

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 65:1

January 2001

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Account-ability

David K. Weber

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you. 1 Peter 3:15

We need to cultivate a theological dislike for the word, "accountability." Most likely, accountability, *mutatis mutandis*, is a necessary feature in the fallen world. Nevertheless, there is a dark side to the present usage of the word. This becomes evident as we consider the most disagreeable phrase, "What we need around here is more accountability!" Often spoken when things are not going well, accountability is frequently a disguise for something more sinister. The call for accountability is managerial doublespeak for "We have a problem, so who gets the blame?" All too often, those harping for accountability pretend to have the "best interests" of the congregation or organization in mind. In reality, occasions requiring accountability too easily become opportunities to control a situation or individual; usually burying the "best interest" of everyone under layers of regulations or intrusive pressures.

How did "accountability" fall in with such dark forces in the linguistic underworld? To answer this we need to look at the false modern assumptions that shape the way we understand "accountability." For reasons treated below, moderns have come to believe that every problem has a "managed solution." Hence the quest to manage conflicts, manage healthcare, manage money, or manage marriages. What we have failed to do is manage managers. Once we believe that every problem can be managed, we soon conclude that every problem ought to be managed. This assumption about managed solutions explains the contemporary belief that the root of all evil is not the love of money but the lack of money. Every social problem is only a problem because someone has yet to be paid to manage it. The problem is that the trust in managed solutions is based in an optimistic myth that has turned out to be a pernicious lie. Who says every problem is manageable? Where do we get this idea? The answer is, it comes from the belief that mankind is on an onward and upward progression guided by human reason and resources. But the myth is sinking towards death as our society faces incorrigible

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problems that are proving to be unmanageable.¹ What is more, it is becoming increasingly clear that in spite of our best management efforts (most likely because of our best management efforts) things still fall apart. We have not managed to manage.

A good manager gets results! Seek ye first technique and principles, and all these results will follow after you. Unruly problems only need the right rule. In one instance, a congregation, serving a class of people who have, for at least the last century, been cold to church membership, were told by the growth experts that the "traditional church" was the problem. The experts said, "If you keep doing what you're doing, you'll keep getting what you're getting!" The problem of dwindling membership in European churches could be solved if only "We'd get going and get growing." Help is only a cliché away. But what happens when accountable results do not follow? Obviously, someone's to blame. Someone has failed to employ the proper technique or rule. Without surprise, this rule-based view of problem management is legalistic. Why have we put up with it, especially in the church? Probably because legalistic accountability comes well disguised. Legalism is always initially flattering—complimenting our principles, rules, and techniques that produce such accountable, measurable, and obvious results. We are called to a church and the problems are revealed. The nearly explicit question is, "Can you market, manage, and manipulate; can you get results for the institution?" We are flattered that others look to us for results.

The parable of the Rich Fool tells the tale of self-flattery (Luke 12:16-21). The moral of the story is in the number of personal and possessive pronouns (I, my, me) used to describe the fool's success. Blessed with a bumper crop, the man industriously begins to manage his future. There is no thanksgiving, no sense of the mystery of success, no appreciation for the many things outside his control. The account of the fool's good fortune was self-centered, autobiographical, and short-sighted. He took

¹Sociologist James Hunter documents the growing cultural divide most obvious in the abortion issue. He quotes the *New Republic's* Andrew Sullivan, who so easily begins the flirtation with coercion all too common among the left in the twentieth century. He writes (*Before the Shooting Begins* [New York: The Free Press, 1994], 8): "The fracturing of our culture is too deep and too advanced to be resolved by anything but coercion; and coercion . . . is not a democratic option."

no account of the unmanageable in life. Things like death and baldness render the unmanageable undeniable. If every problem had a managed solution, every man would have an eternally full head of hair. Though we do not know if the rich man had a full head of hair, we can be quite sure he was full of self-esteem and full of hot air to boot until he “bought the farm.” The parable is instructive because the foolish blow hard lurks in every heart. We want to be held accountable for success. But what do we do when we face the unmanageable and can give no account of it? What do we do when the seminars, conferences, and self-help books fail to manage and domesticate the power of sin, death, and the devil? We get depressed, talk about burn out, find someone to blame, or go back to school.

