

SERVANT HEARTS ABLAZE! MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY?
Presentation to the SELC District Convention – June 2006
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May begin with 15-20 minutes of exercises / discussion based on the paper of Peter A. Hessler, "The role of the laity in the congregation's ministry and mission"

Dear friends in Christ,

Greetings in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ! You are the beloved children of our Heavenly Father!

In preparing for this presentation I had the opportunity to attend the Theological Convocation of the Ohio District. Attorney Peter Hessler presented an excellent paper on the topic of "Mutual Accountability," which is reprinted in its entirety on the website of our Commission on Theology and Church Relations. I commend it to your reading and study because of all the fine detail work regarding what it means for pastor and congregation to be mutually accountable to one another. Mr. Hessler's paper discusses guiding principles of accountability, the responsibilities of the laity in the congregation, and a number of excellent practical applications. The entire paper is worthy of everyone's consideration; the exercises we have just completed are based on his presentation.

Let me summarize his paper and these exercises by suggesting that the idea of mutual accountability can be useful in three areas of congregational life. The first area is in the congregation's relationship with the secular state. Accountability is a legal and corporate necessity as congregations and pastors interact with state fire marshals, local building inspectors, law enforcement officials and the like. In this area I also include the organizational activities of the congregation, such as nominations, elections, adherence to

bylaws and articles of incorporation, etc. The second area where accountability may be useful to congregations is when they deal with sinful behavior within the community of believers. Certainly St. Paul held the congregation at Corinth accountable for the manner in which it failed to deal with the sinful behaviors of certain of its members (1 Corinthians 5). In the twenty-first century congregation a similar sense of accountability is necessary in order to forestall or to deal with sinful behaviors among the members or from the pastor. Indeed, it is within this area of accountability that we might see the procedures for the excommunication of a member or for the removal of a pastor from office, as outlined in traditional constitutions of congregations. The third area in which accountability can be useful in our congregations is by way of encouraging one another to live up to our commitments to one another as redeemed people of God. In this area we might include the way we encourage members to attend the Lord's Supper frequently, and the way we encourage pastors to fulfill the commitments of their office.

All of this is good, and much of it is necessary. In the secular world I see much to commend this description of accountability. In its turn, the church seems to have embraced "accountability" wholeheartedly because we don't want mob rule in our congregations and we don't want our pastors to behave like Martha Stewart. Members like the idea of accountability, and pastors actually seem to like it, too – pastors speak glowingly of their experiences with "accountability groups", usually groups of other pastors with whom they think they can be more vulnerable than they think they can be within their congregations. It seems that to be able to say "I have a group of people that holds me accountable" is a mark of honesty if not honor among pastors these days.

Here is a Scripture passage that directly addresses this current fascination with “mutual accountability”: **“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”** (Galatians 3:1). In the letter to the Galatians St. Paul confronts the redeemed, justified, regenerated, sanctified Galatians with their fascination with the Law. Why should they want to return to the slavery that they had been freed from? As a former Pharisee Paul knew from personal experience that such an intense fascination with the Law, no matter how well-intentioned, is actually slavery, not freedom.

In the same way, if you followed carefully my outline of the uses of accountability a few moments ago, you would have concluded that I believe that accountability is useful as a curb for antisocial behavior, a mirror that shows our sin, and a guide for our life together as redeemed Christians. As I recall, that is the Catechism’s three-fold working definition of the Law (as opposed to the Gospel). To speak even more plainly, “mutual accountability” in the church is all about the Law, nothing about the Gospel. I fear that too much attention to “mutual accountability”, like too much attention to the Law, leads to legalism in our relationships with one another. Like the Pharisees who demanded to know why Jesus’ disciples were “working” on the Sabbath because they were picking and eating heads of grain (Mark 2:22-23), we can become obsessed with “obedience” to the rules. In some congregations this takes the form of a knee-jerk consultation of the bylaws before any decision can be made; in others it takes the form of endless debates about trifles. I also suspect that the Law is not a positive motivator. When the so-called “dishonest steward” in Luke 16:1-8 was confronted with the prospect of being held accountable for his dishonesty, his response was even greater dishonesty as he “revised” the accounts of his master’s debtors. The servant whose huge debt was

forgiven in Matthew 18:21-35 went out from the presence of grace and mercy only to grab another servant by the neck and demand “Pay me what you owe me!” The tenant farmers in Luke 20:9-15, faced with accountability to the owner of the vineyard at harvest time, beat some of the servants that were sent to collect the harvest, killed others, and finally killed the son and heir. These parables show that not only is “accountability” not a positive motivator, but it may have destructive and potentially fatal outcomes.

