



## Biblical Principles

# Accountability: A Good Word

by Jack Spender

Accountability is the ability to give an account. The dictionary lists several meanings for the verb “account” such as: “To provide a reckoning,” “to give a rational explanation,” “to be responsible.” While the word “accountability” itself is not found in Scripture, the root word and the idea which it represents is common, as seen in words like “answer,” “reckon,” and “give account.”

Some people seem almost afraid of the word, and rarely use it in spiritual things. “Giving account,” I was taught as a youth, “is only for the final day of judgment.” “Elders must not be lords over the flock...” And so forth.

Actually, accountability is an integral part of leadership and discipleship! The Lord Jesus often asked questions of His disciples that called for an account or at least some serious reflection. “Where is your faith?” (Luke 8:25). “How many loaves have ye?” (Matt. 15:34). Perhaps the most significant example is the record of the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to the cross. The narrative in Mark 14:32-42 should be pondered carefully. The Lord asks His disciples to

watch and pray with Him. Each time He returns and finds them sleeping. How can we not see a call

to give account in His words to Peter (who had so recently boasted of his abilities): “Couldst not thou watch one hour?” (verse 37). Returning again to find them sleeping a second time, we read: “neither knew they what to answer him” (verse 40).

Apparently the lesson was learned, for accountability became important to the apostles in their life work for Christ. When Peter was charged by certain influential men with having fellowship among Gentiles at the time of his historic visit to Cornelius (Acts 10, 11), we find no defensiveness on Peter’s part at all. Rather, he patiently “reviewed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it in order to them...” (Acts 11:4). The outcome was a happy one, for we read that his critics “held their peace and glorified God...” (verse 18).

In the same way, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, their commending assembly, at the conclusion of the first missionary journey, and when they had “gathered the church together they reviewed all that God had done with them” (Acts 14:27). They

thought it fitting to communicate with those who had been part of their fellowship. In other words, they gave an account of their work.

Elders should take note of all this because it bears directly on their work of making the assembly a place where young believers are disciplined to spiritual maturity. Two things must be kept in mind at all times: The flesh is very *unaccountable*, and real spiritual growth often begins at the point of accountability. Pride asks “Who dares question my actions?” Humility is eager for improvement through correction.

How can this good word be applied in a gracious and helpful manner by those who lead God’s people? Here are some suggestions:

First, don’t think of accountability as a “big-business” term, but simply a synonym for honesty. Defensiveness may signal that one has something to hide. Good questions deserve good answers, and should be welcomed by sincere Christians. I have noted with amusement over the years the actions of certain brothers who disdain the use of the term accountability. If the speaker doesn’t

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appear on Sunday morning, they do not hesitate to call and ask: “Where are you?” Nor can

they accept the word of any treasurer who proclaims, “All is well with the finances,” but insist on prompt, written financial statements. Of course these are simply (legitimate) forms of accountability!

Second, understand how healthy accountability differs from that which is practiced by certain cults in their efforts to control people. The latter says: “You must do what I say.” The former asks: “May I check with you to see if you are obeying what you told me God wants you to do?”

Third, be careful of your motives. Twice Paul reminded the Corinthians that the Lord had given him authority, not for their destruction, but for their edification (II Cor. 10:8; 13:10). Accountability is never a weapon, but a building tool.

Fourth, remember that a major goal of accountability is to learn to take responsibility for one’s actions. When questioning a child or worker for whom you are responsible, don’t assume that they have done wrong. Begin with a question and give him or her the

*(Continued on page 4)*

One of the greatest challenges for an elder (and for the church) is to remain positive and joy-filled in the ministry. There are many joy-sappers that suck away spiritual vitality in a local church and its leadership. Some people seemed “gifted” as negative agents of discouragement. Failed efforts to bring about a much hoped for project or expansion can discourage us. Lack of people for key ministry needs can get us down. Lack of “success” in reaching the lost can be one of the greatest spiritual depressors.

