

PLAIN SPEECH

Volume 3 – Issue 3 – 1 November 2009

“Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech” (2 Cor. 3:12)

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“YOU HAVE VIOLATED MATTHEW 18:15-17!”

While I was preaching in the Denver-Metro area some years ago, it came to my attention that the congregation I was working with (the East Alameda “church of Christ”) had within its ranks a subtle and smooth false teacher. The man’s name was/is Jonathan Albin. It came to light that Jonathan had been working hard to convince folks that Satan was not a real entity, but that instead the term “Satan” was purely figurative; used to denote man as his own worst enemy. From this premise, Jonathan ran to all sorts of unscriptural conclusions, not the least of which was that Jesus never had a literal confrontation with a literal figure named Satan, but instead the Lord was “wrestling with himself” and “talking to himself in his own mind” to use Albin’s words. Once unrepentant Jonathan realized he was not going to get away with his deeds, but would instead be marked publicly as a false teacher at the next assembly of the church (**Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:4-5**), he started grasping at straws. The very first thing that he came up with was to accuse the congregation there of sin. He claimed: “*None of you came to me privately about the matter, thus you have violated Matthew 18:15-17!*”

Jonathan did not get away with his deceitful handling of the Word of God. There was no violation of **Mt. 18:15-17**. Let me show you why, just in case you ever have the same false charge thrown in your direction. Let’s first cite the text under discussion. It reads as follows: “*Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican*” (**Mt. 18:15-17**).

First of all, **Mt. 18:15-17** is not discussing how to handle false teachers, nor how to handle any sort of public sin. **Mt. 18:15-17** is discussing how individual Christians are to handle personal grievances with each other. This ought to be very easy for the honest student of scripture to see. Jesus did not say, “*Moreover, if thy brother shall teach falsehood or if thy brother be engaging in public sin, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone...*” Instead, He said, “*Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone...*” The fact that the import of **Mt. 18:15-17** is noting how individual Christians handle personal grievances is further cemented by Peter’s response to the Lord’s directives. He stated: “*Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him...*” (**Mt. 18:21**). Obviously, this text has no application to teaching falsehood and other public sins. Do not let the Jonathan Albins of the world fool you.

A modern example of the application of the passage may be as follows: brother Tom has long coveted a watch that brother Tim owns. Finally, Tom finds opportunity to steal the timepiece. Later, Tim sees the watch sitting on a table while visiting Tom’s house. Tim tells Tom he has sinned against him by stealing the watch and asks him to return the item. Tom claims that said watch is not Tim’s, but instead was a gift from a co-worker. Tim leaves Tom’s house. He goes home and gets the receipt of purchase for the watch which includes the serial number. He phones two faithful brothers to meet him at Tom’s house in 20 minutes. 22 minutes later the three men plead with Tom to confess his fault (**Js. 5:16**); having shown Tom that the watch he has in his possession matches the serial number of the watch Tim purchased. Tom hardens his heart and claims the documentation Tim has is a forgery. He throws the three visitors out of his house. Having no other choice, the information is passed along to the entire church. They are asked to urge Tom to turn from his iniquity. Tom dodges every call the members of the church make. Finally, having exhausted all other options, and understanding that Tom loves a watch more than he does his own soul, the congregation must now treat Tom as a heathen man and a publican; i.e. they must have no social contact with him.

Second of all, scripture reveals that certain individuals did not follow the pattern set forth by the Lord in **Mt. 18:15-17** and did so with divine approval. Why? The circumstances of their actions fall into a different context than that of personal offenses! Here is but one example (others could certainly be given): “*But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all...*”

Did Paul sin by publicly exposing Peter’s iniquity before privately going to Peter about the matter? Consistency demands that the likes of Jonathan Albin would have to say Paul sinned by violating **Mt. 18:15-17**. Give me a break! If you can believe that then I have some ocean front property to sell you in Botswana. Paul did not sin because, once again, **Mt. 18:15-17** purely has to do with how individual brethren handle disputes, not how to handle public sins. Don’t get it twisted (**2 Pet. 3:16**).