

Practicing the Lord's Word in Matthew 18

A Response to Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes' Defense of the "Open Letter" and Critique of the Christian Research Journal's Reassessment of the Local Churches

Geisler and Rhodes faulted the local churches for what they contended was a failure to follow the pattern presented in Matthew 18. In verses 15-17, the Lord said:

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go, reprove him between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not hear you, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to hear the church also, let him be to you just like the Gentile and the tax collector.

Geisler and Rhodes say, "Matthew 18 sets the pattern to follow, and in it the last recourse is to take it to 'the church'" (v. 17). However, they nowhere define what it means to "take it to 'the church,'" and the applicability of this particular phrase to a publication inflicting widespread damage is doubtful. As the Reformed scholar D. A. Carson has written:

The sin described in the context of Matthew 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.

Although Carson suggests that such a step may not be required, in every case the local churches have attempted to initiate dialogue with their critics. While such attempts have often been welcomed, in some cases they have not only been rebuffed but also publicly mischaracterized. It is striking that Geisler and Rhodes criticize the local churches for allegedly failing to practice Matthew 18 but defend those who have borne false witness and rejected biblical correctives.

¹ D. A. Carson, "On Abusing Matthew 18," *Themelios* 36:1 (2011), pp. 1-3.