

Pastoral Accountability

Nothing does more damage to the Gospel of Jesus Christ than when His leaders compromise their integrity. The church can sustain great blows from her adversary the devil (1 Pet 5:8), if in those attacks she can discover great riches and deep purposes that propel her forward. There is something mystically unifying when a body of believers recognizes the hand of Satan in a situation. The healthy church body binds tightly together in warfare and moves to rectify whatever must be rectified.

One the other hand, when the leadership of a local assembly rejects the commands of Christ and the safeguards that exist for both them and their church, it is very difficult for a local church to recover from the damage. The foundation of truth that girds the local assembly begins to shake violently whenever a leader or teacher compromises themselves and what they have supposedly stood for.

A. Liberty and Integrity

For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another (Gal 5:13)

The subject of personal Accountability can not be examined without a discussion about liberty. God has given everyone 'free volition' or the ability to make choices. The unregenerate are spiritually disabled and cannot use that free volition to honor and bring glory to God, but the Christian is set free from the bondage of the law (Gal 5:1) and the power of darkness (Col 1:13). They possess a freedom that is given to them through Grace and are instructed to be cautious with the exercise of that freedom as it pertains to others.

Liberty therefore, is not a right but a weighty responsibility and a freedom to bless others. It is the condition of not being controlled by one's own needs in order to be instrumental in meeting the needs of others. This is true Christian liberty. Unwise and immature men try to exercise their personal freedom in a way that gains them power or pleasure, yet genuine pleasure and real 'power' are found in accountability to that principle. The selfish and unchecked drives in a man's life can lead him to do the unthinkable at the expense of others as opposed to the uncommon for the benefit of others.

How a leader views his liberty is prerequisite to the way he views accountability. If he views his liberty as his defendable right to do as he wishes, he will be accountable only to those he chooses. Conversely, if he views liberty as a responsibility for which he must give an account, he will embrace the accountability, knowing that God has determined that he is answerable for his actions on several levels. Our liberty is not ours to do with as we please but God's. He has purchased our liberty for himself and for his pleasure. The apostle Paul in 1 Cor 6:19,20 writes "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." The mature leader realizes that God has both entrusted him with liberty and gifted him with accountability. Liberty and responsibility are inseparable.

For example: if the Pastor of a church has no working schedule because he feels it is his 'right' to do with his time as he wishes, he will act and feel as though he is accountable to no one. He views his liberty as a right. If on the other hand, he feels that the congregation deserves his 'best' and that he is privileged to be their pastor, it is likely that he will have a working schedule of some type. The way he views his liberty will determine his accountability.

Integrity is therefore the proper and spiritual view and use of liberty. The duplicity, which is so sadly common today, is the result of separating liberty from responsibility. It is viewing liberty as something I have a right to use as I please, instead of a responsibility to serve others. It is the selfish denial of accountability.

B. Every Man Will Answer for How They Use Their Liberty

First we see in the scriptures that we are all in fact accountable:

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10) It is unmistakably clear that God holds us responsible for our actions. Ro 14:10 says, “So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.” Heb 4:13 also declares that nothing is secret and hidden from His eyes. “And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”

Matt 12:36 shows that we will also be held responsible for our words: “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.”

C. Grace and Accountability

Some have great difficulty reconciling God’s unconditional forgiveness with this level of accountability, perhaps due to a very low estimation of God’s Grace. That we are received and accepted, loved and forgiven are such lofty facts that we sometimes fail to understand that accountability does not lessen or weaken God’s Grace, simply because nothing can!

Heb 12:7 explains that accountability doesn’t detract from the Grace of God, it demonstrates it! “If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?”

This present life accountability to God is our guarantee of eternal life, “But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.” (1 Cor 11:32)

In addition, the very same word for chastening in the above verse is used in Titus 2:12 to prove that Grace does not ignore the believer’s sins. What it does through accountability to is teach and change the believer in such a way that he/she is able to experience the highest purpose for being alive; being transformed into the image of Christ.

At times, that discipline seems incredibly painful “The LORD has chastened me severely, But He has not given me over to death” (Ps 118:18), yet it is the act of a loving father restoring his child to right way of life.

D. God Uses Others to Express His Accountability

The Old Testament is loaded with stories of God’s men coming under his accountability and being disciplined.

- Nathan is used to deal with David
- Abraham’s wife sets him straight a time or two
- A great fish is used to deal with Jonah
- A talking donkey is used to deal with Balaam

Prov 27:6 even seems to encourage being sharp at times to save a brother from erring “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.” Being used by God to bring accountability to another believer is very sacred. It is to be done in a spirit of meekness and self-examination (Gal 6:1) with the intention of bearing the burden that produces the failure in the first place (Gal 6:2)

E. An Even Higher Standard

It is also very clear in the scriptures that God holds leaders to a higher standard of accountability. This is due to the number of levels in which a leader is accountable. James 3:1 says “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment,” meaning an even greater level of accountability. By levels I mean, that he may be accountable to God, to his family, his congregation, other leaders, his organizational relationships, the outside world and so on.

The specific qualifications of an elder are found in two key New Testament passages:

1 Ti 3:1-7 “This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”

Titus 1:6-9 “...if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”

F. The Church and the Leaders Accountability

I will not review and exposit each of the above individual qualities necessary to be an elder. Instead I would ask, “who then ensures that the elder maintains these standards while functioning as a church elder?”

