

ACCOUNTABILITY WITHOUT CONTROL

In Cross Cultural Christian Partnerships

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Accountability and Culture

The world of missions is no longer divided between West and non-West. It is now nearly impossible to talk about partnership in missions without thinking of cooperative working relationships between Christians from both sides of the divide. Therefore, if we believe that accountability is a necessary element of healthy partnerships, we must abandon any trace of belief that it is primarily a Western concept. Many missions organizations feel that the only way to assure accountability of a ministry is to have control over it. However, the experience of many years in missions has shown that it is definitely possible to ensure accountability of a partner ministry without having to control it.

We have learned that the following six basic characteristics of a ministry (which will later be outlined in greater detail) can give us confidence that it will fulfill its commitments in a partnership with us.

1. An accountability structure, such as a board of directors or equivalent
2. Goals and objectives that are clear, measurable and achievable
3. Written policies and procedures to guide its staff
4. Adequate personnel
5. Local credibility
6. Previous commitments have been met

Accountability is a universal concept. It is also Biblical. We find it in *Genesis 3*, where God calls on Adam and Eve to account for their choices and actions. Cain was held accountable by God for his actions concerning his brother, and God would hold accountable anyone who would threaten Cain's life. People have been held accountable from the beginning of time—to God, to local government, to parents and patriarchs, to spouses. In fact, accountability seems to be essential to any meaningful relationship between persons in any culture. It may be called different things and described in different ways, but the concept is the same.

Defining Accountability

Accountability in its broadest sense is the condition whereby the motives and actions of one person are subject to review, examination and judgment by another person or by an authority structure. This is often involuntary.

There is a sense in which I am "my brother's keeper," that I am accountable to what happens to other believers. We are held accountable by God for our actions whether or not we agree. Civil authorities expect us to submit to existing laws, however unpopular we may find them.

Accountability in Christian Partnerships

Accountability in Christian partnerships is voluntary. It is being willing to place one's own motives, actions and outcomes under someone else's review and examination according to mutually agreed upon expectations, in an environment of good faith and mutual trust.

While commitments made in this context are just as binding as any other, in Christian partnerships there is the added element of a good attitude towards accountability itself.

Mutual Trust—Not Control

The success of a partnership depends on each partner's ability to fulfill its part of the agreement. When two parties agree to work together toward a specific and clearly defined goal, good intentions are not sufficient. Both partners must also be capable of doing what they have committed to do. Often one partner will attempt to compensate for his or her lack of confidence in the other by exercising control over the partnership. A foreign missions organization in a given country may involve national believers in its work but will retain all decision-making power, for fear the nationals may not know what to do or how to do it.

In other words, it lacks confidence in their ability—even when it trusts their motives. The history of western missions is replete with examples of unnecessary control due to a lack of trust.

It is difficult to relinquish control without having first gained confidence. Yet if we are to honor each other and the Lord, we must be willing to seek those conditions that allow us to abandon the urge to control in exchange for a well-founded confidence in each other.

This does not mean that we abandon our desire to do a good job "as unto the Lord." It means that we stop viewing our partners as extensions of ourselves to fulfill our programs, and start viewing them as godly men and women in their own right, with equal access to the Father and equally capable of hearing his voice. We may at times disagree with them, which is only natural. But if we lack sufficient confidence in their abilities, it is better to forsake a formal working partnership and preserve only a bond of fellowship in the Spirit, without the strict mutual expectations that a working partnership requires.

The initial negotiation must be done in good faith. Questions of control and accountability must be identified and dealt with openly at the beginning of the partnership. There should be no sense that a partner is doing the other a favor by agreeing to work together. Unless both partners believe they need each other, the partnership will be one-sided, and the relationship will deteriorate with tensions and misunderstandings.

If we cannot control our partner, how can we be assured of its ability to fulfill its part? Is it wrong to expect our partner to meet certain standards of quality and performance? Of course not! Partnerships are based on clearly defined expectations on both sides. It is quite appropriate for each partner to hold the other accountable for commitments made.

Accountability Without Control Involves Risk

Is it possible to guarantee quality and good performance without control? The answer is a resounding NO! In an equal partnership it is not possible to be guaranteed good performance by the other. Partnership between two autonomous entities will always involve a certain amount of risk.

