

# **Biblical Teachings on Accountability: A Challenge to Christian Politicians and Public Office-Holders**

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*ABSTRACT—The practice of public accountability is one which has been trivialized within our national polity for a long time. Public officers seem to have a misconception that it is not quite necessary, hence they order the financial life of the nation as it pleases them. The irony of it is that Christians who according to the Bible are expected to be the light of the world, are not helping matters, as some of them are continually being indicted for unethical practices. So far, this concept is considered the world over as an indispensable part of political governance and there is no denying the fact that the bible attaches much importance to it. In the light of this, this paper discusses the concept from a biblical perspective, appeals to Christians in positions of leadership, to understand their true worth and challenges them into a life of accountability both to God and the State.*

*Keywords: accountability, Christian politicians, public office-holder*

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## **I. Introduction**

Public accountability is a concept which is highly necessary for our economic survival as a nation. It is a virtue which is highly esteemed by the average citizen and expected of every politician and public office-holder, but this highly esteemed virtue has continued to elude the Nigerian society for a long time. Year in and year out, public officers, Christians and Muslims alike going and out of office without rendering account of their stewardship, thus the Nigerian nation has either consciously or unconsciously institutionalized corruption. This has resulted in severe suffering for the teeming populace. At present, nothing seems to be working within the national structure. The power sector is epileptic; the health sector needs healing; provision of housing is virtually non-existent; all areas of transportation have gradually faded into oblivion; and education is crumbling. This failure cannot in any way be attributed to lack of funds, since trillions of naira goes out of government coffers every year. The irony is that this huge sum of money achieves next to nothing, with nobody to hold accountable for this phenomenon. Other developing economies like Nigeria face similar problems.

However, a close study of the subject-matter reveals that there is a divine dimension to it. The holy books teach that God is a God of accountability. In the same vein, virtually all religions teach that every man will be held accountable for his actions either here on earth or in the hereafter. One then wonders why politicians and other public office-holders, who profess religious beliefs, either as Christians or Muslims, and who incidentally, were sworn into office with either the Bible or the Quran are continually entangled in the web of corruption. It is either that they are not aware of the content of the books with which they were sworn into office or they are deliberately disobeying its injunctions.

It is in the light of this that this paper examines this concept from the biblical perspective, highlighting the implications of the biblical teachings and the challenges it poses to the Christian politicians and public office-holders.

## **II. The Concept of Public Accountability**

Accountability is a desperately needed virtue within our world today, and is expected of public office-holders. It implies that

politicians and other public-office-holders voluntarily give account of their stewardship to the populace who have elected them into office and whom they have sworn to serve in whatever capacity. As indicated, this concept is highly necessary for our economic survival as a nation. It is the hallmark of modern democratic governances, without which all the “hue and cry” about eradication of corruption within our national polity will amount to mere illusion. Also, the so much expected dividend of democracy will forever remain a mirage if those in power at any point in time cannot be held accountable for their acts, decisions, policies and expenditure while in office.

Public accountability, as an institution, therefore, should be allowed to complement public management, because it is needed for all the laudable government programs and projects to materialize. It should not be seen just as another political catchword: rather, it should refer to institutionalized practice of account-giving. Day and Klein (1987:5) defines it as a social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct to some significant other. The actor here can be either an individual or an agency, while the significant other could mean an accountability forum, or a more virtual entity, such as God, in case of devout Christians, or the general public in the case of public officers. Simply put within our context, it is a situation where public officers will often be under a formal obligation to give account of their stewardship on a regular basis to specific forums, such as their superiors, supervisory agencies or the public at large. It should remain one of those evocative political words that can be used to evoke an image of good governance.

Historically, the concept of accountability is closely related to accounting. In fact, it literally comes from bookkeeping. According to Dubnick 2002, the roots of the contemporary concept can be traced to the reign of William 1, in the decades after the 1066 Norman conquest of England. In 1085, William required all the property holders in his domain to render account of their possession. These possessions were valued and listed by royal agents in the so called Domesday Book. This arrangement apart from making taxation easier, also established the foundation of the royal governance. The Domesday Books listed what was in the king’s domain; moreover, the king had the entire property owners swear to an oath, with the aim of securing their allegiance. In the early twelfth century this evolved into a highly centralized administration that was ruled through centralized auditing and semi- annual account-giving.

In the centuries that passed since the reign of William 1 of England, accountability has slowly struggled out of its etymological bondage with accounting. It has moved far beyond its book-keeping origins and has become a symbol for good governance, both in the public and private sector. Within contemporary political discourse therefore, ‘accountability’ no longer convey an image of book-keeping and financial administration, but connotes an expression of responsible governance. The concept has come to be used synonymously with such terms as transparency, efficiency, integrity, trustworthiness, fidelity, justice and egalitarianism. Moreover, today, the accounting relationship has almost completely reversed, for accountability no more simply refers to leaders holding their subjects to account, but it is the leaders themselves who are being held accountable by their citizens.