The work of shepherding comes with additional liabilities that can wear a man down: attending endless meetings, dealing with relational difficulties (not only between members of the church, but also between elders themselves), combating false doctrine (and the things that lead in that direction), discouragement from and disappointment in people, shouldering criticisms, struggling with being over-extended by ministry, family and job commitments, neglect of our own spiritual quietness with the Lord and, for many, self-doubt. Sometimes even other elders can get you down!

All these things join forces to knock us down, sap our spiritual vitality, drain our energy and manipulate us into defensive positions with the hope of just staying afloat! Some elders find themselves choosing between two alternatives: fight on without joy or withdraw without joy. Either case, there is no joy!

The temptation can be to instinctively throw up defense mechanisms like pulling our heads back into the shell, distancing ourselves, toughening our hearts or pulling the wagons into a circle (as a group of elders) to fend off the attack of the joy-killers. Yes, few things are worse than serving without joy—it certainly doesn’t glorify the Lord and it diverts energy and attention that should be spent building up the body. The fact that the Scripture tells us to “rejoice” (1 Thess 5:16 NIV) means that joy is not always there in our lives!

Responses to each of the above examples are, of course, readily found in Scripture. For example, the quick answer

to someone leading a church that is small or declining in attendance is that Jesus Himself had a following that dwindled from thousands to just 12 men and a few women—therefore, cheer up because you are in good company! However, joylessness runs deeper than getting a logical answer—it is rooted in lack of faith, it denudes our hope and it weakens our spiritual strength. That is why Paul’s benediction to the Romans includes the following: “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Rom 15:13 NASB)

Joy is more than inner peace—it provides the positive, constructive energy to keep on with your task. The lexicons use words like “delight” and “gladness” to define it. We see from Scripture that it is the positive conviction that “I am in the right place for the

The admonition to “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2) applies to elders too!

right reason and I am glad to be here.” Did not our Lord Jesus experience this? “... who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb 12:2).

Joy is the required atmosphere for consistent, genuine spiritual walking in the Lord. “For this reason also ... we have not ceased to pray for you ... so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord ... strengthened with all power ... for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously” (Col 1:9-11). Without joy, the full life to which God has called us tastes flat like a soft drink that lost its fizz. Such a life in a leader inspires no one and sets a miserable example of Christ-likeness.

How do we guard against joylessness? How do we escape ministry depression once there? Here are three things that may provide help.

**First**, learn to identify symptoms of joylessness or spiritual depression. Here are a few:

- Focusing on people as problems rather

seeing them as children of God in need of shepherding. The problems of people can weigh an elder down, especially when some difficulties never seem to go away. A financially strapped family, for example, may continue that way for years. But Jesus said that is to be expected, “The poor you will always have with you.” In short, get used to it, but don’t let it rob you of your joy.

- Focusing on problems negatively rather than seeing them positively as opportunities. James shows us that problems can lead to growth experiences for all involved. (“...knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:3-4).
- Taking criticism too personally or being a “people pleaser.” This will tie you up in knots and will minimize your usefulness. Accept criticism as part of “elder territory.” Jesus said, “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (Jn 15:20).
- Getting caught up in the details and not seeing the big picture. The Pharisees were guilty of this repeatedly (the nitpicking obsession over mint and dill, etc.).

**Second**, we must turn away from the false notion that joy depends upon our circumstances. For example, “If only we had more mature Christians!” Jesus said, “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me” (Jn 14:1). He said this as the disciples were entering the shadow cast by Jesus’ impending death. Joy can be experienced even when facing the most ominous and real dangers. The general admonition to “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2) applies also to being spiritual shepherds faced with leading an immature flock!

**Third**, understand that joy is a by-product of the work of God in our lives and not the successes of our human efforts. As such, joy is related to faith. “Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full” (John 16:24). As we see God working in response to our faith-

(Continued on page 4)

## Summer Opportunities

by Ruth Spender

The summer months provide most of us with a change of pace from the other seasons of the year. The warm weather and the bright sunshine encourage us to participate in more outdoor activities, whether it be gardening, camping, picnicking with friends, going to the beach or enjoying family time together. In our neighborhood, we find it easier to mingle with neighbors who are often working in their yards or walking the circle we live on. Our family also meets people from all walks of life as we are involved in many of the summer firework shows in our area. In general, it is a time of greater interaction with people we might not see any other time of year.