Some possible answers include:

1. God holds the leader accountable and it is to God alone that the elder must answer. This by the way would probably only be said of a ‘chief elder’.
2. It’s the congregation that God uses to enforce His accountability.
3. Those who ordained him.
4. The other elders hold him accountable.

In reality all of the above answers are true. We have discussed how God holds all of us accountable. The pastor or elder is responsible and answerable to his congregation as well. 1 Ti 5:20 reveals that in certain instances the elder may be brought by the other elders before the congregation and rebuked. Then in verse 21 Paul encourages Timothy not to be partial about this. The following verse therefore gives very relevant advice “Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other peoples sins...”(by avoiding accountability!).

In what areas should the pastor or leader be accountable to his congregation? Here are some suggestions:

1. Doctrine: the local church will hear us preach day in and day out. Any member of the congregation has the right and responsibility to bring to the pastor’s attention concerns about anything taught that is questionable. The congregation should also be encouraged to compare what they are learning to other sources of teaching. They should be encouraged to be “Bereans,” not shunned or penalized for asking questions.

2. Finances: the local church again will witness a pastor's handling of money. Each pastor should voluntarily restrict his handling of finances to administration only with no direct or hands on management of funds. The pastor may lead through the vision of the local church and by wisdom in this area, but should not count money or write checks. He should honor the budget set by the board of elders and never make financial decisions outside of the budget without the approval of the elders.
3. Dealings with the opposite sex: At a time in history when so many pastors and leaders are falling into sexual sins, it is vital that we have policies in place that guard pastors in this area of ministry. A leader must never counsel or be with a woman alone other than his wife – ever. He must also be a gentlemanly example of discretion in both action and conversation. The local leadership must hold one another to these standards. It is not some other man or men, hundreds of miles away that will hold him to good practices and standards, but his own elders and leaders. Pastors should also ensure that each staff member understands and honors this approach.
4. Family schedule: many a pastor has destroyed his own family on the altar of his church. Who will be the first to see this coming but those who are eyewitnesses to his schedule?

G. Ordination and Pastoral Accountability

'Ordination' should take place on the local level with the elders of the local church ordaining pastors. "Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership." 1 Tim 4:14. It is disputed by some that Paul, Timothy and Titus were 'spiritual fathers' and retained the right and authority of ordination over the local church. This simply contradicts the verses which define the elders' responsibility and authority in the local assembly.

We can enjoy and benefit immensely from the investment and wisdom of more experienced men. The years of dedication and sacrifice witnessed in mature leaders can inspire and encourage younger pastors tremendously. However, these men are not 'in authority' in any way over any church other than their own.

In James 5:14,15 the elders of the local church are to be called upon to administer restoration to those who have sinned against the assembly. They are called upon to 'lay hands upon the sick' among them as well.

They are charged with verifying the credibility of witnesses in disputes (1 Tim 5:19). In 1 Cor 6:5 Paul calls for the locals to mediate disputes in order to avoid airing problems before the world's judges.

In Heb 13:7 the elders are said to 'rule' or directly govern the affairs of the local church. The assembly is to follow their faith 'considering the outcome of their conduct'. This has to be observable conduct seen on a local level.

While Peter refers to himself as a fellow elder in 1 Pet 5:1-4, as does John in 2 Jn, the roles of these men should be understood as advisory in nature towards the recipients of their writings and not as directly governing the local churches involved. It is unreasonable that men could wisely exercise governing leadership over another church which could be hundreds or even thousands of miles away.

While the New Testament church was growing, Titus was instructed to appoint (ordain) elders in 'every city' for the 'setting in order' of those churches (Titus 1:5). Paul places 'taking care of the church of God in the same light as ruling his own house (1 Tim 3:5). Neither would be possible if it were acceptable that his authority be usurped by an outside authority.

It is clear that an elder would have no authority to guard or protect the church's doctrine and peace if he

did not have the authority to appoint and remove elders. It is with this premise that Paul insists that elders be accountable to one another and managed by each other on the local level. 1 Tim 5:17-22 .

An outside body cannot properly carry out ordination since:

1. It has no local authority in the church
2. It is not an ongoing eyewitness to the quality of leadership which the candidate for ordination possesses

The charge and responsibility for leading the church is given solely to the elders of that local church and cannot be usurped by nor subjugated to another body. Since the elders are charged with the care and guardianship of the church (Acts 20:28) it should be clear that they carry out those charges by having the authority to appoint and remove elders. This includes the senior pastor, who is actually delegated the authority he has from the other elders.

The pastor's accountability can only be defined and practiced in light of this truth. He is simply the first among equals and holds no special God-given exemption from accountability. He is answerable to his other elders and to his congregation in certain instances. If the pastor views himself as being in authority 'over' the other elders in his church, he has in effect created an additional office outside the interchangeable bishop-elder office defined in the epistles:

1 Peter 5:1-4 The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

The apostle Peter refers to himself as a fellow elder here, not one in authority over the others but serving along side. In this passage we also see elder and shepherd being used to represent the same person. The elder is the office and the shepherd is the function.

Gerald Graziano
Finger Lakes Christian Fellowship