**LIMITING MATTHEW 18:20**

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Mt.18:20). This passage has become the focus of renewed controversy since the coronavirus has forced some churches to alter their times and/or places of gathering. Usually, the controversy centers around the observance of the Lord’s Supper. Simply put, can a local church arrange for smaller assemblies (e.g. in private homes) for the purpose of worship? So, I thought we’d take a look at Matthew 18:20 today.

For starters, the context is discussing the proper way to bring a brother who has sinned against you to repentance. First, you go speak with him alone; if he repents, then your work is done (v.15). But if the first discussion fails, you must bring with you one or two more for another discussion (v.16). Presumably, the presence of others adds a bit of “peer pressure” to the erring brother, as well as their ability to act as “witnesses,” should this matter need to go even further. If your second attempt fails, then the matter is brought before the church. They will hear the charges, and the testimony of the witnesses; then they will speak to the offender, in an attempt to bring him to repentance (v.17). Following that, we see the “apostolic standard” by which any erring conduct is measured (v.18), along with a promise of Divine help in resolving our differences (v.19-20). Clearly, the “two or three” brethren of verse 19-20 refer back to the “witnesses” of verse 16. That’s the context in a nutshell. As an additional lesson, we also learn that there is a clear distinction between an ***individual*** acting (v.15), a ***group of individuals*** acting (v.16), and a ***local church*** acting (v.17). These truths are not in dispute, in terms of the purpose of this article.

The apparent issue of dispute is: ***“Is there any larger application of the principle of Matthew 18:20?”*** Undoubtedly, there is! To say otherwise is to say that Jesus is **ONLY** “in the midst” of the “two or three” who are seeking to save an erring brother – and that is patently absurd. For example, Jesus is in our midst whenever we eat the Lord’s Supper (Mt.26:29). As a matter of fact, the omnipresent Jesus is ***“with you always”*** (Mt.28:20)! So, why would anyone limit the application of Matthew 18:20 to the specific situation in context? Is Jesus not with you when you speak to your brother ***alone*** (v.15)? Is He not with ***“the church”*** when they speak to the brother (v.17)? Of course, He is! And herein lies the folly of limiting the application of Matthew 18:20 to the situation of verse 16.

But some will counter by saying, “You are teaching that whenever two or three brethren gather together, there is a church!” To which I reply, “Don’t be ridiculous.” I am not saying that at all; I am only saying what Jesus said: ***“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them”*** (Mt.18:20). If two or three are “gathered,” is this not an assembly? Of course, it is. And, if two or three are gathered “in My (Jesus’) name,” is He not in their midst? Of course, He is. Taking this a step further, if ***a local church*** arranged for “two or three” to be “gathered together (assembled) in My (Jesus’) name,” would Jesus be in their midst? Who can deny it?

Brethren, have you ever heard of “Bible classes” arranged by the church? Are these not assemblies of the church? If not, then what are they? If a church can arrange assemblies of less than “the whole church” for Bible study, then it can arrange assemblies of less than “the whole church” for the Lord’s Supper! If not, why not? Where does the Bible say “the whole church” must eat the Lord’s Supper at the same place and time? And, **IF** the Bible does say that “the whole church” must eat at the same place and time, then we’d better stop offering communion on Sunday night to those who were unable to attend in the morning! Indeed, is this not exactly what the “no Sunday night communion” folk argue?

I have said many times, that our brethren need to do a long, hard, objective re-evaluation of our concept of “church assemblies.” Whether we want to admit it or not, most of us have viewed “the assembly” as a validating quorum for worship, instead of simply a gathering of saints for worship. God must shake His head in amazement at some of the stuff that we argue about!

--Lanny Smith