For those who may be thinking, “But we need mutual accountability in the church to control the Old Adam” I remind you that Baptism is supposed to do that. As Luther’s Small Catechism says, the significance of Holy Baptism is that “the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise” and that, as Saint Paul wrote, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Let us then deal with one another on the basis of the Christ that lives within each one of us rather than on the basis of the Old Adam that is supposed to be dead! If it is true that Jesus Christ lives within each of us who have been baptized, if it is true that we each have been crucified with Christ, if it is true that we each have put on Christ, then why should we persist in relating to one another in the church as if the Old Adam in me were critically, competitively and even suspiciously scrutinizing the activities of the Old Adam in you? Why do we not instead relate to one another in the church as if the Christ living in me were welcoming the Christ living in you with blessing and with love?

For that is how the Father related to His Son, and how Jesus relates to us. When Jesus came out of the Jordan river at His baptism the Father’s voice said from heaven, “This is my beloved Son” (Matthew 3:13-17). That belovedness is passed on to us as we

share in the baptism of Jesus through His work of redemption. It is that belovedness that Jesus Himself urges upon us in the one commandment He gave to His disciples, “Love one another as I have loved you” John 15:12. If you and I are truly disciples of Jesus Christ, beloved by Him, redeemed by His death on the cross and His glorious resurrection from the dead, sanctified by the power and the work of the Holy Spirit, *and we are all of those*, then when I look you in the eye shouldn’t I be rejoicing that the Christ living in me sees and welcomes and rejoices in the Christ living in you? That is how the love that Jesus had for us works among us.

In our congregations, how might this love work out? How might we see that we love one another the way Jesus has loved us? Not through the lens of mutual accountability, I’m sure! Instead, I propose that we see the love of Jesus within our congregations through a different lens, one that we seldom consider in this congregational context: mutual compassion.

Compassion is a word that seems to have a pretty restricted use these days. We use it to describe our ministry to those in extreme physical, financial, social or emotional need. We have compassion for the hungry, the naked, the sick, the prisoner and the dying, as indeed we should.

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human. When we look at compassion this way, it becomes clear that something more is involved than a general kindness or tenderheartedness. (McNeill, Morrison and Nouwen 1982, 4)

Certainly compassion was a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry. “He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 9:36). The story of the

Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is a story about compassion. Jesus dealt compassionately with the woman accused of adultery (John 8:1-11), and with the woman who anointed his feet because she had been forgiven much (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus became “lost with the lost, hungry with the hungry, and sick with the sick” (McNeill, Morrison and Nouwen 1982, 17). But the level of our compassion seems proportionate to the perceived level of need. The more needy a person appears to be, the more compassionate we are; the less easily we can see a person’s need, the less compassionate we tend to be.

When we take a critical look at ourselves, we have to recognize that competition, not compassion, is our main motivation in life. We find ourselves deeply immersed in all sorts of competition. Our whole sense of self is dependent upon the way we compare ourselves with others and upon the differences we can identify. (McNeill, Morrison and Nouwen 1982, 19)

The story that is most instructive here is the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). I will ask you to think about what happened when that son returned home. The elder son seemed determined to hold both his brother and his father accountable for their actions. The forgiving father would have none of it. Instead, he gently insisted on dealing with both of his sons with love and compassion. Today I want to try to encourage us, pastors and congregations alike, to find ways to relate to one another like the father in the story is relating to both of his sons, like our Father in heaven relates to each of us for the sake of His Son Jesus. We need to find ways to welcome, bless, love and celebrate those who may have gone astray in some way, those who have found themselves away from home and the family of Christ, those who have been in the depths of despair and somehow have returned home. We also need to find ways to encourage, bless, love and celebrate those who have remained faithful, those who have done what

they were supposed to do, those who have always been in the shelter of the family of Christ. As our sanctification progresses, we need to seek the guidance and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us from prodigal sons or elder brothers into forgiving parents, for it is the forgiving father that is most Christlike in the story.

