

Psalm 5

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Lord, in the morning thou shalt hear
My voice ascending high;
To thee will I direct my prayer,
To thee lift up mine eye;

Up to the hills where Christ is gone
To plead for all his saints,
Presenting at his Father's throne
Our songs and our complaints.

Thou art a God, before whose sight
The wicked shall not stand;
Sinners shall ne'er be thy delight,
Nor dwell at thy right hand.

But to thy house will I resort,
To taste thy mercies there;
I will frequent thine holy court,
And worship in thy fear.

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ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Public Adjudication

Kevin T. Bauder

Carl McIntire was the founder of the Twentieth Century Reformation Movement which, among other institutions, included the American and International Councils of Christian Churches. After about 1964, McIntire began pushing the leaders of the American Council to engage in tactics that they considered unbiblical and unethical. They refused to follow his directives. McIntire responded by attacking them publicly through the pages of his *Christian Beacon* weekly paper. They refused to respond in kind, believing that Christian disputes ought not be aired in front of the general public.

During the early 1970s the faculty of San Francisco Baptist Seminary left *en masse* over what they considered unethical behavior on the part of the administration. The professors' salaries were months in arrears. When the administration refused to pay the faculty, the California Labor Relations Board stepped in, insisting that employees could not legally relinquish salary that was owed to them. In retaliation, the administration used its paper, the *Blue Print*, to falsely accuse the faculty of several misdeeds, including suing the seminary. The faculty agreed among themselves not to answer the charges. They believed that they had a Christian duty to accept the wrong instead of airing the dispute in front of the general public.

Both sides in these disputes were fundamentalists. Some were of the sort that gave fundamentalism its reputation for bitterness, confrontation, and fractiousness. But in both cases, the victims of hostile aggression preferred to suffer loss rather than to allow the unsaved world to witness fighting between Christians. They deliberately chose to accept the wrong that was done to them (1 Cor 6:7).

To be clear, the wrong that they accepted consisted of personal harm. These people did not excuse doctrinal deviation. They did not cover up predation against helpless and innocent victims. No, someone tried to blacken their names, and they trusted the Lord for vindication.

A distinction is necessary. Doctrinal aberrations must be exposed. Positions that are publicly taken may be publicly disputed. Criminal behavior falls under the rightful jurisdiction of law enforcement and ought to be reported to the proper authorities. But personal disputes must be resolved between the disputants.



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Those personal disputes may sometimes involve other people. There are times when unethical conduct should be brought to the attention of institutions and networks upon which it reflects. But that should not be done publicly. The rule of thumb should always be to handle the dispute at the most private level possible.

With the rise of social media, the unsaved world has discovered the power of outrage to manipulate the online mob. Opponents who cannot be defeated by legitimate means can be doxed or cancelled. No one gets the opportunity to hear both sides, no one can make careful evaluations of evidence, no one offers considered judgment. There is only the lurid accusation, followed by the pile-on, followed by the crushing of one's opponent.

This strategy aims at personal destruction through mob hatred. For outrage is a form of hate. People who take their personal slights before the public to seek redress are attempting to ruin their opponents through the power of hate.

Some Christians have been watching these tactics in the world at large. They like what they have seen. They, too, have decided to play with the power of hate. They, too, have begun to stir up internet mobs over perceived wrongs. They, too, have begun to use the power of outrage to crush and cancel their Christian opponents. The result is often public scandal of the sort that amuses and offends even unbelievers.

Those who resort to these methods may have been genuinely wronged. They may have legitimate complaints. But those complaints can properly be addressed only to people who have a right to know what has happened and who have the authority to judge the problem. They must never, ever be adjudicated before the general public.

We are all of us sinners. Church members are sinners. Pastors are sinners. Theologians are sinners. Because we are sinners, we commit actual sins. We sin against our Lord and we sin against each other. Our sins lead to wars and fightings, though not all conflicts and disputes are necessarily the result of sin.

Our sins, and our being sinned against, may involve third parties. In some instances, those third parties may need to know the details of the conflict, including whatever accusations of sin are being made. That information should be communicated to the parties as confidentially as possible, even when strict privacy cannot be maintained.

But what genuine good is achieved by taking our accusations before the general public? Doctrinal deviations can be exposed publicly. Publicly articulated positions can be disputed publicly. Criminal activity should be re-

ported to the appropriate authorities. Yet publicly disseminating personal accusations against fellow believers serves no good purpose.

It does not matter whether the accusations are true. To adjudicate them before the public is no different morally from adjudicating them before a civil court or, for that matter, before the devil. The original offense would have to be very grave indeed to match the offense of making the accusation public. It is flatly wicked.

For years I've adopted the policy that I will make no decision based upon an anonymous accusation. Now I find that I must supplement that policy. I will make no decision based upon accusations about personal transgressions that reach me through social or other public media. Nor will I reproduce or pass on those accusations.

If you think that some leader has disqualified himself from participation in one of my ministries, then you can bring your reasons directly to me. Perhaps your cause will seem just, but even then, I cannot decide wisely. Both wisdom and decency require that we together talk to the person whom you are accusing (Prov 18:17). Only when I have heard both of you state your cases will I be able to draw any sort of thoughtful conclusion about that individual's future involvement.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