The accountability that so effectively cultivates personal guilt or vocational doubt does so because it is rule based. It is all law and thus, legalistic. In Saint John’s passion account, we see how this legalism goes beyond guilt and doubt. It also has great potential for manipulation. Legally pure and corrupt to the core, the Jewish leaders held themselves painstakingly accountable to the law, while manipulating the death of Jesus. They insisted that the crucifixion of Jesus was “in the best interest” of the nation. They proved their authenticity by meticulous observation of the law. Willing not to defile themselves so that they could observe the Passover, they refused to enter the praetorium. In truth, the only Passover they observed was to pass over the point and purpose of the Passover. Furthermore, their response to Pilate’s inquiry, which found Jesus not guilty, was to assert a law that, if applied coherently, excluded both false messiahs and the true Messiah (John 19:7). The contrast is stunning – the boisterous and pretentious show of legalistic accountability, effectively used to mask the agenda of Christ’s death. Accountability to regulations, at least in the passion of Jesus, was not value neutral.

The alternative to law-centered or result-centered accountability is, quite literally, account-ability. Account-ability is not primarily concerned with imputing blame or measuring results. For Saint Peter, account-ability is the ability to give an account of our Christian hope.² This is an account of how our beliefs, actions, and rules are knit together in a story that ends happily ever after. Account-ability aims to articulate; to make

²These thoughts on accountability were sparked by reading Gilbert Meilaender, *The Limits of Love* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State Press, 1987), 92 and following.

explicit how this fragmenting, fallen world may be rightly viewed as hopeful, in the light of the gospel. We must make more of the distinction in these two rival versions of accountability. They are as different as a grammar book is to a story. Both the grammar and story rely on words and grammatical relationships to make their points. But no one, save for a few sad souls, curls up with a grammar. Grammars are, from start to finish, about rules.³ They have no plot, no inspiration, and no story.⁴ Hence, accountability, centered in rules and results, loses sight of the whole story. The account is pointless and restless.

Why is law-based accountability restless? *Lex semper accusat*; the law always accuses! It is insatiable; always demanding more so that even rest becomes another thing “we must do.” Without a story and plot, rules and actions become pointless. When called to account, rather than trying to convince others how our beliefs, actions, or rules fit into the story of salvation, we justify beliefs, actions, and rules with the pointless response, “It’s in the regulations” or “We’ve always done it this way.” Real account-ability seeks to articulate the Christian hope that this world gone awry is made aright in Christ. It cannot be an account centered in the works of the law, but in the story of salvation.

In a world bound to disintegration—ultimately pointless and consequently restless—how do we come to see this very same world as hopeful? This happens when our account of hopeless disintegration is seen in light of the gospel and placed into the greater story of salvation. The difference the story makes becomes clearer as we see how in the psalms, the very same law comes to be viewed in two contradictory ways. Scoffers, mockers, and “the wicked” viewed the law as an encumbrance, forbidding and disconnected from the real business of life. Hence, they refused to live by God’s law because they lost sight of the plot of life; they

³Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, is the exception we ignore.

⁴Do not push the analogy too far. There is a story in the grammar that Nietzsche, to his credit, clearly understood. Alasdair MacIntyre writes (*Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991], 98): “Nietzsche remarked . . . ‘I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar.’ What Nietzsche meant by ‘belief in grammar’ was belief that the structure of language somehow mirrors and presupposes belief in an order of things, in virtue of which one mode of conceptualizing reality can be more adequate to that reality than another . . . It was Nietzsche’s insight that so long as reference to such a reality is still presupposed, belief in God is covertly present.”

forgot what He had done, the wonders He had shown them (Psalm 78:11). Forgetting what God has done leads to the assumption that there is no God and to the conclusion that life has neither point nor plot. The law, once wrenched from its context in the story of God's wondrous intervention, becomes distorted into arbitrary and life-denying commands that need not be taken seriously: Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, "He won't call me to account"? (Psalm 10: 13). Without the story of God's salvation, the only account in town is the mocker's boring, narcissistic autobiography, "I Did It My Way."

To scoffers, the Psalmist's prayer, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law" (119:18), makes no sense. Contemporary philosophy calls this moral incommensurability. Nothing in the mocker's universe could measure how the Psalmist discovered the law to be an object of delight that revived the soul, instructed the heart, and was precious and sweet (Psalm 19). To the Psalmist, the law is a sign of a thematic and purposeful world that makes sense only within the greater narrative of God's loving kindness. The law is not pernicious but precious; it is soul restoring rather than life denying; it is purposeful rather than arbitrary. The law is a window into the world held together by God's promises and pictured in the orchestrated movements of the heavens and earth. The psalms do not achieve this sense of unity by ignoring the disintegrating power of human wickedness, the hazards of personal weakness, and the profound depths of despair and death. Rather these evils are subject to the greater account of God's unfailing love (Psalm 33). Hence, an account of the world-seen-aright is expressed in Psalms—praise, worship, and thanksgiving, rather than curses or mockery, are the proper responses to the verses of God's salvation in Christ.