The Lord has increasingly burdened my heart that I may be the only Christian some of these folks will ever meet. How can I effectively share God's love with them and communicate that their Creator desires to have a personal relationship with them? I recognize that God has not gifted me as an evangelist. I do not have that wonderful ability to graciously bring any conversation around to eternal mat-

ters. But God's Word says that we are all to be witnesses [Acts 1:8, 1 Peter 3:15]. That means that we need to be ready to speak for the Lord and have an answer for anyone who asks us why we are different or how we can have peace in this troubled world.

Since being an effective witness is not something which happens automatically, how can we prepare ourselves for this great work? I have found that regularly reaffirming Christ as Lord of my life and asking Him for a love for lost souls is a good starting point. Being honest with the Lord about my fears, my sense of inadequacy and my complete dependence on Him is crucial. Even the shyest Christian can learn to leave tracts in strategic places with a prayer that God will guide just the right person to them. Part of being a "ready" witness is memorizing verses of Scripture that the Holy Spirit can bring to mind when we are talking with others. As I go through each day I try to be looking for any opportunity the Lord may be giving me to speak with others

about Him.

It's important that I be a good listener as I seek to draw people out and understand where they are in their spiritual search. Some are like Cornelius—they have a fear of God, but "not according to knowledge." Others claim to be atheists or agnostics who don't believe in a supreme being or wonder if one exists. Many are scoffers who laugh at the idea that they will one day give an account to God for their lives. Others have honest questions—they may be interested only in an intellectual debate about Christianity, or they may be genuine seekers of the Truth.

Proverbs 15:28 tells us that the heart of the righteous studies how to answer. Role playing with other believers, such as those in your ladies group, can be helpful preparation for relating to individuals from various walks of life. As we witness, it is reassuring to remember that God is the One who opens an unbelieving heart and that He does not depend on us to be gifted in the art of persuasion so that others are saved. 

### Elder Qualification

## Going For The Glory?

by Chuck Gianotti

In his novel, "War and Peace," author Leo Tolstoy captures a pitfall Paul warns about in appointing a man to be an elder prematurely (1 Tim 5:22)—pride. A young Russian prince, Andrew, is serving in the Russian army in the early 1800's. He surveys the looming battle imagining his own anticipated heroics.


He converses with an inner voice in his mind: "The battle is gained by him alone. [General] Kutuzov is replaced, [Andrew] is appointed . . . 'Well, and then?' said the other voice again, 'what then, if you do a dozen times over escape being wounded, killed ... well, what then?' 'Why, then . . .,' Prince Andrew answered himself, 'I don't know what will come then, I can't know, and don't want to; but if I want that, if I want glory, that I want it, that it's the only thing I care for, the only thing I live for. Yes, the only thing! I shall never say to anyone, but, my God! What am I to do, if I care for nothing but glory, but men's love? Death, wounds, the loss of my family—nothing has terrors for me. And dear and precious as many people are

to me: father, sister, wife—the people dearest to me; yet dreadful and unnatural as it seems, I would give them all up for a moment of glory, of triumph over men, of love from men who I don't know, and shall never know, for the love of those people there,' he thought." ("The Modern Library Classics, pg 294).

The secret thoughts of the attention-seeking heart will drive a man to sacrifice that which is truly important. Many men have sacrificed the love of their families for their love of glory in the church. I have, on not a few occasions, heard an adult speak disdainfully about his or her growing up in the home where the father was an elder. The father's obsession with appearances and concern for his standing in the church were more important to him than his care for his own family. The children felt like they were to be trophies on display for dad's reputation. Meetings at the church translated into little or no time for family times together.