This may be why in the recent history of Western missions it has been preferable to establish field branches that are extensions of—and therefore controllable by—the parent agency. The belief is that the effectiveness of the agency is better than that of local leaders. (The irony is that Western control does not ensure quality either!)

A healthy partnership is founded on the ability to have confidence in one another. I must be able to trust that you—my partner—are both willing and capable of fulfilling your part. Likewise, you must be able to trust me. At the same time, each must realize that the other partner may fall short of our expectations.

Responsible trust is based on my confidence in your ability to do your part, and vice versa. And we acquire confidence in one another by making certain objective observations about how each of us conducts our affairs.

I can't control you, but I can observe how you work and then draw my conclusions. What I know about your planning, thinking and past performance determines the level of my confidence in your ability to fulfill your part. And you, of course, will do the same with me. Good will and positive thinking cannot replace the confidence that is based on objective knowledge of each other's capabilities and basic plans.

Partnership is Based on Mutual Expectations

A partnership is built around clearly identified mutual expectations. It may be defined as follows:

a working relationship between two or more autonomous entities whereby each contributes, by mutual agreement, some of its own resources, according to mutually established and clearly defined expectations, toward the accomplishment of a common goal.

I must know specifically what you will contribute to the partnership. Also, you must know what to expect of me. Our confidence in one another is then not simply a general good feeling toward one another but rather an informed assessment that, concerning the specific set of expectations that form our partnership, we have confidence in one another. This is true in complex partnerships just as it is in a simple prayer partnership between two people.

For Example

A Western agency might want to translate the Bible for a certain language group within a closed country. While it cannot place its own translators there, it can provide training for Christian members of that language group. The group in turn can then translate the Bible.

It is not sufficient that there be good Christian fellowship between the Western missionaries and the national Christian leaders. Specific expectations must also be developed.

The national church might expect from the Western agency:

- a. that it provide the trainers;
- b. that the trainers be competent linguists;
- c. that the trainers respect the national agency's autonomy.

The Western agency might expect from the national Church:

- a. that they provide competent trainees;
- b. that they have a Bible translation plan to implement;
- c. that translators' newly acquired skills will be used for the ministry and the project.

Other expectations might be specific tasks, a timetable, channels of communication between partners, etc. Once these and other related expectations are identified, each partner is able to assess its confidence in the other's ability and intent to fulfill expectations—because they have objective points of reference.

An Important Caution

We must be careful to distinguish between confidence in a person's character versus professional competency.

For example, suppose I need eye surgery. I have a friend who is honest, courteous, kind and humble. The fruit of the Spirit is evident in his life. He is very concerned with my plight and would like to do something about it. But, being godly is not enough. I want evidence that he is qualified as an eye surgeon. I may respect him personally, but I also look for things that give me confidence in him professionally.

We are not passing judgment on a brother or sister, but only evaluating his or her capability to do what he or she has committed to do, in the specific confines of the partnership agreement.

Confidence Factors

When we talk about partnerships between two or more Christian agencies, our confidence must be based on a solid foundation. The following six characteristics must be carefully evaluated:

1. Does each partner agency have an accountability structure (board of directors or equivalent) that is informed, involved and responsible?

Informed—Board members know the leaders and workers, the goals and objectives of their ministry, its more significant program activities, the status of finances and accounting policies. They know the ministry's more significant administrative procedures, and who is responsible for major decisions. They are able to explain and promote the ministry to others.

Involved—Board members attend board meetings regularly and participate in deliberations. They pray faithfully for the ministry and its leaders and workers, visit outreach locations, and have some degree of first-hand knowledge of the ministry. They support the ministry financially and in other ways.

Responsible—Board members see themselves as ultimately—and legally—responsible for the ministry. When there are problems, they are willing to step in and do their part to solve them.

A board that does these things not only provides stability to the ministry, but also helps to preserve its sense of direction and that of its leaders. And most important, it provides an accountability structure for ministry leaders, which helps to protect the credibility of the ministry.

The accountability structure need not be complicated. It can be a formal board of directors or an informal group of mature men and women who meet regularly and assume personal and corporate responsibility for the integrity of the ministry and its leaders.