The nature of worship suggests a helpful distinction; our account-ability is much more liturgical than legalistic. By this we mean our account is first and foremost concerned with God's work already completed rather than on our works yet to be performed. Note how the shape of the liturgy is the story of salvation. Mankind's mournful cry for mercy (*Kyrie*) is turned into praise (*Gloria*) by the intervention of the Triune God (Creed) who has made us fit to live in His presence (*Sanctus*) by the sacrifice of Christ (*Agnus Dei*). The order of worship is neither arbitrary nor irrelevant to life. The liturgy expresses, as nothing else, the

complete trajectory of the story of salvation. It articulates the framework that supports our "ludicrous" account of the world as hope filled rather than abandoned. The liturgy declares to the world why we believe that Psalms, rather than curses, are the appropriate response to life in this world, lived in the promise of the gospel. Account-ability, being liturgical, is very wary of the legalistic emphasis on rules and results.

Furthermore, because account-ability is liturgical, expressing the story of God's salvation, it emphasizes the linguistic over the legalistic. In John's Revelation, the church is led through apocalyptic times by the Alpha and Omega. He is the Logos made flesh, who sustains His church with the arsenal of the alphabet (Revelation 1). Christ is the incarnate acrostic who orders all things, from A to Z, in a Psalm.⁵ He sustains His church with the linguistic resources that include the letter of the law, the word of promise, and the story of salvation. The implications of this linguistic emphasis are immensely practical for a pastor's account of his labors and the church's understanding of her reason for existence. The world-seen-aright depends on the word-read-aright. The time spent in maintaining one's biblical languages or reading theology will always seem to many an inordinate waste of time. The practice is warranted because, like nothing else can, such reading cultivates the linguistic skills essential for account-ability; that we declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

Reading the word aright may be understood in three ways.⁶ First, this kind of reading recognizes the narrative unity that runs through creation, fall, exodus, law, redemption, grace, and the end times. To the uninitiated reader (like the Ethiopian eunuch), the particulars of Scripture obscure the unity. Scripture appears to be disconnected; a compilation of legalistic prohibitions; tedious genealogy; a convulsive clash of genres, and troubling accounts of a capricious God intent on pointless bloodshed and gore. When read aright the fragments are tied together into the story of

⁵An acrostic Psalm begins each line or section with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The poetic practice takes on theological significance with John's identification of Jesus as the logos (Word) and the Alpha and Omega. Jesus brings together all the chaotic parts of this world into the story of salvation so that "our mouths might show forth Thy praise."

⁶Alisdair MacIntyre, in his treatment of theological change from Augustine to Aquinas, insightfully identifies these three characteristics of reading rightly. MacIntyre, *Rival Versions*, 88.

salvation. This mode of reading aright is analogous to the popular computer generated three-dimensional pictures. At first blush, the "pictures" seem to be no more than a confused combination of designs or disconnected figures. But, when seen correctly, the parts come together into an integrated and connected unity.

The account of hope reads Scripture as a single narrative of God's presence and promise in the world. While scholarly and devotional reading are crucial to this mode of reading, some current practices militate against seeing the overall arc and sweep of Scripture. Biblical scholarship is needed to engage the distinctions, questions, and problems that arise in the course of reading, in order to render a plausible account for the unity of Scripture.⁷ But when scholars neglect the very difficult task of thinking out the liturgical, catechetical, and homiletical implications, scholarly inquiry tends to become piecemeal and compartmentalized. The whole gets lost in the fragments. Likewise, the devotional practice of thumbing through Scripture in search of the comforting quote of the day shrinks and fractures Scripture. Rather than embedding our problems into the continuous story of salvation, as is done in the Psalms, we embed Scripture fragments in our own narrow autobiography and hope they help solve the problem. Rather than surrounding our problems by the promise of Scripture, fragmented reading surrounds Scripture with a sea of problems.

The alternative to the piecemeal or fragmented reading is to read in a way that cultivates a view of the whole plot and purpose of Scripture. One way is to read within the liturgical calendar. There, the tension between the particular text, our particular context, and the movement of God's salvation is maintained week in and week out. This kind of reading does not bend to our problems or projects, but bends these things to God's acts of salvation. There our problems and projects find their proper place within the unified account of God working everything for good, even in a fragmenting world. This overlaps with the second mode of reading aright.

