

## **In Defense of *Defeating Pharisaism***

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As an author, I am gratified when anyone chooses to interact with something I have written; provided, of course, that the reviewer succeeds at doing so in a way that is fair and accurate. Admittedly, this type of literary appraisal is not always easy to pull off. In a recent issue of *Encounter* (Summer 2014, Vol. 11) Dr. Wave Nunnally presented a review essay of my book *Defeating Pharisaism: Recovering Jesus' Disciple-Making Method* (IVP/Biblica Books, 2009). While this is a thoughtful, passionately written essay in which the author includes some positive commentary, ultimately, I found the reviewer's interaction with my book to be less than thoroughgoing, and therefore somewhat lacking in terms of its accuracy. Because this particular review essay fails, in my mind, to accurately represent both the tone and message of *Defeating Pharisaism*, I feel the need to offer this response, hoping to clarify for the journal's readers what its thesis is and is not. I want to, from the outset, express my gratitude to the editors of *Encounter* for the opportunity to do so.

### **The Primary Problem**

The primary problem I have with this review of my book is that it fails to sufficiently acknowledge and interact with several crucial argument-framing discussions included in the work—discussions that are vital to an accurate understanding of its message. As a result of this critical misstep, the readers of the review are likely to come

away with a superficial, imprecise, perhaps even jaundiced understanding of the message of *Defeating Pharisaism*.

### **The Pastoral Concern Driving *Defeating Pharisaism***

To be more specific, a major weakness of this review, in my opinion, is its failure to provide readers with an adequate representation of the pastoral concern behind the book being appraised. As I clearly indicate in the book's introduction, the central concern of this work has to do with contemporary church members acting in ways that are devastatingly harmful to the health and mission of local assemblies—ways that are eerily reminiscent of the Pharisees *as they are portrayed in the Gospels*. Early on I explain:

An increasing number of books, magazine articles, and blogs express concern over the negative image conservative Christians project to the world. It has become more and more apparent that *the Pharisaism we find Jesus wrestling with in the Gospels is alive and well in our evangelical churches*.

This is a crucial issue. Perhaps more than any other factor, the presence of this Pharisaism in the lives of evangelical church members, along with the corresponding lack of genuine Christian discipleship, accounts for the

lack of growth experienced by many of our churches, the burnout experienced by many of our pastors, and the mass migration of tens of thousands of young people from evangelical churches either to no church affiliation at all or to churches that, in their attempt to be culturally relevant, may be guilty of altering and compromising the gospel. (Tyra, *Defeating Pharisaism*, p. 6)

Let me say this as clearly as possible: the purpose of this work is *not* to prove that all of the historical Pharisees were horrible people, but that the actions and attitudes attributed by the Gospels to at least some of the Pharisees of Jesus' day can also be found among some of Christ's followers today. These actions and attitudes are detrimental to the spiritual health and missional effectiveness of contemporary conservative (evangelical and Pentecostal) Christians and churches. However, because Matthew portrays Jesus using the Pharisees in His Sermon on the Mount (in ways that are both explicit and implicit) as anti-models of the type of discipleship He has come to effect, a disciple-making curriculum based on Jesus' most famous disciple-making speech can be used to steer church members away from a Pharisaical approach to the Christian life toward a more grace-oriented and gracious experience of it.

Because the reviewer does not sufficiently acknowledge the stated purpose of *Defeating Pharisaism* and the pastoral concern which drove me as a pastor/scholar to pen the work, nowhere in his essay does he, in an adequately explicit manner, offer an opinion with respect to it. This failure to convey an accurate understanding of the stated purpose of my book, and then speak to it, cannot help but cause me to wonder if the review(er) is not guilty of missing the forest for the trees.

