

CHRISTIAN ACCOUNTABILITY

Jesus said: “For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents¹, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey...After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.” (Matthew 25:14-15, 19)

“[Jesus] also said to His disciples: ‘There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, “What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.”’” (Luke 16:1-2)

In the most general sense, Christian Accountability means answering to God for our use of His gifts to us, whether or not we have conducted ourselves in accordance with God’s gracious will. We either multiply the grace of God in faith, righteousness, mercy, and love, or we waste it in self-gratification, laziness, neglect, and stubbornness. As the Apostle reminds us: “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).

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For what are Christians accountable to God – what gifts? Basically, everything we have been given: “And what do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7) King David declared seeing the collection of materials for the building of the temple in Jerusalem: “For all things are Yours, and of Your own we give to You” (1 Chr. 29:14).

¹ A talent was a measure of weight (in coinage of pure or alloyed gold, silver, bronze, or copper) representing a person’s load equivalent to about 57 modern pounds, in Greece equal to 60 minas (=6000 drachmas [~6,500 Roman silver denarii]). In the 1st century A.D., a Roman denarius, an alloy of silver and bronze, was about a day’s wage.

The Lord taught: “And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you. Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk. 12:29-32). This teaching comes just after the parable of the rich man who tore down his barns to build bigger ones capable of holding his over-abundance of material goods. “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night *your soul will be required of you*; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Lk. 12:16-21; italics mine).

Christian Accountability understands the source of our life and then gets on with the business of life conducting it with the heart and soul attuned to God’s purposes in Christ. The wisest man wrote: “Remember your Creator until the silver cord is removed...Then the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it...Hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including everything that has been overlooked, whether it be good or evil” (Eccl. 12:6, 7, 13-14).

Christians, therefore, are accountable not so much as to what they have as to what they give away, that is, in living righteously by keeping God’s commandments of love in offering all of life as a sacrifice in service of God. “[B]y the mercies of God, present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service²...be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and

² Gk., *tēn logikēn latreian*, lit., “worship according with reason/the word”; the root of the adjective *logikē* is *logos*, “reason, word,” e.g., “In the beginning was the Word (Gk., *Logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:1, 14).

acceptable and perfect will of God...Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Rom. 12:1-2; 13:8). "'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me'" (Matt. 25:34-36).

Thus Christians are stewards, not private owners, of God's property. Christians are accountable for their management of God's goods, especially in distribution to others for whom they are given and shared. Such an arrangement entails mutual accountability, and a breach of rightly managing God's goods is sin and evil not only affecting the one who wrongly stewards, but the others in the same household of God. *In their accountability to God, Christians are accountable to each other.*

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"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' (Deut. 19:15). And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church³. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (Matt. 18:15-17).

"For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside (i.e., non-Christians)? Do you not judge those who are inside (i.e., baptized Christians)? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person' (Deut. 17:7)...For if we would judge (Gk., *diakrinein*) ourselves, we would not be judged. But

³ Gk., *ekklēsia*, that is, the liturgical assembly; see 2 Chr. 7:9; Joel 2:15-16; 1 Cor. 11:18f..

when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned (Gk., *katakrinein*) with the world⁴” (1 Cor. 5:12-13; 11:31-32).

“For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good. And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother (i.e., a fellow Christian)” (2 Thes. 3:11-15; cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-11).

“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much...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” (Jam. 5:16, 19-20).

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In their mutual accountability to God, God places certain persons in positions of authority to teach and lead Christians into this way of stewardship, and these persons in turn will be held accountable for the exercise of this responsibility. First, a basic order exists within marriage upon which the healthy household and society function. The husband/father is the head of the household, and the wife/mother is the nurturing partner. Next, parents bear the responsibility of teaching stewardship to their children, and children are to honor and respect their parents’ guidance in the Lord. Likewise, masters (today, bosses and employers) share this position of influence and authority

⁴ The Apostle utilizes three verbs in succession for the process of judgment/accountability: *diakrinein* (“discern”), *krinein* (“judge”), and *katakrinein* (“condemn”).

within the overall economy of civil society. Finally, government officials bear this responsibility to which they will answer before God regardless of the type of governmental system in which they operate (see Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Cor. 7; 11:8-12; Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; 1 Tim. 2:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:13-17).