⁷For an account of the problems and possibilities of biblical scholarship see Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990); and William C. Placher, *Introduction to Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, by Hans Frei (New York:Oxford University Press, 1993), 7.

To read aright in this mode, is to discover ourselves inside the Scriptures. Augustine's *Confessions*, written as a conversation with God, is the paradigm example of this kind of reading. Reading Scripture in this way, we read not merely as spectators outside the narrative, but as characters, integrated into the unfolding plot of presence and promise. Though separated by centuries from the Exodus, Jews learn to say, "We came out of Egypt" or "We entered into the Promised land." Similarly, Saint Paul writes that we were buried with Christ through baptism and we were crucified with Him (Romans 6). Paul was not merely reading about Christ, but living in Christ.

In C. S. Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, at a very suspenseful moment, Lucy enters into a frightening house in order to read the mysterious book of spells. Finding the book she begins to read a spell entitled, "for the refreshment of the spirit." As Lucy begins to read, the spell becomes more like a story, so that soon "she had forgotten that she was reading at all. She was living in the story as if it were real."⁸ To read aright, is to recognize that Scripture addresses us not as one outside the account, but as witnesses participating in this account. There is something serendipitous and gracelike in this mode of reading. It moves from faith to faith and so is in that category of things more "caught than taught." Children catch on to this way of reading Scripture when they see how their parents do not merely read the Bible, but live out their lives as called characters within the story. The same holds for a pastor and his congregation. While preaching and teaching, the congregation recognizes that the pastor is not merely giving instruction about Christ, but living in Christ. This mode of reading is evident when we realize that the order of worship expresses the deep order of life. Then we see the liturgy boldly asserting that the awesome, fearful symmetry of God's promise and presence are cast as a canopy over our fragmented lives. Then we find ourselves praying, not saying the liturgy. Though open to misunderstanding, we may think of this mode as less word and more sacrament. Our initiation comes not so much by teaching, but by tasting; "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8).⁹ It is a gift of grace when we are freed to forget we are reading and are living in the story.

⁸The Lewis illustration is taken from G. Meilaender's, *The Limits of Love*, 19.

⁹G. Meilaender describes this kind of reading as an experience of the myth that is "more like tasting than thinking, concrete rather than abstract." *The Limits of Love*, 21.

The third mode aims at right reading of secular or rival texts. This kind of reading brings Scripture to bear on the issues, questions, and problems raised by secular texts. Its aim is to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). The metaphor of Scripture as a lamp and a light is helpful (Psalm 119). In this mode of reading we are not staring into the light of God's word or studying the loveliness of this light. Our intention is not to go blind by staring at the light, but to have that light illumine our path. When we read in this way, we shine the light of God's word onto secular texts, in order to understand these texts in the light of the word. Peter Brown, in his *Augustine of Hippo*, documents Augustine's practice of detaching secular texts from their contexts in order to make them available for Christian purposes.¹⁰ It could have been said by Augustine's pagan contemporaries that he read all the right books, but got all the wrong things out of them. Augustine read his Plato, but refused to read him on his knees. Augustine was a linguistic pirate, plundering the texts for whatever riches they possessed and pressing them into service within Scripture's narrative.

Augustine read his current events as he read secular texts. Writing as Alaric threatened the destruction of Roman civilization, Augustine, observes Meilaender, "... sought only to make sense of his world, to find in it what meaning he could, to praise it wherever possible – but not to let the Christian life be definitively shaped by it." In *The City of God*, Augustine read the shattering events of disintegration into Scripture's narrative of promise and presence. This mode of reading allowed him to cling "doggedly to a faith that . . . the secular effort of mankind had not been wholly in vain." And unlike his secular contemporaries, who had no account for hope, Augustine, reading these events into the narrative of Christ's promise and presence, was preserved from the despairing cult of futility.¹¹

This mode of reading is expressive of a confidence in Scripture to engage the problems and questions raised in secular texts and events. An example of this kind of confidence is Paul's engagement of the

¹⁰Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), especially chapter 23.

¹¹Gilbert C. Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991) 33. Meilaender quotes from Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 31.

philosophers of the Areopagus (Acts 17). By reading their authoritative texts, Paul challenged the Athenians to give an account of how the "otherness" of God ("To an unknown god," 23) squared with the nearness of God ("in him we live and move and have our being," 28). Placing the Athenian texts beside each other, Paul rendered his rivals account-disabled. Offering a way out of their incoherence, Paul rendered his account of the transcendence and immanence problem, by asserting the history and mystery of Christ's incarnation and resurrection. Luke records the marginal results of Paul's efforts purposefully. Paul's ability to give an account of the gospel was undiminished by the slight numerical success achieved. Though fraught with both rewards and dangers, Paul and Augustine illustrate how "textual relations" with secular literature serve Christian accountability.

