

**Probity and Accountability among Nigerian Church Leaders in the Context of
1 Samuel 12:1–5**

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Abstract

Lack of accountability is a major challenge to national development, as it permeates all aspects of socio-political life. However, the tendency is to point an accusing finger at the politicians, especially those in government, the police, the judiciary, and parliamentarians. Meanwhile, very little is said about the church leaders or clergy, as they are accorded eminence and considered God's representatives on earth. We are now in an era when many church leaders live in opulence and openly flaunt it, claiming that it is a testimony of God's goodness to their lives. Thus, the issue of probity and accountability among church leaders in Nigeria has become a subject of intense debate in recent times. With increasing reports of financial mismanagement, moral failures, and abuse of power within religious circles, there is a pressing need to examine the biblical standards of leadership as exemplified in 1 Samuel 12:1–5. Against this background, this paper adopts exegetical and hermeneutical approaches in examining the importance of probity and accountability among Nigerian church leaders using Samuel as a model. The paper posits that Church leaders must develop and maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect, as well as cultivate the spirit of efficient Christian life, so as to infuse sanity into the church and society.

Keywords: Accountability, Probity, Nigerian Church Leaders, Ethical Leadership, 1Samuel 12: 1-5

Introduction

The Church in Nigeria, a vibrant and rapidly growing force, finds itself at a critical juncture. While boasting significant influence and numerical strength, its moral authority and public witness are increasingly undermined by scandals involving its leaders. Allegations and proven cases of financial mismanagement, embezzlement, extravagant lifestyles incongruent with congregational realities, sexual misconduct, abuse of spiritual authority, autocratic governance, and a pervasive lack of transparency have become distressingly common (Ojo, 2007; Burgess, 2008; Ukah, 2016). This crisis of probity (uprightness, honesty) and accountability (the obligation to answer for responsibilities and actions) strikes at the very heart of the Church's identity and mission. It erodes trust among congregants, fuels public cynicism, cripples the Church's prophetic voice against societal corruption (omosor, 2019), and fundamentally contradicts the teachings of Christ and the apostles.

The need for a robust theological and ethical foundation to address this problem is paramount. The Old Testament, particularly narratives surrounding leadership transition and prophetic integrity, offers profound insights. The farewell address of Prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 12:1-5 stands as an exemplar of blameless leadership and public accountability (Tsumura, 2007). Facing the nation, he served faithfully and the newly anointed king Saul, Samuel voluntarily submits himself to public scrutiny concerning his conduct throughout his judgeship. His questions – "Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes?" – and the people's resounding affirmation of his integrity – "You have not cheated or oppressed us... You have not taken anything from anyone's hand" – provide a powerful scriptural archetype against which contemporary leadership, especially spiritual leadership, must be measured (Smelik, 1992).

1 Samuel 12:1-5 provides a framework to deal with the problem of accountability within Nigerian church leadership and prescribing pathways towards healing and reform. It argues that the principles embedded in Samuel's testimony – transparency, stewardship, service over self-interest, independence from corrupting influences, and the courage to subject oneself to public evaluation – are not archaic ideals but urgent imperatives for the Nigerian Church today.

The article offers an exegetical analysis of 1 Samuel 12:1-5, exploring its historical, literary, and theological dimensions to distill the core principles of accountable leadership. Also, it provides an overview of probity and accountability among Nigerian church leaders, outlining the manifestations of the problems and its damaging consequences. Besides, it delves into the complex interplay of factors – theological, socio-cultural, ecclesiastical, and economic – that create fertile ground for corruption and lack of accountability. In addition, it constructs a theological framework for probity and accountability, firmly rooting it in the character of God, the ministry of Christ, and the witness of the early Church, using Samuel as a key exemplar. Similarly, the paper proposes a comprehensive set of practical and structural reforms for Nigerian churches, drawing directly on the principles derived from 1 Samuel 12:1-5 and addressing the identified root causes. Finally, it concludes by emphasizing the non-negotiable nature of integrity for the Church's survival and effectiveness in Nigeria.

