

Accountability: Part 1

Sometimes you'll hear politicians and other public figures using the word accountability. It seems to be very much in vogue in the world, but strangely, very absent in the church. Accountability between believers ought to set the pace for accountability in the world. In this two-part series, let's look at what accountability is, why it is necessary, and how to carry it out as far as the Christian life goes.

The word accountability is defined by Webster's dictionary as "the state of being liable to answer for one's conduct; liability to give account, and to receive reward or punishment for actions."

That's a good definition. Accountability is where your conduct is not left unchecked. You are always likely to be called to explain or answer for what you have done, and that ought to affect your behaviour. Accountability is where you are held to a particular standard through the supervision and scrutiny of others, with the possibility of punishment or reward.

We see many examples of accountability in everyday life. In some workplaces, there is accountability regarding what time you arrive at or leave work by means of 'punching in' with a card. Every employee knows their entrance and exit is being recorded and reviewed. Their late coming or their early leaving will be picked up and they will have to answer for it.

Some workplaces have performance appraisals or reviews where a manager will sit with an employee and go over their job performance to see if they've been meeting the job's requirements, reaching their targets and so forth. The presence of a job review hopefully stimulates employees to perform better.

During an exam, you have invigilators. People who remain in the room while students are writing to make sure no one is using crib notes, or looking at another's answers. Businesses have accountability through external auditors, who are called in to go through the finances of a company and make sure all is above board.

Some places, especially those that deal with large amounts of cash – have cameras recording the actions of both the employees and the customers. And as soon on the roads as you drive are metro cops and speed traps that produce accountability. You know you cannot speed when there are cameras and traps, you know you cannot jump lights and be aggressive when there is a metro cop car right next to yours.

Restaurants have accountability in the form of health inspectors. If a restaurant does not keep to the minimum standard of cleanliness, they can have their license revoked and may no longer operate. The presence of such inspectors keeps them in line and holding to a standard of hygiene in the kitchen.

In all these cases – there is a standard that must be met – punctuality, job performance, financial integrity, lawful driving, cleanliness and other things. So we may ask – why isn't it enough to just give people the standard and leave it there? Why can't we just tell people not to speed, not to cheat in an exam, not to lie on their tax returns, not to cut corners on cleanliness in food preparation?

Why do you need managers, auditors, metro cops and health inspectors? The answer is because the human heart is not prone to good; it is prone to evil. If the sinful nature is not met with resistance, with the threat of some form of penalty, it will go its own way.

Well, we should not think it is any different in the church. It is all very well to have the standards given to you in the Word of God in a sermon. But if that is all church is, then we should abandon it and go home and listen to tapes of preachers.

In fact, this is what many people do, and their inconsistent, up and down Christian life is proof of it. They are like a restaurant that is above the health inspector, a student who knows he cannot be caught cheating, a driver who cannot be arrested. When there is no threat to the sinful nature, be sure it will go its own way.

God has made His local church an all-in-one place – where you are not only supposed to hear the standard preached, but receive the accountability that enforces the standard as well. Church is supposed to be not just telling you to keep your restaurant clean, but also sending caring health inspectors to help make sure you're doing it. The church not only tells you to be honest, it sends an auditor to check your books. This is what God designed, because He knows the nature of the human heart.

Unfortunately, modern churches have all but departed from this model. Church is now a place where one can hear a motivational talk or a clever speech with Christian anecdotes. The pastor is a once-a-week public speaking expert who thrills the crowd with an entertaining, informative and even creative speech.

If the pastor is more of an expository preacher, you may even get some standards of how to live my life unto God. But if there is no thought of enforcing, of ensuring or supervising that the hearers submit to that standard, then that church falls short of God's plan.

This idea of the church holding its members accountable is foreign to modern culture, and so many a church refuses to come anywhere close to it. No, that would chase people away – for modern society hates the idea of being held accountable. It hates watchdog organisations and accepts their accountability only begrudgingly. So the modern church, which is all too eager to grow numerically for fear of losing people, that it completely drops the ball on accountability.