## **The Historical Pharisees vs. New Testament Pharisaism**

That this concern is justified is indicated by the fact that the bulk of the criticisms the author of this review levels at my work are grounded in the fact that he, an expert on early Judaism, is unhappy with the manner in which I interact, and sometimes fail to interact, with sources related to the study of historical Pharisaism. While I can certainly understand this scholarly concern, I believe it is mitigated by the fact that chapter two of *Defeating Pharisaism* includes a section titled "The Debate Concerning the Historical Pharisees versus 'Pharisaism.'" In this very important argument-framing discussion, I make a clear distinction between the historical Pharisees and *how the Pharisees are portrayed by the authors of the New Testament Gospels*. While I personally have a hard time believing that the New Testament authors ascribed attitudes and actions to Jesus in a willy-nilly manner, I nevertheless conclude this discussion by announcing the following methodological presupposition:

Regardless of the historical circumstances, the fact is that the New Testament portrays Jesus as denouncing a certain set of actions and attitudes that are attributed to the sect we know as the Pharisees. I refer to this set of actions and attitudes as "New Testament Pharisaism." *All historical questions aside, to the degree these problematic actions and attitudes are capable of being experienced by Christ's followers today (hence the term "Christian Pharisaism"), the denunciations uttered by Jesus are of extreme importance.* This is why it is imperative that we Christians seek to understand the bad blood that existed between Jesus and the Pharisees

as the Pharisees are portrayed in our New Testament. (p. 40)

I consider it unfortunate that the reviewer did not explicitly acknowledge and interact with this crucial methodological presupposition. Instead, he criticizes me in a rather strident and sustained manner for not providing sufficient historical support for the way I (and other biblical scholars) see the Matthean Jesus using the Pharisees as anti-models of kingdom discipleship. To set the record straight, my thesis (very carefully outlined in chapters four and five of the book) is that, while all of the Gospels seem to present the Pharisees (collectively) as a group of religious leaders who were antagonistic rather than supportive of Jesus' public ministry, something was going on in Matthew's church that caused him to portray the Pharisees in an especially negative light—as anti-models of the kind of Christian discipleship for which Jesus is looking. Whether or not one accepts the theory that Matthew was writing from Antioch at some point after the events described in Acts 15, the following passages make it crystal clear that Matthew does indeed portray the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees as one fraught with polemical tension: Matthew 5:20; 9:32-34; 12:9-14, 22-37; 15:1-13; 16:1-12; 21:33-46; 22:15; 23:1-33. While I can understand the reviewer's desire as a historian to want to do justice to what the extra-biblical sources have to say about the historical Pharisees, it is my contention that the usefulness of his essay is lessened by the fact that it does not explicitly acknowledge and interact with the crucial distinction my book is careful to make between historical Pharisaism and the way Matthew portrays them. Rather, the reviewer goes so far as to at least hint at the possibility that I have willfully misrepresented certain Pharisaism scholars and deliberately avoided any historical

sources that do not support my thesis. Neither accusation is true.

### **The Pharisees in the Sermon on the Mount**

Furthermore, thoroughly convinced that the historical Jesus would not have used the Pharisees as a negative example of the type of kingdom discipleship He prescribed for His followers in the Sermon on the Mount, the reviewer mounts several attacks on my attempt to demonstrate that this is precisely what Matthew's Gospel has Jesus doing. Since space limitations will not permit me to address each of these critiques one by one, I will simply aver that, while a few of them possess a measure of merit (see below), others are debatable, and most of them, once again, center in the reviewer's concern that I do not try to "adduce evidence from the literature of the period to support [my] conclusion[s]."

While none of the exegetical/methodological critiques just alluded to defeat my thesis, I will concede that I could have done a better job of scrutinizing the nature and quality of the historical research of the exegetical observations made by some of the contemporary scholars I cite in my book. Also, I will acknowledge that some of my arguments for the idea that Jesus had the Pharisees in mind—not just in Matthew 5 but in chapters 6 and 7 as well—are inferential in nature.

However, with respect to this latter concession, I resist the notion that any of the exegetical takes presented in my treatment of Jesus' most famous sermon are, as the reviewer asserts, a matter of "abject speculation." Instead, each of them is informed by a hermeneutical theory alluded to in various places in the book, especially a section of chapter six titled "The

Significance of the Sermon’s Audience” (pp. 121-23). In a nutshell, this theory explains why “at several points along the way, Jesus seems to say things in the Sermon that would not have made sense to his audience on the mount but would have made sense to Matthew’s audience—his church members.” According to this theory, “Matthew assumed that his readers possessed the ‘outside repertoire of cultural information’ necessary for them to correctly ‘fill in the gaps in the story and organize the parts into a coherent and meaningful whole.’” As a result, he “could allow ambiguities to exist in his story line because he trusted that his readers would be able, given the prior information they possessed, to ‘disambiguate’ the text” (p. 122). It is this hermeneutical theory that lies behind some of the exegetical suggestions I make in the book— suggestions based on how the entirety of the New Testament portrays Jesus’ interactions with the Pharisees. For instance, while the reviewer confidently asserts that my conclusion with respect to Matthew 5:11 (that the persecutors to which Jesus referred were the Pharisees) was arrived at “without any evidence to support it, either from the Bible or from outside the Bible,” the truth is that I had Matthew 23:29-36 in view. This is not to say that all of the reviewer’s critiques are without merit; only that some of them founder due to a failure to interact more carefully with certain important discussions included in the work.