Historical Context of 1Samuel 12:1-5

This passage (1Samuel 12:1-5) occurs at a pivotal moment in Israel's history. The people, dissatisfied with the perceived failures of Samuel's sons as judges and desiring to be "like all the nations," have demanded a king (1 Sam 8:1-5). Samuel, initially resistant but instructed by God to acquiesce, has anointed Saul (1 Sam 9-10). Saul has just won a significant military victory (1 Sam 11), solidifying his position. Chapter 12 represents Samuel's formal transfer of civil leadership authority to the monarchy while reaffirming his prophetic role and God's ultimate sovereignty (Birch, 1998).

Samuel's entire ministry occurs within the context of the Mosaic covenant. Leadership, including his own judgeship and the nascent monarchy, is understood as stewardship under Yahweh, the true King. Covenant faithfulness (*hesed*) and obedience to Torah were the bedrock of societal well-being (Deut. 17:14-20; 28). Samuel's speech is fundamentally a covenantal exhortation. Moreover, Samuel embodies the prophetic office – called to speak God's word truthfully, confront power (including kings), and call the people back to covenant fidelity. His integrity is foundational to his prophetic credibility (McCarter, 1980).

Summarily, the historical context of 1 Samuel 12:1-5 is thus dual-layered. Within the narrative, it reflects the profound socio-political and theological tensions of establishing a monarchy in Israel around the 10th century BCE. Samuel's vindication authorizes him to define the king as subservient to the Mosaic covenant. On a deeper level, the passage is a product of the Deuteronomistic school's exilic reflection (Smelik, 1992). It retrojects their core theology onto a pivotal moment in Israel's past, explaining the ultimate failure of the monarchy and affirming that national destiny hinges not on human kingship but on fidelity to Yahweh and his prophets. The passage is a timeless lens on the confrontation between divinely ordained authority and human political power (Birch, 1998).

Literary and Rhetorical Analysis 1Samuel 12:1-5

According to Tsumura (2007), Samuel's speech is carefully structured:

1. Introduction (v1): Announces the transfer of authority ("I have listened to everything you said... and set a king over you") and establishes his right to speak ("You now have the king as your leader. As for me, I am old and grey...").

2. The Challenge (v2-3a): Presents himself and his sons for public scrutiny ("Here I stand... Testify against me..."). He poses specific, tangible questions covering economic integrity ("ox," "donkey," "taken anything"), judicial integrity ("cheated," "oppressed"), and susceptibility to corruption ("bribe").

3. The People's Response (v4-5a): The people unanimously affirm Samuel's blamelessness ("You have not cheated us..."). They invoke Yahweh as witness.
4. Samuel's Affirmation and Yahweh's Witness (v5b): Samuel confirms their testimony and calls Yahweh Himself as witness against them if they can find any fault.
5. Rhetorical Force: Samuel voluntarily submits himself to scrutiny. His questions are concrete, relating to everyday abuses of power. He invites accusation ("Testify against me"). This is not defensive but assertive integrity. The public nature is crucial – accountability is not private. The invocation of Yahweh elevates the moment to a solemn covenant witness (Alter, 1999).

