

Chapter 4

Accountability

Introduction

Shame and blame has finally come into colloquial conversation, though its use has been around for as long as there have been people who attempt to control others. If you don't know the phrase, maybe you do know about the idea of microaggressions, a more current term brought into cultural conversation by those who work with trauma. The phrase, "death by a thousand cuts," may get traction with you. The phrase, "nibbled to death by a thousand ducks" has a more humorous turn at first, but still sparks the imagination.

I lost count back there of how many students gave as part of their introduction to their classmates that they had grown up in a Christian home. It was a delivery expected to bring rapport with the rest of the group.

Over the course of a semester, and with some of those students my acquaintance went past that stretch of weeks, I could tell that those students' idea of "Christian" behavior was a relatively narrow, even shallow, one. They were those who had a weak work ethic—whether as a student or those in a staff position in a congregation. They often acted out of an entitled persona. They might fudge on truth. Some of them were found to abridge the respective educational institution's rules against plagiarism. At the heart of their violation of principles of etiquette and ethics was that any wrongdoing on their part was the fault of someone else—blame them. Shame those who were perceived to be beneath them.

I grew up in a culture where shame and blame was the primary parenting style. There were some teachers who used the approach, embarrassing the students so as to look stronger and in control. Resisting shame and blame gets a variety of responses. Often, it is simply a "Oh, don't you know? I was only joking." But the emotional damage to others is done.

The shame and blame approach in its lighter forms are the beginning of the pathway to bullying. Put downs, sarcasm (the mode usually when the fall back "can't you take a joke" comes to the fore), harassment are stages of intensification of emotional attack and quite possibly physical attack.

Without a doubt, many of those students who testified in the holiest of language that they grew up in a "Christian" home suffered under the load of shame and blame. In lots of ways, they never saw or felt any other way to relate to and with others.

I have to report that some of those back there did seem to assimilate a better way of relating to others, they managed to transform out of the shame and blame approach to life. They adopted a style that has to be called mutual accountability. It has a much more biblical and theological base than the shame and blame approach. It conveys a care, a concern, an empathy, a humility about it—characteristics not found in shame and blame.

This chapter begins another three-chapter division, a triad if you please, with three major value constructs. I prefer to call them constellations, which together form another, larger constellation. They, like the three major ethical theories noted in an earlier place interface, are interdependent, especially when viewed through a biblical filter. Accountability leads off here, to be followed by Chapter 5, Forgiveness and Chapter 6, Courage.

Values, in short, are those standards which a society, a culture, holds in high esteem. These have historic sense about them, borne out of contexts before the current culture, but also with the sense of ideals toward which we aim or are pulled. Their informative and formative dynamics shape our present attitudes and actions.

These values, particularly from a biblical perspective, are not to be considered as abstract, ethereal concepts. That was the mode that has come to be called “platonic” after Plato, another Greek philosopher, whose teacher was Socrates and Plato’s most famous student was Aristotle. Quite a trio there, who had a lot to do with shaping the course of ethical thought, philosophy, in Western culture, much of which lies at the rootage of identifying values for and from culture.

The biblical framing of values has historical context, but also future projections, connected by the arcs of the continuing process of the present. Biblical values are primarily earth-based, life-based, possibilities of concretizing their intent are at the fore. They can be described qualitatively but are most importantly defined by the actions they inspire, quantified if possible.

Certainly, these values sourced from the Bible bear the continual speculative address. Too much emphasis on the historical presentations of these values, as interpreted over our shoulders, makes things get out of balance. There is need for dissecting out the perennial influence of values from what becomes essentially enculturated versions of them.

Also, speculative framings of values that carry the abstractions imagined into “heavenly realities” become fodder for entertainment for congregations, as well as fuel for raising fears and anxieties to draw persons in closer. There is a long-term dilution of theology and ethics if either or both of these past and future framings are emphasized.

For they will cater to neutralizing the work of Spirit, as well as disperse a message that “dumbs down” congregants. For, most importantly the matters of mutual accountability specifically, and all values that are biblically sourced are best expressed as they are viewed and experienced in real life.

Accountability, Some Definition

It depends upon who is framing the idea of accountability, then, as to how platonic, even gnostic, versions of values are understood through the filters of Christian applied theology. At the least, accountability, especially when drawn from Scripture, is not a mono-vocal concept, singular in meaning or application. Accountability has attributes, facets, which interface not just with cognates but other concepts of valuing so as to form a larger, more wholistic pattern for engagement, emulation.

