

ACCOUNTABILITY

Ray Cawston

Ray served as a missionary in northern Peru for fourteen years in association with Echoes of Service. He is currently course leader at the training centre of Gospel Literature Outreach in Motherwell.

To discuss accountability in the missionary enterprise means to discuss relationships and therefore to touch on one of the most delicate areas of Christian missions. It is a subject, however, that serves as a useful point of focus in examining what is involved in concrete terms for a missionary representing both the Lord and the home church in a cross-cultural situation. The task of asking and attempting to answer questions relating to accountability also leads to the clarification of some matters that are especially relevant to the Brethren missionary enterprise today.

What is accountability?

In the parable in Luke 16 the rich man says: 'Give an account of your management'. Accountability is the 'quality of being liable to give account of and answer for, the discharge of duties or conduct'.¹ That there exists this solemn obligation between the Christian and his master is clear, and it follows also that accountability in Christian matters also exists at a human level because it is the Lord himself who has ordained that we should live and work not in isolation, but in relation to others in the Christian community of the church.

The term is widely used today in management, where it is considered essential to define chains and areas of accountability. This is not just to keep personnel up to scratch but serves the equally important role of enhancing a sense of personal achievement and satisfaction. To this end it is often related to specific goals and targets. A 'low level of accountability . . . means that the individual often sees very little evidence of personal achievement'.²

We should not assume that management techniques are also biblical, and a difference that will immediately appear is that no system, structure or arrangement can have success in truly Christian terms without the motivation of the Spirit and an inner longing to please God, 'for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:10). When it comes to a matter of conscience, Paul exclaims: 'If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ' (Galatians 1:10). This awesome sense of responsibility is the foundation for any work that will last.

The New Testament record of missionary work does not, however, limit accountability to this individual vertical dimension. When the Lord Jesus sent out the twelve and then the seventy, he not only gave them a specific commission and detailed instructions but he also formed them into a team and sent them out in pairs to support one another. When they returned they gave an account of their work (Luke 9:10; 10:17). The early church followed this pattern both when Peter and John were sent to Samaria (Acts 8:14) and when Saul and Barnabas were sent out from Antioch, 'committed to the grace of God'. When they returned they gave an account of the 'work they had now completed' (Acts 8:25; 14:26-28). Paul felt a deep sense of commitment not only to his home church but also to the churches established through his witness. He took advice from them (Acts 17:10), he kept them informed (Ephesians 6:21-22), he explained his actions to them (2 Corinthians 1:16-24), he received financial help from them (Philippians 4:15-16), he longed desperately for news from them (1 Thessalonians 3:5-7), and he respected and admired them (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

There is a further important area of accountability in the missionary life of Paul and this is to be found within the relationships he formed with fellow-workers. So strongly did he feel the need for this mutual bond of responsibility that when John Mark abandoned the team in Pamphylia, Paul determined not to have him as a fellow-worker in subsequent missionary partnership (Acts 15:38).

We can say, then, that the New Testament gives clear examples of missionary accountability, fundamentally in direct relationship with God himself, and then—subsequent to that—towards sending churches, towards young churches in the area of missionary enterprise, and then towards fellow-workers within that enterprise. These relationships are also to be viewed as reciprocal. When a local church takes seriously its responsibility towards a missionary it has commended to the work, communicating regularly, praying earnestly, supporting financially, and even sending representatives on

visits, then there will be few problems in developing bonds of mutual love and respect.

Missionary structures

The *Missionary Reporter* (a precursor of *Echoes of Service*) referred in 1853 to 'the principle that the one church of Christ on earth is, and should be, the missionary society'.³ An article in the first issue, written by the editor, carried the title: 'Every Church a Missionary Society'. While the outworking of this principle has not always been ideal, the principle itself is based on a very biblical instinct. As a result of ignoring this a situation arose described by G W Peters as 'this unfortunate and abnormal historic development which has produced autonomous missionless churches on the one hand and autonomous churchless missions on the other'.⁴ Some see missionary societies as a confession of failure on the part of the church. They function 'when the church has lost sight of her missionary responsibility'.⁵ Peter Cotterell, who disagrees with Orlando Costas on other issues, basically agrees with this last view.⁶ In what sense then can a missionary be accountable to his fellow-workers and relate to them in his work?