2. Are ministry goals and objectives clear, measurable and achievable?

Clear—Goals and objectives should be easy for the ministry staff to understand, fully embrace, and explain to others—especially their partners.

Measurable—It should be possible to measure progress in achieving goals. For instance, if a ministry wants to plant ten churches, then criteria must exist that define when a church is planted.

Achievable—Goals and objectives should be achievable. For example, the goal to “reach the world’s lost with the gospel” is not adequate. An achievable goal is more specific, naming target groups, numbers, time-frames and methods.

Each ministry’s specifics will be different, and may be very simple or complex, but goals and objectives need to be outlined in segments that can actually be achieved.

3. Does the ministry have specific policies and procedures to guide its staff?

Policies define the principles that will govern the organization—its authority structure, how decisions are made, and by whom. Every organization, no matter how small or how simple, needs to have well-defined policies. Procedures describe the mechanism for implementing policies—who does what task, what records must be kept, etc.

Examples in the area of finance are:

Policy—All financial decisions must be approved by the board of directors.

Procedure—Requests for expenses will be submitted by the director to the board treasurer for approval once a month.

4. Does the ministry have adequate personnel, in number and skills, to accomplish the goals and objectives?

Unless the organization has the people to do the work, the work won’t be done.

Unless those people have the needed skills, the work won’t be done properly. For instance, an organization may have the best policies and procedures for financial management, but if it doesn’t have someone who can keep good accounting records, it will fail to meet expectations.

5. Does it have local credibility?

The potential partner’s credibility should be researched within its own working environment. If those who know the ministry best cannot recommend it without reservations, we need to reconsider the partnership.

It is possible, coming from another culture, to add tension to local relationships by not paying heed to what responsible local observers can tell us.

6. Has the ministry adequately met previous commitments?

Good or bad performance of past commitments may be a good indicator of a partner’s ability to fulfill future commitments.

How are Confidence Factors used?

Notice that the confidence factors listed here are not instruments for control. They do not tell a partner what to do. Partner leaders—together with their boards—decide what goals, objectives,

policies and procedures should be adopted. We simply look for signs that give us confidence in the partner's ability to fulfill expectations.

We may also use the confidence factors to help each partner identify areas of strength and of weakness; they provide tools to analyze an organization and determine where it needs strengthening.

In a healthy partnership, each partner is willing to strengthen the other's weak areas—as long as we don't force our ways on the other.

In Conclusion

At this point, you might well ask, "Isn't this concern with accountability too restrictive?" Or, "Where is the freedom to follow the Lord's lead and the flexibility to change course along the way?"

First, in a partnership, partners should feel free to discuss and negotiate changes with each other at any time. Partner relationships need not be rigid, unbending or legalistic. But in a true partnership, each partner voluntarily agrees to be bound to the other in those areas that make up the partnership. They agree not to make unilateral decisions or changes in the terms of the agreement.

No one should be forced into a partnership. But if I voluntarily choose to enter into a partnership, I must honor my commitment to my partner and work to earn my partner's confidence.

We have found that these principles, when applied conscientiously and with good will, allow us and our partners to have the best of both worlds: we get a high degree of accountability while preserving each partner's autonomy and decision-making integrity. In short, it produces a strong, healthy and productive cross-cultural partnership.

ACCOUNTABLE FOR FAITHFULNESS

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Defining Accountability

- Accountability in its broadest sense is the condition whereby the *motives* and *actions* of one person are *subject to review*, examination and judgment *by another* person or by an authority structure.

Accountability in Christian partnerships

- It is being *willing* to place one's own motives, actions and outcomes under someone else's review and examination according to mutually agreed upon expectations, in an environment of *good faith* and *mutual trust*.

- In Christian partnerships there is the *added element of a good attitude towards accountability itself*.

Traditional criteria for accountability

a) measuring results

b) measuring group loyalty

measuring results

- more typically Western - based on measurable gain

In Western societies, community infrastructure and stability has been delegated to external institutions: government, courts, and schools.

Goals and tasks can be segregated from relationships. Individual work and usefulness are seen as derived from success in achieving the task.

Goal: 10 churches in one year - at end of year, count the number of churches and decide if we succeeded or failed.

