfolds is something entirely unexpected according to John's narrative. When John encounters Jesus and recognises him as Lord, John responds in the way we would expect, according to John's narrative understanding. He responds with reverence, as one who does not consider himself worthy enough even to untie the thong of Jesus' sandal. But contrary to John's every expectation, Jesus asks John to baptise him. John is so taken aback by this request that his immediate reaction is to resist. According to John's narrative of repentance, it is not Jesus who should be baptised by John; rather, it is John who should be baptised by Jesus. In his pushback, John tries to hold Jesus accountable. What do I mean by this? In his initial reaction to Jesus, John challenges who Jesus is according to John's account of who he thinks Jesus should be.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, as ironic as it may be, John assumes a certain authority over Jesus based on his understanding of who Jesus is as a character in John's story.

However, in response to John's immediate reaction to hold Jesus accountable in this way, Jesus insists: 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness' (Matt. 3:15). For Jesus, his undergoing a baptism of repentance is integral to God's plan; it is part of the narrative of how God is making all things right. In response to Jesus' insistence, John consents to the new narrative that Jesus is introducing to the world. Whereas John has been exhorting individuals to turn their lives around through their own repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sin, Jesus' actions align with a new narrative of repentance that is grounded in him. As becomes clearer elsewhere in the New Testament, righteousness is not fulfilled by individuals themselves repenting before God. Rather, it is fulfilled by Jesus identifying with the very depths of humanity, of its sinfulness, and delivering it into new life. By submitting to John's story of repentance, and undergoing baptism, Jesus brings John's story to its fulfilment so that, in and through him, the story of creation would be turned around. Jesus' baptism, therefore, is one of the first instances of Jesus standing in for humanity, in our place and on our behalf, and turning humanity around in ways that we cannot do for ourselves. It is through the vicarious humanity of Christ that God establishes forgiveness, that death makes way for life, and the old Adamic humanity is given new representation in the new Adam, Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

How does the story of Jesus' baptism conclude? It ends with the trinitarian stamp of approval on this introduction to the new narrative. As Matthew describes: 'When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"'

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1. We see such a challenge of Jesus by many of his followers over the course of his ministry, most prominently by Peter when he challenges Jesus' foretelling of his suffering, death and resurrection (Matt. 16:22).
  2. On the vicarious baptism of Christ, see J.B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), pp. 63–70.

(Matt. 3:16-17). Right here, in this conclusion, we are presented with a motif that is at the heart of the Gospel narrative. The Gospel does not revolve around stories of individuals turning their lives around, making themselves righteous before God, but in the triune God stepping into the human narrative, transforming that narrative, so as to redeem creation and draw the narrative of creation to the conclusion that God prepares for it.

Accordingly, a new view of baptism would come to be developed, evident in the ministry of the apostle Paul, which stresses that the 'one baptism' is about identifying with the 'one Lord' Jesus Christ, by the 'one Spirit', according to 'one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (Eph. 4:4-6). Contrary to John the Baptist's narrative, Paul's theology of baptism is not simply about preparing individuals for Christ's impending judgement. Indeed, at one point in Acts, Paul challenges some disciples who have only received John's baptism of repentance. He pronounces: "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus". And so, on hearing this, the disciples were baptised in the name of Jesus' (Acts 19:4-5). This baptism in the name of Jesus is not grounded in individual acts of repentance but in the revelation of who Jesus Christ is for us and, therefore, the faith that he inspires by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Two Views of Accountability to God

How does this Christocentric narrative of baptism relate to a theology of accountability? To address this question, let me first propose the following definition of accountability to God, building on the definition of accountability I offered in the introduction.

*Accountability to God:* the condition of someone standing before the God who has authority to judge who that person is and should be in creation. It is according to God's creative purposes that human beings understand who they are and should be, and so it is according to God's own purposes that God judges persons.

In John the Baptist's initial narrative, humans are primarily accountable to God in and of themselves, based on their own life and action. Now it is the case that the baptism of repentance gives persons a chance to receive God's forgiveness, to become purified and reborn into a new way of life. Nonetheless, a person's worth and value still seem to be measured and defined according to an individual's own merits, their own righteousness, their own baptism, repentance and purification. Based on the Christocentric narrative, by contrast, human beings are accountable to God in Christ. This means that, ultimately, a person's worth and value are derived from Christ, according to who he is and what he does on our behalf. Christian baptism thus becomes about a person being 'baptised into Christ' or 'into the name of Christ' (Gal. 3:27). And, as Paul adds, it involves 'putting on' or 'being clothed in Christ' (Gal. 3:27), which is brought about by being united to Christ by the Spirit.<sup>3</sup> As Everett Fergusson explains, in this verse, Paul is saying that baptism in

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3. See Douglas Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), pp. 124–27.