If you pattern your church along Christ's lines – where there is not only instruction but also supervision and correction – your church probably won't explode into a megachurch with a coffee bar and a skating rink within two years. Because once people show up and realise you are not just speaking about Christlikeness as a nice, abstract concept, but that you mean business as to seeing it implemented, you'll soon lose the drifters who want Christianity without accountability.

The fact is, God meant His church to not only disseminate information, but to be a close-knit community of believers who expect obedience for one another. The prevailing attitude in the church today regarding holding one another accountable is often heard in this tired and abused phrase: "It's not up to us to judge." With that sweeping statement, the speaker pretends to assume the moral high ground, as one more gentle, loving and meek than the other Christians.

Christians not taught in the Word wither at this remark, because of course, who wants to appear to be judgemental? And so this little phrase has become a favourite of those who hate accountability either for themselves, or the discomfort of applying it to others. But is that true? In fact it is not.

Reading 1 Corinthians 5 gives us the very opposite of this cliché. In the context of dealing with a man who was unrepentant, Paul writes the following:

But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore put away from yourselves the evil person.

1 Corinthians 5:11-13

Notice he says, *“what have I to do with judging those outside?”* By that, he refers to unbelievers. And then he adds the phrase – *“do you not judge those who are inside”* – by which he means believers. Those who are outside – God judges. God will deal with the judgement of unbelievers, but it is up to believers to judge the sins in one another. This is his reasoning for putting such a man outside the church – precisely because Christians are supposed to judge each other.

But wait a minute. What about Jesus’ words in **Matthew 7:1-2**: *“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.”* Here Jesus means, do not pass sentence on another person’s motives. If you are severe with another person, showing them no mercy because you think you understand what is going on in their heart – you will be judged by the same standard.

In fact, in the very next verses, Jesus goes on to talk about the kind of accountability we are to have, saying:

“And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

Matthew 7:3-5

Notice, Jesus does not say, ‘Take the plank out of your eye and stop trying to get the speck out of your brother’s eye.’ He says, ‘Take the plank out of your eye so you can *see clearly, so as to* take the speck out of your brother’s eye.’ This comes right after the verses not to judge. So clearly, when Jesus says do not judge, He does not mean remain uninvolved in rescuing your brother from sin.

What he means is, do not judge a person’s motives and intents of the heart, because you cannot do that. This in line with **1 Corinthians 13:7**: *“Love believes all things.”* Love believes the best about someone. But we are entitled – even commanded – to judge one another’s actions. That is, we are to compare the life and actions of our brothers and sisters in Christ and call them to the standard of the Word of God.

So accountability is supposed to be very much a part of the church of Jesus Christ. Let’s see a few Scriptures that emphasise this. Firstly, the principle is taught in the Old Testament.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him.

Leviticus 19:17

Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.

Proverbs 27:5-6

Let the righteous strike me; It shall be a kindness. And let him rebuke me; It shall be as excellent oil; Let my head not refuse it. For still my prayer is against the deeds of the wicked.

Psalms 141:5

Moving into the New Testament, it is clear the Bible expects believers to be holding one another accountable. We read the familiar words of Jesus in Matthew 18:

“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear

them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”

Matthew 18:15-17

Paul writes to the Galatians as to what is expected when another believer has become stuck in a sin and have fallen:

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.

Galatians 6:1

James likewise has encouraging words for the ministry of holding others accountable:

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

James 5:19-20

What does it look like to have this accountability?

Accountability in the church is when you voluntarily place yourself in a situation where you are lovingly held to the standard of the Bible by other believers. You may be probed as to your actions, and should be willing to give an account for them. This is willingly yielding up your independence and a certain amount of privacy, to expose your ways, your heart and your life to another believer, so as to prevent you from drifting into secret sin. It is to seek out correction and welcome it when it comes. It is a safeguard you build into your life to keep you right with God.