The rules-results accountability also proposes a way of reading Scripture. The Bible is read for its principles for living or techniques of institutional prosperity. Rather than an account of God's promises, Scripture is read for its lawlike predictability. Scripture is thought to have its counterpart principles not unlike the law of physics, "What goes up must come down." To read the Bible in this way leads us to believe the expert who says, "If only you do x, y, and z, it will happen to you what happened to me." This is untrue. If growth principles and technique were so predictable, numerical growth would be assured. But this is not the case. This reveals the problem with reading Scripture as a means of growth. It implicitly denies Scripture as a means of grace. Grace is not so tidy as to lend itself to lawlike predictability. Personal promises are vastly different from impersonal principles. We confess that God is trustworthy; we do not confess He is predictable. This surely is the message of the cross.

No one (except, perhaps, the thief), understood the point of our Lord's death. The cross was accounted as a tragedy, a misfortune, or a fitting defeat. Jesus was ridiculed for having failed to achieve His Messianic goal. In retrospect, and only in retrospect, did the ambiguity of Christ's death resolve into the clarity of the resurrection. This ambiguity and mystery of grace must inform the way we think about church growth and our mission. We cannot forget that the church rightly celebrated the results of Peter's preaching with the conversion of 3,000 souls (Acts 2:41). We remember that Paul was not shy about giving an account of his hard work (1 Corinthians 15:10). There is ambiguity with how the church is to

approach her mission faithfully. Hence, we must find ways to pursue together, in as frank and earnest a way as we can muster, to assess critically how the gospel shapes our methods and mission. In this spirit, I offer this argument.

There is a problem with the current emphasis on busyness, activism, dynamism, goal orientation, organizational aggressiveness, financial growth, and membership growth. It does not make a keen enough distinction between institutional well being and confessional well being. It is possible to gain the whole world and lose the soul of our confession. The emphasis on activism too easily forgets that the key "activity" of the church is linguistic and liturgical, centered in the day called "rest." If we speak of activity it is the activity of the word and sacrament conforming our reading and seeing to God's promise and presence. Of course, no one is explicitly denying the importance of word and sacrament. But there is a sneaking suspicion that a church, first and foremost concerned with the linguistic, liturgical "activity," is in a "maintenance mode" or is "dying of good taste." Statistical results are more impressive than hearing the promise.

Eugene Peterson identifies this suspicion underlying contemporary views of worship. He writes, "I'm convinced that pastors don't give two cents about worship And there's a reason for it. True worship doesn't make anything happen. It is a losing of control, a weaning from manipulative language and entertainment Pastors sense that if they really practice worship they are going to empty out the sanctuary pretty fast."¹² If the liturgical emphasis empties out the churches, why not use the emotive language and techniques of entertainment? Why not pursue the way of proven managerial manipulation or moralistic activism if it can keep the church viable?¹³ The short answer is, these things undermine our account-ability. The short answer is more divisive than persuasive. The case needs to be argued that the emphasis on technique

¹²Eugene Peterson, interviewed in *The Wittenburg Door*, November/December 1991.

¹³There is not space to summarize adequately Alisdair MacIntyre's critique of the ethical theory of Emotivism, except to note that MacIntyre persuasively spells out the intimate connection between Emotivism and social manipulation. Insofar as forms of Emotivism are present in the church, unseemly manipulation may also be assumed to be present. One may see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 23 and following.

and indiscriminate use of emotive language are products of a view of the world that mostly rejected orthodox Christianity. I contend that our contemporary managerial and moralistic practices are more nearly related to the Enlightenment than to the gospel.¹⁴

Fueled by the devastating religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thinkers in the eighteenth century concluded that religion had done enough "good" for the world. Modernism asserted that the terrestrial agenda would be set on the course of progress through the exercise of enlightened reason. Central characters in this ever-upward march were a certain kind of moralist and the bureaucratic manager. Theirs was the task to discover the rational structures of the reasonable world and determine the universal rules to order society. The key to modernism was the belief that laws or rules would render life predictable and manageable.