### **The Author’s Actual Motive**

Near the end of his essay, the author of this review refers to the negative impact a book like *Defeating Pharisaism* can have upon Jewish readers, complaining that it is “disconcerting for Jews to have their ‘heroes of the faith’ demeaned.” Then he makes the following observation: “Whipping boys’ and scapegoats are always easy to find if

you want to find them. It is always easier to define oneself by a negative and to look better at the expense of someone else.” I could be wrong, but it seems as if I am being accused here of having created a spurious caricature of the Pharisees precisely so that I and my readers can feel better about ourselves in comparison. At the very least, the reviewer leaves the door open for his readers to assume that this is what he is suggesting.

In response to this rather bold accusation, I will point out that yet another troubling lacuna in this review is the absence of an adequate treatment of several important discussions presented in chapters one and three of the book. Near the end of chapter one I include a section titled: “The Essence of Jewish Pharisaism.” Though I go on in chapter two to indicate that my focus in the work is on Matthew’s portrayal of the Pharisees rather than the historical Pharisees themselves, I felt it necessary in this initial chapter to provide my readers with several scholarly takes on what may have been behind the separatist impulse my treatment of the movement’s history ascribes to it. Once again, I consider it unfortunate that the author of this review chose not to cite and opine on the conclusion I offer there. Because of the importance of this discussion, I feel the need to present an excerpt that is of some length:

Surely there were historical Pharisees, even in Jesus’ day, who wanted nothing more than to live their lives in a manner pleasing to God and to encourage their fellow countrymen to do the same. On the other hand, it is also easy to see how a fear-based pursuit of a psychological certainty concerning salvation could manifest itself in several religious developments (for example, the development of an authoritative oral

tradition, a legalistic approach to salvation, a preoccupation with religious rituals and external acts of piety, a separatist mindset, etc.) that together served to eliminate for the Pharisees any vestige of spiritual ambiguity. Could it be that at the heart of historic Pharisaism there existed not simply a concern for integrity but also an inordinate need to be certain, to be in control, to be able to determine precisely who was pleasing to God and who was not? Could it be that at the heart of historic Pharisaism there existed a fundamental inability to live with spiritual uncertainty and to exercise simple trust in the goodness and mercy of God? (p. 31)

Again, whether or not the reviewer agrees with this take on the essence of Jewish Pharisaism, I believe he owed it to his readers to interact with it. To do otherwise is to fail to accurately represent my proffered understanding of the pastoral concern that may have motivated Matthew to portray Jesus as having a very serious problem with the Pharisaism practiced in his day.

Moreover, in chapter three of the book—a chapter aptly titled “An Inconvenient Truth”—I include discussions of: “The Connection between Pharisaism and Historic Christian Fundamentalism,” “The Connection between Fundamentalism and Contemporary Evangelicalism,” “The Negative Effects of Pharisaism on Evangelical Communities,” and “Some Possible Root Causes of Christian Pharisaism.” Though all of these topics are critical to an adequate understanding of the book’s overall message, a failure to sufficiently interact with the last discussion referred to above is an especially serious *faux pas* for any reviewer of this work to commit. Why? Precisely because it is by means of this discussion that I explain not

only why a Pharisaical approach to religion can seem so very compelling to many people (and hence, why I can in chapter eight of the book associate it with the “broad road” referred to in Matt. 7:13), but also “why Jesus was so vitriolic in his polemic against the Pharisees” (p. 72). Rather than rehearse this discussion in its entirety, I will, at the risk of greatly oversimplifying some very important theological, spiritual, and psychological concepts, simply indicate here that I am not alone in holding that Jesus considered the demand for spiritual certainty at the heart of Pharisaism to be a subtle form of idolatry. In other words, it was because the Matthean Jesus considered a Pharisaical approach to religion to be an inappropriate substitute for a real, trust-based rather than fear-based relationship with God as one’s heavenly Abba, that He was so vociferous in His opposition to it. Any review of *Defeating Pharisaism* that is not careful to reference these crucial argument-framing discussions simply cannot succeed at presenting to its readers an accurate, fair-minded presentation of the book’s main thesis, much less the author’s motive for writing it.