Core Principles of Leadership Accountability from 1Samuel 12:1-5

- a. Transparency and Openness to Scrutiny: Samuel initiates the evaluation himself. He operates in the light, not secrecy. His life and administration are open books. He welcomes public examination of his conduct (Evans, 2000).
- b. Economic Probity (Stewardship): The questions about ox, donkey, and taking anything highlight the leader's responsibility regarding material resources. Samuel did not exploit his position for personal enrichment. He understood leadership resources (time, authority, finances) as a sacred trust (cf. Luke 16:10-12). This directly counters using ministry for personal wealth accumulation (Tsumura, 2007).
- c. Judicial Integrity and Fairness: Accusations of cheating and oppression imply the abuse of judicial or administrative power. Samuel upheld justice impartially, refusing to bend the law for personal gain or to favor the powerful (Evans, 2000). He protected the vulnerable (widow, orphan, alien – Deut. 10:18; Isa 1:17).
- d. Resistance to Corruption (Bribery): The explicit mention of refusing bribes underscores the leader's independence from corrupting influences. Samuel's judgments were based on God's law, not financial inducements. His "eyes" remained open to truth, not blinded by greed (cf. Exod. 23:8; Deut. 16:19).
- e. Servant Leadership over Self-Serving Leadership: Samuel's questions implicitly contrast his service-oriented leadership with the potential self-serving tendencies of kings (foreshadowed in 1 Sam 8:11-18). His focus is on what he did not take, what he did not do to harm the people. His leadership was defined by service and restraint.
- f. Blamelessness (Integrity of Character): The Hebrew term translated "blameless" (*tamim*) implies wholeness, completeness, integrity. It denotes a life lived consistently according to God's standards, free from major moral defects that would disqualify or discredit (cf. requirements for elders in 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Samuel's integrity was publicly recognized and undisputed.
- g. Public Accountability: The accountability is not to a closed committee but to the very people he served. While ultimate accountability is to God (v5b), Samuel recognizes the necessity of horizontal accountability to the community. His legitimacy rests partly on the people's affirmation of his integrity (Tsumura, 2007).
- h. Covenantal Foundation: Samuel frames his integrity within the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. His faithfulness as a leader reflects Yahweh's faithfulness. His challenge implicitly sets the standard for Saul and future kings: leadership must be exercised under God and for the people's good, not the leader's aggrandizement (Birch, 1988).

Theological Significance of 1Samuel 12:1-5

Samuel's testimony is not merely autobiographical; it is profoundly theological. In the first instance, it presents God as the source and standard. Samuel's integrity flows from his relationship with and obedience to Yahweh. God's character – holy, just, faithful – is the ultimate standard for leadership (Lev 19:2; Mic 6:8) (Baldwin, 1988). Moreover, it depicts leadership as divine stewardship. All authority is delegated by God (Rom 13:1). Leaders are stewards (*oikonomoi*) accountable to God for how they manage the resources, people, and responsibilities entrusted to them (1 Cor. 4:1-2; 1 Pet 4:10). Similarly, it presents Integrity as essential for prophetic voice. Samuel's blameless life gave weight to his prophetic words. Moral compromise silences the

Church's ability to speak truth to power in society. Credibility is earned through consistent integrity. In addition, it is the foundation for the Kingly Ideal. Samuel sets a benchmark against which all subsequent Israelite and Judean kings would be measured (Baldwin, 1988). His model points towards the perfect King, Jesus Christ, whose sinless life and sacrificial service embody ultimate integrity and accountability (Phil 2:5-11; Heb. 4:15).

The Problem of Probity and Accountability among Nigerian Church Leaders

The contrast between the Samuel paradigm and the contemporary Nigerian church landscape is stark and deeply troubling. While countless Nigerian pastors serve with integrity and sacrifice, the systemic issues are undeniable and corrosive. Mentioned below are the manifestations of the crisis among Nigerian Church leaders.

1. Financial Impropriety and Lack of Transparency:

Unaccounted Funds: Widespread absence of independent financial audits. Church income (tithes, offerings, donations, project funds) often flows through opaque channels with limited oversight, making misappropriation and embezzlement easy (Mbamalu, 2016; Ogunewu, 2018; Ibekwe, 2019).

Personal Enrichment: Leaders using church funds for extravagant personal lifestyles – luxury cars, private jets, palatial homes ("parsonages"), foreign trips – vastly exceeding reasonable ministry needs or congregational means (Ukah, 2008; Marshall, 2009). The "prosperity gospel" often provides theological justification for this.

Fuzzy Accounting: Blurring of lines between personal finances and church finances. Leaders treating church assets as personal property. Lack of clear budgets or financial reporting to membership (Ogunewu, 2018).