The moralist most representative of modernism was German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant believed that moral behavior would conform to rational rules (categorical imperatives). Because these rules were discovered by reason, rational and autonomous beings would recognize the rules as binding and pleasing, and would freely choose these imperatives as their own.¹⁵ The key rational understanding of these moral rules was the principle, "We can because we ought." If we conclude that we ought to do something, it means that we possess the resources to see it through. There can be no rule or duty that cannot be accomplished by a rational human being. This trust in the human ability to manage holds even with Kant's view of radical evil; that people were inclined toward evil.¹⁶ With this nearly biblical understanding of evil, Kant did not arrive at anything like grace. Grace was irrational because it assumed rules that could not be humanly fulfilled. Rather, Kant saw the problem of evil overcome by a rational ordering of rules. What Copernicus did for astronomy in discovering the

¹⁴While the following is much more an assertion than an argument, the assertions are grounded in an application of Alisdair MacIntyre's critique of the Enlightenment in *After Virtue*.

¹⁵MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 44.

¹⁶Radical evil, Kant believed, was a philosophic conclusion that he arrived at through the rigors of reason rather than by religious revelation. Much more likely, argues MacIntyre, is that all of Kant's practical morality, inclusive of his view of evil, was smuggled in from his Lutheran childhood in Königsberg.

rules by which the location of stars and planets could be predicted. What Newton did for physics in discovering the laws of time and motion to predict the movement of objects, Kant intended to do for human behavior. Kant was not reticent in expressing his admiration for the starry heavens and the moral law—both stars and heavens were law-centered and predictable. For Kant, rational principles yielding reasonable imperatives would render the precarious human situation predictable.¹⁷

Joining the moralist, the bureaucratic manager was to “cure” the problem created by the Enlightenment’s ideal individual, the “unencumbered self.” The unencumbered self was a law unto himself (autonomous); fully free to fashion his own rules however he wished. As Dostoyevsky recognized, in such a society, God becomes irrelevant and everything becomes permissible. According to the late Arthur Leff, this realization of a world without God produced “an exhilarated vertigo, a simultaneous combination of an exultant ‘We’re free of God’ and a despairing ‘Oh God, we’re free.’”¹⁸ The problem with unencumbered selves, or “godletts” as Leff calls them, was to find ways to get along happily in the pantheon: With each “godlett” and “goddesslett” being a divine law unto him or her self, the potential for social disorder was staggering. The task of ordering the chaos of individualism into a society fell to the value-free, bureaucratic manager.

The manager, armed with information and social scientific technique and theory, would allocate resources, organize space, and pass regulations to order society. Unlike the Kantians, managerial rules did not reflect theoretic principles, but hard-nosed practicality. They would organize and manage society so the greatest number of “godletts” could enjoy the greatest liberty. The story has turned out rather differently. The story has turned out not to be a story, but a catalogue of disintegration.

¹⁷MacIntyre summarizes Kant’s view of the categorical imperative, writing (*After Virtue*, 45): “It is of the essence of reason that it lays down principles which are universal, categorical and internally consistent.” A more specific version of the imperative is Kant’s reworking of the golden rule (*After Virtue*, 46): “Always act so as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of others, as an end, and not as a means.” *After Virtue*, 46. From our present cultural perspective so influenced by nihilism and relativism, Kant’s hope of a “rational” rule-based morality is naive at best.

¹⁸Arthur Allen Leff, “Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law,” *Duke Law Journal* number 6 (1979): 1232-1233.

The bureaucratic order turned out to be a zero-sum game. The more scarce the resources and space (real or imagined), the more abundant the bureaucratic regulation. Those who wished to control a thing created a crisis with one hand and offered their managerial services with the other. Without surprise the resources always seemed to get allocated in ways that produced more managerial bureaucracy and promoted a secularist agenda.

The American system of government-run education demonstrates the manipulative power of bureaucracy operating under the cover of objectivity and reason. The debate and defeat of the *Rainbow Curriculum* in New York City's schools, illustrates the unmasking of the myth of value-neutrality of the "managed" society.¹⁹ Presented as a reflection of the cultural mosaic that is New York City, the curriculum was, in fact, reflective of the aggressive leftist and gay social agenda of the political and educational bureaucracy. While claiming to promote the virtue of tolerance, the religious values of the many, many parents who opposed the curriculum were treated with condescension and contempt. Opponents of the curriculum, an opposition that was itself diverse and multifaceted, were characterized as a single block of religious bigots governed by irrational phobias. The curriculum was defeated. This defeat was a single episode in the precipitous unraveling of the trust in the secular, managed society. In the exclusion or absence of the Gardener, the Enlightenment's method to manage the garden has failed.