The biblical answer seems to lie in our understanding of the word 'partnership'. Seven of the apostles were fishermen and we are clearly told that, before they left all to follow Christ, four of them were 'partners' (*koinōnoi*, Luke 5:10). Although belonging to different families they collaborated in the earning of their living by forming a fishing partnership. Jesus said '... from now on you will catch men'. They were now 'fishing partners' in a new sense. The word 'partner' can obviously refer to our fellowship in the church, but it goes beyond that to refer to a partnership in the work of the gospel of those who belong to different congregations. Paul refers to Titus in this way when he speaks of him as a partner (*koinōnos*) and a 'fellow-worker' (*sunergos*, 2 Corinthians 8:23). Paul and Titus were from different churches but they formed a partnership for a specific purpose, joining with at least seven others, from at least four different churches (Acts 20:4-5), to administer the relief fund during Paul's third missionary journey. Others contributed financially. The word 'partnership' (*koinōnia*) is used in 2 Corinthians 8:4 and in Philippians 1:5. Paul is grateful for the 'partnership in the gospel' of the Philippians, something he refers to again in Philippians 4:14 (*koineō*).

We have already referred to Paul's use of the word 'fellow-worker'. In fact he uses this word twelve times to refer to people

who were not from the same church as himself but who gave him their wholehearted support, joining with him and with one another in the work of the gospel. Philippians 4:3 is an excellent example of this, where Paul speaks of men and women who have joined him in the contest (*sunathleō*), figuratively forming a team in the modern sporting sense of the word, to achieve an important aim.

The words 'partnership' and 'fellow-worker' are those in the New Testament that not only permit but encourage us as Christian workers to associate together for the furtherance of God's work in personal, prayerful and financial terms, wherever this would lead to a more effective carrying out of that work. Missionary service groups, editorial boards, youth camp committees, Gospel Literature Outreach and other such bodies are fulfilling the New Testament concept of 'partnership'. They can be formed and disbanded as appropriate, they have no jurisdiction over the churches, they depend on the churches for personnel and prayer support and they have as their aim the establishment of local churches. They provide a valid framework for accountability only in a delegated sense in so far as the commending church sees such a body as an arm of its own activity, enhancing the usefulness of the church's own missionary or missionaries. If the relationship functions in such a way that the church-missionary link is weakened then it has gone beyond what is biblical.⁷

Local church leadership in the area of missionary activity

As we have seen, Paul's recognition of his accountability to churches which he himself had been instrumental in establishing could not have been stronger, and this applied also to churches he had not yet visited but which were in areas where he intended to work. There was indeed in his own mind no dichotomy between the 'sending' and the 'receiving' churches. They were all churches possessing the immense dignity of declaring the 'manifold wisdom of God' not only on earth but also to heavenly beings (Ephesians 3:10). A recognition of that dignity is the first step to a genuine sense of accountability to local leadership. The differences between cultures can of course present difficulties, here as everywhere else, and the determination to achieve mutual understanding and genuine mutual appreciation, as far as that is possible, is absolutely fundamental.

All Christian workers need a framework of discipline and fellowship, and the cross-cultural missionary must seek this and submit to it first within his own local church in the area where he is

working. He or she can never place himself or herself above such discipline, nor should a relationship of partnership with fellow-workers be allowed to replace or weaken this local church link. At the same time where the sending and supporting church is still in the home country, there remains a basic responsibility which can never be replaced. After all, he or she is not an immigrant but a missionary, usually with a temporary visa arrangement and without the possibility, legally or practically, of being financially supported by the church with which he or she is working.

Apart from local church membership a missionary has to relate to fellow-workers of the country where he is serving, to elders and pastors, youth leaders, evangelists and full-time or part-time workers in different ministries. Often such a relationship is a tremendous help to a young, inexperienced foreign worker cautiously making his way into an unfamiliar sphere of ministry. A deep sense of comradeship and mutual respect can develop that will be the missionary's greatest bulwark in times of discouragement and uncertainty. To use the term accountability here is to run the risk of seriously understating the position. A missionary can be a little careless with his verbs, drop his camera, forget his 'jabs', and write a poor newsletter, but if he doesn't look on national workers who are getting on with the job and skilfully serving the Lord already in his adopted country as precious above measure, then he might as well take the next plane home.

