

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 18:19 - 18:20



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg provides an interpretation of Matthew 18:19-20, where Jesus refers to "the church" twice. The first instance is in Chapter 16 where Jesus tells Peter that he will build his church upon the rock. In the second instance, Jesus says that when two or three are gathered together in his name, he is in their midst. Gregg suggests that the term "church" refers to the ones called out and those who have become Christians and joined Christ. While the Bible does not prescribe a specific way to hold church, Gregg notes that church discipline can occur in any setting.

### Transcript

Today we'll be looking at some important verses in Matthew 18. If you can follow along in your own Bible, it is to your advantage, I think. If you are in a situation where you cannot do that, then I hope you may be able to listen carefully and follow easily along with what we are reading.

In verse 19, this is Matthew 18, verse 19 and 20, Jesus said, And again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them. Now it's important for us to get the context of these statements.

Actually, these statements are fairly well-known statements. Christians, I should say, are quite familiar with them. But this is in the context of Jesus talking about the authority of the church, really.

He says in verse 17 that when a person who has sinned against you has been confronted a couple of times in different situations and they will not repent, he says, Then tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, then let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. And then he goes on with some of these words that we were just looking at.

Now, what's interesting to me is that there are only two times in the record of the Gospels in the Bible where Jesus used the term the church. One of those times was back

in chapter 16 where Jesus said to Peter, Upon this rock I will build my church. Interestingly enough, it is in the same context that he first said, Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

So Jesus talked about building his church, and this is Matthew 16 and verse 18. That's the first time out of only twice that Jesus spoke about the church using that language, the word church. And in that place, he indicated that Peter would have the authority to bind and loose those things on earth which are bound and loosed in heaven.

Now, in the second and final time in the record of the Gospels that Jesus mentions the church, it's the passage we're considering. He also, in the context, does talk about binding and loosing because in verse 17 of Matthew 18, he says, Take it to the church, tell it to the church. If they refuse to hear the church, then treat them like a heathen and a tax collector.

Then he says, Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. So you see, the two times that Jesus mentions binding and loosing are also the same two places and only two places in the Gospels where he mentions the church by that name. And I believe that this business of binding and loosing, probably in the original context, is talking about the special authority of the apostles to allow or disallow or to set norms.

Although, since he has mentioned the church, there's really two possibilities. One is that the apostles have this power to bind and loose in the context of the church. Another possibility is that the church itself, in the context of the whole world, the church has the power to bind and loose.

Now, this could be understood either way, but in these following verses, the way we see those earlier verses affect the way we understand these verses. When Jesus said, Again, I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. Well, two of you, does that mean two of the apostles? Or does it mean two Christians in general? It's not really entirely possible to establish beyond question.

If he is talking about the church as a whole being that agency on earth that can bind and loose and can enforce and can declare and establish norms, the norms of God on earth, then the two of you might simply mean any two members of the church. Any corporate expression of the church. If the other is understood, if we're talking merely about apostolic authority, then he might simply mean if any of you apostles, if two of you apostles agree on anything.

That is to say that no apostle by his own opinion could set a norm, but there would have to be agreement among at least two of the apostles. Because actually earlier in the chapter, in verse 16, he said, By the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word shall

be established. It's really not absolutely certain to know, but this is a very important passage in understanding the church because it is one of the few places that Jesus talked about it.

I'm going to take the broadest view of this, although I'm not sure that we are allowed to do so. I'm going to just have to take my pick and follow my instincts. I'm going to assume that two of you on earth refers to two Christians, not necessarily two apostles.

If it does refer to two apostles, of course, this then is speaking of the apostles' special authority. But when Jesus said, If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. It's essentially saying that we're two believers, or perhaps two of the apostles in the context, are both praying with agreement about the same thing.

That is, they both have the same concern, and they both agree what the will of God is on the matter, and they're together joining their hearts and their words in asking God to do a certain thing. That it'll be done. Now, of course, this raises the question, What about an individual praying without two agreeing? Isn't there some promise that whatever we ask in his name will be done, even if we're an individual? Well, it does say in James chapter 5 that the fervent, effectual prayer of a righteous man avails much.

It does not imply that there have to be two righteous men. And yet, we're talking about a fervent and effectual prayer on the part of a righteous man. An effectual prayer, in order to be effectual, needs to be according to the will of God, certainly.

And if one person prays according to the will of God, I believe that prayer will be answered. The problem is, a person might be mistaken about what the will of God is, and might be praying for what he thinks is the will of God, but indeed may be mistaken what the will of God is, and God may not wish to answer that prayer in that way. And that's where the agreement of two comes to our aid.

If we have confirmation, you say, I think this is the will of God, and I feel like praying this way, and the other says, you know, I agree with you on that. I confirm that. I'll amen that.

