

Matthew 18:20 — Where Two or Three Are Gathered Together

In My Name, the Passive Voice, One Moral Center, Independency Refuted, and the Four Assembly Functions

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:15–20

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20)

Where, Not If: A Place, Not a Condition

The verse does not say if two or three are gathered together. It says where. The word where directs the mind to a place. This is not an incidental grammatical point. The assembly of God is not a hypothetical condition that obtains when certain people happen to be in the same location. It is a place — a spiritual place, not a geographical one, but a real and definite one.

Israel had a geographical center where God placed his name: Jerusalem, the temple mount. That center was the place of his governmental presence, the place from which counsel was given, the place to which his people came in worship. Now, with Israel set aside, a new order has come in. The new center is not geographical but spiritual. Where two or three are gathered together unto my name — that is the divine center. It does not matter where on the earth they are; geography separates them, but morally it is one place. The Lord is in the midst of it.

The verse does not say wherever, either. Wherever would be too broad — as if any spontaneous gathering of two or three believers constituted this. Three

believers stopping at the same street corner are not, by that fact alone, gathered in the assembly sense. The promise is corporate, not merely about individual presence. The Lord is with each individual believer — I will never leave thee nor forsake thee — but what verse 20 speaks of is the authoritative presence of the Lord in the midst of his gathered people, with all that implies for binding and loosing.

The Passive Voice: Gathered, Not Coming Together

The Greek verb is passive: they are gathered. Not we came together; not we assembled. Something is being done to them. The Holy Spirit is the agent; the saints are the objects of his action. J.N. Darby's paper on Personal and Corporate Actions in the Spirit of God draws out this distinction. There are personal actions of the Spirit in the individual believer, and there are corporate actions of the Spirit that gather the saints together to Christ.

The Lord acts by the Spirit now as he always did on earth. Everything he did and said in the days of his flesh was by the Spirit, expressing the Father's mind. That does not change because he goes up into the glory. The Spirit is sent down during the Lord's absence to take care of Christ's interests here — and one of those interests is the gathering of his saints to himself. When we are caught up at the rapture, the passive voice applies again: we shall be caught up together. A power acts upon the saints to bring them to him. And here in the gathering of the assembly, the Spirit gathers unto Christ. The saints are not organizing a voluntary association; they are being gathered to their Lord.

A Newbury lexical note observes that the tense of the verb describes a completed action that continues: having been gathered and gathering. A one-time meeting does not qualify in the full sense of this verse. It is not merely that on a given occasion a group of believers gathers. The assembly is the gathered company that continues to be gathered — an ongoing expression of what the Spirit is doing in

bringing saints to Christ.

Together: One Moral Center, Not Many Independent Ones

The word together is as important as any other in the verse. They are gathered together — not each gathered to the Lord individually in his or her own corner, but gathered together. This single word demolishes the idea of independent assemblies that are each centers in themselves. There is one center — Christ himself, in the sanctuary above (Hebrews 8:2, 10:19–20). When believers at Ephesus enter the holies in spirit to worship, and believers at Corinth enter the holies in spirit to worship, they are entering the same sanctuary, before the same throne, unto the same Christ. There is one moral place, expressed at multiple geographical points.

This is why what is bound on earth is bound in heaven. Corinth's action in putting a man out touches Ephesus too. Paul, writing from Ephesus, commands Corinth regarding a matter there (1 Corinthians 5) — what business was it of his? The answer is that the assembly is one. There is not a Corinthian binding and an Ephesian binding; there is one binding, because there is one gathering place, one moral center, one Christ in the midst. The man who is put out in Corinth has no standing in Ephesus. He cannot go there and ask them to review his case as independent brethren who will give him a fresh hearing.

Independency resolves this by making each assembly its own authority. But that means what is bound on earth is only bound locally. Each assembly binds only for itself. This is not what the scripture says. The scripture says it is bound in heaven — and there is only one heaven. Independency therefore either reduces heaven to a collection of independent sections, or it must silently concede that its bindings are not actually bound in heaven at all.

Why This Verse Appears in Matthew's Gospel

Objectors often ask why the church should appear in a book that seems to be written especially for the Jews. The answer is that Matthew is specifically the gospel of God's governmental changes. Chapter 12 records the sin against the Holy Spirit by the Pharisees who attributed the Lord's works to Beelzebub. Chapter 13 follows immediately with the similitudes of the kingdom in their mystery form — consequent upon that rejection. This is not accidental. The mystery form of the kingdom — the kingdom of the heavens in the Lord's absence — begins in the very gospel that traces the rejection of the Lord and the consequent change of dispensation.

The expression kingdom of heaven is used throughout Matthew, while the other Gospels use kingdom of God. The explanation sometimes given — that Matthew used kingdom of heaven because Jews revered God's name — fails to explain the five instances in Matthew itself where kingdom of God appears. The true distinction is this: when the Lord spoke of something true at the very moment he was speaking it, he used kingdom of God. When he spoke of the kingdom as it would be in his absence, he used kingdom of heaven. This explanation, opened up by J.N. Darby, makes the book coherent and explains why the church assembly appears here: Matthew was specifically tracing governmental changes, and this verse is part of that.

Those who say the verses 15–20 were only in force while the Lord was here, or that the church did not begin until Acts 9 or Acts 13 or Acts 28, misunderstand the prospective character of the passage. Everything spoken about the kingdom of heaven was prospective — looking forward to the Lord's absence. The assembly in verse 20 was not yet in existence when the Lord spoke those words. He was anticipating the new order. Just as the similitudes of the kingdom in Matthew 13 suppose his absence, so this does.

What Is Not in the Verse, and What Is

Several things are not in verse 20, and their absence is as instructive as what is present. The burning of the heart is not here. Luke 24:32 records two disciples who said, Did not our heart burn within us while he talked with us by the way? Yet they were not at the right place. The Lord vanished from their sight and they returned to Jerusalem as fast as they could — and were found gathered with the others. The burning of the heart did not mark the place; it was not the signpost. The verse does not say, Where your heart burns within you, there am I in the midst. The place is marked by other things.

The ruin of Christendom is also not in the verse. Some have argued that the ruin is so thorough that this verse can never again form the basis for assembly action. To argue this way is to openly confess that what one wants to do is contrary to the Lord's words. The verse stands regardless of the condition of Christendom. Whether the church is in order as in 1 Timothy or in disorder as in 2 Timothy, this verse retains its meaning and its application. What the ruin does is undermine the practical outworking of it — because when a man is put out, he can walk down the street to another voluntary association and be received — but it does not touch the truth of the verse itself.

What is in the verse: in my name, gathered, together, there am I, in the midst. All of these require careful attention. And the verse is filled with grace. The Lord is worthy of billions of worshippers gathered to him. He deigns to promise his presence where only two or three are found. That is grace stooping to meet us in our weakness.

The Four Assembly Functions

Four functions of the gathered assembly are found in the New Testament in connection with the Lord's presence in the midst. First, the remembrance of the Lord in his death and the breaking of bread. Second, prayer. Third, prophets speaking two or three, and the others judging, as in 1 Corinthians 14. Fourth, the

exercise of assembly discipline to put away evil from the presence of the Lord, as in 1 Corinthians 5.

These are the four, and there is no scriptural ground for counting on the Lord's presence in the midst for any invented addition to them. Christendom is full of things invented for congregations to do, but none of those things carry the promise of verse 20. It is those four, meeting as the assembly understanding itself to be the assembly, that have the warrant of scripture. A prayer meeting in a private house, even if all the same persons from the assembly are present, is a private occasion; the ground of verse 20 is not thereby invoked.

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