Kelly (1997) emphasizes that accountability is essential for establishing and maintaining wholesome relationships. It is important at every level of society, hence there are such concepts as political, employment, social and business accountability. Everyone needs the values and benefits of accountability. It helps keep people honest and credible; preserves and protects their integrity; and prevents them from becoming complacent and negligent in personal relationships and professional responsibilities. At the same time, it presents one with challenges of endeavoring to measure up to a standard in one’s responsibilities.

### **III. Biblical Accountability**

Schmidgall (1997) emphasized that a vivid study of the Bible reveals that God expects accountability on a regular basis. He pointed out that God confronted Adam and Eve with the fact that they had hidden themselves. He did not absolve them immediately but waited as they gave an explanation of their actions and followed it up with discipline (Genesis 3:1-24). Other instances of accountability abound in the Bible: Cain, who murdered his brother, Abel, was required to face the Lord (Genesis 4:1-16); Moses, who in a fit of rage did not follow God’s instructions carefully, was by God forbidden to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 20:11-12); David who committed immorality with Uriah’s wife, was confronted by the Prophet Nathan (2Samuel 11:1-12:23). Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the Holy Spirit and to Peter, were not only asked a reason for their actions, but

were judged for them (Acts 5:1-12); and the man in the Corinthian Church who committed immorality with his stepmother was banished from the church (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:1-5). It is therefore clear from scripture that accountability is part of the divine plan. It is a key to keeping on course or correcting one's course and an important means of channeling our energy and resources as leaders. It is absolutely essential if we are to avoid behaving in destructive ways.

Many of the parabolic teachings of Christ are lessons in stewardship, which is the biblical word for accountability. Grant (1974, p. 55) explains that in the Greco-Roman world, a steward was a person called to a right use of that which had been entrusted to him by another. These parables therefore enjoin the principle of accountability on everyone. They point to the fact that God will hold everyone accountable for his action and lifestyle. They explained that Christians will have to give an account of their service to God, receiving reward or punishment (Wenham n.d:86). The bible indicates that in the exercise of biblical stewardship, Christians are to be faithful in little things (Luke 16:10); are to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness (Matt 6:33); and as servants, should be particularly concerned about the welfare of others (Habecker, 1987, p145). The concept therefore is a great regulative principle of human life; the organization that trifles with it will fall; any nation or community that fails to inculcate it in its administration is heading for doom; and any individual person who fails to imbibe it as a way of life can never make any headway. A man may misuse what is committed to his hands and his neighbors may not have the wherewithal to call him to question, however, he will answer to God, whose eyes watches his every thought, motive and expression of behavior.

The life of Samuel was a typical example of public accountability. The biblical narrative has it that Samuel served the nation of Israel for his entire lifetime. He was a leader highly revered by the populace. When he was to retire from his service to the nation, he specifically challenged the people, to bear witness against him if he had dealt fraudulently with anyone. He says:-

Let me ask this, Have I ever taken anyone's ox or donkey or forced you to give me anything? Have I ever hurt anyone or taken a bribe to give an unfair decision? Answer me as the Lord and his chosen king can hear you. And if I have done any of these things, I will give it all back. "No," the

Israelites answered. “You’ve never cheated us in any way!”  
(1Samuel 12:3-4).

Here, Samuel challenged the people publicly to testify against his administration in the event of any mismanagement or corrupt practices, but the people could not find any fault in him (Fleming 1994:111). Such is the type of accountable lifestyle that is required of God from every Christian politician or public officer.

#### **IV. The Challenge of our Time**

In many countries of the world, especially in Africa, this concept has been highly trivialized and handled with such levity that being in politics is almost synonymous with looting and stealing. Politicians and other public officers desecrate the national wealth with utter impunity. They loot the treasury at will and get away with it. Politics has therefore been given the tag of a “dirty game”, in which only dirty people get involved. It is in this context that there are assertions in certain Christian quarters that committed Christians have no business being in politics. They maintained that Christian involvement in politics should not go beyond voting in elections and thereafter continue to pray for those so elected. They doubt the possibility and credibility of Christians getting involved in the so-called dirty game, without being corrupted by it.