Christ ‘determines one’s identity’; being baptised into (the name of) Christ means that one belongs to Christ.<sup>4</sup>

While on the surface these two narratives could appear competitive, this would be a misperception. It is rather the case that Jesus’ narrative brings John’s narrative to its fulfilment<sup>5</sup>—not simply in and through Jesus’ baptism but in and through the ministry that his baptism inaugurates, culminating in his death and resurrection. In the story of Jesus’ baptism, the Lord enters John’s narrative of repentance, identifies with human sinfulness, and is cleansed, in order to make all things new.<sup>6</sup> It turns out that John’s baptism does not simply prepare the way for the coming of the Lord’s judgement. Rather, it prepares the way for Christ entering fully into the human situation and taking its consequences to himself as the judge judged in our place, to use Karl Barth’s famous phrase.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, in Paul’s later baptismal narrative, the emphasis is placed on participation in Christ, in his death and resurrection, and on the human value and worth that derives from him. This point is brilliantly captured in Gregory of Nazianzus’s words of proclamation: ‘Christ is baptized, let us descend with him that we may also ascend with him’.<sup>8</sup>

This brief sketch of some of what it means to be accountable to God in Christ is not straightforward. The complexity of this view becomes even more evident when we connect it to many other relevant passages in Paul’s writings. Take, for example, the following mystifying assertions from Paul in Col. 3:4-5:<sup>9</sup> (1) a person’s new life in Christ ‘is hidden with Christ in God’; (2) a person’s new life ‘is’ Christ; and (3) the glory of a person’s life will appear when Christ appears. Is there anything we can say about the

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4. Everett Fergusson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 149.

5. Accordingly, John Calvin writes: ‘we see that the completion of baptism is in Christ, and for this reason we call him the proper object of baptism’. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.15.6.

6. As Sean McDonough writes, ‘Whatever we make of the particulars of the story of Jesus’ baptism by John, Jesus clearly embraces the vision of renewal offered by John and makes it his own. In all the Gospels, we are meant to see that Jesus is in agreement with John’s basic proclamation, even if he may modify or advance it in certain ways’. Sean McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 24.

7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter *CD*), trans. and ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957–75), IV/1, pp. 211–83. Drawing on the words of Gregory of Nazianzus, it might be more appropriate here to describe Jesus as the purifier purified in our place. As Gregory writes: ‘Jesus submitted to be purified in the river Jordan for my purification, or rather, sanctifying the waters by his purification’. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 7*, trans. Charles Browne and James Swallow (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894), 38:16; see also 29:20.

8. Gregory, *Orations*, 39.14.

9. I recognise that the authorship of Colossians is disputed. If, however, Paul did not write Colossians, it doesn’t make a big difference to the argument of this article.

meaning of such assertions (at least, prior to the eschaton)? The first thing to say is that, given some of the rhetorical flourish in Paul's writings, we need to be careful about investing too much energy in making logical deductions from some of his grander statements. Yet we must also not be too quick to dismiss them. What I think we can say is that these three assertions suggest that God identifies God's account of who humanity is and should be with who Jesus Christ is. This explanation, however, does not get us very far. So, in this next section, I shall elaborate on what it means to be accountable to God in Christ and then connect this to Paul's baptismal theology, with a particular focus on his letter to the Colossians.

## Accountability to God in Christ

I noted in the introduction that we are born into a world in which we grow and develop according to accounts that others have of us. As such, I suggested that we live in a world in which relationships of accountability are foundational to our formation. Not only is this an observable feature of human life, but it is also a dynamic for which God creates humans; God creates humans to grow, to flourish, and to experience obligation in response to the judgement of others. However, while this dynamic is itself a very good thing, it also exposes humans to being distorted by false narratives. This danger lies at the heart of the sinful narrative of the world. From the very origins of human storytelling, we have told one another false narratives that compete with God's true narrative. Often on the basis of overinflated notions of human autonomy, we seek to take the place of God as the authority over (or author of the meaning of) our lives. As the second creation narrative in Genesis depicts, the fall of humanity is bound up with the wayward human desire to embrace, for ourselves, the authority to judge what is right or wrong, good or evil, according to our own delusions of grandeur.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, when God reveals God's true narrative to this fallen world, it turns out to be, in so many respects, subversive of the sinful narratives that form us.