Exploitative Fundraising: Manipulative tactics, emotional blackmail, and promises of miracles used to extract money from vulnerable congregants, often with little accountability for how funds are used (Gifford, 2004; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005).

2. Abuse of Power and Spiritual Authority

Autocratic Governance: Concentrated power in the "General Overseer" or "Founder" with little or no meaningful checks and balances. Church boards or councils often exist in name only, rubber-stamping the leader's decisions (Kalu, 2008).

Spiritual Manipulation: Using claims of divine revelation, prophecy, or threats of curses to control members, suppress dissent, demand unquestioning obedience, and shield oneself from accountability (Chitando et al., 2013). The concept of "spiritual fatherhood" can be twisted into abusive control.

Nepotism and Cronyism: Appointing family members or close associates to key positions regardless of competence, ensuring loyalty over accountability and creating fiefdoms (Burgess, 2008).

Suppression of Dissent: Labeling questions about finances or conduct as "lack of faith," "rebellion," or "touching the Lord's anointed," effectively silencing critical voices (Obadare, 2018).

3. Moral Failures and Ethical Lapses

Sexual Misconduct: Cases of adultery, sexual harassment, and abuse of vulnerable members (including minors) by clergy, often covered up internally to "protect the ministry's image" rather than prioritizing justice for victims (Akinade, 2015; Ilesanmi, 2020).

Fake Miracles and Prophecies: Staging or exaggerating miracles and prophetic words to attract followers and donations, constituting fraud (Ukah, 2016).

Plagiarism and Intellectual Dishonesty: Lack of originality in sermons and publications, sometimes bordering on theft of intellectual property (Burgess, 2008).

Political Compromise: Some leaders openly endorsing corrupt politicians or accepting patronage in exchange for political support or silence on issues of governance, compromising prophetic independence (Ojo, 2007; Hackett, 2011).

4. Lack of Structural Accountability Mechanisms:

Absence of Independent Oversight: Few churches have functioning, independent boards with real power to investigate, hire, fire, or set remuneration. Leaders often appoint the board members.

No Clear Codes of Ethics/Conduct: Many denominations and independent churches lack written, enforceable ethical guidelines for leaders (Ilesanmi, 2020).

Failure of Denominational Structures: Where they exist, denominational headquarters often lack the will or capacity to effectively investigate and discipline wayward leaders, especially popular or financially powerful ones (Ukah, 2016).

Congregational Apathy/Fear: Members often feel powerless or fearful to ask questions due to spiritual intimidation or the perceived stature of the leader (Akinade, 2015).

Consequences of the Lack of Probity and Accountability among Church Leaders

- i. **Erosion of Trust:** Scandals severely damage the trust between leaders and members, leading to disillusionment, cynicism, and membership loss (Akinade, 2015).
- ii. **Undermined Prophetic Voice:** The Church loses moral authority to speak against corruption in government and society when its own house is not in order. Hypocrisy becomes a major stumbling block (Rom 2:21-24).
- iii. **Hindered Spiritual Growth:** When leadership models self-interest and lack of integrity, it stunts the spiritual maturity and ethical formation of congregants.
- iv. **Damaged Public Witness:** The Church's reputation in wider society suffers, making evangelism and social engagement more difficult (Johnson, 1989).
- v. **Financial Mismanagement Impact:** Resources meant for ministry, charity, and community development are diverted, limiting the Church's positive impact (Sennett, 2008).
- vi. **Emotional and Spiritual Harm:** Victims of abuse, financial exploitation, or spiritual manipulation suffer deep and lasting trauma. Cover-ups compound the harm.
- vii. **Reinforcement of Societal Corruption:** Church corruption mirrors and potentially reinforces the broader culture of impunity and lack of accountability in Nigeria (Haugen, 2012).