Accountability holds in and of itself a constellation of expressions, each of which contributes to what can be called justice. Visualizing the matter of accountability is the beginning point of those considerations that are named variously as fairness, responsive actions, balance, promises kept, covenant, equilibrium, trust, dependability.

For those viewing our sense of accountability, they should be able to project a level of expectation, even predictability, of what our actions will be. In some form and fashion, agreements are made, perhaps verbally, in writing, or the intent of body language like a handshake testifies of a relationship that has formed or is forming. There is a continuance nature to accountability. There are matters of trust between individuals and groups.

Permission is granted for the exchange of commendation as well as correction. To pull from the introduction, there may well be blame to be shared, but blame, and its too often partner of shame, are not the only tools, functions, modes of the relationship. A mutual respect weaves through the arrangement, the actions, the lives involved.

Accountability, incorporating the many facets that could define it, attempts—as do the other two members of its triad, forgiveness and courage—to highlight the image of God in each person, in humanity. This concept is a valuable one to hold as one attempts to act to and with others with accountability.

In contemporary society there are concepts, themes, ideals which match expressions of accountability in Christian scripture, especially the Old Testament. These matches often fit the motives originally expressed in Scripture as expectations of promises made were met with promises kept. The integrity of one's promise could be maintained by one's word(s) of agreement to the expectations.

From the Old Testament there are three major expressions of accountability: contract/covenant; retribution/consequences; relational/community. These form a good place to begin identifying accountability in real life. Notice there are congregational and cultural interchanges/interfaces here for understanding the larger concept.

Perhaps it has become a monotonous line by now, but here again, as well, is another triadic arrangement—if for no other reason than an easy associational arrangement comes forward. Like so many of these arrangements there is interface and at points even blur into one another's image. But, for some sense of particularity, they are delineated below in mostly separate categories.

Contracts/covenants--In scripture there are oaths taken, comments made between parties. Sometimes body language was involved, not unlike today's handshake. Landmarks, as in piles of rocks, were used to denote promises made between Hebrew tribes. Boundary lines of property were established according to oral agreements.

The covenant relationships established between God and the Hebrews followed a kind of contract arrangement. These covenant arrangements mirrored other kinds of such agreements in cultures around the Hebrews. For them, the conversation went something like this. From God

would proceed the phrase “If you (the people) will do “this or that” I will do this or that.” Rules were extended—think Ten Commandments—all intended to be behavioral guardrails on the platform of giving first priority to God in all things.

Thus, contracts from Scripture can be illustrated, perhaps understood more clearly, through the filter of deontological ethical theory. Duty, obligation, accountability, were expected. Rules, laws, are not necessarily the highest form of behavior modification, but they are beginning points, all of which require education and practice.

The covenant rules, laws, might appear harsh in some instances to our time. In perspective, in proportion, to cultures about them, the Hebrews contract-covenant approach was intended to give a lift to their culture as compared to the others. The lowest common denominator of morality could be addressed but the intent, the motive, of shifting behavior aimed to a higher level was ever apparent.

The retributive dimension of accountability. —This framework too often is understood as only penalty driven. Lawrence Kohlberg’s work in moral development described as stages considers that the American society, for instance, rises to and plateaus, for the most part, at what he termed the law and order stage. Rules, deontological framings, take over.

Sometimes these are just what are needed, but interestingly in recent days in the twenty-first century those who lead with “We need ‘the rule of law’” are the ones most suspect as to whether they hew to such themselves.

These parties have, in recent events, most often fallen among those who are labeled as Christian nationalists—and from my perspective portray more nationalism, in some rather negative forms, more than values of Christianity. Their law-and-order approach is often couched in language that pulls from Old Testament proof texting without contextualization. There is an easy juxtaposition for these kinds of proof texting with a culture of shame and blame.

As well missed by some users of “retribution” and “law and order” is the biblical sense of how retribution carries the ethical theory of teleology—consequential applications. Those matters which give us purpose, even the ideas of “summum bonum”—another contribution of Aristotle—or highest good—fall within the parameters of teleology. Functionalism, usefulness, utilitarianism are aspects of teleology.

