

MATTHEW 18:20

By Ronnie Wolfe

Introduction: Some very serious confusion seems to be rampant in our Baptist groups today concerning this passage of Scripture. Who are the “two or three” in Matthew 18:20, and what power or authority do they have? Let’s notice the answer under two topics: A Powerful Pretext and The Proper Context.

A POWERFUL PRETEXT

A pretext is “something that is put forward to conceal a true purpose or object; an ostensible reason; excuse:” according to Webster’s Electronic Unabridged Dictionary. In theology or Bible study, this would include explanations of verses which do not fit the context, which is “the parts of a written or spoken statement that precede or follow a specific word or passage, usually influencing its meaning or effect” (ibid.).

Matthew 18:20, which reads, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,” is many times taken out of context. The majority of Bible expositors think this verse has to do with the building or starting of a church. They teach that for “two or three” to be gathered together means that a church is born, started, built or otherwise comes into existence. This could not be farther from the truth, and we shall consider this in the last point of this article; but now we must consider some implications of this popular interpretation on this verse.

(1) If it is true that “two or three” gathering together in his name constitutes a church, then Peter and John were a church in Acts 3:1 when they went up to the temple to pray. Notice that they were baptized, and they were gathering together in the name of the Lord. If they were not gathering together in His name, then what they were doing here was wrong and would not bring glory unto the Lord.

(2) If it is true that “two or three” gathering together in His name constitutes a church, then Barnabas and Saul were a church in Acts 13:1-2 and needed not that the Antioch church separate them unto the work whereunto the Lord had called them.

(3) If it is true that “two or three” gathering together in His name constitutes a church, then Peter, James, John, and Jesus constituted a church when they were on the mount in Matthew 17:1 where the Bible says, “And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart.” Certainly they were all scripturally baptized, and they were together, “two or three” of them in the name of the Lord; so they must have been a church separate and apart from the church at Jerusalem or any other church around the area. The fact of the matter is, there were churches popping up all around Jerusalem when Jesus was wandering the earth. They were popping in and out as corn in a popper. They would be a church with two or three, then they would be a church with four or five, then they would be a church with twelve or twenty or a hundred and twenty.

(4) If it is true that “two or three” gathering together constitutes a church, then two or three people from two or three different churches may gather together to have a Bible study or to do some evangelistic work, and they would constitute a church.

(5) If it is true that “two or three” gathering together in His name constitutes a church, then several churches meeting together for a bible conference or revival meeting would constitute one church; and they could carry on church business or baptize people as a single group. There are at least “two or three” gathering together, and they certainly are doing so in His name.

(6) If it is true that “two or three” gathering together in His name constitutes a church, then associations and conventions could conceivably be scriptural churches, since they gather together, “in His name.”

Matthew 18:20 is taken completely out of context when applied in this way. I would agree that some of these situations are a stretch of the mind; but when our own Baptist preachers begin to interpret scripture the same way as the universalists do, then we see the danger of this interpretation. Universalists believe that this verse teaches church organization, and many of them stretch the interpretation almost as far as I have done with some of the examples above. But I have done so to show the folly of a wrong interpretation. Even some Baptists of old, such as Charles Spurgeon, have taken the universalist interpretation of this verse; and there is no wonder, since Bro. Spurgeon hob-knobbed with many universalists in his day and even served many of them the Lord’s Supper.

THE PROPER CONTEXT

Then, what is the proper contextual interpretation of this verse? Does it have anything to do with church organization as such? Is this a verse, which gives two people anywhere and at any time, who have scriptural baptism, authority to covenant together and be proclaimed by God a church? I think not! To conclude so is ludicrous. To those who so interpret this passage, the question must be asked, “Is it just sometimes, or is it always that a church is constituted when two or three are gathered together in His name?”

In the context of chapter 18 of Matthew, the Lord is dealing with church discipline, not church organization. He is instructing the disciples on how to deal with a brother who has sinned against them. The individual who has been sinned against must go to that brother and tell him of his wrong. If he listens to that individual, then he has gained his brother back into his fellowship (v. 15).

The second step to discipline is for the person who has been offended to take one or two more people with him so that no doubt will be had as to what is said and that every word will be established (v. 16).

The third step to discipline is that, if he does not listen to the several who come to him, then tell the church (v. 17). Now at this point we must understand that a church is already in

existence. This situation has to do with a church that is already functioning; and the whole ordeal takes place within the bounds of that local church. Nothing is mentioned here that would give us any inclination to believe that a new church is being established, organized, born or built.

Speaking of the church that is already in existence, the Lord speaks about the binding and loosing. This is a continuation of the thought on discipline. A church has the authority under the sovereign God to bind and loose a person into or away from membership in a local church. The Greek tense allows us to realize that the binding should be done as it has already been done in Heaven. Binding a person would be placing him under the discipline of the church; loosing a person would be forgiving him and releasing the restrictions upon him and bringing him back into full fellowship of the church.

If my friends who are going the way of the universalists are telling the truth, then I have been in church many more times than I ever thought; for, while my cousin and I were at the creek praying for God to bless the muddy water we were about to drink, we were in church. When my brother and I were in trouble so many times and in danger numbers of times and asked God to help us, we were in church. When my wife and I are driving in the car and praising God for blessings and singing the songs of God, we are in church. God forgive me, also; for I have given some very bad advice to people who have moved into areas where they cannot find a church to attend. I should have told them not to worry; because when they awake on Sunday morning and go to their kitchen to worship the Lord and have their devotion at home because there is no church nearby, they are a church. If they need a pastor, they can simply call one to be a pastor of this little church. If they want to baptize someone, they can just do it, because they are a church.

Remember, our Lord did not say in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there will I start a church." He did not say "for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there will I build a church." He said, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." He simply means that, when two or three people go about church discipline the way He has just instructed, He will approve their efforts and bless them. He will affirm and confirm their way of conducting this church business.

Although it is becoming less and less popular to believe in church succession and proper Baptist perpetuity, this preacher still believes as he has his entire ministry. I base my belief in this doctrine, not on the many historians and theologians who have trod the path of ministry in this world, but in the words of our Lord and the apostles who wrote the Bible. I know of a certainty, however, that many old writers referred to "parent" churches as far back as the 1700's. They spoke about getting authority to transfer members from a "parent" church to a "mission" church. This does not make it wrong or right, but it does give some evidence that it has been done for a lot longer than our "almost universalist" friends pretend it to be.

To my friends who still hold these truths to be self-evident, stay with the stuff and stand strong unto the end; for our standing for this truth can make our churches glow and grow to His

glory, or our weakness can cause their light to flicker in a dark time which will mirror the times of darkness wherein many of our brethren died for the truth they held. Are we ready and willing to hold up these truths, or will we give in to the “new light” of contemporary doctrine? May God give us the wisdom to put on the armor of God and, when all is done, to stand.