However, in spite of the fact that we may not always agree with each other on this topic, it is the submission in this paper that there is nothing wrong with Christians participating in partisan politics. Geisler (1987:587-588) quoting Burke remarked that all that is necessary for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing. If good people don’t get involved in running the government, then evil people will and they will always have field days looting the treasury. According to him, it is not going to do us any good cursing the darkness, all that is necessary for light to prevail over darkness is to make certain efforts to light some candles. He therefore submitted that Christians have a moral obligation to be involved in the administration of their world. As Christians, we are called to be light in the dark places in the world and salt penetrating a rotten world. There are no indications that the Bible specifically warned Christians against being in politics. The problem of our time is that there are certain realities which the Christian office-holders must come to

terms with, in order for them to function effectively and religiously in their various offices, three of which are hereby discussed.

The first of these is that leaders are God's agents (Prince 1973:46-57). Our leaders should be aware of this fact. It is the ignorance of it that has almost made vices a way of life among them. An agent is one appointed by another person to act on his behalf. The Bible tells us that power belongs to God (Psalm 62:11). He is the actual and supreme ruler of the universe and only delegates authority to whoever pleases Him (Daniel 4:25-26). It went further to say that no power, - that is, government or leadership-, could exist except it is ordained by God. God has a hand in every human government. He appoints leaders into positions, expects them to function according to His express command and equally expect their followers to submit to their authorities (Romans 13:1-7). Therefore, leaders whether spiritual, secular or political are God's agents among men. Governance is God ruling in the kingdom of men, with their fellow men as His agents. (Daniel 4:25-26). This is quite imperative because He needs to coordinate the activities of men for peace and orderliness to prevail in the world and this is impossible without the assistance of mankind. His sovereignty notwithstanding, God is limited in certain contexts. To Him therefore, men are quite indispensable because He cannot achieve most of his objectives on earth without making use of them. Because of this limitation on His part, He depends solely on men to organize their fellow men generally for their good. This is what leadership is all about. It is men functioning among men as coordinators of their fellow men for their good and that of the environment.

It behoves our leaders to have this at the back of their mind that they were brought into their present leadership positions by God, in order that they may act as His representatives among their people. Their election or appointment as the case may be was made possible by God only because he wanted it and thereby sanctioned it. The main reason behind this is that He wants to make use of them to improve their world. If they find themselves in power today, it is because it only pleases God, for them to share part of his belongings (power) with them. Therefore the power they have is delegated authority which must be administered in line with the instructions of God who owns it and must be accounted by. It is only wise to operate an equipment according to the manufacturer's manual, without which it cannot function properly. The problem of some is that, power which is God's is being administered contrary to his instructions, hence the

sufferings that is being experienced in the lands. For these sufferings to be alleviated there is the need for our leaders to hold themselves accountable to God and the State. This is the greatest poverty alleviating tool a country can have.

Next is the fact that leadership is accorded divine recognition. Because of the importance of leadership, God gave it a strong recognition in the scheme of things. Therefore leadership from the biblical perspective is a divine assignment. It is recognized, developed and commissioned by God when necessary and respected by Him. The word “recognition” will be considered from three perspectives, which are foreknowledge, approval and respect. In other words, when we say that God recognizes leadership, we mean that He has a foreknowledge of the institution; the personnel that run them; approves of the institutions and give due respect to those in leadership positions.

With respect to foreknowledge, the biblical viewpoint is that, nobody becomes a leader by accident. Many of the leaders in the Bible – Moses, Samson, Joseph, Gideon and Joshua etc – became one because they had been so chosen by God. A typical example was that of the Prophet Jeremiah. When God called him to the prophetic office, Jeremiah reacted rather negatively to the call with a feeling of reluctance, inadequacy and personal unworthiness. He protested and shrunk from the task God gave him and beg to be excused. He complained about his tender age, lack of experience and eloquence. To him he was only a child and not mature enough to function as a prophet (Freeman 1983:242; Mears 1983:223-224). However, God told him that his appointment never came by chance; rather he had been divinely designated for the position even before he was born. The message to him was – “Before I (God) formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:4-5). Same was the case with Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson and a host of others. The import of this is that God knows all the leaders by name, he is aware of the various positions which they occupied and all what they did was open to him. In this context, our leaders need to be reminded once again, that they are in their present positions by divine arrangement. Therefore, they should make the best use of this golden opportunity, which God has placed at their disposal by giving selfless and sacrificial service.

Apart from God’s foreknowledge of those in leadership positions, He also gives approval to the institution. All through the Bible, there is no record of God despising any leader. Although He might caution



them for their excesses, but there are no indications whatsoever, that God was offended because people occupied leadership positions. God himself is continually being referred to as the Supreme Governor of the Universe. In other words, He occupies the overall leadership position, approves of other leaders in their respective positions, but only expects them to be subject to His rule.