Paul's letter to the Galatians casts light on this failure. As Paul argues against the Galatian moralists, he exposes the problem with rules-based accountability. Admittedly the distinctions between rules and the theological understanding of the law are considered here in an imprecise way. Also, what the Galatian moralists meant by law and what Kantian moralists meant by rules are, in significant ways, different. Both, however, are rule-governed and fall under Paul's judgment; all who rely on works of the law are under a curse (Galatians 3:10).

For Paul, rules are coherent only in the wider account of God's intervention into human history, especially in Christ's incarnation. Thus,

¹⁹For a very interesting and surprisingly enjoyable read about the whole multiculturalist agenda, see Richard Bernstein, *Dictatorship of Virtue* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

Paul argues that dietary rules and circumcision, abstracted from the incarnation and the revelation of the gospel, are not only incoherent, they were pernicious means to manipulate the behavior of others (Galatians 2:4). The Galatian context offers an instance where the two modes of accountability are operative and at odds. The Galatian version of accountability aimed to measure Gentile converts by Jewish dietary and circumcision rules. Paul argues that these laws were arbitrary and incoherent, not only to Gentile sensibilities, but to the truth of the gospel. Their aim was not liberty, but manipulative control. Paul's account implicitly understands that such accountability to rules would lead either to hapless hypocrisy or hopeless despair. Hence, the moralists must be put to the question, "How do rules of diet and circumcision fit into the account of the gospel?" Paul then presses the account to absurdity to show its incoherence. In essence he argues, "If removal of the foreskin achieved x degree of moral purity, why not finish the job and go for total purity *qua* total emasculation" (5:12). As the moralists could not "read" their rules into the gospel narrative nor could they "read" Paul's liberty or the Gentiles out of the gospel, Paul demonstrated that they had become readers of a different narrative (1:6). The accountability that Paul called for was not first and foremost about rules, but about sinners' righteousness in Jesus Christ. This broad account so arranged and ordered rules, beliefs, and actions into a narrative or systematic unity that Paul could speak intelligibly of such difficult tensions as between law and liberty and the freedom that bears each other's burdens.

Not long ago, most everyone believed the Enlightenment story of the inspiring vision of a garden without God. It was progress governed on its course by human reason, science, and technology. This once-inspiring vision has dissipated into the comfortable skepticism and tenured nihilism of the academic and media elite, and now possesses all the inspiration of the motor vehicle department. The fact that we are now said to be in the postmodern period attests to the failure of modernism's secular story. Postmoderns do not believe in a different story of the human race, but in the belief that this is no story. We are all caught in a bad novel where episodes make no sense and characters arbitrarily come and go. The plight of the world without the author and finisher of salvation, is to be account-disabled. The postmodern world truly cannot give an account of its core beliefs, rules, or reasons for action. In education, secularism is unable to account for the books that constitute its core canon because there are no core beliefs. In morality, rules granting

easy abortion and divorce are acclaimed “achievements” of an enlightened society. Truth to tell, such so-called achievements clearly reflect what happens when “godlets,” who have no story but their thin, boring autobiographies, are unable to give an account for why they should defend things so basic as keeping promises or guarding life.

What ought not be forgotten is, that in the nineteenth century, when the Enlightenment vision was still plausible, every major Christian denomination bellied up to the rationalist’s bar hoping to be considered “reasonable.” The result was a distortion of the Christian account into an echo of secular philosophy. Today we are facing a variation on this temptation. The present fondness for moralistic principles, the extolling of measurable success and bureaucratic church growth smack of the Enlightenment myth of progress through managed solutions. If this is a correct reading of our situation, it would be strange indeed, were this vision of secular progress to find appeal in the church, just as it is being exposed as unaccount-able to the post-modern world.

The failure of modernism as a coherent account of life was played out in the closing months before Jean Paul Sartre’s death. For most of his life, Sartre was a militant atheist, who did much purposefully to subvert the account of life as purposeful.²⁰ Yet, nearing his death in 1980, he said, “I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here; and this idea of a creating hand refers to God.” We should not make too much of Sartre’s admission. Neither should we make too little of it. For Sartre to repudiate (perhaps even repent of), his life and his writings, he needed the language he had formerly ridiculed. “What language shall I borrow” goes the passion hymn of Bernard of Clairvaux. What a wonderful thought. Borrowed language allowed Sartre to understand his death very differently from how he understood his life. The thought of borrowed language compliments the psalm prayer, “Oh Lord open thou my lips that my mouth may show forth thy praise.” Our account-ability depends on grace not only for its content, but for the ability to proclaim as well. Luther’s last written words sum it up; “We are beggars, and that’s the truth.” Death forces even literary giants to recognize that we are linguistic

²⁰See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 214-215 on MacIntyre’s discussion of Sartre’s denial of the possibility of a human narrative.

beggars unaccountable — or is it account-disabled? Because death renders our most sincere words clumsy and cliché, we borrow from greeting cards or “say it with flowers.” Better by far is the rite of Christian burial to keep us account-able.

