

Andrew Torrance. *Accountability to God*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. Oxford University Press, 2023. xi + 220 pp. \$90.00 (hbk).

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A Templeton Religion Trust–funded project at Baylor University explores the idea that accountability could, and maybe should, be understood as a virtue that contributes to human flourishing. Andrew Torrance contributes to this project by locating the notion of accountability in a theological context. As Torrance notices, in our cultural moment the notion of accountability has mostly a negative connotation. Politicians from left and right demand loudly that their opponents give an account of their actions. Social media posts call for those in power to be “held accountable.” The underlying assumption in these cases is that bad things may come to those who give account. Torrance, however, believes that from a Christian point of view accountability is a positive thing. Not only do relationships of accountability express that we care and value things—a world in which no accountability exists is a world covered by a gray veil of uninterest—but human beings also essentially exist in relationships of accountability because they are creatures, accountable for their lives to God. Torrance’s book examines what Christians mean by the idea of being accountable to God.

Torrance’s examination unfolds in two parts. The first offers an analysis of the concept of accountability and the second develops a constructive theology of it. Torrance defines accountability between persons as

the condition of someone (the accountee) standing in relationship 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 characterizes the relationship between the accountor and the accountee and their roles within it, but which is specifically oriented towards an end(s) that is proper to the accountee. (20)

In a series of four chapters Torrance argues that accountability is to be distinguished from the concept of moral responsibility (chapter 1); that accountability requires a relationship, communication, and interpretation; that it is teleological; and that relationships of accountability are hierarchically ordered (chapter 2). Moreover, Torrance holds that accountability is a relational virtue aimed at the flourishing of the accountee (chapter 3). As such, accountability is to be carefully distinguished from the vice of exploitability (chapter 4).

Although Torrance starts each discussion with relationships of accountability that can be applied in a wider societal context, it becomes clear throughout that a theological vision about God’s relationship to creation fuels his conceptual analysis. *God* is the ultimate accountor. Torrance distinguishes moral responsibility from accountability because he judges that the latter better expresses a Christian narrative in which accountability towards God is

rooted in loving relationships that determine humanity's end (28). This in turn illustrates how accountability is to be embedded in relationship (44), calls for an interpretation of the ways in which God ultimately defines the objective ends for humans (51), accounts for what is teleologically actually possible for accountees (55), and creates a pyramid of accountors and their relationships to us, with God as the ultimate or absolute one at the top (57). That accountability is a virtue is grounded on the premise that God created us to flourish in and through embracing both God's authority over us and the God-given authority of other human beings (61). Finally, abusive relationships of exploitation are distinguished from virtuous relationships of accountability precisely by determining how these relationships are not embedded in the divine ends for human beings (80–81).

Only in the second part of his book does Torrance unpack the theological narrative on which these determinations in the first part rest. That he saves it for the second part makes for a somewhat complicated reading experience. Using a theological vision to determine one's conceptual stipulations and philosophical commitment is not wrong. In fact, from a Christian theological point of view it is to be welcomed. But as a reader I found that, having first read the book according to the natural flow moving from part 1 to part 2, I then needed to reread it moving from part 2 to part 1 to fully appreciate how Torrance's conceptual stipulations and distinctions are motivated by his theological commitments.

Chapter 5 focuses on the teleological shape of creation. God does not first create the world and then decide what to do with it; rather, creation is embedded in election, and election expresses God's determination of the goal and meaning of that which God calls forth. Appealing to Karl Barth, Torrance unpacks these stipulations by the idea that creation is embedded in covenant, rather than the other way around. Covenant in turn expresses relationships of accountability. These relationships are asymmetrical in that the covenant is unilaterally established by God. These relationships are moral in character, since God gives guidance to God's people about the ways in which they should fulfill their role vis-à-vis God, even though, given the unilateral nature of the covenant's establishment, these people's identity as covenant partners is not determined by their adherence to the moral framework.