Especially in the Church, Christ has appointed spiritual fathers to exercise His very authority of leading with the Gospel. This applies to the Prophets who came before Christ, and now to the Apostles and their successors, the bishops and priests (Gk., *presbyters*). Christ said of the Apostles: “He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me (i.e., God the Father)” (Lk. 10:16; cf. Matt. 10:11-15). The Apostle Paul writes: “Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit...I have been entrusted with a stewardship...that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel” (1 Thes. 4:8; 1 Cor. 9:17, 18).

Christians are told: “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, which faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever...Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, *as those who must give account*. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:7-8, 17; italics mine). The Apostle James writes: “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (Jam. 3:1).

“And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers”; then, later in the same epistle: “Whenever you come together⁵...Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge...And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches

⁵ *Come together* (Gk., *synerchesthai*) refers to assembling (as the church/*ekklēsia*) for the Liturgy of Holy Communion (cf. 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:17-18f.; Heb. 10:19-25; 12:22-24).

of the saints (1 Cor. 12:28; 14:26, 29, 32-33; cf. Acts 13:1-3). "And [Christ] Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints" (Eph. 4:11-12). "The elders (Gk., *presbyters*) who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder (Gk., *sympresbyteros*) 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 (Gk., *episkopein*), 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" (1 Pet. 5:1-3; see Acts 20:17, 28).

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In the language of Scripture and the Church, bishops and priests (Gk., *presbyters*⁶) are successors of the Apostles, the prophets and teachers in the Church who rule as pastors (shepherds) leading the rational sheep of God in emulation of the Chief Shepherd and Bishop, Christ Jesus (1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4). Together with leading the Divine Liturgy and teaching the Faith, these spiritual fathers exercise what is known as the Office of the Keys pertaining specifically to the practice of Confession and Communion. "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19), reiterated by Christ Jesus in the Resurrection: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn. 20:23).

⁶ The English word *priest* (Old English, *prester*) is, in fact, a shortened form of the Greek word *presbyter*. In the New Testament the titles *bishop* and *presbyter* are used synonymously (see also Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5-9). The distinction between the two positions is that the Bishop is the chief, or head, pastor presiding in the Church at the Divine Liturgy (*episkopos* [Gk.] means *overseer/supervisor*), and the Presbyters serve as teachers at the direction of the Bishop. The third order of clergy, Deacons, minister a variety of helping services in the Church (see Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim. 3:1-13). The other essential fourth "order" in the Church is the Laity, the People, without which nothing is done (Matt. 18:20; 1 Pet. 2:4-5, 9-10; 1 *Clement* 49).

Addressing the permission of blatant sin by a man in Corinth, the Apostle Paul exercised this office. "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together (see note 5 above), along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5:4-5). The man was bound to his sin, and heaven (participation in Holy Communion) was closed to him as long as he continued unrepentantly in this sin.

Then in the next letter we read, "this punishment (Gk., *epitimia*, 'penance') which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow...For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us...For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 2:6-7, 10-11; 7:10). The man's sin was loosed, and he was re-admitted to Holy Communion in repentance and faith.

As the Lord said to the Prophet Ezekiel, "I made you a watchman for the house of Israel...when you do not give [the lawless] explicit warning to turn from his ways so he may live...his blood I will require at your hand...But if you explicitly warn the righteous man not to sin, and he does not sin, the righteous man shall live, because you explicitly warned him; and you will deliver your own soul" (Ez. 3:16-21). Spiritual fathers are held accountable for the charge given them by the Lord Jesus: to preach and teach the Gospel of repentance, faith, and love, to preside at the Lord's Table, and hence to exercise the keys of the kingdom.

Christian Accountability encompasses all these aspects: the Christian standing before God answering for their own conduct, encouraging and answering to one another in the peace and love of Christ, maintaining godliness within the various relationships of

this life, and pursuing communion with God and one another in true holiness and worship of God the Holy Trinity.