Financial accountability

It would be tempting to think that money matters would take a place of low priority, but the scriptures and common experience do not bear this out. The first case requiring church discipline was to do with the deceptive handling of funds and resulted in the deaths of the perpetrators (Acts 5:1-11). Jesus said '... if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?' (Luke 16:11). The greater part of Paul's third missionary journey was devoted to collecting funds for relief aid and in order to administer these funds honourably he selected a representative band of men from the contributing churches (Acts 20:4). He explains his reasons when he states that he is '... taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men' (2 Corinthians 8:20-21).

Funds are entrusted to missionaries either for their personal needs or for specific projects. Although in the first case accounting is often not expected, it might be if the Christian worker has the

understanding that gifts received by him or her shall be credited to the common account of the group partnership. International Teams, who have coordinated two-year missionary projects in fifty-five countries, with missionaries drawn largely from Brethren assemblies in the USA, operates each team on the basis of a common purse.⁸ Even when this does not apply, there is an implicit responsibility on the part of the recipient of funds to be accountable for the fulfilment of declared aims and goals in the work for which that money was given. Accurate information about activities should be shared, not as a fund-raising ploy, however subtle, but as an act of fellowship and openness.

Where funds are entrusted for specific needs other than personal needs, it is usually essential that accounts be kept and rendered for the handling of these funds. The voluntary and professional fulfilment of this obligation is the recipient's best protection from any doubts or suspicions arising, and protects above all the reputation of the name he bears. It is true that during the revival under King Joash 'They did not require an accounting from those to whom they gave the money to pay the workers, because they acted with complete honesty', but this was in the workmen's use of funds for which strict accounts on the part of those responsible had already been rendered, for they 'counted and tied up in bags the money that was put in the house of the Lord' (2 Kings 12:10, RSV). On a larger scale than that which we have in mind here, some ghastly cases of deception have occurred and continue to occur, and it was partly in response to this that in the USA the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability was set up. What is needed at a personal level is a simple, voluntary code of practice.

Accountability patterns and principles

It is common practice to generalize about the missionary enterprise of the church. One of the most useful steps forward would be to recognize the almost unending complexity of ministries and modes of operation that are allowed for by the New Testament and remain appropriate for today's needy world. The Brethren movement has a record of cross-cultural missionary witness that is quite extraordinary and, even today, almost one percent of those in fellowship in UK assemblies are serving abroad in this way.⁹ There is, however, currently a widespread uncertainty about the way ahead, and this uncertainty is largely concerned with accountability. Let us identify and treasure those valuable features of our missionary work that do indeed reflect New Testament practice. The emphasis on the local

church will be one of these. To suggest, however, that a New Testament principle is that the missionary should be 'answerable only to the Lord', without any human accountability is unwise at its best and dangerous at its worst. It implies an emphasis on individualism that is not biblical and goes against our treasured emphasis on the corporate nature of the church. While there are diverse patterns of missionary relationships, there are some clear guidelines that can be suggested:

FUNDAMENTAL ACCOUNTABILITY

To God, who as creator and redeemer
leads and sustains in the work of
the gospel as in the whole of the Christian life.

ACCOUNTABILITY TO OTHERS:

PRIMARY

SECONDARY

To: —the commending church

—other supporting churches,
groups and individuals.

For: —declaring general or
specific aims and goals
—reporting on the fulfilment
of these and on the work in
general
—conduct of the work, and
lifestyle in harmony with
the original commendation

—use of time and effort
that coincides with what was
implicit in the support being
given.
—reporting on the above.
—reporting accurately on the
use of funds given for
special projects.

- To: —the local church in the area of work. —other local churches, national fellow-workers and evangelical work in general in the area of service.
- For: —all that is implicit in church membership, whether as a recognized leader or not. —informing fully about work undertaken. —taking the counsel of the church seriously. —full recognition of the supporting role of the missionary and the need for sensitive dialogue and collaboration with all who serve around him in true fellowship. —making evident that any partnership with fellow-missionaries is secondary and never divisive.
- To: —fellow-workers who are linked in partnership, whether this is structured or not.
- For: —the forming of common goals, where this is seen to be for the furtherance of the work. —cooperation in achieving these goals through prayer and growth together in the Lord. The true work of the Spirit in bringing a willingness to complement one another rather than to compete with one another—that is team-work. —the sharing of information, experience and resources as a concrete expression of fellowship. —compliance with legal requirements that will avoid the jeopardizing of the work as a whole.