From the back of the sanctuary the borrowed language begins. Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Words borrowed from Paul; borrowed from the rite of baptism. The processional Psalm, borrowed from David, is chanted as the casket is brought forward, slowly embedding the grief into the Psalmist’s confidence. The simplicity of the intoned chant and the antiquity of the Psalm move the processional forward to a point as the body is placed beside the baptismal font. Death gloats in Herbert’s poem, “Alas poor mortal, void of story . . .”²¹ No story, no plot and no point. The unpretentious ceremony is an account that cuts through the cacophonous accusations of hell that life has no point. We return to the font where once we received the new life.

The Enlightenment failed because it had no *telos* to tell us. It could not tell us the point of a life once the myth of progress vanished. But how does the gospel account of “cross cross, suffering suffering” fare any better? How are we able to give an account of hope? One word tells it all: *Tetelestai!* “It is finished.” The cross tells us the *telos*. The cross tells us that the point of this story is sacrifice; Christ dying that we might live. So, the cross offers us a treasure, a thesaurus of cross words. Words that can speak of sacrifice together with life. Indeed these are words of eternal life. But, there is a general dissatisfaction in the church with the stock of words, preserved and passed on to us, from which we are free to borrow

²¹A DIALOGUE-ANTHEM, George Herbert

Christian:	Alas, poor Death, where is thy glory? Where is thy famous force, thy ancient sting?
Death:	Alas poor mortal, void of story, Go spell and read how I have killed the King.
Christian:	Poor death! and who was hurt thereby? Thy curse being laid on Him, makes thee accurst.
Death:	Let losers talk: yet thou shalt die; These arras shall crush thee.
Christian:	Spare not, do thy worst. I shall be one day better than before, Thou so much worse, that thou shalt be no more

and believe. Why is the creed reworked or deleted from worship? Why is the Western eucharist liturgy considered a liability to growth? Hymns are disparaged for their lack of warmth and feel. Maybe, by playing down how we feel, these words train us to see what is real. Maybe they are cautious about the manipulative use of emotion so that when we need them most, they can be trusted.

One word of eternal life, lavishly spread throughout the funeral rite, is "forever." Over and over the repetition of "forever" brilliantly rejects death as the end of the story. It may be that we only appreciate the vocabulary of "forever" when confronted by our mortality. Walker Percy asks, "How can it be that only with death and dying does the sharp quick sense of life return?"²² Instead of teaching us how to live, replete with rules and principles, cross words train us to die, so to cultivate in us a "sharp quick sense of life." This is why cross-centered words are not self-centered or rule-centered. These things are irrelevant in being accountable when facing death. Our account of hope reaches its height as the body is lowered into the depths, "Dust to dust . . ." Are we giving into despair? Does our account get high-centered on the problem of our humanity? We are "humus," rotting dirt! But then, from the beginning of this account, we are told what happens to dirt in God's presence, hearing His promise.

When Jesus was called to account for His "subversive" activity, He said, "I have spoken openly . . . I have said nothing secretly." The guard who struck Jesus recognized that the High Priest would find the answer inadequate. "Is that how you answer the high priest?" he asks. The answer is, "yes." That is how our Lord gave account and that is how we are to give account. Certainly, bureaucratic accountability will always be with us and is probably modestly important. To paraphrase P. G. Wodehouse, "If you'd stack all the forms and reports one on top of another, they'd reach part way to heaven." Who can say more? But, when we are called to account for our pastoral labors or account for the "good" the church is doing in the world, our account, first and foremost will point to those linguistic and liturgical transactions; teachings and sacraments; secret to no one. Our account-ability is chiefly that we have faithfully labored at becoming listeners and readers of God's word and have labored to teach others to do the same. That we have through

²²Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1999) 146.

prayer, struggle, and meditation been diligently attentive to the broad narrative of Scripture; that our reading of Scripture has not become impersonal or professional; that we have struggled with current literature and events so that we might make every thought captive to Christ. All that we might see the world rightly and give an account to others that they may do the same. God help us to be account-able.