What is God's true narrative for creation, according to Paul? In short, it is a narrative that is grounded in God's electing purposes: purposes that are actualised in creation and providence, which find their true substance and true end in Christ. As David Fergusson puts it, 'the world was made so that Christ might be born'.<sup>11</sup> For Paul, it is in, through, and for Christ that 'all things [*ta panta*] 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). When it comes to humans specifically, God chooses humanity in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. And God predestines humans for adoption through Christ (Eph. 1:4-5). This is the true narrative as Paul understands it. So, for him,

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10. See W. Malcolm Clark, 'Legal Background to the Yahwist's Use of "Good and Evil" in Genesis 2-3', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88.3 (1969), pp. 266-78; Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 1: Genesis 1-15* (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1998), p. 63.

11. 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.

the coming of Christ is not simply a divine repair job but the very consummation of God's narrative for creation. God identifies creation with Christ such that creation finds its fulfilment as the new creation in derivation from Christ.

Now, superficially, one could respond to Paul's Christocentric narrative with a concern that it opens the door to a kind of Christomonism—a charge that is frequently levelled against Karl Barth in his appropriation of Pauline theology.<sup>12</sup> That is, if Christ is at the centre of the human story—the one in whom the human story finds its fulfilment—then any role for the agency of other humans could appear to be extraneous or irrelevant.

The key point to reiterate in response to this concern is that, under the Christocentric narrative, all other human narratives are derivative rather than extraneous. One of the problems with the worry about Christomonism is that it often assumes that Christ's agency is somehow competitive with the agency of other human beings. However, to view Christ as being at the centre of the human story is not to see him as one all-consuming being into whom all creation will ultimately be subsumed. Rather, it is to see him as one who has the authority to bring creation to its fulfilment, unifying it as one kingdom under God. This kingdom is not grounded in divine violence but in the loving God–human union created in Christ, in whom God is with us and for us. Since this union only exists in Christ, all other humans depend on Christ—the 'one mediator between God and humankind' (1 Tim. 2:5)—to communicate this union to them, by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> The Spirit unites persons to Christ in a union of kinship—a kinship in which they are united by sharing the same Spirit (rather than the same blood).<sup>14</sup> This kinship does not prevent persons from expressing themselves in their own unique ways but frees them to do so in a way that is expressive of the flourishing that comes from belonging to Christ.

How, more precisely, are we to understand the place of human beings within this Christocentric narrative? The notion that Christ brings about the fulfilment of God's overarching story for creation—and that no other human can add to this fulfilment, but only participate in it—indicates that no human has any authority over God, parallel to God, but only ever under God. At best, humans can only ever be sub-authors in God's story of creation. Any pretension that humans have some ultimate storytelling ability, over or alongside God, is to treat humans as divine, which is idolatrous. Against such pretence, Paul argues that we must not be taken 'captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ' (Col. 2:9). Since Christ 'is the head of all rule and authority' (Col. 2:10), all other rulers and authorities have been disarmed (Col. 2:15).

12. Barth refers to the 'unlovely term' of Christomonism as the view 'that Jesus Christ has merged into world-occurrence and world-occurrence into Him, so that we can no longer speak of them as separate things'. *CD IV/3*, p. 713.

13. As Matthew Thiessen writes, 'To receive the *pneuma* is to be en clothed in Christ because the *pneuma* is the *pneuma* of God's son, who is Christ'. Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 111.

14. See Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 113; Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 76–77.

What guidance does Paul give for how humans can play a positive role in God's narrative—how they can become who they are in Christ? Rather than trying to summon up their own meaning for their lives, Paul calls the Colossians, on the basis of their baptism, to 'seek the things that are above, where Christ is' (Col. 3:1) and to 'let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts' (Col. 3:15). On the one hand, this means that they must '[p]ut to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry' (Col. 3:5). On the other hand, he calls them to 'put on . . . compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience . . . And above all these things put on love' (Col. 3:12, 14). These verses offer a small sampling of the practical guidance that Paul gives as to what it looks like to be clothed in Christ—to embody and enact the account of who humans are in Christ. Paul is clear, therefore, that being in Christ is not simply some mystical transcendent state of being which has no practical implications for how we live in the present. For Paul, being in Christ is a being in action, which means that he holds the Colossians to an account of who they should be as active members of the Church—as members who, in and through baptism, 'have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator' (Col. 3:9-10).