Relationships are important, but less important than the goal. They are presumed to be taken care of in some other way.

Measuring group loyalty - more typically non-Western - based on security derived from trust - protecting the clan is seen as more fundamental than achieving the goal, because without the clan the goal is meaningless.

Outside institutions are not trusted to preserve group unity and stability. Tasks are not merely a job to be done, but a context in which community is strengthened.

In such cultures people are held accountable in terms of their loyalty to a person, family or institution. Results are important, but less important than loyalty. A task achieved at the expense of community stability is a contradiction.

In such cultures, a church may also set a goal of 10 churches in one year, but this goal is primarily the expression of a desire. Their satisfaction at the end of the year will depend more on how well they expressed loyalty than on whether 10 churches were established. Strained relations would give a sense of failure even if the numerical goals were achieved or exceeded.

Question: What are the problems with this approach?

Question: What is good about this approach?

Accountability

Universal - all human communities display it, from a group of two to a group of 100 million.

Biblical. - Genesis 3, where God calls on **Adam and Eve** to account

Cain was held accountable by God for his actions concerning his brother, and God would hold accountable anyone who would threaten Cain's life.

The **apostle Paul**, when he sent contributions to the church in Jerusalem, took accountability seriously, and formed an **accountability team** to carry the money.

I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. ¹⁷For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. ¹⁸And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. ¹⁹What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. ²⁰We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. ²¹For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men. ²²In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. ²³As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. ²⁴Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it. [2Cor.8:16-24].

Accounting for Faithfulness

1. *We do not control all the variables that affect results.*

- 1Cor.3:6: I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God gave the growth

Paul was faithful in planting, Apollos in watering ... that is all they could do, that is all they could be held accountable for.

2. *We do not know the future.*

- James 4:13-14: Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow

Parable of The Faithful Servant
Matthew 25:14-30

Who are the faithful servants?

v.16, 17 - The one who had received five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more.

His faithfulness is shown by his attitude and his work, not the outcome, which could have been lost on a bad market, or stolen by bank-robbers.

Who is the unfaithful servant?

v. 18 – But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

His unfaithfulness was in the fact that he did not work for his master's interests, but only thought of himself and his safety.

How do we account for faithfulness?

A faithful servant shows his faithfulness in specific things.

Attitude

Diligence

Action steps

What about results? Is there not a place for results in ministry?

- Account for faithfulness
- When growth occurs, report results
- **Measuring faithfulness** - As Christians, we know that we do not have control over external circumstances. As the apostle James says,

¹³Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." (James 5:13-15).

He teaches us to use the conditional little word "IF", acknowledging that it is the Lord who controls results. What, if anything, is under our control?

In light of this discussion, how do we account for faithfulness?

1. We commit ourselves to those things we can reasonably know we can do.

If our desire is to see ten churches established among a given people in the next five years, we can state what steps we plan to take to accomplish that.

- i. Did I do the field survey by the date I set myself to do?
- ii. Did we make the appropriate preparations to establish residence in the area?
- iii. Name three additional tasks you can do toward that hypothetical goal of 10 churches in 5 years.

How does this help us relate to those who want to help us?

IS IT WRONG, THEN, TO SET GOALS?

Setting goals is good, because they give us a sense of direction, a theme around which we can organize our faithfulness (obedience).

(God gave Israel the goal of reaching and entering the promised land).

Though we may not establish ten or five, perhaps not even one church in that time, we can still be held accountable for those things we committed to do toward the goal. You may add many more things to that list. And when we are not able to do something, do we have an honorable explanation?

We do not know the future

Still, we can be held accountable for our faithfulness in pursuing the goal. This is all we can do, and this is all we can honestly seek support for. Anything else puts us in an untenable platform for ministry, which may seem good initially but creates an unhealthy environment in which we are tempted to force artificial results or deceive with our reports in order to

Paul wanted to avoid any criticism of the way the apostles administered the gift [v.20], so he created **a team of trusted people who could make sure that the money was handled correctly.**

People have been held accountable from the beginning of time—to God, to local government, to parents and patriarchs, to spouses. In fact, accountability seems to be essential to any meaningful relationship between persons in any culture. It may be called different things and described in different ways, but the concept is the same.

What are the essential characteristics of accountability?