Factors Fueling the Lack of Probity and Accountability among Nigerian Church Leaders

Understanding the crisis requires examining the complex web of factors within the Nigerian context that enable and perpetuate weak probity and accountability. The factors include the following:

1. Socio-Cultural Factors: These include the following:

Patrimonialism and the "Big Man" Syndrome: Nigerian society is often characterized by patrimonial governance, where power is personalized, and leaders distribute resources and positions based on patronage rather than merit or rules (Joseph, 1987). The "Big Man" expects deference, loyalty, and unquestioning obedience. This culture infiltrates churches, where the "Man of God" becomes an untouchable figurehead whose authority is absolute and beyond question (Kalu, 2008; Marshall, 2009).

Respect for Authority: Deep-seated cultural respect for elders and figures of authority can morph into unhealthy deference, discouraging critical questioning or holding leaders accountable, even when wrongdoing is suspected.

Materialism and Consumerism: Rapid urbanization and economic pressures fuel intense materialism. Religious leadership can become a lucrative pathway to wealth and status, attracting individuals motivated more by gain than service (Gifford, 2004). The display of wealth becomes a sign of "God's blessing" and power.

"Suffering and Smiling" / Tolerance of Corruption: A degree of societal tolerance for corruption exists, often born out of resignation or the perception that "everyone does it." This can translate into congregations turning a blind eye to leader misconduct.

2. Theological Distortions:

Prosperity Gospel Theology: The dominant theological framework in many Nigerian Pentecostal/Charismatic churches often equates faith with material wealth and health (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Gifford, 2004). This:

- i. legitimizes the leader's extravagant wealth as a sign of divine favor and spiritual power.

- ii. Focuses congregational giving on securing personal blessing, diverting attention from how funds are managed.
- iii. Can portray poverty as a curse or lack of faith, silencing concerns about resource distribution.
- iv. Elevates the "anointed" leader as the indispensable conduit of God's blessing, making them seemingly indispensable and above critique.

Misinterpretation of "Touch Not My Anointed": Psalm 105:15 and similar verses are frequently cited out of context to shield leaders from any form of criticism or accountability, fostering a culture of impunity (Chitando et al., 2013).

Hyper-Charismatic Emphasis: An overemphasis on spiritual gifts, miracles, and "anointing" can overshadow the biblical requirements for character and integrity in leadership (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1). A leader's perceived spiritual power can excuse moral failings (Foster, 1998).

Ecclesiological Weakness: Many churches, especially newer Pentecostal movements, lack robust biblical ecclesiology. Structures are often built around a single powerful leader rather than shared leadership (eldership) and congregational responsibility as seen in the New Testament (Acts 14:23; 20:17-28; Phil 1:1).

3. Ecclesiastical and Structural Factors:

Weak Internal Governance: As noted, the absence of independent boards, financial controls, audit committees, and clear succession plans is endemic (Adeyemo, 2018).

Denominational Fragmentation and Independence: The proliferation of independent churches and ministries, often founded and controlled by a single individual, makes external oversight virtually impossible. Even within denominations, enforcement of discipline is weak.

Lack of Professional Standards: Unlike professions like law or medicine, there are no universally enforced mandatory ethical codes or licensing bodies for clergy in Nigeria with disciplinary powers (Aluko, 2020).

Legal Loopholes: Churches often operate as registered trustees or NGOs, but regulatory bodies like the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) have limited capacity or mandate to investigate internal financial management or ethical conduct. Tax exemptions can also shield financial flows.

4. Economic Factors:

Poverty and Vulnerability: Widespread poverty makes congregants vulnerable to promises of miracles and financial breakthroughs, leading them to give sacrificially without demanding accountability (Folarin, 2012).

Church as Economic Enterprise: For some leaders and their families, the church is primarily a business venture, a means of livelihood and wealth generation, displacing its spiritual mission. The pressure to sustain this "enterprise" can fuel unethical practices (Banks and Paul, 1999).

Theological Framework for Probity and Accountability

The call for probity and accountability is not merely pragmatic; it is deeply theological, grounded in the nature of God, the work of Christ, and the purpose of the Church.

