

Reaction to Pastor James Huebner's Essay:

Brotherly Admonition That Encourages Accountability

E. Allen Sorum

“The test is Friday and you are responsible for the entire semester’s material.” Check your pulse. Even if you have not sat in a classroom for a decade, I know your circulation just improved. We react physically to the threat of being held accountable. Do you equate accountability with preaching the law? So how can accountability help us “overcome weaknesses and help us grow in commitment and knowledge?” Our essayist suggests, “Why not shift the (accountability) conversation from fear and hate to joy and delight?” How? Think of accountability in terms of stewardship.

God has given to us the privilege of being his stewards. God wants us to manage what he has given to us to carry out his mission. Our stewardship is imperfect but God’s grace is not. Because of God’s grace, we find “joy” and “delight” in the privilege and responsibility of sharing the gospel of God’s grace with the world. If by accountability you mean, “Show me your schedule and quantify your productivity,” you will not encourage me much. If by accountability, you mean, “God has brought you into his glorious light and has lavished blessings upon you so you declare his praise to the world,” you are likely to gain a partner for that task. Your reframing of accountability into these terms, Pastor Huebner, is encouraging.

Our essayist reminded us that God wants pastors to proclaim God’s Word. We are the “ministerial cause” in God’s plan of salvation. We are therefore accountable for presenting God’s Word “in a way that is logical and winsome, touching both the head and the heart” (Huebner quoting Hein). Huebner asserts:

Of all the things for which we as pastors are accountable to God...this is the main thing...You can argue all day about what command from God for public ministers you think is most important...but I am convinced that it all comes down to announcing, heralding, preaching, proclaiming, teaching, telling, saying, speaking, conveying, communicating by life and lip that God welcomes sinners into his arms because of the life and death of Jesus Christ. That is what God wants. That is what God wants done. That is what God wants me to do and you to do as pastors, and we are accountable to God for that.

Note our essayist’s mission focus. We appreciate this focus. It is appropriate here. And it is encouraging. The rest of the paper is divided into four parts.

*We are accountable to God.*

This assertion would be terrifying if not for Pastor Huebner’s assurance that Jesus has “atoned for all our sins, even the ones of failing to be the kind of pastors he wants us to be.” Covered with the blood of Jesus, we can stand before God and not fear our failures. This section was a

sermon—thinly veiled—by which we were encouraged to be the best preachers and shepherds and students studying to be pastors we can be. The sermon concluded: “With our Prince’s life over ours, with his gracious pardon, and with his life-enriching power, who would not thrill to be accountable to God, the King?” Encouraging.

*I am accountable to myself.*

Pastor Huebner encourages us to not only know ourselves but to know ourselves well. We will therefore admit the obvious that we graduate from this seminary as “unfinished products.” Even after seminary, we will set continuing education goals so we can grow in our stewardship of our spiritual health, and our knowledge and ministry skills as well as our physical health. An encouragement that I thought particularly important was this: “I don’t have to be anyone else, but I can strive under God’s grace to use the gifts, skills, and talents he has given me to be the best ambassador for Christ I can be. Souls are at stake.” Again, encouraging.

*I am accountable to the calling body.*

In this section, I see the strong influence of Pastor Huebner’s twenty years on the presidium of the Southeastern Wisconsin District. Those to whom discipline is entrusted will not allow the divine call to be used as a cover for bad behavior. Called workers are accountable to their calling body because God called them to their positions through that calling body, that is, through the church. In normal circumstances, however, this truth is not burdensome. God’s people call the pastor (or teacher or staff minister) and work hard to develop a loving and respectful relationship with the pastor. Through this relationship, the calling body can support their pastor for a continuing growth in faith, knowledge, and ministry skills. Huebner reflects: “Jesus has surrounded me with an army of support.” Mature, trained, and equipped congregational leaders will not club their called workers with an accountability model more appropriate for the business world. Rather, pastors and their people will assess and evaluate and encourage and interview in order to “carry out our joint mission of proclaiming Jesus to all in the best possible way.” Pastor Huebner’s theme and focus is consistent throughout. It is about the mission. We want to be wise stewards of everything that God has given us so that we can carry out God’s mission. Encouraging.

*I am accountable to my brothers in ministry.*

It is challenging to carry out God’s mission. I may struggle in my stewardship of all that God has given to me. But I am accountable to God, to myself and to my calling body to be this faithful steward. Pastor Huebner’s last encouragement therefore is, “Why not partner with a brother or brothers in ministry who will encourage (you)... We need each other.”

Studies of graduates from North American seminaries suggest that forty to eighty percent (depending on the study) will leave the public ministry in the first five years. In the past forty years, one out of four graduates of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary have left public ministry. Studies consistently find that seventy percent of pastors describe themselves as depressed. This depression often leads to a variety of extremely dangerous self-medicating schemes. Clearly, “We need each other.”

Pastor Huebner is confident that his pastor colleagues will hold each other accountable in doctrine and practice. We all heard his earnest plea, however, to respect our brother’s different applications of doctrine when the community our brother serves would require different applications. Rather than blind attacks from internet fox holes, let us trust one another, communicate with one another, and share our encouragement with one another. How terribly inappropriate that a brother in faith and a colleague in ministry is one of the reasons why I want to quit being a pastor. We come from the same place—this place. Every one of us is a “means of grace man.” We share a commitment to the unconditional gospel. We all believe that the Scriptures are about Christ, offer salvation in Christ, and are the inspired and inerrant Word of God. We are prepared to hold each other accountable for doctrine and practice. We will also trust each other. Our various applications of doctrines depending on our communities and circumstances prove that we are Lutheran. These differences in application and in philosophy of ministry do not give us reason to question who is Lutheran.

Thank you, Pastor Huebner, for your work. Writing papers probably is not your favorite ministry task. But it was good that you were willing to take on this assignment. Your experiences in your three decades of public ministry and your heart equipped you to serve us and to encourage us. Here is what I pray will be our reaction to your encouragement: In grateful response to all that God has given us that allows us to participate in his mission, why not choose a brother to sit with us regularly if not weekly to read, to pray, to encourage, to listen, to listen with our hearts, and to hold each other up until all the world has heard from our lips, “Jesus lives...Jesus saves...Jesus reigns!”