Theological Foundations for Personal Responsibility   by David W. Gill (1998)

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1. What is "personal responsibility"?

My subject is *personal responsibility* (or "individual" responsibility)---not national responsibility, the special responsibility of Christian churches, or other possibilities. And we will explore the *theological foundations*---not the political, philosophical, or psychological foundations---of such responsibility.

Why is this important? What is our problem today?

We have too many people who deny, ignore, or evade responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Business leaders may make decisions which harm employees, consumers, and the environment---but excuse themselves from responsibility for the consequences of their actions.   Politicians sometimes behave corruptly in seeking campaign financing, in misrepresenting their opponents, or in their personal relations---and then do everything they can to avoid accountability to the electorate. Teachers may fail to prepare adequately for competent teaching, athletes may be out of condition and give half-hearted efforts, parents may produce offspring with no intention of providing them a stable and healthy home environment.

The list goes on. Irresponsible people in all sectors of society blame others, make excuses for themselves, and tell the rest of us to buzz off because it is none of our business what they do. How can we promote personal responsibility in such an irresponsible era?

Let's begin with some definition of the term: *responsibility* means *accountability.* Remember the basic meaning of "response" is "answer." If you are responsible you are accountable---you are *answerable.* You must answer or account for your conduct, for what has happened, or for what is or will be happening. It is your *obligation* to do something and you are *accountable* for whether and how it is done. We designate individuals as "responsible" when we want to indicate who should be blamed or praised, who should be asked about something, whose fault or credit something is. This is the first meaning of personal responsibility: a descriptive, factual indication of who is obligated to care for something and is answerable for how well or poorly this is done. Dr. Chase is responsible for the activities of Wheaton College's Center for Applied Christian Ethics. If you don't like what's happening, tell him about it!

In a second sense, "responsible" and "irresponsible" are terms of praise or reproach (not just statements of fact as in the first definition). Thus, to be personally responsible means that you willingly and reliably agree to care for something and be held accountable for it. We praise someone by saying "She is very responsible."   We reproach someone by saying "he is irresponsible," i.e., "he shirks accountability" or "she is unreliable." A responsible person *willingly accepts accountability* and *willingly agrees to care* for something and be blamed or praised for what happens. A responsible person is *reliable*; we can count on them taking care of what they say they will. Professor Fletcher is a responsible person in this sense; he readily agreed to substitute for his ill colleague and he could be relied upon to show up as he agreed.

2. The Theological Foundation of Personal Responsibility

The theological foundation of personal responsibility begins in Creation, in what God said and what God made. Man and woman are created by the word of God and then are addressed by their Creator. Man and woman are made in the image and likeness of God, a rich, complex, and illuminating notion. For our purposes, we will note three aspects of God's creative word and act that serve as the foundations of personal responsibility: *freedom, knowledge,* and *relationship.*

First, just as the Creator is free to choose to make something, name it, and care for it---so the creature-in-his-image is made free to choose to make something, name it, and care for it. Personal responsibility is grounded in freedom. Human beings have the capacity and the opportunity to make such choices. If they did not, any notion of personal responsibility would be a sham and a farce---like a tyrant who hangs some poor soul, blaming them for the bad weather.   Responsibility is based on freedom, on having the capacity and opportunity to act or not to act. Part of this might be described as "freedom of the will." Humans are capable of making choices, of self-transcendence, of willing one thing or another.   Of course, no one is wholly free and unconditioned (by genetics, chemistry, social conditioning, demonic influence, psychological need, the Holy Spirit, etc.); but neither is anyone wholly bound and conditioned (if the hardcore determinists or hyper-Calvinists are correct, there is no point in talking about personal responsibility). Whatever freedom we retain as people made in the image of God is the first ground of our responsibility.

Now everyone does not experience the same <u>degree</u> of freedom, capacity, and opportunity. "To whom much has been given, much shall be required" (Luke 12:48). A greater degree of responsibility attaches to greater maturity, intelligence, power, awareness, and opportunity. Everyone has some significant freedom and thus some significant responsibility; the <u>degree</u> of responsibility rises in proportion to the degree of freedom, capacity, and opportunity.

Second, <u>personal responsibility is grounded in knowledge</u>. No matter how free we may be, if we don't know about something we cannot be held responsible for it (except in the case of willful ignorance-- where we could have and should have known something). Adam and Eve were personably responsible not just because they were free but because they had been addressed and instructed by God about what they could and could not do. They knew. Of course, knowledge without freedom relieves one of personal responsibility: if I am paralyzed or imprisoned I cannot be held responsible for failing to do what I could have if I had freedom of movement (except in the case of antecedent irresponsibility that led to my paralysis or imprisonment. e.g., I know you need my help but I'm too drunk to move). Knowledge brings responsibility.

Third, <u>personal responsibility is grounded in relationship</u>. To respond is to answer <u>to</u> someone else. A "response" requires a "stimulus." Responsibility is a relational term.   In the creation accounts of Genesis we can see both vertical and horizontal relationships established. The Creator/creature "vertical" relationship brings with it responsibility. God speaks to man and woman, giving them tasks, opportunities and duties, making them responsible.   God pursues and questions them: "Where are you?" "What have you done?" "Where is your brother?" and so on.   <u>Human beings are accountable, answerable, responsible to God for their choices and actions.</u>

We are also responsible to others to whom we are related. The commission to be fruitful and multiply and to care for the earth was given to man and woman in partnership. They communicate with each other; they depend on each other---it is not good to dwell alone; they are responsible to each other as partners. <u>Human beings are answerable, responsible, to others with whom they share life and its tasks.</u> We cannot live without others, it is subhuman and practically impossible. We must share a common life in various ways. It is this commonality that brings us into relationships and relationships cannot work without acceptance of personal responsibility.