1. The Character of God

- a. Holiness: God is fundamentally holy (Isa 6:3; 1 Pet 1:15-16). He calls His people, and especially those who lead in His name, to reflect this holiness – which includes moral purity, justice, and integrity (Lev 19:2). Leaders who engage in corruption profane God's holy name (Ezek. 36:20-23) (Wright, 2004).
- b. Righteousness and Justice (*Mishpat & Tsedaqah*): God is intrinsically just and righteous (Deut. 32:4; Ps 89:14). He demands just dealings, fair treatment of the poor and marginalized, and righteous governance from human leaders (Ps 72:1-4; Jer. 22:3; Mic 6:8). Samuel's refusal to cheat or oppress embodies this divine justice (Wright, 2004).
- c. Faithfulness (*Hesed*): God's covenant faithfulness is unwavering (Lam 3:22-23). Leaders are called to be faithful stewards of the responsibilities and resources entrusted to them within

the covenant community (1 Cor. 4:2). Samuel's lifelong service exemplifies this faithfulness (Burrige, 2007).

- d. Transcendence and Immanence: God is both transcendent (above creation) and immanent (involved within it). Leaders are accountable to this God who sees all and will judge justly (Heb. 4:13; Rom 14:12). Samuel's invocation of Yahweh as witness underscores this ultimate accountability (1 Sam 12:5) (Kaiser, 2008).

2. The Ministry and Example of Jesus Christ

Servant Leadership: Jesus explicitly redefined leadership as servanthood (*diakonia*) (Mark 10:42-45; John 13:1-17). He washed feet, associated with the marginalized, and ultimately sacrificed Himself. This stands in stark contrast to leadership models based on domination, status, or self-enrichment. Samuel's service-oriented leadership prefigures Christ's (Okunoye and Jemiriye, 2025).

Humility and Self-Emptying (Kenosis): Christ voluntarily emptied Himself of divine privilege, taking the form of a servant (Phil 2:5-7). Leaders are called to the same humility, rejecting self-aggrandizement and privilege-seeking. Samuel's lack of acquisitiveness reflects this spirit (Willard, 1998).

Integrity and Sinlessness: Christ lived a life of perfect integrity, without sin (Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22). While leaders are not sinless, they are called to strive for blamelessness and Christlikeness in character (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6-7). Samuel's blamelessness points towards Christ's perfection (Banks and Paul, 1999).

Confronting Corruption: Jesus vigorously confronted religious hypocrisy and exploitation, particularly the corruption of the Temple system (Matt 21:12-13; 23:13-36). His prophetic ministry challenges modern church leaders to cleanse their own houses (Mbamalu, 2016).

Stewardship Parables: Jesus frequently taught about faithful stewardship of resources (e.g., Parable of the Talents - Matt 25:14-30; Unjust Steward - Luke 16:1-13), emphasizing accountability to the master (Burrige, 2007).

3. The Nature and Mission of the Church

The Body of Christ: The Church is the visible representation of Christ on earth (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22-23). Its credibility and witness depend on the integrity of its members, especially its leaders. Moral failure in leadership scandalizes the Body (Ukah, 2008).

Kingdom Community: The Church is called to model the values of God's Kingdom – justice, righteousness, peace, and integrity – as a counter-cultural witness (Matt 5:13-16; Rom 14:17). Internal corruption betrays this Kingdom mandate.

Priesthood of All Believers: While recognizing distinct leadership roles (Eph. 4:11-12), the New Testament emphasizes the shared responsibility and mutual accountability of all believers (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Matt 18:15-17). Samuel's public accountability resonates with this principle (Burrige, 2007).

Prophetic Voice: The Church is called to speak truth to power and advocate for justice in society (Amos 5:24; Mic 6:8). This voice is silenced when the Church tolerates corruption within its own ranks.

4. Samuel as Christological Type and Ethical Exemplar

Samuel foreshadows Christ in his role as prophet, priest (intercessor - 1 Sam 7:5-9; 12:19, 23), and judge (leader). His integrity, as presented in 1 Samuel 12:1-5, provides a concrete, historical model of leadership under God that anticipates the perfect leadership of Christ and serves as a perpetual ethical standard for all God's servants. His life demonstrates that faithfulness to God necessarily manifests in ethical probity and accountability to the people served.