Paul also adds that a major part of what it means to flourish as the one body of Christ, in which 'the Word of Christ dwells in [them] richly', is to hold one another accountable as a community of accountability: 'teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom' (Col. 3:15). He calls the Colossians to establish and upbuild one another according to who they are in Christ so that they might come to know and act out their roles as characters in the Christ narrative. Upon making these practical points, Paul reiterates that whatever the Colossians do as the Church, they must do 'in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col. 3:17).

How does a Pauline theology of accountability relate to baptism? The answer to this question comes by considering what Paul has to say about those to whom he is speaking. Paul describes the Colossians as having 'been buried with [Christ] in baptism', and who, in baptism, have been 'raised with [Christ] through faith in the powerful working of God' (Col. 2:12). This raises more questions. If it is the case that the Christocentric story of creation applies to all things (*ta panta*), then why does Paul here (and elsewhere) primarily direct his guidance to baptisands? What difference does baptism (with water) make to how persons relate to their accountability to God in Christ? The basic answer to these questions is that baptisands are those who are marked out and united as members of the one body of Christ: the faith community that, as a whole, consciously and actively identifies with Christ.<sup>15</sup> Because the Church has eyes to see and ears to hear who they are in Christ, its baptisands are ready to be held to an account of who they are in Christ. Baptisands, therefore, are those who are being mobilised to play an active role in the Church's vocation of worshipping God and participating in God's mission to the world. What about those who are not baptised with water? These are persons who must be invited to come to know who they are in Christ, to know that they also belong to Christ

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15. As N.T. Wright notes, 'Baptism is a *community-marking symbol*' (original emphasis). N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), pp. 421–22.



and his body so that they can also be marked out in baptism as persons to be held accountable according to who they are in Christ.

Water baptism, therefore, marks a person as a member of the Church in a way that identifies them as ready to be held to account for who they are in Christ. This mark is not merely a cultural mark. As George Hunsinger notes, water baptism is ‘a form of God’s Word [that] imparts what it proclaims in, with, and through its visible form’.<sup>16</sup> When God’s Word is embraced and proclaimed in the ritual baptism by marking out a person as a member of the Church, the Spirit is also present, uniting the baptizand to the body of Christ, thereby undergirding the proclamation that initiates that person into the life of the Church. Therefore, as Hunsinger adds, following Peter Vermigli, ‘water baptism is . . . an instrument of the Spirit’.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, baptism is an outward sign which, by the power of God, prepares the ground for a person’s life of discipleship.

Before turning to consider the virtue of accountability, there is a specific dimension that I wish to highlight here, which is especially relevant for understanding a Pauline theology of accountability. For Paul, baptism invites a person to embody and to enact God’s account of who they are, cleansed of the sin that shrouds them. The Christian life, therefore, is not primarily motivated by the thought of earning some extrinsic reward. Rather, baptism delivers a person into a life in which they praise God for the intrinsic rewards (e.g., new life, purity, peace and abounding joy) that flow from discovering and becoming who they essentially are, which happens when they are held to God’s account of who God creates them to be. When a person is built up in their faith, they find the life of faith to be its own reward, and, consequently, they embrace their faith in thanksgiving to God. This emphasis on the intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivations of the Christian life is essential to a Pauline theology of accountability.<sup>18</sup> This is evident in the following passage from Colossians:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (Col. 2:6-7)

In line with these verses in Colossians, Paul also has the following to say in his epistle to the Romans, in response to the charge of antinomianism:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him in baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3-4)

In these passages, Paul does not call followers of Christ to perform good works by bribing them with extrinsic rewards or threatening them with extrinsic punishment. Rather, he seeks to motivate them by reminding them who they are, as their baptism testifies. In the passage from Romans, he is basically saying, ‘Do you not know that you can act out

16. George Hunsinger, ‘Baptism and the Soteriology of Forgiveness’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2.3 (2000), p. 257.

17. Hunsinger, ‘Baptism and the Soteriology of Forgiveness’, p. 258.

18. On intrinsic vs. extrinsic ethics in Paul, see Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics*, pp. 363–65.

who you are?’ For Paul, the value of following Christ is discovered by knowing who we are in Christ. It is upon learning this truth that we come to rejoice in who we are in Christ and, with joy, are motivated to become who Christ calls us to be, in gratitude to God. This joy, as I now consider, is characteristic of a person who has formed the virtue of accountability.