Now all relationships are not of the same <u>kind</u>; responsibilities vary according to the characteristics and expectations of various relationships.   Friends have responsibilities to each other that exceed what they owe to others. We have responsibilities to those with whom we work, to our neighbors with whom we share a space, to our fellow-Christians with whom we share a Lord and a life, to our fellow-citizens with whom we share a political order, and to our fellow human beings with whom we share an earth. We are responsible for our fair share of competently caring for what we have in common.

 So too with the more hierarchical role-related responsibilities of parents and children, employers and employees, church leaders and members, teachers and students, elected officials and the electorate. Roles and relationships determine responsibilities. In general, the more powerful partner in such relationships has greater responsibility---"We who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1).   But the less powerful member is also challenged to be responsible in the relationship (cf. Colossians 3:18-4:1; I Peter 2:11-3:7).

3. On Holding Ourselves and Others Responsible

We must <u>hold ourselves accountable</u> for our conduct. Accountability, of course, requires authority. But to the extent that we have freedom, we have authority over ourselves, we have choices to make about what we are and do. Responsibility begins, then, with self-examination, self-judgment, self-control, self-discipline (the 9th fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23).

We also <u>hold each other accountable</u> in our relationships. Sometimes the only sanction we can bring is our disapproval or rebuke. We can speak up. We can confront the irresponsible one. When we do this, of course, it is well to remember the counsel of Paul to always try to restore our erring brothers and sisters in a spirit of meekness and gentleness (Gal 6: 1). Recall, too, the counsel of Peter to try to persuade non-Christians always in a spirit of meekness and gentleness (I Ptr 3: 16).

The notion that those who have erred and acted irresponsibly should be treated with scorn and contempt, that everything possible should be done to disgrace, humiliate, and punish them, that all of their apologies and repentance should be thrown back in their face as we scream "hypocritical liar" at them---this is most certainly *not* rooted in the image of God and the leading of the Spirit; it is rooted in Satan, "the accuser of the brethren, who accuses them night and day" (Rev. 12:9-10).

In extreme cases we may withdraw from the relationship (the friendship, business, church, political movement, nation); we may invest our energy and support in a rival or a replacement of the one

judged irresponsible. If we are in a position of special authority and responsibility we may be able to force the one who has been irresponsible either to compensate for losses due to his or her irresponsibility, or to give up a position so as to preclude future losses and harms.   Not to exercise such authority and hold people under our leadership accountable is itself irresponsible. Often it is actually demeaning and harmful not to hold people responsible for what they do. It is demeaning because we are implying that they are too weak, sick, or foolish to be responsible (like the rest of us); that's an insult. It is harmful because people cannot grow in strength and health unless they face discipline and resistance; the offender won't become a stronger man by giving him a "pass" when he irresponsibly offends.

Ultimately, in a theological perspective, all people are <u>accountable to God</u>. All human responsibility is finally to God. God will be our judge. We will all have to give an account to God some day. Of course, this truth must not become an excuse to evade the exercise of responsible oversight and discipline. Nevertheless, it is a strange irony that sometimes those who most fervently proclaim their belief in human responsibility to the living God show the least confidence that God actually will hold people accountable. If we really did believe that God rewards and punishes justly, we would not get so apoplectic when it appears that someone might just escape what seems to us the just punishment for their irresponsibility and failure. Vindictiveness is a sign of the absence of true faith in God.

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Will this sort of theological reflection be of any help in promoting that "personal responsibility in an irresponsible era" we spoke of earlier?   Clearly, only Christians who believe in the Creator and bow to the authority of Scripture are likely to be leveraged into more responsible lives by my argument.   But we Christians could well use a more regular call to personal responsibility from our pastors and teachers. We are not always models of responsibility! More responsible Christians in businesses, schools, and neighborhoods would, by their example alone, have a powerful salting and lighting effect on the world. This life witness should not be underestimated. As in all things, "judgment begins with the household of God"---not in the President's office, or Microsoft headquarters, or the White Sox locker room, or the home for unwed teenage mothers. Let's put our own house in order.

To those who are not likely to respond enthusiastically to biblical authority, Christians can at least offer a proposal for thought, something like this:

(1) we need more responsible behavior in our society---without it our culture will certainly continue to become more dangerous and violent, more wasteful and filthy, more lonely, more corrupt;

(2) responsibility goes with freedom---let's crusade for freedom for all the people and for the responsibility that accompanies the all legitimate liberty,

(3) responsibility goes with knowledge---let's work against ignorance and for education and the responsibility that accompanies all true knowledge,

(4) responsibility goes with good relationships---let's build good friendships, families, neighborhoods, and work-teams, helping each other and holding each other accountable to rise to our highest potential, and

(5) responsibility goes along with having the right kind of personal strength and character---we can't have true, lasting dignity and pride if we are irresponsible.