Towards Reform: Practical and Structural Recommendations Rooted in 1 Samuel 12:1-5

Addressing the crisis requires decisive action based on the principles derived from Scripture, particularly Samuel's model, and a clear-eyed assessment of the Nigerian context. Needed reforms can be carried out through the following ways:

1. Emulating Samuel's Principles

Voluntary Transparency: Leaders should proactively open their ministry and financial dealings to appropriate scrutiny, rather than waiting for scandals to force disclosure. Annual independent audits should be mandatory and made available to members.

Public Accountability Forums: Churches should institute regular (e.g., annual) meetings modeled on the 1 Samuel 12 dynamic, where leaders report on ministry, finances, and challenges, and members have a structured opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback in a spirit of mutual respect and covenant faithfulness.

Commitment to Economic Probity: Leaders must adopt modest lifestyles commensurate with their congregational context and clearly distinguish personal finances from church funds. Clear policies on remuneration, expenses, and use of church assets must be established and followed. The focus must shift from leader enrichment to community development and mission.

Rejection of All Corruption: Churches must have zero-tolerance policies for bribery, fraud, nepotism, and exploitation. Clear reporting mechanisms for misconduct must be established and protected.

Cultivating Blameless Character: Emphasis must return to the biblical qualifications for leadership (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), prioritizing character (integrity, self-control, hospitality, good reputation) alongside gifting. Ongoing discipleship and accountability relationships for leaders are crucial.

Servant Leadership Culture: Church structures and teaching must actively promote the model of Christ-like servant leadership, dismantling autocratic tendencies and fostering humility and mutual service among leaders and members (Okunoye and Jemiriye, 2025).

2. Building Robust Internal Accountability Structures

Empowered Independent Governing Boards/Elderships: Churches must establish functioning boards or elderships with real authority. These should feature: members elected by the congregation or appointed through transparent processes not solely controlled by the lead pastor; clear constitutional mandate including hiring/firing of senior pastors (subject to due process); setting compensation, approving budgets, overseeing audits, and handling disciplinary matters; regular meetings with documented minutes and diversity of membership (gender, age, profession).

Mandatory Independent Financial Audits: Annual audits by reputable, external auditing firms must be non-negotiable. Summarized audit reports should be presented and discussed at congregational meetings.

Clear, Enforceable Codes of Ethics: Every denomination and local church must develop and publicly adopt detailed codes of conduct for leaders, covering finances, sexual ethics, power use, conflicts of interest, and relationships. These must include clear disciplinary procedures applied consistently and fairly.

Financial Oversight Committees: Separate from the governing board, committees tasked specifically with budget oversight, expense review, and internal financial controls.

Transparent Budgeting and Financial Reporting: Detailed annual budgets should be presented to and approved by the governing body/congregation. Regular financial reports (income, expenditure, project status) should be shared with members.

Safe and Independent Reporting Mechanisms: Confidential channels (e.g., ombudsperson, independent committee) must be established for members and staff to report ethical concerns or misconduct without fear of retaliation. Whistleblower protection is essential.

Succession Planning: Clear, transparent processes for leadership transition must be developed to avoid crises, nepotism, or power grabs when a founder/leader departs.

3. Theological and Discipleship Reformation

Reclaiming Biblical Stewardship: Teach balanced biblical stewardship emphasizing generosity, but also accountability, simplicity, and using resources for God's Kingdom purposes (justice, mercy, evangelism, discipleship) rather than leader opulence.

Critical Engagement with Prosperity Gospel: Theologians and pastors need to constructively critique the excesses and distortions of prosperity theology, emphasizing the cross, suffering, service, and the dangers of wealth (Luke 12:15; 1 Tim 6:6-10).

Re-teaching "Touch Not My Anointed": Provide sound biblical exegesis of Psalm 105:15 and similar texts within their historical and literary context, demonstrating they do not grant leaders immunity from accountability for sin.