## **The Virtue of Accountability**

The virtue of accountability is what disposes a person to embrace the condition of being accountable as defined above. It is on this basis that persons are inspired to experience purity, peace and abounding joy in being held to an account of who they are in Christ. The reason that this disposition is virtuous is that it is an excellent feature of how God creates humans to live their lives before God; it is essential to the role that humans have to play in God’s story.

One of the distinguishing features of this virtue is that it is relational; it is formed and exercised in relationship to others. The relational nature of the virtue of accountability is especially evident in a relationship of accountability to God. As we have considered, persons do not fulfil their accountability to God in and of themselves. Rather, they become accountable to God by the Holy Spirit uniting them to Christ—thereby holding them to an account of who they are in Christ. This happens by the Spirit judging a person’s heart in a way that does not simply punish them retributively—i.e., by fostering a sense of guilt—but restores them by uniting them to Christ so that they might receive the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). By restoring them in this way, persons become who God creates and calls them to be in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, according to the will of the Father. Accountability to God, therefore, involves a trinitarian relationship of accountability.

As we have also seen, however, accountability to God does not simply involve individuals and God; it involves persons being formed in, with and by the Church community through which God works. The Church constitutes the creaturely domain wherein the virtues of the children of God are cultivated according to the trinitarian relationship of accountability, as it is mediated through the life of the Church. This happens by God working through the members of the Church community holding one another accountable, which they do by reminding each other who they are, what it looks like to embody who they are, and who it is to whom they belong. Again, baptism marks a person’s initiation into this community of accountability, which is why Paul appeals to this mark when he calls persons to conform to who they are in Christ.

The final point I shall make here is that a critical element in the formation of the virtue of accountability is belonging: belonging to the person who holds them accountable and also to the shared project that characterises their relationship of accountability. It is by finding belonging that a person can settle into believing that the person(s) of standing or authority are holding them to an account that is true to who they are. Throughout Scripture, it is clear that God upbuilds persons by creating contexts in which persons can discover their belonging as children of God. It is by finding belonging (e.g., belonging to God, to Christ, to the Church, etc.) that the virtue of accountability is nurtured within the Church in a way that prepares persons to embrace the account of how they should live their lives before God. As we have seen, baptism plays a foundational role in communicating this belonging to persons.

## Conclusion

To conclude, let me draw together some of the threads of this article and summarise two interconnected implications that follow from understanding baptism as an initiation into a community of accountability in Christ, by the Spirit, according to the will of the Father—implications that call for more consideration than I can offer here.

*First, baptism initiates a person into a community that does not primarily judge them according to an account of who they should be but according to an account of who they are in Christ.* This is what it means to hold persons accountable in Christ. It is the shared task of the members of the Church to teach one another who they are in Christ and what it means to belong to him and his body so that, together, their lives might grow into this reality and find the joy and fulfilment that comes from doing so. Such accountability does not simply involve obligating one another to act in obedience to Christ. Rather, it involves creating a place of belonging where persons will be habituated into becoming followers of Christ, characterised by the virtue of accountability. As a result, persons will become inspired to follow Christ as an intrinsic good rather than as a means to some extrinsic end. It is in this way that Christ rules in a person's heart (Col. 3:15).

*Second, baptism acknowledges that a person belongs to the Church unconditionally, irrespective of any judgements about their value and worth to society.* This belonging gives persons the security and assurance to become followers of Christ unburdened or unparalysed by the shortcomings of their actions. So much so that, when the Church is acting as the body of Christ, the Church becomes a community of accountability in which persons actually want to confess their sins, on the understanding that the Church's judgement will support them in their journeys of restoration. While there are many ways in which a person's behaviour can be self-destructive, ultimately, no person has the power to destroy the fact that, in Christ, they are claimed as a child of God and must be known and judged as such. In the words of the author of 2 Tim. 2:13, 'if we are faithless, [Christ] remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself'.

By emphasising these two points, a baptismal theology of accountability stands against prevailing notions of accountability according to which: (1) persons are judged (especially retributively) in a way that reduces accounts of them to an account of their actions; (2) human belonging is conditional upon an account of their actions—if you behave in these ways, if you achieve these things, then you will be judged worthy to belong to our group. By resisting these two notions, baptism is a radically subversive act that challenges many of our societal systems of accountability—to the extent that our societal systems elevate the value and worth of the 'more functional' (or 'properly functional') members of society and denigrate the value and worth of those whom society deems 'functionally insufficient' or 'dysfunctional'. Baptism does not simply challenge these systems by introducing a counternarrative, but by introducing persons to the true narrative for which God creates the world and, therefore, to the true account of who each person is created to be in Christ.<sup>19</sup>

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