A Word That's Not in the Bible

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'Accountability' is a very corporate-sounding word for a very relational concept. It's not complicated or controversial, it's simply obvious. Just like businesses invite auditors to examine their practices and procedures, we as Christians should invite the perspective of other trustworthy believers. We should be humble enough to receive their views about how we are living, but also bold enough to speak up (in gentleness and grace) about what we are seeing in the lives of others. God has given people wisdom and He puts us in each other's lives so that we will help each other to be more like Jesus. It isn't just a good idea, it's absolutely vital.

Accountability Questioned

That's why I was alarmed to recently read a fellow pastor's words on social media. In a frustrated tone, this person boldly took aim at a negative trend they're seeing in some churches. Unfortunately, their critique wasn't leveled at a particular sin or compromise currently found in the house of God – it was against the very concept of being accountable to each other. In a generation that should be doing whatever possible to reject worldliness and live holy lives, it was an extraordinarily counter-productive shot for a church leader to fire.

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> concept.

In amongst some undisputed, obviously correct observations – we should all first be listening to the Holy Spirit, for example – this misleading statement was made: Nowhere in the Bible do we see the word 'accountability'. It's not in the King James Version, it's not in the NIV, it's not a Bible word. This may surprise some people, and could even cause some to question whether we should be practicing something that does not appear in the Bible, but it's actually a very weak argument to make. We shouldn't be concerned about whether or not a word appears in the Bible; we should concern ourselves with whether or not we see the ingredients that create the concept. And besides, the word 'accountability' isn't the only well-worn word that doesn't appear in the Bible.

Another Word Not In The Bible

I remember the exact moment two young men came to me at a Christian music festival and, without much context and in the hushed tones of true conspiracy theorists, asked me if I realised that the word 'trinity' doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible. I told them I hadn't actually realised that fact, while inwardly thinking that what I really hadn't realised was how much I didn't care. But it turned out they were right – go and search the word 'trinity' in the 1,700 or so pages of the Strong's Exhaustive Bible Concordance. It's not there. It's a word we made up. But hands up if you don't believe the doctrine of the trinity of God. Anyone? Didn't think so. The word isn't in the Bible but the concept is. The ingredients are there. The results are there. From Scripture you can prove that there is a Father, a Son and a Holy Spirit; that the Father and Son are one; that the Son and Spirit are one; that the Father and Spirit are one. Boom. Trinity.

Concept is Key

It's the same with the word 'accountability'. The pastor who took to social media was right – the word itself doesn't appear in Scripture. But his overall point was wrong, because the concept does indeed appear. And the minute you begin to worry less about the word than the actual concept, it becomes obvious. For a start, the bulk of the New Testament is made up of letters to churches. If all we had to do was listen to the Holy Spirit and no one else, why were those letters even written? We are obviously expected to listen to the voices of people as well as God, because the way God often speaks is through people. No man's voice should ever take the place of God, but no man should assume that God cannot speak to him through a person.

Paul Was Accountable

Want more ingredients of accountability? Consider Paul, who was extremely accountable to

people. A reminder: Paul was evangelised by the risen Jesus. Anyone got a conversion story to top that? He had a vision of heaven so real that he wasn't sure if he was actually there and heard things he was not permitted to repeat (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). You'd think a guy like that wouldn't really need to take advice or correction from people, and yet we see the opposite. In Galatians 2:1-2 he outlines a trip to Jerusalem and to the apostles to present the gospel he was preaching. He'd been born again seventeen years previously by this point, but he went to the apostles to check that he was preaching the right gospel, 'to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain.' Paul, the great apostle, was initiating an audit on himself. Do you really think, with the incredible revelations he'd received directly from Jesus, that he needed to do that? He clearly thought so. He didn't use the word 'accountability', but that's exactly what's being described. He wasn't presuming he was getting everything right, but was humbly inviting perspective.

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Paul was also prepared to speak into the lives of others. He took time in his letters to give personal messages that would hold people to account, whether it was telling Archippus to complete what God had told him to do (Colossians 4:17) or highlighting Euodia and Syntyche's need to stop quarreling (Philippians 4:1-2). He did it with honour and encouragement, and without insensitive bluntness, but he still did it. He didn't think to himself, 'They have the Holy Spirit and they must listen to Him. I have no right to say anything.' He partnered with Jesus by being a true brother and speaking up where it seemed necessary. Again, you will not find the word 'accountability' anywhere in those passages, but they describe the very outworking of the concept.

God Speaks Through People Too

And so I must take great exception to the flawed, unbiblical idea that we should not be accountable to one another just because we do not see that word in the Bible. If someone is standing against the abuses of accountability – like controlling people or hypocrites, for example – I will stand with them in solidarity. But if they enthusiastically throw out the bath water because of that abuse, I'll remind them that there's a baby in there. The abuses of the concept do not erase the concept – they just mean we should apply it with care and grace. Yes, Jesus did say that the Holy Spirit Himself would teach us all things (John 14:26) and John did write that we have an anointing from the Holy One and all know the truth (1 John 2:20), but there's also something else: 1 Corinthians 12:13 tells us that we are all baptised in one Spirit. As I try to hear the Holy Spirit teaching me, He may just be doing it through your voice into my life. In fact, that's

often how it happens. God used Priscilla and Aquila to graciously hold Apollos accountable in Acts 18:18-26, and if we want to live like the church of Acts, we should embrace the same pattern they lived out.

“Fools” for Jesus

I’ll end with an observation. The leader who posted their frustration with the idea of accountability called it ‘foolishness’. This is not an unexpected reaction, and I suspect that as our generation moves more and more towards a Christianity that suits itself, the idea of opening our lives to scrutiny will indeed seem foolish. But I’m happy to be a fool. The day I called on Jesus I gave away my rights anyway, and I would rather do the difficult things by faith than do the easy things because it makes me happy. The person who wants to reject an obviously important part of the New Testament has the right to make their own decision, but I want something more. I want to get somewhere. Decades from now I want to be serving Jesus with even more faith, and I need help from my brothers and sisters if I’m going to do that.

So I want to encourage you: Let’s practice accountability. Let’s invite the perspective of others. Let’s speak the truth in love to each other. Let’s not listen to people who call us into a Christianity where we don’t have to give an account to the family of God for the way we live. Such a Christianity doesn’t exist. Let’s ignore that nonsense. Let’s actually read the Bible – the whole thing. And let’s not get hung up on words that are absent when it’s abundantly clear what’s been there all along.