

Are there accountability partners in the Bible? Do pastors rule?

Authority and Accountability in the Bible

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I used to do some freelance editing for a man who ran a Christian publishing, Internet, and speaking ministry. A few years before his death, he found that he was unable to, in good conscience, continue his membership in the church of which he had been a member and elder. Soon afterward, "Christian" forums had threads about him that went something like this: "Did you hear that so-and-so is no longer under the accountability of a church?" "What? Do you mean that he's not under a church covering?" "This is outrageous! How can he continue his ministry while being unfaithful?" "Well, all I know is that as long as he's not under the authority of a church, I'm not listening to him any more."

Here is the question I want to answer in this article: Does the Bible teach that Christians are to be accountable to, covered by, or under the authority of a church, a pastor, someone called an "accountability partner," or any other member of the church? Notice that I am not addressing either church membership or attendance, as such. I will address that subject in another article. Right now, I simply want to address the question of accountability to a church or member of the church.

Accountable, Yes; But to Whom?

The Bible certainly speaks of accountability. Matthew 12:36, for example, speaks of the accountability on the day of judgment of those who speak idle words. In 1 Peter 4:4-5, we read of those who run riot and speak evil of Christians giving account "to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead." Notice from these two verses that being accountable to someone is the same as being under someone's judgment. In other words, those who are accountable to God are subject to His judgment—He judges whether what they have done is right or wrong. Keep this in mind as we continue.

So far, we have determined that the wicked will be called upon to give an account of their works to God, and that their being accountable to God is the same as being subject to His judgment. But what about Christians? Romans 14:12 tells us about Christians: "So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." We Christians are to

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give an account. But to whom do we give this account? Do we give it to a church? No, we are to give an account to God. Notice the verse that immediately follows: "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Romans 14:13). So, these verses say that we are to give an account to God, but we are NOT to judge one another. That doesn't sound like being held accountable to a church to me. In fact, Paul is teaching against the idea that we Christians are to be judging one another, which is another way of saying that he is teaching against the idea that we are accountable to one another. And, since the church is the assembly of Christians, we, therefore, are not accountable to the church.

Church Discipline

Now, some of you are no doubt wondering about discipline. Surely, the Bible does teach what has come to be called church discipline (the term itself is not found in the Bible). But it is largely misunderstood. The overriding principle behind church discipline is that it is practiced in response to specific actions. That is, church discipline has nothing to do with the practice of accountability in which a member is always accountable to another member or members or the entire congregation or the pastor for how the member lives his or her life.

One of the most often cited Scriptures regarding church discipline is Matthew 18:15-17. I have always thought that this Scripture addresses church discipline. In fact, as I write, there are still articles on this website that I have written in which I cite this passage when discussing church discipline. But, as I studied this matter of accountability, I recently came to see that Matthew 18:15-17 has absolutely nothing to do with church discipline. It is merely instruction on how two brothers in the Lord are to handle a situation in which one commits some offense against the other.

Notice that they are first to speak alone. If this does not work, then they are to speak with one or two more witnesses. If this is also unsuccessful, then they are to bring the matter before the assembled brethren (the church). The purpose for each of these steps is to bring about reconciliation. There is absolutely nothing in these verses about accountability, judgment, or discipline. Christ's final statement, "but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican," is an instruction to "thee," which is "you" in the singular. This is not an instruction to the church; it is an instruction to the offended person. Jesus is saying that if the person who has

offended you does not hear the church's admonition to reconcile, then you are to treat him as a stranger. That is, rather than continue the antagonism, it is better to simply stay away from each other. This is not an instruction to disfellowship or excommunicate anyone. Nothing is said about that at all. It is simply instruction on how to avoid further contention.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul indicates that for specific, gross, public sin, we are to stop associating with the sinner. In verse 5 and in 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul also speaks of delivering the offender to Satan. We don't know what this means, and it may have been something only the apostles could do. Its point, however, was the destruction of the flesh, apparently meaning the destruction of the person's sinful carnality.