Some specific situations:

The following cases, based on fact, illustrate the diversity of experience within which the principles set out in this paper need to be worked out:

1 A couple who were commended to missionary work in an African country have now been serving for ten years. They receive less than one percent of their income from gifts forwarded by their home

assembly and links with this church have now weakened for other reasons. They realize that if they neglect close fellowship with other workers and do not humbly seek the guidance of the local church where they work, they will become answerable to no one.

2 A young man is sent abroad to an Asian country by his local church, who take their responsibilities very seriously, pray for him, write to him and provide most of his income. When, however, they seek to give him detailed guidance about how his work should develop, he feels that there are situations abroad which they can never fully understand. He points out to them the importance of his accountability to fellow-workers and to his local church abroad.

3 A young woman travels to a South American city with the wholehearted support of the home assembly. She fits into her local church and is welcomed and cared for by other missionaries, but she feels increasingly depressed. She longs for help and guidance, not just in living but in making plans for her work and in keeping to them. She needs a team situation in which to pursue goals with mutual accountability.

4 A young couple, after real thought and prayer by themselves and the local church, are sent to a European country to work in a team situation within a recognized partnership relationship with fellow missionaries. Their attempt to develop mutual accountability in this way is marred by a feeling that they are considered to have abandoned a position of 'being answerable only to the Lord'.

Conclusion

The majority of, but by no means all, UK missionaries from Brethren assemblies who have served overseas have in the past appeared on the prayer list issued by *Echoes of Service* and the editors have exercised a valuable ministry on their behalf in forwarding funds and disseminating information. It would never have been claimed, however, by these editors that this apparent uniformity was reflected in the pattern of missionary activity. A most diverse situation has always existed where some missionaries have formed teams centred on a locality for medical or educational work, others have formed country-wide associations, others have become pastors of their local churches, others have travelled widely with no firm links anywhere, and some have been fiercely independent. It is therefore a misconception to hold that a common feature of such missionary work has been the virtual rejection of

accountability to others for the work undertaken. It is also an erroneous generalization to hold that the missionary society necessarily involves the abandonment of biblical principles of freedom of action and conviction. One may have very good reasons for not working with one of the very fine evangelical missionary societies but at the same time recognize the very valid reasons for their existence.¹⁰

It must be maintained that responsible, biblical missionary outreach by the church today must involve patterns of accountability that express Christian fellowship in concrete terms before the eyes of a needy, critical world. If churches are to be planted where the unity of the Spirit is to be treasured, then those engaged in church planting must clearly demonstrate their willingness to enter into responsible relationships with all who are involved in this enterprise at home and abroad. By so doing the quality of their own Christian experience and the fulfilment of their own pastoral needs will also be enhanced. This is not the directive activity of a hierarchy, but the collaborative partnership of those who are 'God's fellow-workers' (1 Corinthians 3:9).¹¹

NOTES

- 1 Oxford Dictionary definition.
- 2 M R Williams *Performance Appraisal in Management* (Heinemann, 1972) 146.
- 3 A Pulleng et al (eds) *Turning the World Upside Down* (Echoes of Service, 1972) 28.
- 4 G W Peters *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Moody Press, 1972) 214.
- 5 O Costas *The Church and its Mission* (Tyndale, 1974) 169.
- 6 P Cotterell *The Eleventh Commandment* (IVP, 1981) 156.
- 7 On this, see M Griffiths *Cinderella with Amnesia* (IVP, 1975) 150.
- 8 International Teams *Team Manual* 11 (1984) 4-8.
- 9 P Brierley (ed) *UK Christian Handbook 1983* (Marc Europe, 1983) 35.
- 10 M Griffiths *Get your Church Involved in Missions* (OMF, 1974) 17; W W Webster 'The Messenger and Mission Societies' in R D Winter, S C Hawthorne (eds) *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (William Carey Library, 1981) 766-767 especially points 1-6.
- 11 1 Corinthians 3:9. See also, for an exposition and a commentary on the whole subject: W E Vine *The Divine Plan in Mission* (Christian Missions Press, n.d.) 35-39.