In chapter 6, Torrance turns to the Fall as the story that expresses how humanity refuses to embrace its accountability to God and instead wishes to judge itself by its own standards. Torrance sees the tree of life as revealing that Eden is not a place where humanity is left to define its own future, but rather a place of accountability, where God's judgment defines human flourishing. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, by contrast, warns of the possibility of human beings refusing to be defined by divine judgment, instead wishing to autonomously set or determine their lives. The outcome of the story speaks of life and freedom that are found in living within accountability to God and that are lost when this accountability is rejected. Before eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, human beings lived according to God's knowledge of them and God's intentions for them. In eating from the tree, they choose their own moral autonomy.

In chapter 7, Torrance turns to the biblical notion of living out of "fear of the Lord." He considers this to be the antidote to the eating of that tree. As human beings become their own moral compass, they lose a sense of their place in the accountability structures that give them life. To be redeemed from this, their meaning-making orientation needs a complete turning-around. Rather than thinking about God as a character in the story they tell about their lives, living in fear of the Lord entails a redirecting of human orientation so that they consider themselves to be characters in the story that God tells about creation. Therefore, those who live out of "fear of the Lord" love God for God's sake, not for the sake of those things they might obtain from God.

In the eighth chapter, Torrance turns to baptism as the central way in which persons are initiated in a new relationship of accountability to God in Christ. Torrance detects a development in the baptismal theology within the New Testament. For John the Baptist, Torrance holds, baptism mediates God's forgiveness and initiates them into a new relationship of accountability to God, based on the merits of their own agency. But for Paul, human beings are baptized into Christ and thereby found accountable in him. That is, who they are is not measured by the merits of their own lives, but by that of Christ's, in whose vicarious humanity God establishes forgiveness and brings forth life out of death. By being in him, "a person's worth and value are derived from Christ, in accordance with who he is and what he does on our behalf" (171).

As human beings are in Christ, they thereby reach their telos, Torrance argues. Here he draws on an argument he previously made in chapter 5. There he argues that creation is embedded in election; but he also notes that God's election needs to be understood Christologically. As the Colossians letter holds, Christ is the end of the story of creation. Torrance has, it becomes clear, a supralapsarian Christology. With Paul he holds that the incarnation is not just meant to bring creation back on track. Rather, the whole of creation is directed at Christ (109–11). As Torrance quotes theologian David Fergusson: "The world was made so that Christ might be born" (173).

Torrance reads the notion that Christ is the telos of history in such a way that the narratives of all other human beings are derivative of Christ's. Those who are baptized have already been marked out in this way. By their baptism they are embedded in a community that holds them accountable to their identity in Christ and that helps them grow into what they already are in him. To be baptized is to be "initiated into the church as the place of accountability that is fertile for being heard and being conformed to God's story" (167).

In the ninth and final chapter Torrance explores how Paul's life, encounter with Christ, and subsequent self-reflection thereupon in his letters exemplify the theological turn that Torrance believes the gospel to entail: Human beings start to understand themselves "not from a human point of view" (2 Cor. 5:16), but as what and who they are given to be in Jesus Christ.

In evaluating Torrance's argument, it should be observed that "accountability" is not a standard theological concept. In this relatively slim volume, Torrance makes a convincing case that nonetheless the Christian story could fruitfully be read through the lens of accountability. At the same time, if Torrance continues working in this direction, I would like to raise three questions for further reflection.

First, what does it actually mean to hold someone accountable for failing to live up to one's relationship of accountability? While discussing extensively how accountability fits in the larger Christian story, Torrance never gives an explicit account of how one's being held accountable actually works. What are the appropriate ways for holding someone accountable? Given his understanding of accountability as a virtue that contributes to human flourishing, it is not surprising that the few things Torrance says suggest that holding someone accountable is mostly pedagogical in nature. For example, by holding a student accountable, a teacher aims for the student to continue to be formed and educated in appropriate ways. By holding their baptized accountable, a congregation aims for them to lean into their identity in Christ. By holding creatures accountable, God aims for them to find fulfillment. This leaves open the question, Which ways of holding accountable are more appropriate than others? Moreover, it particularly raises the question of whether some ways of being held accountable ought to be punitive rather than pedagogical. This leads us into contested theological territory. For example, a strong voice in Torrance's own Reformed

