

Ephrata Church of the Brethren
Galen Hackman
Demolishing Strongholds
Accountability
James 5:16-20

As we were working through the Naming the Powers, Understanding Strongholds series back in Lent, I was thinking about why it is so difficult for us to gain victory over things in our lives that somehow keep us from being all we were created to be.

Why is it that I struggle to change my attitude, or my critical spirit or my excessive spending—or whatever? As I thought about this, and especially as I was thinking about this series, dealing more specifically with how we take down the strongholds in our lives, I came to recognize the power of these four principles that we are outlining week by week as we lead up to our Sacred Assembly.

Confession—we need to be honest about our stronghold. We need to name it and to agree with God about the nature of it

Repentance—of course just knowing our issue is not enough. As we agree with God about the nature of our sin, we feel sorrow over it. That sorrow then leads us to actions of repentance, wherein we seek to turn from our issues and turn toward God.

Those are two really important spiritual disciplines for the Christian life. They are foundational. No progress in our spiritual journal occurs without these.

However, we all know that often this is not enough. Especially when the issue we are dealing with is really a stronghold—something deeply ingrained in us that has exercised strong control over us.

We have all been there. We fail. We feel bad. We name it to God. We promise to never do it again. We even try to make some adjustments to help keep us from falling again. But it happens again and we find ourselves back where we started from.

I believe one of the missing components in this scenario is what I am talking about today—accountability.

What is accountability? ***Pull out the insert in today's bulletin—the one marked Demolishing Strongholds.*** Notice this definition:

Accountability: Living in community, getting honest with ourselves and with other people in our lives; being vulnerable, reliable, transparent, genuine, trustworthy and true; holding ourselves and others to our words and commitments.

I really like that definition. You can find it also in our congregational DNA. Simply put, accountability is giving other people the freedom to speak into your life in meaningful—sometimes hard—ways.

Accountability is a biblical principle. Notice the scriptures on that insert. They are just representative of many others that could be used. We are accountable to God first of all; after all he is our Creator.

But we also are accountable to the people with whom we live together in community. That of course includes your family. It includes the contractual relationship you have with your employer or employees. And it includes the covenant relationship you have with the other believers in your church.

One of the images used in Scripture to help us picture what it means to live in relationship with each other in the Church is the image of the body. Notice the Scripture from Ephesians on the back side of your insert.

Ephesians 4:14-16: Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

If individually I want to be at this place in my life where I am not blown about by every desire and whim and wind of doctrine, I will need to be connected to a body in which “each part does its work.” In other words, to be free and victorious, I need the help of others.

When I open my life up to others, I am becoming accountable.

Why is this so important? Simply put, accountability is important because the possibility for self deceit lies deep within each of us. If we know we can get away with it, many of us will try.

In the 1980s, an I.R.S. research officer in Washington named John Szilagyi had seen enough random audits to know that some taxpayers were incorrectly claiming dependants for the sake of exemption. Sometimes it was a genuine mistake (a divorced wife and husband making duplicate claims on their children), and sometimes the claims were comically fraudulent (Szilagyi recalls at least one dependent's name listed as Fluffy, who was quite obviously a pet rather than a child). Szilagyi decided that the most efficient way to clean up this mess was to simply require taxpayers to list their children's Social Security numbers... [His] idea was ... put into law for tax year 1986. When the returns started coming in the following April, Szilagyi recalls, he and his bosses were shocked: seven million dependents had suddenly vanished from the tax rolls, ... Szilagyi's clever twist generated nearly \$3 billion in revenues in a single year.

Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics* (William Morrow 2006), p. 239

My point is that when there is no accountability, human nature more easily leads us astray. I'm not suggesting that any of us would have listed fraudulent dependents on our tax returns—I'm only saying that we all need accountability systems in our lives.

There are a number of ways I work at building accountability into my life. On a personal level, my wife Doris is the closet person in my life. As husband and wife, we live in a covenant together. We try to honor that in many ways—a simple one is that it is rare when we do not know where the other person is—even on days when we do not see each other from morning till evening.

Professionally, it is also important that I live in community with others and submit to accountability. I work at this in a number of ways. Organizationally, I meet most months with the Ministry and Evangelism Commission. They help guide the ministry here. I routinely say to them: Is there anything you need to say to me.

When I began realizing that we have come under spiritual attack here at church and that if we were going to break through it also knew I would need some help. So, with the approval of the Ministry and Evangelism Commission, we put together a team of people who are helping to guide me through this process. I call this the Issachar Team, from a reference to people from the tribe of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:22). The team includes the Moderator and Associate Moderator of the congregation, representatives from M&E and a few others. Each week this team, along with the other staff of the church, review my sermons and make invaluable contributions. The team meets regularly to discern how the process is going, what needs to be said, what is not clear, how are people responding.

I am also accountable for my ordination to the Atlantic Northeast District, so I have been in conversation with Craig Smith, our District Executive, about the process we are in here at church. By the way, brother Smith is planning to be with us, Lord willing, for our Sacred Assembly.

I share this simply to demonstrate ways that I try to implement accountability into my life. It is important for me and it is important for all of us.

So accountability is important because without it we can be too easily led astray. It is also important because living in community—living with integrity—brings a wholeness to our lives that is otherwise missing. When I open my life up to others, and they to me, I join them on their life's journey and I begin to see from their perspective and to understand life via their experiences, and I am richer because of it.

I think there are two huge parts to accountability that are most difficult for us.

One is being vulnerable enough with another person so that we and they feel comfortable confessing our faults on each other. James says:

James 5:16

confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

There is something very powerful in this kind of vulnerability. It is too often the missing piece in our struggle to break free from strongholds. The more we can be really real with another person—a person who will hear us, love us, not judge us, but walk with us—the more power we will realize in our lives. It is a basic biblical truth that we seem to avoid like the plague.

The other really difficult piece of accountability relates to our responsibility to hold each other accountable to our commitments and responsibilities in the church.

A wise person once said:

All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.

Attributed to English philosopher Edward Burke

Jesus said:

Matthew 18:15-17

"If a brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

And Paul reminds us:

Galatians 6:1-2

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Why do we do this so infrequently? My guess is that our hesitancy relates to the sallow nature of our relationships with each other in the Church—something we are working to change through our emphasis on community and discipleship groups. We do not care deeply enough about each other to really want the best for them, and thus we do not take responsibility as a caring brother or sister should.

My guess our inability to do this also has something to do with our own level of spirituality, as well as our own self worth. Who am I, we say and think, to speak to that person about that, or to raise this question about this, or whatever?

Naturally, we are called to walk by the law of love, so love must always be the guiding principle of our relationships. True love cares enough to confront—but true love confronts lovingly. Our attitude, our choice of words and our motives must always come under the scrutiny of love.

And my guess a lot of our hesitancy to live in this kind of community results from the culture of our times. The great American dream of freedom and independence and private property—which I believe are all good things—has often left us feeling like we are not accountable to others nor responsible for anything other than our own stuff.

Of course all those excuses are lies. In the Body of Christ we are brothers and sisters of one family of faith, and we love each other. True love cares enough to confront. Whether you are dealing with a spiritual stronghold in your life personally, in your family, in your community, or here in the church, freedom will not come so long as we live only to ourselves. We need each other.

This morning Bev Gerhart has a testimony that relates to our inability to truly live in community with each other in the church.

Testimony

I want to end by again asking that each of you attend the Sacred Assembly on May 18 at 9:30 am.