This being said, I must confess that I am somewhat sympathetic to the reviewer’s concern regarding the negative effect the title of my book might have upon any Jewish folk who happen upon it. The last thing I would want to do is contribute to the anti-Semitism that, unfortunately, has been manifested from time to time in Christian history. This is why, after having pointed out in chapter four of the book that “virtually all introductions to the Gospel of Matthew will refer to the anti-Pharisee emphasis that is readily observable within it” (p. 87), I am careful in an associated endnote to indicate that: “At the same time, most scholars exhibit a marked and valid concern to make it clear that the vitriol

present in Matthew's Gospel is not directed toward the Jewish people as a whole but at their religious leaders specifically, especially the Pharisees" (p. 94). Moreover, throughout *Defeating Pharisaism*, I keep emphasizing the need for those who would address the presence of Christian Pharisaism in their churches to be careful to avoid doing so in a Pharisaical manner (e.g., pp. 249-50)!

And yet, while I am willing to concede that the book's title was perhaps an unfortunate choice, I cannot disavow the work's ultimate message. Since, according to the Apostle Paul, the gospel itself will prove for some to be a stumbling stone (see Rom. 9:30-33), the emissary of Christ cannot always avoid giving offense. Book titles aside, I am fairly certain that the reviewer would agree with the proposition that just because a biblical teaching can cause offense is no reason for Christian disciples to deny or even ignore it (see Acts 17:32).

### **The "Truth" about an Anti-Pharisaism Motif**

The reviewer concludes his review essay, insisting that the very idea that the New Testament portrays the Pharisees in an essentially negative light is belied by the fact that Jesus shared some of their beliefs, engaged in some rabbinic practices, and allowed himself to be called "Rabbi." He also asserts that any anti-Pharisee motif in the New Testament is ruled out by the fact that the Apostle Paul refers to himself as a Pharisee in Acts 23:6.

In response to this conclusion to the review essay, I will offer two observations. First, the fact that the Gospels portray Jesus attending the synagogue, being referred to as a rabbi (i.e., "teacher," see John 1:38), and

even promoting respect for the rabbinic office (Matt. 23:1-3), does not mean that those same Gospels do not also portray Jesus offering some pretty strident criticisms of several attitudes and actions He attributes to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, and using them as negative examples of life in the kingdom (Matt. 5:20; 23:3-33; cf. John 3:1-15). Second, though it is true that Paul referred to himself as a Pharisee in Acts 23:6, the reviewer neglects to comment on the possible significance of the courtroom context of that strategic declaration, and completely ignores how Paul's autobiographical reference to his former life as a Pharisee in Philippians 3:1-11 seems to undermine the idea that he was supremely proud of his Pharisaical background, or perceived no serious discontinuity between it and his pursuit of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

As I bring this response to Wave Nunnally's review of my book to a close, I wish to express my thanks once again to the editors of *Encounter* for this opportunity to clarify the work's thesis. I also want to make it clear that I remain unabashed in my insistence that there is a Christian Pharisaism at work in too many conservative churches. This reality can either be ignored to our peril or addressed in an intentional yet gracious manner. I know from personal experience (twenty-seven years of pastoral ministry) that the discipleship instruction presented in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount can serve as a catalyst for the cultivation of a disciple-making environment that succeeds at gently steering congregation members away from Christian Pharisaism toward a more grace-oriented and gracious approach to the Christian life. If anyone reading this defense of *Defeating Pharisaism* shares this missional concern, I hope they will consider

giving this volume a careful and prayerful read. I would also encourage individuals to recommend *Defeating Pharisaism* to people who have been wounded by the legalism, judgmentalism, separatism, dogmatism, and hypocrisy they have experienced in church. It has been my experience that this book, despite its imperfections, possesses both a spiritual and missional value and can make an important difference in the lives of individual Christians and their churches.