And as we put it: you are lovingly held to the standard of the Bible. There is no threat of jail, or possibility of losing your job here. There are threats – make no mistake – the ultimate threat of losing out on the fellowship of the church. But all along the motive is restoration to usefulness to Christ, out of a heart of love.

Why do you need accountability? Because, as **Jeremiah 17:9** puts it: *“The flesh is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”* In other words, the heart’s number one problem is that it lies. It will cheat, it will speed, it will cut corners if left to itself. John mentions this dishonesty when talking about sin in his epistle:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

1 John 1:8-10

All society’s watchdogs must exist because people are deceitful. We will have a dirty restaurant if we can, we will cheat on our taxes if we can, we will copy answers during an exam if we can. And we will disobey the Word of God unless we are held to it by one another. We rationalise away our sin till we see it – we often need another to show us.

The truth is, we slide towards spiritual lukewarmness and stagnation without accountability. God’s Word cautions us: *“Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin,”* (**Hebrews 3:12-13**). These verse state that we need the exhortation of one another

daily to prevent our hearts from hardening. Accountability is to be frequent and consistent if we are to steer clear of unbelief.

In addition, we tend to fizzle out when it comes to application. James reminds us: *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does,” James 1:22-25.*

Someone must sometimes come and show us the mirror. We deceive ourselves into thinking that hearing the standard is as good as doing it – looking into a mirror is as useful as using it. Accountability ensures we see how we are really doing in terms of applying the Word.

What does accountability entail?

1. Church membership

People often debate over whether there was formal church membership in the early church. My answer to that is: there didn't need to be. Those who were in, were in, and everyone knew it. In persecuted countries, I doubt very much whether they have formal membership, because only the committed pitch up. But in our situation of lukewarm, half-hearted church attendees, membership is a step of accountability. Membership says: 'I am more than an observer; I am a participant. I don't just want to hear the Word; I want to do the Word. And along those lines, I want to be held to that standard. Consider me submitted to the process of Matthew 18 in this church should I need it.' Church membership also helps the pastors of the church. How do you shepherd people you don't know you have?

2. God's standard proclaimed

We need to hear what God wants – the Bible correctly interpreted and applied. This means hearing it preached accurately. It means being in Bible studies together. It means being in one-on-one discipleship together. It means counselling one another with the Word of God. But in whatever circumstance – we are having the standard of God's Word proclaimed to us. Not only so – but we need to have it continually repeated! Again and again you hear God repeating His commands in the Bible. Why? Because He knows we are a forgetful people – we need to hear the Word over and over. This corresponds with the first part of **2 Timothy 3:16**: *“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”* We must hear doctrine – teaching – so as to know what God expects.

3. Thirdly, there must be reproof

This is when the Holy Spirit uses any of these means to identify a failure to keep the Word of God in our lives. Using another believer, the Holy Spirit shows you yourself and compares that image with the Word of God. They in essence show you what God expects, and they show you a mirror. Confession of sin to God is what should result after this stage.

4. Fourthly there is correction

This is where what is expected is substituted with the sin happening. The obedience necessary to substitute and replace the disobedience must be done. Where there has been no repentance,

church discipline may eventually take over, once all the relevant steps laid out in Scripture have been followed.

5. Instruction in righteousness

This is literally the *‘training in righteousness’* referred to in **2 Timothy 3:16**. Accountability must also build structures to maintain the obedience. Biblically-informed structures and procedures can help Christians to put off the old man (box in and deny the flesh) and put on the new man (and Spirit-empowered life). These structures or training programmes to develop and maintain obedience to God can include homework, memorisation and practical applications.

Accountability supplies doctrine, reproof, correction and training in righteousness. **2 Timothy 3:17** then gives us the result: *“that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

So we have seen essentially what accountability is, why it is needed. In Part 2 of this series, we will answer the questions – to whom am I accountable in the church? And how must accountability be done?