In many ways, each of us, each people group, cultural movements are products of the teleologies of the past—we, for instance, are the consequences of those who have birthed us. Our cultural contexts are products of the consequences of those who came before us. There are lessons for how do our concerns and actions have consequences for those who succeed us in time and space. The bringing together of teleology to retribution gives a positive dynamic not usually held as important in the “law and order” cultures, both societal and congregational.

Where the shame and blame approach has both implicit and explicit exclusionary dynamics, taking the teleological dynamic as a longer, deeper dynamic, some practices can be changed. For instance, consequences evenly applied can be beneficial for a group to understand that

miscalculations, breaking of rules should be addressed but not with discriminatory conclusions. There are retributive aspects, teleologically understood, that allow for rehabilitation, protection, even reparation for victims, families, even the law breakers.

We cannot dismiss that retribution arises off the pages of the Old Testament. But, the best readings, interpretations, demonstrate the style, the form, is categorized as divine retribution, with actions delivered upon people groups, not necessarily to individuals.

Jesus turned the idea of retribution on its head, and should, therefore, be emulated as we think about retribution and accountability. Jesus taught that one should turn the other cheek. This teaching gave Paul ground for telling the Roman Christians not to repay evil with evil. These teachings are difficult for most people not only to understand, interpret, and incorporate into today's cultures but most of all to act out of these ways of responding to people who do us wrongly. It is in this response that we come closest then to another facet of accountability, the distributive, or relational dimension.

The distributive/relational facet of accountability—It is tempting to call this one the highpoint of accountability, of justice, of highlighting the image of God in each person in humanity. Pieces of the former aspects of accountability have pointed toward this aspect of accountability, but the distributive form definitely places accountability in the center of shalom, as one of the parts of shalom's multi-faceted constellation of values.

With accountability brought into the warp and woof of shalom, the scale of the ideas takes on lots of dimensions. We find ourselves considering matters as intimate and personal as one can imagine, but also the degrees to which we can imagine of the immensity of Creation. This scaling idea may become so boggling as to neutralize not only our attempts to understand but much more become better at our behaviors of accountability.

One possibility is that we move into a lifestyle of indifference, making ourselves, in effect, unaccountable. To avoid that state, consider accountability on a level most of us deal with every day.

For instance, if you have thought the matter of accountability could be subsumed under promise keeping you are onto something. That is a concept that most of the culture understands in its ideal forms, as well as when a promise is broken, then accountability has taken a hit. And maybe promise-keeping as in made in a wedding ceremony also comes to mind. These ceremonies have an informal contract idea with an oral exchange of language meant to build an emotional interface with a couple. A formal contract idea comes to bear with a marriage license issued from and collected by the state. What are known as "common law marriages" with essentially oral agreements and saying so to the public exist in several states. If the marriage is ended, still a traditional process of divorce is required.

Though many parts of the Church consider marriage to fall under the sacramental rubric, still in most cases the State holds the validating factors toward recognizing what is a marriage or how to dissolve one. The State, whether it knows it or not, acts out of a sense of natural law regarding marriage. One has to give some consideration as to whether or not contractual relationships get at

a more core idea of promise-keeping in regard to marriage between any consenting adults—and that term consenting is one which bears scrutiny—than many in the Church, and individual congregations, are willing to assimilate. To say another way, there are cultural expressions of accountability that can be lessons learned for congregational life, which can and should be addressed more directly.

Accountability and a Congregation

The style of polity or governance determines to some degree how accountability is understood in the life of a congregation. My opinion is that by and large, whatever that style may be or is idealized to be, it does not enjoy widespread appreciation or understanding. A quiz on mutual accountability given to a congregation would be met with empty test responses, quizzical looks, and who knows what kind of negative feedback. I perceive it to be a real paradox that no matter whether a congregation is interfaced with an overtly hierarchical system of governance, or is marketed as a “free church,” there is still a lack of education on accountability. Lots of accountability, whether in free church or hierarchical governance, moves through tacit (unspoken) rules.

More specifically, there has been a widespread effort, development, no matter the polity, toward more authoritarian ways—from those titled and self-perceived leadership types—toward who is accountable to whom.