In Titus 3:9-11, Paul tells Titus to "avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain" (verse 9). Then, continuing the same thought, he tells Titus to reject [*paraitou*—literally, "beg off from"] after the first and second admonition someone who is a heretic (a schismatic or causer of division or someone causing a party spirit). In other words, Paul is telling Titus that if someone continues to want to debate with him over the law, for example, after warning the man about the unprofitableness of such questions, Titus should simply stop responding to the man's questions. Don't continue to lock horns with such a person. By asking about such carnal matters, he shows himself to be self-condemned anyway. These instructions to Titus are for one-on-one personal interactions, and they can be useful to any Christian. I have used them myself in dealing with people who want to argue with me over Sabbaths, Old Testament feast days, clean and unclean meats, and other legalistic matters. I give them a couple of chances, but if they continue to argue, I stop responding to their questions. But these verses in Titus say nothing about church discipline.

On the other hand, Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.... And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15). The Greek for "disorderly" in this passage is a military term. The picture is of someone who gets out of ranks. When that happens, we are to withdraw ourselves from following or accompanying him and get back

into rank ourselves. We are to have no company with him but still consider him a brother.

Again, notice that these Scriptures are to be implemented only after actual gross transgressions. There is nothing here of continual accountability to "accountability partners" (something completely unheard of in the Bible), the church, or the pastor. We are accountable to God.

Shape Up, Gertrude!

Nevertheless, it is an absolute fad in the church to have an accountability partner. Morris is accountable to Mavis, and Mavis is accountable to Gertrude. They meet and tell each other the gory details of their personal lives. Then they slap each other with, "You shouldn't be doing that. You should be doing this. Go out and do this and report back to me next week." My friend, this is only one step away from confessing to a priest and having him tell you to do twenty Hail Marys. It is sheer cultic legalism. Christianity is not about having someone keep us in line by telling us what to do or what not to do. It is about growing in the grace we have in Jesus Christ. Yes, there is a way to live the Christian life. But it is a gracious way that we find by communicating with God through His Word and prayer. And His Word says nothing whatsoever about accountability partners.

This is not to say that we are not to encourage and comfort each other by reminding one another of the Gospel, God's promises, and the hope of Christ's return. Many Scriptures—such as Hebrews 3:13; 10:25; Romans 15:14; and Colossians 3:16—address this. But these are general, loving reminders to each other of God's grace, not specific, legalistic works imposed on specific people.

Gotcha Covered

Look high and low and you will never find a biblical excuse for the idea of seeing either the church or a human being (other than Jesus Christ, who is both God and man) as a covering. Those who try to push the idea that you need to be under the cover of the church or under the cover of the pastor or under the cover of anyone else are really saying that you need to be under the control or authority of the church, the pastor, or someone else. But does the Bible say that you are to be under the authority of a church or person?

Under the Authority of...?

In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus says, "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister [*diakonos*—"servant"]; And whosoever will be chief [*prōtos*—"first"] among you, let him be your servant [*doulos*—"slave"]: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." In these verses, Jesus is telling His followers that they are not to be like the princes of the nations and exercise authority over people. Instead, they are to be like servants and slaves. This being true, all other Scriptures, which would seem to say that a pastor, elder, or anyone else in the church can claim to have authority over any of his brethren, must be understood in this light.

"Obey them that have the rule over you...."

There are several Scriptures that are often resorted to in order to demonstrate that church members are to be accountable to pastors. One of these is 1 Timothy 5:17: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine." It is the word "rule" that I want to concentrate on. It is translated from the Greek word *proestōtes*. It literally means "stand in front," such as to stand in front to preside or to stand in front to lead. It does not at all mean "rule." So, this verse should simply start by saying, "Let the elders who lead well..." To be a leader does not automatically imply authority over the people one leads.

Hebrews 13:7 states: "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." The Greek word translated "rule" in this verse is *hēgoumenōn*. It means to "lead" or "go before." The tenses in this sentence show that it is speaking about former leaders. The *Weymouth New Testament* translates the verse as, "Remember your former leaders—it was they who brought you God's Message. Bear in mind how they ended their lives, and imitate their faith." That *hēgoumenōn* should never have been translated "rule" when referring to church leaders is determined by the fact that it is found in Luke 22:25-26: "And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief [*hēgoumenos*], as he that doth serve." This is Luke's account of

Matthew 20:25-28 that we saw above. "He that is chief" would be better translated "he who is leading," but my point is that Jesus is specifically ordering the leaders to be servants, not rulers.

