



themelios

*An International Journal for Students of
Theological and Religious Studies*

Volume 36 Issue 1 April 2011

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THE GOSPEL COALITION

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DESCRIPTION

Themelios is an international evangelical theological journal that expounds and defends the historic Christian faith. Its primary audience is theological students and pastors, though scholars read it as well. It was formerly a print journal operated by RTSF/UCCF in the UK, and it became a digital journal operated by The Gospel Coalition in 2008. The new editorial team seeks to preserve representation, in both essayists and reviewers, from both sides of the Atlantic.

Themelios is published three times a year exclusively online at www.theGospelCoalition.org. It is presented in two formats: PDF (for citing pagination) and HTML (for greater accessibility, usability, and infiltration in search engines). *Themelios* is copyrighted by The Gospel Coalition. Readers are free to use it and circulate it in digital form without further permission (any print use requires further written permission), but they must acknowledge the source and, of course, not change the content.

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Articles should generally be about 4,000 to 7,000 words (including footnotes) and should be submitted to the Managing Editor of *Themelios*, which is peer-reviewed. Articles should use clear, concise English, following *The SBL Handbook of Style* (esp. for abbreviations), supplemented by *The Chicago Manual of Style*. They should consistently use either UK or USA spelling and punctuation, and they should be submitted electronically as an email attachment using Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx extensions) or Rich Text Format (.rtf extension). Special characters should use a Unicode font.

REVIEWS

The book review editors generally select individuals for book reviews, but potential reviewers may contact them about reviewing specific books. As part of arranging book reviews, the book review editors will supply book review guidelines to reviewers.

EDITORIAL

ON ABUSING MATTHEW 18

— D. A. Carson —

D. A. Carson is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

Several years ago I wrote a fairly restrained critique of the emerging church movement as it then existed, before it morphed into its present diverse configurations.¹ That little book earned me some of the angriest, bitterness-laced emails I have ever received—to say nothing, of course, of the blog posts. There were other responses, of course—some approving and grateful, some thoughtful and wanting to dialogue. But the ones that displayed the greatest intensity were those whose indignation was white hot because I had not first approached privately those whose positions I had criticized in the book. What a hypocrite I was—criticizing my brothers on ostensible biblical grounds when I myself was not following the Bible’s mandate to observe a certain procedure nicely laid out in Matt 18:15–17.

Doubtless this sort of charge is becoming more common. It is regularly linked to the “Gotcha!” mentality that many bloggers and their respondents seem to foster. Person A writes a book criticizing some element or other of historic Christian confessionalism. A few bloggers respond with more heat than light. Person B writes a blog with some substance, responding to Person A. The blogosphere lights up with attacks on Person B, many of them asking Person B rather accusingly, “Did you communicate with Person A in private first? If not, aren’t you guilty of violating what Jesus taught us in Matthew 18?” This pattern of counter-attack, with minor variations, is flourishing.

To which at least three things must be said:

(1) The sin described in the context of Matt 18:15–17 takes place on the small scale of what transpires in a local church (which is certainly what is envisaged in the words “tell it to the church”). It is not talking about a widely circulated publication designed to turn large numbers of people in many parts of the world away from historic confessionalism. This latter sort of sin is very public and is already doing damage; it needs to be confronted and its damage undone in an equally public way. This is quite different from, say, the situation where a believer discovers that a brother has been breaking his marriage vows by sleeping with someone other than his wife, and goes to him privately, then with one other, in the hope of bringing about genuine repentance and contrition, and only then brings the matter to the church.

To put the matter differently, the impression one derives from reading Matt 18 is that the sin in question is not, at first, publicly noticed (unlike the publication of a foolish but influential book). It is relatively private, noticed by one or two believers, yet serious enough to be brought to the attention of the church if the offender refuses to turn away from it. By contrast, when NT writers have to deal with

¹D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

false teaching, another note is struck: the godly elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine *and refute those who oppose it*” (Titus 1:9 NIV).

Doubtless one can think up some contemporary situations that initially might make one scratch one’s head and wonder what the wise course should be—or, to frame the problem in the context of the biblical passages just cited, whether one should respond in the light of Matt 18 or of Titus 1. For example, a local church pastor may hear that a lecturer in his denominational seminary or theological college is teaching something he judges to be outside the confessional camp of that denomination and possibly frankly heretical. Let us make the situation more challenging by postulating that the pastor has a handful of students in his church who attend that seminary and are being influenced by the lecturer in question. Is the pastor bound by Matt 18 to talk with the lecturer before challenging him in public?