Early on in the history of the Church, a clergy-laity divide formed and has become wider and wider as the centuries have passed. For, the lack of mutual accountability or at least discussion, mentoring, studying about mutual accountability has contributed to some of the decline of the Church. Unfortunately, here is one of the conspiracies of silence, left so under ecclesial wraps.

The biblical-theological platform for considering the place and power of mutual accountability lies, again, in further understanding the relatively oblique concept of human beings made in “the image of God.” Where are the responsibilities to God toward fulfilling the charge of having dominion (stewardship) of Creation? Indeed, a theology of the earth, of matter, of the environment, all creatures, and humans will find a place for accountability on the part of humans to care for all this and each other.

We perhaps quote “Love one another” without absorbing the reality that the statement is a deontological one, a rule, an imperative, but with the elements of the benefits of appropriately applied retributive accountability and especially always the loftiness of relational accountability driving the dynamics. There is placed an accountability on each of us to exercise, to discipline, ourselves toward doing just that.

And the agape love the New Testament, based on the Old Testament terms usually translated as mercy or lovingkindness, likely does not come upon or out of an individual, or a congregation, in one fell swoop. There is a process afoot, of humans’ own making, of crossing those bridges of bias, misunderstanding, misjudgment, toward one another. These attitudes and actions give shape to sexism, ageism, racism, and all other “isms” which demean, dismiss, disallow, disenfranchise the “image of God” in any other person, person groups.

Some of the “love one another,” could be expanded upon how do we treat those who break promises to us personally and/or to society? Here are the questions of getting along with family, neighbors, but also how should society respond to law breakers? Are there problems with the laws themselves? How are people who are incarcerated to be treated upon release, for instance? Moreover, how does one refrain from making promises that can’t be kept? That’s a tough one, since most promises we make have some elements of unknown about how the event, the conversations, the lives will spin out.

Do we frame the promise made in such specific terms that we know when we’ve bumped against one of those unknowns and can be prepared to back away, circumvent, charge on? Does it depend upon the context and with whom one or the group is making the promise(s)? Do we need to develop more of a sense of flexibility toward how things are going to work out with a promise made intended to last for, well, from now on?

How do we maintain a sense of self-accountability without, for instance, being obsessive-compulsive about following all the rules and when we make a mistake that is the end of the world? Those who have been reared in a shame and blame context and culture have more trouble with this matter than anything else.

The extreme expressions are those, on one hand, come from those who become more and more introverted crossing t’s and dotting i’s—the moral versions of those as they understand them. As well, there are those who give up trying to hold to the morality guardrails they’ve been inundated with. They have been heaped upon with the admonitions, “Because it’s the right thing,” or “Because I said so.”

As we have learned something of accountability, those understandings will possibly give us directions through the maze of promises we make and possibly break. Self-recrimination may arise, which is another of those dynamics that typically do not get attention in ecclesial settings.

Here is an example of where and how accountability begins to merge, blur, into forgiveness—a second part of the values triad. There has to be dialogue of identification but especially engagement of accountability and forgiveness.

And, with forgiveness we have to break ground, for most of us, on self-forgiveness. Forgiveness will be viewed more closely in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Accountability, in a biblical and Christian sense, as well ironically in a cultural sense, must be articulated beyond our one-to-one relationships, those we probably think of first. There is an accountability of global proportions on us. For instance, go outside to a place where you can view the sky on a clear night. Sit, stand, meditate on what you can see. Feel the immenseness. All the time have Psalm 8 in mind or read it in snatches by flashlight. Surely there is some sense of awe which will translate into being more aware of the negative impact humanity is making on this relatively small part of the universe, planet earth.

For Further Discussion:

1. Do you have experiences of being held accountable that you came to see the accountability standards did not reflect humaneness, recognition of the “image of God”?
2. Agree or disagree with this—The “image of God” concept finds closer relationship with human rights than civil rights.
3. An article years ago was entitled “Are we a nation of liars?” How would you respond to that question now? Yes, no? Why?
4. How does one respond to those who enact matters that obviously are harmful to others with their statement, “I’m only doing my job?” How do we respond to systems that allow a free pass with such a statement from not only individuals, but institutions, corporations?
5. How do we deal with the matter of mutual accountability if the context is that a person, a group, an organization, a congregation provides support—as defined by physical, emotional needs—but the parties supported have no way of responding in kind?
6. Are there any occasions when following good etiquette/manners reflects being ethical?