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Comments

Perry Yoder

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Comments

PERRY YODER

Dorothy Craven's paper has a very nice and cogent structure. It moves from: (a) To whom are we accountable?, to (b) For whom are we accountable?, and on to (c) For what are we accountable? In the very first paragraph she puts her finger on what is a, or perhaps the crucial issue. That is, that even though we acknowledge that in some sense we are responsible to God, and before God, and may even be ready to accept responsibility before God for others, that does not necessarily mean that we think we are responsible or accountable to others.

The things which Dorothy mentions under (c) (For what are we accountable?) I would summarize around two terms -- orthodoxy and orthopraxis, 'proper belief' and 'proper action.' What I see happening in the Mennonite groups, and presumably also among Friends, is a tendency toward a split between those who say that we are accountable in terms of action, and others who see accountability in terms of beliefs.

The first group maintains we are accountable to each other for such practices as our peace position or social justice, while the second usually presents a list of beliefs to which we must adhere. While I think this is a false and inappropriate dichotomy, it is nevertheless one which does exist and affects our notion of accountability.

More generally in studying the paper we find that it is suffused with three themes. The first and most significant for the development of the paper is defining accountability in terms of responsibility. The other two themes which are mentioned but not fully developed are accountability seen as commitment, and accountability in terms of relationships. It is these last two points which I would like to expand for purposes of furthering discussion.

COMMITMENT

When we talk about accountability within a group we need to remember that accountability takes place within a framework of commitment. It is for the things and to the people to whom we have made a commitment that we are accountable. This being so, a direct relationship exists between level or depth of commitment and the extent of accountability people feel within a group.

One of the frustrations of working within a group results from the different levels of commitment people have to the group and its objectives. Some people are members only because of commitment to one particular aspect of the total life of the group, while some make a more comprehensive commitment. Others may seek only a social level of commitment. In the context of a group with quite diverse commitments and expectations, those who are most deeply committed often come to ask the question: Why should I put myself out to do this or that if I can't count on others sharing the same level of commitment? For this reason commitment tends to decline to the level of the lowest common denominator in a group and that in turn becomes the level of accountability as well.

For this reason we cannot divorce talk about accountability from talk about commitment. What is the strength of our commitment? What is the level of our commitment? What does our membership in the group mean? All these questions seem to be prerequisites for discussing intelligently the matter of accountability within a group.

RELATIONSHIP

This leads to the second of the two themes I mentioned -- relationship. From a biblical perspective, accountability exists and grows out of relationship, because accountability is a necessary and natural part of establishing and maintaining a relationship.

In the Bible the instrument used to establish accountability within a relationship is "covenant," as Dorothy has mentioned. It is necessary in this context to understand that the laws which we see in the Bible are part of a covenant relationship and are not legalisms. They are an explicit statement of what one is committing oneself to in a relationship to the God of the covenant and to the people formed around commitment to this covenant God.

This is important, because as soon as we begin to talk about accountability the bugaboo of legalism immediately raises itself for many people. It is assumed that we are going to set up rules and regulations; we are going to become legalistic. It should be stressed that biblical law as covenant law was not meant to lead to legalism. Instead it is the explicit setting forth of what a committed relationship to God involves. And, as its counterpart, what relationship within the people of God entails.

Perhaps an analogy will help illuminate this aspect of relationship. Marriage is like a covenant relationship. When couples become married the things they do for each other are done not because they

need to earn each other's favor or love, but because they enjoy a committed relationship between themselves. In maintaining their relationship, they find there is accountability because the relationship embodies such a deep commitment of each partner to the other. To become unaccountable to each other would impair the marriage relationship.

So it is with our relationship with God. As we enter into relationship with God and with the community of her people we are also reflective of God's will which is given to maintain relationships, both vertical and horizontal. In the Jewish tradition, they would say that when we become a people of God and establish a relationship with God, we take on the yoke of heaven and the yoke of the Torah. By that they meant that as one acknowledges the sovereignty of God and experiences it in one's own life, living in obedience as part of God's people is an inseparable part of that experience.