In Hebrews 13:17, we read, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." "Rule" is translated from *hēgoumenois*, the same word meaning "lead" that we saw above. "Obey" is from the Greek word *peithesthe*." It means to be persuaded or to be persuadable. I think the best way to understand this word is to see that forms of this word with the negative suffix "a" attached are used in the Bible of people who are perversely and willfully disbelieving. Notice the *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible's* translation of 1 Peter 2:7-8: "Then to you who believe belongs the preciousness. But to disobeying ones [*apeithousin*], He is the 'Stone which those building rejected; this One became the Head of the Corner, and a Stone-of-stumbling, and a Rock-of-offense' to the ones stumbling, being disobedient [*apeithountes*] to the Word, to which they were also appointed." The first part of Hebrews 13:17 is better rendered, "Be persuadable to those leading you, and do not resist...." We must remember that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians, and the admonition is based on an allusion to the Old Testament Jews who were willfully disbelieving and rebellious. The writer of Hebrews is telling the Jewish Christians to not be like this.

We should also bear in mind that at this time, Christians did not have Bibles in front of them as someone spoke. Outside of the Old Testament Scriptures and perhaps copies of some epistles and maybe a Gospel account, they did not have a canon of Scripture to which they could readily compare what a speaker said. Thus, the writer of Hebrews is giving the recipients of his letter his personal stamp of approval on their leaders, who were apparently men he knew. It was as if he were saying, listen to what they say, I know they are sound in the faith.

In verse 24 of Hebrews 13 we again see *hēgoumenous* mistranslated in many English Bibles as referring to rulers, when it should be referring to leaders.

But what about Titus 2:15? Isn't Paul's advice to Titus here an admonition to exercise authority? "These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee." "Authority" in this verse comes from *epitagēs*. It means either "injunction" or "urgent

admonition." Since this is what Titus is to speak, exhort, and rebuke with, I would say that here it is best translated "urgent admonition." Titus is no more to lord it over others than any other Christian.

"They that must give account...."

We have already looked at Hebrews 13:17, but I would now like to address a different part of the verse. Let's look at it again: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." Notice that it says that the "rulers"—really leaders—"watch for your souls, as they that must give account." I know from personal experience that there are pastors who understand this to mean that God holds pastors responsible for the souls of the members of their church and, because of this, the pastor must know of everything that takes place in the church and must approve or disapprove it. Not only that, but everyone must be in unity with the pastor's position on all matters and that whatever does not agree with the pastor's position is not approved of God. Obviously, this boils down to the pastor having complete authority over his congregation, and each member being completely accountable to him. I want to warn anyone who is in a church that believes this that this misunderstanding of this passage is dangerous, cultic, and virtually the same as the stance of the Roman Catholic church that the priest is the mediator between his congregation and God. In reality, this passage says nothing of the kind.

Near the beginning of this article, I quoted Romans 14:12, which tells us that "every one of us shall give account of himself to God." This is a very clear statement. Thus, if we must give an account of ourselves, then surely there must be something wrong with understanding Hebrews 13:17 to say that our pastors must give an account of us. If I may paraphrase Hebrews 13:17, all it is saying is that Christians should not be willfully unbelieving of their leaders and resisting them. As good leaders, they are "sleepless" (*agrupnousin*—the word translated "watch" in the King James Version) for the lives or souls (*psuchōn*) of those they lead. The allusion is to shepherds watching over their flocks by night. In this manner, that is, by showing their concern through their watchfulness, they are giving an accounting of their faithfulness to their duty. So, the admonition is, don't stubbornly disbelieve the leaders so that they can do this with joy. The verse has nothing to do with pastors ruling the church because God will hold them accountable for the souls of their congregants. It is about Christians not stubbornly disbelieving their leaders, and the leaders

selflessly serving their brethren by watching over them as shepherds or pastors. Shepherds lead their flocks, make sure they are fed, and protect them from danger. The flocks trust them because of the example they set, not because they threaten or beat their flocks into submission.

Notice how Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 1:24: "Not for that we have dominion [*kurieuomen*—lordship or rule] over your faith, but are helpers [*sunergoi*—co-workers or co-laborers] of your joy: for by faith ye stand." A Christian has a direct relationship with God through Jesus Christ. No pastor, no "accountability partner," indeed no one has any right to interfere in that relationship. Romans 14:4 is a corrective to anyone who thinks he has some sort of authority over another's faith: "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand." Notice verses 8 and 9 of that chapter: "For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living." No one has a right to come between one of God's saints and the Lord who bought him.

On earth, God exercises His authority not through any man or any body of men but through His Word in a one-on-one relationship with each saint. As a Scripture I have quoted many times says, "And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).