

# Accountability of Public Ministers

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## Introduction

In evangelical ministry, gospel is the supreme motivator. “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). “Apart from [Jesus], you can do nothing” (John 15:5). What Jesus did me for is the foundation for what I do for him.

Gospel motive, however, is more than a philosophical principle. It is at the practical heart of my spirit’s daily struggle against the flesh. The good news of Jesus constantly renews my willingness to do with joy what my flesh sees only as duty.

Every pastor goes through this struggle when it comes time to give an account of his ministry. Whenever my church council asked me to give an account of my monthly pastoral duties, every time the seminary asked me to account in writing for my supervision of a vicar, every year the synod asked me to account for my parish work on statistical report forms, and at every annual meeting that my board asked me to account for why I did something the way I did it, my flesh bristled.

By the grace of God, the spirit won, and I gave all those brotherly accounts. Yet, though the spirit was willing, my flesh kept whispering in my ear: “What’s the matter, don’t they trust you?” “If you were called by God, why do you have to give an account to men?” “Do these people really have a right to question my ministry?” It always required every ounce of gospel strength God provided to overcome my old adam’s objections to giving an account to my brothers. This ongoing struggle is the reason a called servant’s accountability remains a matter of public discussion in our church. The flesh still needs to die; the spirit still needs to be reborn.

In the infant years of our synod WELS pastors wrestled with their accountability to German mission societies. Shortly after that, they bristled at the judgmental attitude of the Missouri men who did not like their doctrinal laxness. Barely had the newly formed Synodical Conference smoothed these ruffled feathers when in 1903 the Cincinnati case brought the matter of accountability back to the forefront. Missouri and Wisconsin pastors argued with and among each other for thirty years about what accountability local pastors and congregations owed to their synod. In the 1920’s the Protes’tant controversy, spawned by resentment of decisions which district officials made, raised new charges of legalism.

With the Protes’tant controversy in full fury and the issues between Missouri and Wisconsin still unresolved, Professor August Pieper wrote a paper on Wisconsin’s doctrine of church and ministry, including the matter of accountability. His paper issued a warning aimed at the heart of the issue. He said that those who fail to see that they are freed from every law in Christ will err on ministry issues:

The doctrine of the Church and of its commission (office) is only the reverse of the doctrine of justification, nothing more than the doctrine of the status, the nature, the call of those who have been justified by grace through faith and in Christ are freed from every law. Whoever acknowledges that will not easily err seriously here either. (August Pieper, “Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of Its Ministry, With Special Reference to the Synod and Its Discipline,” *Theologische Quartalschrift*, October, 1929; *WLQ* translation April 1962, p87.

The Protes’tant controversy eventually died down, and the church and ministry debate subsided for a couple of decades as Wisconsin and Missouri were caught up with new concerns about fellowship and Bible interpretation. But the matter of accountability came up again in the 1950s and 60s as Wisconsin struggled with its decision to break with Missouri.

Some Wisconsin pastors believed that Wisconsin should have withdrawn from Missouri earlier and left the synod in the 50s. When they tried to take their congregations with them, synod officials entered these congregations and pleaded the synod's position to members. The withdrawing pastors resented this as an unwarranted intrusion into their ministry. Continuing resentment over this may lie behind the recent breakdown in talks between WELS and CLC. After WELS broke with Missouri in 1961 a number of Missouri splinter groups met with Wisconsin leaders to find grounds for unity. In all but one case, church and ministry issues—including the matter of accountability to a synod—stood in the way of unity.

This issue just won't go away. In 1989 Armin Schuetze, at the request of the Conference of Presidents, wrote a study outline on the called servant's accountability to his Lord, his calling body, and to his synod. Obviously, the COP's request for this study stemmed from occasional challenges to accountability that continue to arise in the districts. The flesh still resents discipline, reporting, planning, schedules, statistical remitting, and the perceived intrusion of circuit pastors, mission boards, and mission counselors.

### **Ministers are accountable first to the God who called them.**

To stifle the flesh and revive the spirit, let's look at four Bible principles and their application to the matter of brotherly accountability in the church. The first principle is, "Ministers are accountable first to the God who called them." People on all sides of the church and ministry debate agree on this principle.

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. *It is the Lord who judges me.* Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God. (1 Corinthians 4:3,4)

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as *men who must give an account.* Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17)

But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. *If any man builds on this foundation* using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, *his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light.* It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we *who teach will be judged more strictly.* (James 3:19)

### **Ministers account to God by reporting to the believers through whom God calls them.**

A pastor's divine call today is mediate, that is, God calls us indirectly, through the medium of a gathering of believers we refer to as a calling body. Paul's call to be an apostle of Jesus Christ was immediate, given face to face by the Savior himself. But the apostle's call to be a missionary was mediate, given by the Holy Spirit through the congregation at Antioch. Thus Paul accounted directly to Jesus for his apostleship, but gave reports to the congregation at Antioch about his specific missionary activity.