Emphasizing Character over Charisma: Preaching, teaching, and leadership training must prioritize the development of Christ-like character (Gal 5:22-23) and the qualifications listed in Timothy/Titus as the foundation for ministry.

Congregational Empowerment: Educate church members about their biblical role and responsibility within the Body of Christ, including the right and duty to expect ethical leadership and transparency. Foster a culture where respectful questioning is seen as healthy, not rebellious.

4. Engaging External Realities

Denominational Accountability: Denominational headquarters must establish strong, independent ethics committees with the authority and resources to investigate allegations against leaders within their jurisdiction and impose appropriate discipline, including removal. Support systems for whistleblowers and victims are crucial.

Interdenominational Cooperation: Churches across denominations can collaborate to establish shared ethical standards, peer review mechanisms, and resources for promoting accountability (e.g., the Christian Association of Nigeria - CAN, Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria - PFN could play stronger roles).

Constructive Engagement with Regulation: While guarding religious freedom, church bodies should proactively engage with government agencies (like the CAC, Financial Reporting Council of Nigeria - FRCN) to explore reasonable, non-intrusive frameworks for ensuring basic financial transparency and preventing fraudulent activities by religious organizations, particularly concerning registered charities/NGOs. Self-regulation is preferable but must be demonstrably effective.

Civil Society Partnerships: Churches can partner with reputable anti-corruption NGOs (e.g., Transparency International Nigeria) for training on governance, financial management, and ethical leadership.

Conclusion

The narrative of Samuel's unimpeachable integrity in 1 Samuel 12:1-5 stands as an enduring beacon, illuminating the path of righteous leadership and exposing the shadows where probity and accountability are lacking. For the Nigerian Church, grappling with a crisis of credibility fueled by leadership scandals, this ancient text speaks with prophetic urgency. Samuel's voluntary submission to public scrutiny, his emphatic denial of economic exploitation, judicial corruption, and bribery, and the people's resounding affirmation of his blameless life provide not just an ideal, but a non-negotiable standard rooted in the character of Yahweh Himself.

The manifestations of the crisis – financial opacity enriching leaders while ministries starve, spiritual authority wielded for control and suppression, moral failures covered by institutional silence, and the glaring absence of effective accountability structures – are symptoms of deeper maladies. These include the toxic fusion of the "Big Man" syndrome with distorted prosperity theology, weak ecclesiastical governance, congregational apathy or fear, and a socio-economic context rife with corruption. The consequences are devastating: eroded trust, a crippled prophetic voice, stunted spiritual growth, a tarnished public witness, and the tragic diversion of resources meant for God's work.

Reform is not optional; it is existential for the Nigerian Church. It demands a return to the theological foundations of leadership as stewardship under God, modeled perfectly in Christ the Servant-King and exemplified powerfully by Samuel. This requires a multi-pronged approach: the courageous embrace of Samuel's principles of transparency and service by leaders themselves; the construction of robust internal structures like empowered boards, mandatory audits, enforceable ethics codes, and safe reporting mechanisms; a theological reformation that prioritizes character,

biblical stewardship, and a critical engagement with prosperity gospel excesses; and a willingness to engage constructively with external realities, including strengthening denominational discipline and exploring reasonable regulatory frameworks for transparency.

Ultimately, the call to probity and accountability is a call to faithfulness. It is a call for Nigerian church leaders to stand before their congregations and before God, as Samuel did, and be able to declare, "Whose ox have I taken?" with a clear conscience. It is a call for congregations to reclaim their covenantal responsibility to expect and demand such integrity. Only when the Nigerian Church seriously heeds this call, grounding its leadership firmly in the model of Samuel and the lordship of Christ, can it hope to regain its moral authority, fulfill its divine mission as salt and light, and authentically contribute to the healing and transformation of Nigeria. The witness of Samuel challenges the Nigerian Church: choose integrity, embrace accountability, and rediscover the power of a blameless life lived before God and people.

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