As we do this, as we undergo this transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit, what are we likely to see? We know what a congregation looks like where pastor and people hold each other at the arm's length of accountability: people and pastor deal with one another with cold and distant objectivity; neither sees the deep need of the other. What do you think a congregation would look like if pastor and people together determined to put away their fascination with accountability and instead became enthralled with embracing one another close in the arms of compassion? We know what a congregation looks like where pastor and people deal with one another in suspicion: fear of being victimized or manipulated is the order of the day. What do you think a congregation would look like if it were a community of believers where pastor and people made every effort to deal with one another in mercy? We know what a congregation looks like where pastor and people distrust one another: hearts that ought to be open to Christian brothers and sisters in blessing are instead closed, locked down, and withdrawn. What would a congregation look like if the hearts of the people were to go out to their pastors, and the hearts of the pastors were to go out to their people? We know what a congregation looks like where mission and ministry are motivated by the cold flame of legalism-induced resentment: such a congregation can be self-centered to the point of narcissism. What would a congregation look like where the hearts of people and pastors are united in mission and ministry because they are ablaze with the warm fire of

the Gospel that is in them, eager to share that Gospel of Christ's love and compassion with each other and with the world? Then and only then, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, will our congregations truly be ablaze in mission – when we are first ablaze with love and compassion for one another.

In the Name of Jesus – You are the beloved of our heavenly Father! Amen.

DISCUSSION GUIDE – PRELIMINARY EXERCISES**Principles of Mutual Accountability**

- 1 The roles of pastor and lay person are complementary, not competitive.
- 2 Pastor and people are accountable to each other, and accountable for each other.
- 3 Whoever wants to become great among you must become your servant.

Some roles and responsibilities of lay people:

- 1 Concern yourself with *your* responsibility before calling others to task for theirs.
- 2 Understand the reason for the pastoral office and the role of the man filling it.
- 3 Assure attention to the central purpose of the church.
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- 5
- 6
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Some roles and responsibilities of the pastor

- 1 Preach
- 2 Parish administration
- 3 Visit the sick
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Practical applications

- 1 Be creative in the way you present God's Word.
- 2 Be proactive, not reactive.
- 3 Adopt written policies that provide for accountability.
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- 8
- 9
- 10

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

- ✦ 1 Corinthians 5 – *Immorality in the church at Corinth*
- ✦ Galatians 3:1 – You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?
- ✦ Mark 2:22-23 – One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”
- ✦ Luke 16:1-8 – *The parable of the dishonest steward*
- ✦ Matthew 18:21-35 – *The parable of the unforgiving servant*
- ✦ Luke 20:9-15 – *The parable of the wicked tenant farmers*
- ✦ Galatians 2:20 – I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
- ✦ Matthew 3:13-17 – *Jesus’ baptism*
- ✦ John 15:12 – Jesus said, “My command is this: love one another as I have loved you.”
- ✦ Luke 10:25-37 – *The parable of the Good Samaritan*
- ✦ John 8:1-11 – *The woman caught in adultery*
- ✦ Luke 7:36-50 – *Anointing Jesus’ feet*
- ✦ Luke 15:11-32 – *The parable of the Prodigal Son*

RESOURCES

- McNeill, Donald P., Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J. M. Nouwen. 1982.
Compassion: A reflection on the Christian life. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Nouwen, Henri J. M. 1989. *In the name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian leadership.* New York: Crossroads.
- _____. 1994. *Here and now: Living in the Spirit.* New York: Crossroad Publishing.
- _____. 1997. *Bread for the Journey.* San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Peterson, Eugene H. 1987. *Working the Angles: The shape of pastoral integrity.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Vanier, Jean. 2005. *Befriending the Stranger.* English translation by Jean Vanier. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

QUOTES AND RESOURCES – MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY?