But pride has other symptoms as well. Have you ever secretly wondered if anyone would ever write about book about your life and ministry? Have you imagined yourself as the hero of your church's growth. Have you quietly been jealous when another is honored, but you are not? Have you positioned yourself into the position of prominence? Have you pretended to be humble to gain attention for your humility? How do you handle when your work or ministry goes unnoticed?

The truth of the matter is that all of us, not just those who are young, are prone to issues of pride.

"Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed . . . You younger men . . . all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time..." (1 Peter 5:1-6). 

## Accountability *(continued)*

opportunity to level with you. Learning accountability in the affairs of daily life helps to prepare the believer for the final accounting to God in the future. (Parents should remember this, too, when training children. It is a mistake to raise a child with the idea that there are no absolutes, and that all those in authority can eventually be made to back down.) Therefore, this is not a subject to be confined to the church, but is part of every healthy family, school and business.

Finally, practice giving account of yourself and your labors to God on a daily basis. Hebrews 13:17 which describes church leaders as “they that must give account” is often limited to elders’ final accounting at the judgment seat of Christ, but there is no reason why it cannot also be applied in their present work. What joy it must bring to the heart of God to hear elders recounting the desires and victories, the joys and sorrows of their ministry to the Chief Shepherd! Few things will go so far to remind us that accountability is indeed a good word for elders. In fact, it’s a good word for every-



## From the Q-Files

*There’s nothing I like less than bad arguments for a view that I hold dear.* Daniel Dennett.

*“The heart has its reasons which reason knows not of.”* Blaise Pascal

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## Joy-Sappers *(continued)*

based requests for His intervening power, joy results. So if there is no joy, we are not actively engaging the Lord in faith. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22)—Jesus said that we must abide in Him if we want to be fruitful (Jn 15:4).

**Fourth**, take a break once in a while. The Jews were commanded to break once a week from all labors (Exodus 35:1-3). Jesus took His disciples away for rest (Mark 6:31). This includes daily times of quieting our souls. Also, it means taking adequate time off each week away from work and church-related responsibilities.

**Finally**, remind yourself of Jesus’ example. We need to “[fix] our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:1-2). We are inspired as we look to Jesus’ attitude in facing the cross. He was motivated by the joy of obeying His Father’s perfect will. Also, He was motivated by the joy of knowing lost souls would be restored to relationship with God through His death on the cross. The character and motivation of Christ becomes ours as we spend time meditating and focusing on His work on the cross.

Yes, the work of being an elder is burdensome at times. But we can still have joy despite the pressures of ministry. And it is this joy that keeps us going in the work of the Lord—and enjoying it!



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*Scripture versions are noted in the first reference in each article.*

## From the Q-Files

*Bill Bennett had a rough first three weeks as a member of President Ronald Reagan’s cabinet as Secretary of Education. He was roundly attacked by the press which called for his resignation or firing. In his words, “I came in the cabinet room and there was a folder--three folders. One of the folders said, BENNETT. And I was sitting by myself and I thought some of my colleagues were inching their chairs a little away from me. And we finally got to the last item: Bennett. And the president—I was pretty isolated at this point and the president started to read aloud just the headlines. ‘Bennett, a dunce in the classroom,’ Bennett, the James Watt of the second term,’ ‘Bennett must be fired.’ And I was sinking farther and farther in my seat as the president read aloud. And my colleagues were drawing farther away. Reagan put the last clipping in and folded it up and he said, ‘Now, that’s Bill Bennett’s first three weeks in office. What’s wrong with the rest of you?’*

*“It was a great moment--it was an exhale moment, too...But it was also one of the kindest and most considerate things anybody ever did for me ...It was a moment I’ll never forget, and it taught me what a leader can do, and what it can mean to the morale of people to have done that.”*

*Reagan told him, “You know they like to criticize me for being in show business. But one thing you learn in show business, there’s a difference between the critics and the box office. Don’t worry about the critics, just keep doing your job.”*

Peggy Noonan in “When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan”, p. 234-35.

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