In the church at Antioch... While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:1-3)

No one among us questions that the Lord does his calling through the church, an assembly of Christians. (cf Ac 6; Tt 1:5). (Schuetze, “A Called Servant’s Accountability”)

The authority to call (*ius vocandi*) is implied in the authority to administer the Gospel (*ius ministrandi evangelii*) given to the Church. Hence it is proper to speak of the derived right of local congregations to call. (Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, 1970, p10)

My flesh has little trouble being told to account to God. I can give an account of my ministry to God out of sight and earshot of my brothers. Nobody on earth can see the numbers I turn in to God. Nobody on earth can hear my excuses. In fact, nobody but God knows whether I have actually given an account. My flesh is comfortable with that.

But the Bible’s concept of accountability extends beyond the comfort level of my flesh. A second scriptural principle teaches that “Ministers account to God by reporting to the believers through whom God calls them.” In 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 St. Paul is not arguing that he is accountable only to God, but that he is accountable *first* to God.

Paul’s own words and example show that a part of his account to God was given through his calling body. As God calls us through the congregation, he wants us to account to him through that group of believers. A mediate call requires a mediate accounting. Giving an account to God includes giving an account to our brothers. Paul gave an account to the Antiochan congregation after the first and second missionary journeys. Only his arrest prevented him from giving an account also for his third journey.

For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men. (2 Corinthians 8:21)

From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. (Acts 14:26,27)

When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time in Antioch... (Acts 18:22,23)

### **Ministers account to each calling body for the scope of ministry assigned to them by that body.**

Every divine call is limited in scope. Nobody is called to undertake every aspect of public ministry. The scope of Jesus’ ministry was limited in time. He did not begin ministry until he was ordained/installed at his baptism. The scope of Jesus’ ministry was also limited in assignment. Although his redemptive work was universal in scope, his prophetic earthly ministry was limited to work among the Jews. Jesus restricted the scope of the evangelism work of the disciples in the same way. He set priorities to carry out his limited scope. He did not respond to his opportunity to evangelize the Greeks when it was time for him to go to the cross.

[Jesus] answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” (Matthew 15:24)

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. (Matthew 10: 5,6)

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir, “ they said, “we would like to see Jesus. “ Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (John 12:20-23)

In the same way the ministries of Paul and the Jerusalem apostles was limited in scope. Paul’s ministry was restricted to evangelism work in Gentile countries, while the Jerusalem apostles concentrated on the Jewish people. Even among the Gentiles, Paul’s work was restricted to preaching, so he refrained from baptizing.

James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. (Galatians 2:9)

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel. (1 Corinthians 1:17)

The calls our congregations extend to pastors are also limited in scope. Local parishes do not call their pastors to publish hymnals and catechisms, do foreign mission work, or train the next generation of public ministers. Our congregations assign these and other areas of ministry to the synod through their willing affiliation.

To the extent that congregations entrust some of their gospel ministry to the synod, the pastor’s call to a congregation is actually a call from the synod too. By our membership in the synod we pastors recognize this brotherly arrangement. We understand that we have a dual accounting role. We account to our congregations for the scope of ministry they assigned us and to the synod for the scope of ministry our calling bodies commit to it. When pastors account to the congregation and to the synod for the respective areas of ministry their divine call assigns to each, we acknowledge that our call comes from God mediately through both bodies.

It is likewise *the Holy Spirit* who through the same bond of a common faith *draws Christians together in Jesus’ name* in other groupings and draws Christian congregations together in larger groupings, such as *a synod, that then may share their mutual gifts and gain strength for certain, chases of the great task of the Church. such as the training of pastors and teachers, the establishment and maintenance of mission fields.* (Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, 1970, p7)

Church assemblies other than local parish may make judgments both in matters of doctrine and adiaphora and ask for compliance. The council at Jerusalem made rulings about matters of doctrine and adiaphora and asked all the churches to comply. St. Paul told the Corinthians to comply with doctrine when he commanded them to excommunicate a man living in sin. Paul also asked the Corinthians to comply with adiaphoristic arrangements that he made for a churchwide offering and to honor the representatives he sent to collect it.

It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. (Acts 15:19-20)

All they (James, Peter and John) asked me (Paul) was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Galatians 2:10)

The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. (Acts 21:18,19)

When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 5:4,5)

So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to a completion this act of grace on your part... Now finish the work so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means .... And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself... As for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it. (2 Corinthians 8:6,11,18,19,24)

The New Testament gives us freedom to arrange ourselves in any way that will serve the gospel. We set up constitutions and lines of accountability by common consent, in good order, to serve the ministry of the gospel. We have complete freedom to assign matters of doctrine and brotherly agreements in adiaphora in any orderly way. Our membership in the synod is our formal, brotherly acceptance of whatever order we agree on.