Can we free ourselves from the need to judge others? Yes . . . by claiming for ourselves the truth that we are the beloved daughters and sons of God. As long as we continue to live as if we are what we do, what we have, and what other people think about us, we will remain filled with judgments, opinions, evaluations, and condemnations. We will remain addicted to the need to put people and things in their “right” place. To the degree that we embrace the truth that our identity is not rooted in our success, power, or popularity, but in God’s infinite love, to that degree can we let go of our need to judge. (Nouwen 1994, 81)

The compassionate life is the life of downward mobility! (Nouwen 1994, 138)

True ministry must be mutual. When the members of a community of faith cannot truly know and love their shepherd, shepherding quickly becomes a subtle way of exercising power over others and begins to show authoritarian and dictatorial traits. The world in which we live – a world of efficiency and control – has no models to offer to those who want to be shepherds in the way Jesus was a shepherd. (Nouwen 1989, 63)

To bless means to say good things. We have to bless one another constantly. Parents need to bless their children, children their parents, husbands their wives, wives their husbands, friends their friends. In our society, so full of curses, we must fill each place we enter with our blessings. We forget so quickly that we are God’s beloved children and allow the many curses of our world to darken our hearts. Therefore, we have to be reminded of our belovedness and remind others of theirs. Whether the blessing is given in words or with gestures, in a solemn or an informal way, our lives need to be blessed lives. (Nouwen 1997, September 7)

Essential to the work of reconciliation is a nonjudgmental presence. We are not sent to the world to judge, to condemn, to evaluate, to classify, or to label. When we walk around as if we have to make up our minds about people and tell them what is wrong with them and how they should change, we only create more division. Jesus says it clearly: “Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge; . . . do not condemn; . . . forgive” (Luke 6:36-37). In a world that constantly asks us to make up our minds about other people, a nonjudgmental presence seems nearly impossible. But it is one of the most beautiful fruits of a deep spiritual life and will be easily recognized by those who long for reconciliation. (Nouwen 1997, December 27)

We see that sometimes our churches, our Christian communities, are filled with the same power struggles, the same story of divisions and conflict because our churches, like our communities, are made up of broken, wounded men and women, like you and like me. Constantly we need to be led back to the essential message of Jesus, the message of love, the message of the beatitudes and of humility. We have to become increasingly aware of the many different ways we can create division, the ways in which we criticize others; our need to prove that we are better than others. (Vanier 2005, 12)

My basic orientation as a pastor is that the significance of what I see before me is not what I see before me but what Christ has said and done. Far more relevant than what I feel or think, or what this person feels or thinks, is what Christ has said and done. This is a person for whom Christ died, a person he loves: an awesome fact! This is a person preserved alive until this very moment in a world of hurtling automobiles, ravaging diseases, and psychotic menaces. Am I prepared to admire? Am I prepared to respect? Am I prepared to be in reverence? (Peterson 1987, 189)

DISCUSSION GUIDE – MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY?

Instructions: Discuss the four questions below as a group. *Save the questions in italics to consider by yourself, with your pastor, or with others from your church.*

1. What do you think a congregation would look like if pastor and people together determined to embrace one another in the arms of compassion? *How closely does your home congregation resemble this ideal? What might your home congregation's next step toward that ideal be?*
2. What do you think a congregation would look like if pastor and people made every effort to deal with one another in mercy? *How closely does your home congregation resemble this ideal? What might your home congregation's next step toward that ideal be?*
3. What would a congregation look like if pastor and people determined always to bless one another? *How closely does your home congregation resemble this ideal? What might your home congregation's next step toward that ideal be?*
4. What would mission look like if the hearts of people and pastor were ablaze with the warm fire of the Gospel that is in them, eager to share that Gospel of Christ's love and compassion with each other and with the world? *How closely does your home congregation resemble this ideal? What might your home congregation's next step toward that ideal be?*