God's recognition of leaders can also be seen from the fact that He accords them due respect. This could be seen from the way and manner by which God deals with such people throughout history. We can take one example from the biblical story of Joseph. During the time of Joseph's stay in Egypt, God had a message for the nation. Here, God's respect to the leadership was demonstrated by the fact that He never by-passed the Pharaoh of the day, but gave the message directly to him in the form of two dreams. These were the two dreams, which Joseph interpreted and which raised him to prominence in the land. The dreams were first to the leader. It was the inability of the leader and his aides to interpret them that brought Joseph to the scene (Genesis 41:1-57).

The third is the fact that accountability is a must. Whether we believe it or not, this world is just a place of sojourn for us. No matter how long we might stay here, we will leave one day and be faced with either the pleasure or the frustration of standing before God and giving account of our stewardship. You will be asked to give account of how you managed the affairs of that position which He has appointed you to. Giving account of yourself before God will be pleasurable if you perform well, but would be quite frustrating should you mess up that position.

Our leaders are to bear in mind that the part which they were appointed to play today wherever they might find themselves transcends this world into eternity. How they lead, will determine what they will get from God in the end, it is either commendation or condemnation. There will be commendation for good and responsible leadership and condemnation for irresponsible management of human and material resources. Although they might manage to escape being accountable here on earth, this is quite impossible before God. The Bible says – "So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). In other words, whether we believe it or not accountability will take place, it might be here or in the hereafter.

## V. Remedy

The remedy to irresponsible leadership within the Nigerian polity is accountability. But this will continue to elude us until we recognize the place of spirituality in political or corporate leadership. Spirituality in the sense in which it is employed here has to do with ones relationship with God. The most important characteristics of a leader should be his devotion to God. A leader who aspires to excellence must be a man of the spirit. To make any positive impact in any position, whether it is politics, social service or whatever, there is the need to start with a personal relationship with Christ. It is impossible to give out more than one has within. As Christians, only through Christ living in us will we have the energy, wisdom, compassion, vision, patience and the grace needed to be honest stewards of what is committed into our hands.

In this context therefore, there is the need for a re-definition of Christianity. It is obvious that many leaders who profess to be Christians and who were sworn into office using the Bible; do not understand what their faith is all about. Christianity is more than going to Church or laying claims to salvation or being born again, rather the man who claims to be a Christian must exemplify in the practice of holiness. Holiness is the life and nature of God. Anyone who claims to serve God must share his nature (2Timothy 2:19). An empty profession of the faith is not enough. The scriptural emphasis is that of total commitment and surrender to God. It is a situation whereby the man who profess to be religious takes time to obey all the injunctions of the faith as stated in the Holy Scripture. This is practical Christianity. According to the Bible, a real Christian is a person who (i) has come to God as a lost sinner; (ii) accepted by faith with the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, by surrendering to Him as Lord and Master; (iii) confesses Christ as Lord before the world; and then, (iv) endeavor to please Him in every thought, word and deed of his life. All these will culminate in him being led by God in all steps to be taken. Whenever God leads, it becomes quite easy to function properly as a leader of men. Our leaders should bear in mind that their relationship with the “Holy Other”, determines to a large extent their relationship with “the others”.

The privilege and responsibility of being the people of God demands a knowledge and practice on his character. Christian politicians should therefore ensure that theirs is not a life of greed or ostentatious living while in power, for these are some of the elements

which engenders unaccountability. They should allow themselves to be guided by biblical principles in the exercise of their national assignments. The words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes are germane here. After his assessment of all human endeavors, he came to the painful conclusion that all was vanity and displeasure of the spirit (Ecclesiastes 1:15-2:26). King Solomon concluded this message of his with these words of encouragement and caution to his readers. He says “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it is good, or whether it is evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). The emphasis here is that – You can escape being accountable now, but you cannot escape it forever. You can escape being accountable here, but you cannot escape it in the hereafter. To whom much is committed, much is expected.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The concern of this chapter has been public accountability. As already indicated, virtually all facets of life within the African environment is ailing because the money earmarked for their funding, maintenance and sustenance usually end-up in some private pockets. It is not an overstatement to say this will continue to stoke the embers of under-development on the continent. There is therefore, the need to start thinking of this issue very seriously. It behoves those in prominent public positions, who profess one religion or the other, especially Christians to whom this paper is addressed, to introduce a biblical dimension to governance. The Bible refers to Christians as the light of the world and the salt of the earth. In this capacity, they should rise to the occasion and lead the way in the pro accountability crusade, through personal example. It is only through this that the public trust in them, which has been eroded can be restored and simultaneously, by it the nations will be liberated from the shackles of corruption.

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