This situation is tricky in that the putative false teaching is public in one sense and private in another. It is public in that it is not a merely private opinion, for it is certainly being promulgated; it is private in the sense that the material is not published in the public arena, but is being disseminated in a closed lecture hall. It seems to me that the pastor would be wise to go to the lecturer first, *but not out of obedience to Matt 18, which really does not pertain*, but to determine just what the views of the lecturer really are. He may come to the conclusion that the lecturer is kosher after all; alternatively, that the lecturer has been misunderstood (and any lecturer with integrity will want to take pains not to be similarly misunderstood in the future); or again, that the lecturer is dissimulating. He may feel he has to go to the lecturer’s superior, or even higher. My point, however, is that this course of action is really not tracing out Jesus’ instruction in Matt 18. The pastor is going to the lecturer, in the first instance, not to reprove him, but to find out if there really is a problem when the teaching falls in this ambiguous category of not-quite-private and not-quite-public.

(2) In Matt 18, the sin in question is, by the authority of the church, excommunicable—in at least two senses.

First, the offense may be so serious that the only responsible decision that the church can make is to thrust the offender out of the church and view him or her as an unconverted person (18:17). In other words, the offense is excommunicable *because of its seriousness*. In the NT as a whole, there are three categories of sins that reach this level of seriousness: major doctrinal error (e.g., 1 Tim 1:20), major moral failure (e.g., 1 Cor 5), and persistent and schismatic divisiveness (e.g., Titus 3:10). These constitute the negative flipside of the three positive “tests” of 1 John: the truth test, the obedience test, and the love test. In any case, though we do not know what it is, the offense in Matt 18 is excommunicable because of its seriousness.

Second, the situation is such that the offender can actually be excommunicated from the assembly. In other words, the offense is excommunicable *because organizationally it is possible to excommunicate the offender*. By contrast, suppose someone in, say, Philadelphia were to claim to be a devout Christian while writing a book that was in certain ways deeply anti-Christian. Suppose a church in, say, Toronto, Canada decided the book is heretical. Such a church might, I suppose, declare the book misguided or even heretical, but they certainly could not excommunicate the writer. Doubtless they could declare the offender *persona non grata* in their own assembly, but this would be a futile gesture and probably counter-productive to boot. After all, the offender might be perfectly acceptable in his *own* assembly.²

²This argument could be ratcheted up to the denominational level for those who—mistakenly, in my view—think that “church” in Matt 18 has that sort of multi-assembly organization in view.

In other words, this sort of offense might be excommunicable in the first sense—i.e., the false teaching might be judged so severe that the offender *deserves* to be excommunicated—but is not excommunicable in the second sense, for the organizational reality is such that excommunication is not practicable.

The point to observe is that whatever the offense in Matthew 18, it is excommunicable in *both* senses: the sin must be serious enough to warrant excommunication, and the organizational situation is such that the local church can take decisive action that actually means something. Where one or the other of these two senses does *not* apply, neither does Matthew 18.

One might of course argue that it is the part of prudential wisdom to write to authors before you criticize them in your own publication. I can think of situations where that may or may not be a good idea. But such reasoning forms no part of the argument of Matthew 18.

(3) There is a flavor of play-acting righteousness, of disproportionate indignation, behind the current round of “Gotcha!” games. If Person B charges Person A, who has written a book arguing for a revisionist understanding of the Bible, with serious error and possibly with heresy, it is no part of wisdom to “Tut-tut” the narrow-mindedness of Person B and smile condescendingly and dismissively over such judgmentalism. That may play well among those who think the greatest virtue in the world is tolerance, but surely it cannot be the honorable path for a Christian. Genuine heresy is a damnable thing, a horrible thing. It dishonors God and leads people astray. It misrepresents the gospel and entices people to believe untrue things and to act in reprehensible ways. Of course, Person B *may* be entirely mistaken. Perhaps the charge Person B is making is entirely misguided, even perverse. In that case, one should demonstrate the fact, not hide behind a procedural matter. And where Person B is advancing serious biblical argumentation, it should be evaluated, not dismissed with a procedural sleight-of-hand and a wrong-headed appeal to Matthew 18.