In regard to this point of committed relationships forming the background for biblical accountability, Dorothy makes good use of two images from the New Testament, the Vine and the Body. If the people of God are inextricably connected with each other they are necessarily accountable to each other, since there is a high degree of interdependency. In contrast to these images in which accountability grows out of relationship, we can see how very artificial it is to make strangers accountable to each other.

When we do try to make strangers accountable to each other, we have law. That is how we operate in general society. When I drive a car I am accountable for driving on one side of the highway and not on the other. That is not because I know anyone driving past me, but because that is the way we regulate behavior between people who do not know each other. In this case my accountability is to the law which is designed to protect. Biblical accountability has its focus in those relationships that are committed relationships where people have trust as a bond between them. Then the accountability is not one of law but of mutuality; we are accountable to each other.

The images of Vine and Body can also suggest to us further aspects of biblical accountability. First, biblical accountability imagines God relating to a people and not just to individuals. In our individualistic culture we tend to forget that God does not speak to me alone. She is not my private oracle. God is not about the business of calling out little autonomous individuals, but is about the business of nourishing bonds and building bodies. This is basic to the biblical understanding of accountability. The focus of accountability seen in this light is to build the committed community.

BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE OR MATURITY

As a consequence of this covenant and community focus, the primary aim of accountability does not reside in “membership” but in “maturity.” The crunch of accountability comes for many of us in connection with boundary maintenance. Whom do we “let in” and whom do we exclude? How do we exclude those who don’t fit? Accountability is often seen in terms of asking these questions. Too often we want to set up barriers and say people have to measure up to certain standards and then they can be “let in.” The problem with this focus is that accountability often leads more to homogeneity and independence than to interdependence and mutual commitment. Biblical accountability rather is a process of realizing in life what the commitment meant when we became part of the Vine and Body. It is an ongoing process and an ongoing pilgrimage. Accountability for maturity!

Dorothy quotes that very powerful passage from Ephesians which is a typical passage about accountability: “Until we grow up into that maturity represented by Christ.” Jesus is the revelation of what it means to be truly human and mature. Accountability then becomes a process in which we mature and grow to the place where we are no longer children, tossed about by this thing or the other but have integrity and character.

INTERDEPENDENCE

Along the same lines, since accountability is based upon relationship and commitment, it does not mean homogeneity but interdependence. Accountability should not force everyone into the same mold. It is very helpful that George Fox talks of accountability in terms of the gifts. If we would believe that everybody is different and has different kinds of gifts and realize that interdependence is necessary, then I think accountability would take on a new urgency and have greater significance for us.

Furthermore, Vine and Body language also means that accountability is not hierarchical. It is not a pruning operation, where some people wield the shears and others need either to buckle under or get cut off. We have to see ourselves as in it together. We are one Vine and one Body. If accountability grows out of mutual commitment, accountability is mutual.

Accountability seen in terms of relationships also has very serious theological implications because it deals with the root nature

of sin, broken relationships, and alienation. The lack of accountability is a symptom of a deeper sickness because it is indicative of a lack of relationship and of commitment to one another. Thus accountability is a central issue for a people of peace because the healing of broken relationships has been seen as central to our mission. What is faith about? What does the Gospel mean if not the ability to heal and to knit together? If we cannot live within our fellowship as united people of one Body and one Vine how in the world are we going to do anything about the Middle East? Nicaragua? etc., etc.

SUMMARY

Finally, to summarize, biblical accountability makes sense in a community in which there is a committed 'covenantal' relationship between its members and with God. This type of accountability focuses less on rules imposed upon people and to which they must answer, and more on spiritual formation which grows from mutual relationships with others. Thus our focus in discussing accountability should be more on maturity than on boundary maintenance. Boundary maintenance should only occur because of the failure of maturity, not to protect a stagnant group.

The covenantal community produces a people of mature character because people are rooted. They know where their commitments lie. In our society it is a difficult task to work at maturity and accountability. We must strive always for a balance between the freedom which our culture nourishes within us, and the structure and accountability which are necessary for growth and for nurture. For it is in maturity within the Body, growing up into Christ who is the Head, that we become truly free.