In Christian liberty congregations look to the synod to train and recommend pastors qualified for the public ministry... As a pastoral member of the synod the pastor places himself into a relationship of accountability to the synod... Both the congregation and the synod will recognize that they too are accountable to God for preserving the integrity of the public ministry according to his Word. (Schuetze, "A Called Servant's Accountability")

Thesis III: Whether the synod has the power of the keys depends only upon this, whether it is church in the proper sense of the word, i.e., a communion of saints. Whether it is, that is decided by the question, whether it has the marks of the true church. Thesis IV: The synod is church in the proper sense of the word. (August Pieper, "Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of its Ministry, with Special Reference to the Synod and its Discipline," *WLQ*, Volume 59, 1962, pp.112,116")

There is no absolute autonomy and independence of the local congregation from the other parts of the church. (*Ibid*, p 123)

Thus all the words of Scripture concerning brotherly admonition and the exclusion of the wicked and of false teachers are valid for the church in every form, for the synod as well as for the local congregation. (*Ibid*, p 127)

**Ministers are moved by the same gospel that made them brothers to give an account of their ministry in a brotherly way.**

Accountability, however, is not primarily a matter of the three legal principles we have discussed. Most of all, accountability is a matter of attitude. The gospel, not the law, moves us to give a willing account of our ministry to our brothers. Freely offered accountability grows out of a gospel-inspired humility and desire to serve. Men with years of language study know that the word pastor is translated shepherd, not king. In the church, the governors and the governed strive in the spirit to call others to account and to give an account with this attitude.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder... Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers -- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:1-3)

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. (Philippians 2:4,7)

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25-28)

The pastor should expect to serve and help his brothers in a synod even as he expects their helpful service. Only when pastors are willing to encourage, strengthen, admonish, correct, and reprove one another with the Word of God will a synod remain truly united and spiritually strong. (Armin Schuetze, "The Shepherd's Place in the Synodical Flock," *Shepherd Under Christ* p358)

In this context of Jesus-generated humility we understand Prof. Pieper's statement about freedom from the law. He was not speaking about outward form, but motive. He was not suggesting that we can operate the visible church without orderly forms and rules. Rather, he meant that brothers in faith are free to give an account of their ministry without the resentment that legal compulsion creates. The gospel that made us brothers moves us in an orderly way to account to each other as brothers.

Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil, live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. (1 Peter 1:16,17)

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. (Galatians 5:13)

Without becoming officious, each pastor is to be his synodical brother's keeper, but in a spirit of humble helpfulness void of pride and self-righteousness. At the same time, he should be willing to accept brotherly admonition, either when it is given informally or by someone who has an official responsibility. (Schuetze, *ibid.*)

What we have said with regard to any abuse of authority or any infringement upon our Christian liberty must not be understood to mean, or to give encouragement to the notion, that all laws and regulations in the Church are incompatible with, and a curtailment of, Christian liberty. To take that attitude would throw gates ajar for all manner of disorder, confusion, and chaos. No, the church of God is not a lawless, disorderly body. Its motto, which the Lord Himself has given her, is rather: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). Let all regulations and laws governing adiaphora be the expression of the collective thought of the majority, arrived at in the unhampered exercise of their Christian liberty. It must never be said of a congregation -- or of the synod, for that matter -- that a certain resolution was "railroaded through." On the other hand, however, if a resolution has the endorsement of a majority, the minority should cheerfully

yield, rightly assuming that in a meeting of Christian brethren all have voted their honest conviction, that therefore the opinion of the majority best expresses, promotes, and safeguards the best interest of the cause. If therefore all will conscientiously observe these points, our Christian liberty will suffer no harm. (H. Studtmann, "Authority in the Church," *The Abiding Word*, Vol 1, p426)

### **A Called Servant's Accountability**

There is no question among us that those who serve the church in the public ministry, whatever form that may take, have been called by the Lord. (cf Eph 4:11; 1 Cor 12:28; Ac 20:28). No one among us questions that the Lord does his calling through the church, an assembly of Christians. (cf Ac 6; Tt 1:5). Our congregations recognize the validity of receiving help and advice from the synod (the larger fellowship of believers) as they under God extend calls. When it comes to the calling process of the congregation and the assisting role of the synod, Scripture gives no specific directives. Yet all things must be done in an orderly way (cf 1 Cor 14:40), conflicting in no way with the revealed will of God in Holy Scripture.