tradition holds that given God's own righteousness, God ought to hold wayward sinners accountable by punishing them (John Calvin). This then, of course, leads to an atonement theory in which God, wanting to be gracious to sinners rather than condemning them, must step in and take the punishment upon himself—a theory of penal substitutionary atonement. Torrance's treatment of accountability to God is silent on these matters. Nevertheless, how one parses these issues has important consequences for how believers see themselves situated in their accountability vis-à-vis God.

Second, the question of what it means to be held accountable is particularly pressing with regard to the core of Torrance's theological narrative: that we are not judged according to our own actions, but according to who we are in Christ. Our identity and value do not lie in our individual accomplishments but "in the fact that, in Christ, we are beloved by God who bestows value and meaning upon us" (201). As Torrance rightly notes, this is a radically subversive point of view which challenges many of our societal systems of accountability (183). It is also a point of view that even within the Christian community is grasped only with difficulty and needs all the emphasis and attention Torrance gives it. At the same time, it does seem that it has important implications for one's theology of accountability. Is it not the case that on this line of thought, exactly because we are accountable to God for who we are in Christ, we are thereby let off the hook for who we are in ourselves? Torrance speaks movingly about the Spirit's work of drawing us into Christ, enabling us to identify with him (201). As noted above, Torrance takes the church to be a community that is to help us in this process and hold us accountable to it. But when it comes to our accountability to God, we are not held accountable for our ability to identify with Christ, but rather for what we already are in Christ. The ways in which we do not identify with Christ, but rather weave our own stories of identity and agency, are ultimately judged delusional and without power in making any difference to the destiny of ourselves or of creation (202). This calls for a reflection on the ways in which God accounts for delusions.

Third, the question of how God holds us accountable becomes particularly pressing when we zoom in on the twofold narrative that Torrance tells about humans being in Christ. Both narratives are Pauline in origin and character. As I noted above, one narrative follows the logic of election, and election is both Christologically determined and primordially situated. All things were created for Christ, in whom we are elected and to whom we are drawn, as Colossians and Ephesians witness. The other narrative follows the logic of baptism. Torrance mostly speaks about baptism as an event that enfolds us into the community of the church and makes us accountable to that community. But he also touches on the Pauline notion of being "baptized into Christ" or "into the name of Christ" . . . Paul is saying baptism in Christ 'determines one's identity'; being baptized into (the name of) Christ means one belongs to Christ" (171). Note, however, two things. First, in the context of Torrance's argument, being folded into the church and being folded into Christ result in being placed into two very different accountability relationships and structures. In Christ, I am accountable to God as what I am outside of my own agency, as folded into Christ's vicarious humanity. In baptism, on this argument, I am accountable to the church for what I become through my own agency, as the Holy Spirit has me grow into alignment with my identity with Christ. This then raises the question of how one should see the relationship between these two different accounts of what baptism accomplishes. But second, if we hold onto the narrative that baptism does not just fold me into the church, but also, and primarily, into Christ, the question then arises of how we should construe this narrative in relation to the narrative of election, according to which we are included in Christ in election, from before the foundation of the world.

I wish to conclude with a personal observation. Torrance's project may focus on a hitherto theologically under-theorized concept ("accountability") but the theological narrative he uses to unpack this notion is shaped by an idea that anyone who is familiar with the history of Reformed theology will recognize as deeply rooted in a Torrancean understanding of the gospel: the vicarious humanity of Christ. I believe in this book Torrance uses this notion only once, but it sums up his understanding of the difference the incarnation makes. When he uses it, he rightly also references a book of his grandfather J. B. Torrance and could easily have referenced many other volumes penned by earlier generations of Torrance theologians. As such, this book is also a worthy contemporary testimony to the remarkable fruitfulness of this multigenerational theological heritage.