
Accountability

Routinely inspections are carried out on public buildings as a way to keep the building safe and up-to-date. Fire extinguishers, exit signs, and elevators need to be inspected regularly to ensure that they are in good working order. A fire extinguisher might hang on the wall, but if a fire breaks out and the extinguisher has lost its pressure, a small fire could rapidly become a large one, even destroying the entire building and taking lives. If we never had people inspect our building, it's likely that we would let things slide, to our detriment. It is true that quite often these inspections cost the owners of the building some money, for fire extinguishers need to be replaced from time to time.

We often balk at rules and regulations, and sometimes they are a bit onerous, but we also understand that most of them are there for our own good. We don't like to admit it, but most of us need someone else to hold us accountable so that we do what is expected of us. If things aren't inspected, chances are we won't do what is expected. As has often been said, we tend to do what is inspected rather than what is expected.

Perhaps another example: a few years ago two similar houses were being built in the lots next to our house. The framers for the first house were able to finish all the framing in one week while the framers for the second house took more than two weeks, and both crews had about the same number of guys with the same level of experience. The contractor for the second house wondered why his workers were so slow, and the answer came back: because the contractor for the first house was on site and made sure that his workers knew what to do and ensured that they did it. This second contractor showed up once or twice a day, if at all. While his workers were not incompetent, they were not being guided to do what was expected of them, they tended to be inefficient, and there were times when they were inactive.

We tend to do what is inspected not what is expected. In other words, if we are going to do what is expected of us, someone needs to hold us accountable. This is also true of living for Jesus. If we are not inspected, we may find ourselves not doing what is expected. For this reason, we need others to inspect our lives and hold us to what we should be doing. We call this being held accountable.

1 Corinthians is a prime example of the apostle Paul holding a church accountable. In that letter we find about ten different problems in the church that Paul has heard about from others, some of them more harmful than others but all of them significant. For example, a man was having sexual relationships with his stepmother, and Paul challenged the Corinthian church to discipline that man with the intention of leading him back to a Christ-like lifestyle. Or, as another example when the Corinthian church celebrated communion, they did so in such a way that they drew sharp lines between the various kinds of members. Because they did not treat their fellow believers as brothers and sisters, Paul warns them that they were eating and drinking judgement on themselves and putting the whole church in danger. Or, as another example, some of the members of that church were adopting dress codes and hair styles that would identify them as participating in the worship of the Roman pantheon of gods. Paul challenges the Corinthian church to consider what they are doing and urges them to live in unity with each other even while they are fully obedient and committed to following Jesus Christ.

If Paul wrote a letter to our church, and if he identified some of the things that we are doing that are not fitting for a follower of Jesus Christ, how would we respond? I suspect that we might be offended following the pattern of the world which tells us that when we identify an unsuitable behaviour in another, we are being judgemental. And judgementalism, according to our culture, is one of the greatest sins we can commit today. “You may not judge me,” we are told.

It becomes very difficult to hold each other accountable if accountability is seen as being judgemental. But there is a difference between the two. Being judgemental is to be condemnatory at the same time. Holding someone accountable is to do so for their own good. Paul, when he wrote his letter to the Corinthians, was not being judgemental, for his goal was not to condemn the church but to bring it back so that it conformed with the will of God. His purpose was for the Corinthian church to thrive and grow in Christ so that it could be a faithful witness to the gospel.

A few weeks ago someone went through our church building and inspected our fire extinguishers. The person who went through our church building and evaluated them was not being judgemental when she noticed that some of them need to receive a more thorough inspection and thus need to be replaced by new ones. She was not condemning our church, but, rather, she was given the task of evaluating our present situation so that we our building is kept safe so that it can be useful to us for ministry. We might chafe at the cost, but we know it is for our own good that our building is inspected, for we are well aware that we do what is inspected not what is expected.

So, who is given the responsibility of holding us accountable? It is all of us. All of us hold the rest of us accountable. Sometimes this task has been left to the pastor and elders and deacons, but they step in only as a last resort, after fellow believers have done all they can to urge their brother or sister to live by God’s Word. And we should all be willing to accept that others will hold us accountable. This is hard, especially when accountability is misconstrued to be judgementalism, but as followers of Jesus Christ, we can distinguish between the two. It is for our benefit that we hold each other accountable, and, ultimately, it is for the glory of God, for when we serve him well, God is indeed glorified.

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