The specific question this presentation is to address concerns itself with the accountability of those who have been called into the church's public service. In considering questions of accountability, we must recognize as basic what has been said in the previous paragraph. No conclusions we draw, no procedures we set up dare do violence to these basic principles. In the interest of brevity and clarity and ease of discussion, I have chosen to present the material in the form of a set of theses. To simplify the wording of the theses, I shall use the word "pastor," recognizing that what is said of him applies to all forms of the public ministry.

### **Theses**

- A. Accountability to God
  1. Since the pastor is a servant and steward called by the Lord, he is first and foremost accountable to God. 1 Cor 4:1-5.
  2. The Lord requires that "those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."
  3. Faithfulness means that the pastor is diligent in doing what the Lord has entrusted to him and does everything in the way the Lord wants it done. 1 Pe 5:2-4.
  4. Since faithfulness also includes the motives that produce the outward action, it can in its fullest sense be judged only by the Lord.
  5. The Lord will judge the pastor's entire ministry at the "appointed time," that is, when he comes in judgment.
  6. At that time "he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts."
  7. A pastor will conduct his entire ministry ever conscious that he stands before the judgment seat of God, accountable to the one who has redeemed him and called him into public service.
  
- B. Accountability to the Congregation
  8. Since God calls the pastor through the medium of the church (congregation, group of believers), the pastor is accountable also to those through whom the Lord has called him.
  9. By giving the church a list of required qualifications for such who serve in the public ministry (1 Tm 3:2-13; Tt 1:6-9), the Lord enjoins on the church to evaluate the Christian character and abilities of those it calls into its service.

10. The church may determine the scope of each specific call and will note what specific qualifications, in harmony with Scripture, are required to fulfill the assignment. Ac 1:21; 6:2-4; Eph 4:11-12.
11. The qualifications required of one who was called into the public ministry apply to him throughout the time of his service under that specific call.
12. Thus a relationship of accountability exists between the pastor and the congregation that has called him.
13. The congregation is to hold the pastor accountable in the manner and to the extent that God holds the pastor accountable.
14. The pastor cannot be held accountable on the basis of qualifications that are the subjective desire and wishes of the congregation apart from the Word of God.
15. The qualifications the congregation is to evaluate are those which can be judged by man who “looks on the outward appearances” such as the pastor’s doctrine, conduct and words.
16. The Bereans, e.g., held Paul accountable by examining the Scriptures every day “to see if what Paul said was true” (Ac 17:11).
17. The congregation cannot examine the pastor’s heart and motives; in that sense the Lord alone can judge the pastor’s faithfulness. 1 Cor 4:3-5; 1 Th 2:4.
18. Some qualifications may diminish over a period of time, others may be lost through a single action (e.g., blameless).
19. The congregation has the right and responsibility to take appropriate action when a pastor lacks or loses the necessary qualifications adequately to fulfill the requirements of the congregation’s call.
20. Since the pastor was called by the congregation to serve in its behalf, only the congregation that called him has the right to terminate his call.
21. The pastor cannot claim that his divine call places him beyond accountability to the congregation in matters it can and is required to judge.
22. The congregation will take care to act in a spirit of love and according to good order.

C. Accountability to the Synod

23. In Christian liberty congregations look to the synod to train and recommend pastors qualified for the public ministry.
24. When the synod recommends a pastor and accepts him into membership, this is evidence that he is judged to be qualified for the public ministry.
25. As a pastoral member of the synod the pastor places himself into a relationship of accountability to the synod.
26. In determining whom it can acknowledge as a qualified pastor or pastoral candidate, the synod may not follow arbitrary standards but is bound by the requirements of the Word of God.
27. To preserve and enhance pastoral skills and abilities the synod may recommend and provide additional in-service education and training.
28. When a pastor experiences personal problems that affect his ministry, the synod may assist him by means of a Christian counseling program.
29. If the synod concludes that a certain pastor has lost the qualifications necessary for the public ministry or for his specific call, Christian love will lead it to report this to the congregation he is serving.
30. The synod cannot terminate a call the congregation has issued. It can, however, terminate the pastor’s membership as a pastor in the synod when he no longer has the required qualifications.



31. The synod may assist and guide the congregation so that Christian concern and love as well as good order are observed in dealing with the situation.
32. If a congregation insists on retaining a pastor- who is not qualified to be a member of the synod, its membership in the synod comes into jeopardy. This may happen especially when doctrinal error is involved.
33. Both the congregation and the synod will recognize that they too are accountable to God for preserving the integrity of the public ministry according to his Word.

D. In Conclusion

34. In applying biblical principles to specific situations the church cannot escape an element of subjective evaluation and human judgment.
35. All involved (pastor, congregation, synod) will remember that it is the Lord Jesus who is the head of the church. It is he who graciously gives the church its public servants as precious gifts according to his wisdom and will. Pastor, congregation and synod will therefore pray for help and guidance to function in such a way as to preserve the integrity of the divine call.