I think that is the will of God. Let's pray together about it. That where there is agreement and confirmation concerning the will of God on the matter, then that prayer will be answered, because, of course, those two or more who are agreeing on it are much more likely to have correctly discerned the will of God than just one individual acting alone.

It is not that an individual praying alone cannot have power with God in prayer. And as long as he knows he's praying according to the will of God, it seems to me he's got as much power in prayer as two or more. But two or more are useful in determining with greater certainty whether the thing prayed for is the will of God, because only those

prayers that are according to the will of God will be answered, or at least we don't have any right to expect prayers to be answered if they are not according to the will of God.

We know this from 1 John 1, verse 14, where it says this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desire of him. If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

That's the point. And so two agreeing on this are more likely to ascertain correctly the will of God than one acting alone and just going on his hunches, although there are, of course, cases where a weak might pray alone and might very well discern the will of God. In fact, sometimes the Scripture states what the will of God is unmistakably, so that there would be no confusion about it at all.

But when Jesus then speaks in verse 20, he says, For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them. Now, it's interesting that this statement would be made in the context where Jesus mentions the church on one of the two occasions that he does so. Is he here defining for us what constitutes a church? Now, we need to realize that the word church is used a variety of ways in Scripture.

When people ask what I think about the church, it's very important, first of all, before I can answer, to know what they mean when they use the word church. To many people, the word church refers to an institution that has, you know, bylaws and membership and maybe tax exemption and they have a certain building and they have a certain established institution. And they call that the church.

Well, okay, if that's what you're calling the church, let's make sure we got the definitions right and I can tell you what I think about that. But I think best if we understand it in the biblical sense, and the Bible does use the word church a variety of ways. First of all, the word church, which in the Greek is *ecclesia*, and literally means the called out ones, it is used first in Scripture in the Old Testament.

In the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, the word is used of the congregation of Israel. They were the ones that God had called out of Egypt to be his people. And they were his church.

In fact, even Stephen in the book of Acts chapter 7 refers to Moses leading the church in the wilderness, meaning, of course, the people of Israel that God had called out of Egypt. The called out ones is what the word church means, and Israel in the Old Testament were the church. The ones who had been called out.

However, Jesus came along and he called out a remnant, even from Israel, to be his *ecclesia*, his called out ones. And these called out ones were a very small remnant indeed. At one point it was merely the apostles.

But it grew to a larger group and has come to eventually include even Gentiles, who have been grafted into this olive tree. And so the church now is a phenomenon that consists of the remnant of Israel who are believers and the remnant of the Gentiles who have believed. And that is what is the church today.

Now, according to the New Testament, this church of called out ones is really not a merely local phenomenon. It is a global phenomenon. God is calling out people all over the world out of every nation to be his people, to come into his church.

And therefore, any person in any part of the world who has responded to this call and has been called out and has become a Christian and been joined to Christ, that person is part of this whole church. The church is a global fellowship. It exists with or without organization.

Now, I did not say anything negative about organization. I just said that this global fellowship, this global family of people born of God, is an entity that exists with or without organization. That is, it may be organized, but even before it is organized, it exists.

And when Paul began to go out and spread the gospel in Gentile lands, for example, on his first missionary journey, he extended the church to new regions. There were Gentiles in Asia Minor and other places in Galatia that Paul called to the feast. And they came and they became part of the Christian church.

In some cases, he did not organize them at all, did not appoint leaders there until a later date. He traveled on and came back to these churches and organized them. They were churches.

They were part of the church. Even before they were so organized, but he later organized them by appointing elders in every church. But the church existed before there were elders in it.

The church is simply a spiritual reality, a spiritual fellowship of those who believe in Christ. However, in addition to this phenomenon of a global entity called the church, the Bible uses the term church to speak of all the Christians in a particular geographical area as well. In some cases, the church refers to all Christians everywhere in the world taken as a collective.

For example, in Ephesians, when Paul talks about the church, he's talking in general about the whole body of Christ. And what he has to say applies to the whole body of Christ the world over. He's not talking about local assemblies.

But the whole body of Christ does have local expression. Because if there is a phenomenon of fellowship of people all over the world, that means that in certain localities there are portions of that whole fellowship. There are local manifestations of it.

And therefore, all the Christians in a certain locality, let us say the city of Rome or Corinth or Philippi in the Bible, or today it would be whatever town you're in, all the Christians there are part of the local church. And that simply means they are the local sampling of that whole global entity called the church. Just all the Christians in your town are part of your town's church.

And they are still part of the whole church of all other towns combined the world over because this is a global phenomenon. But as a localized fellowship, they are capable of working together more than they can, for example, with people across the ocean from them. And therefore, the local expression of the church exists wherever there are Christians, two or more, in one area.

Now, the Bible speaks of the word church in yet one other way. And this third sense in which the word church is used in Scripture is referring to somewhat organized gatherings of believers in some kind of meeting place. For example, in the church of Rome, there appeared to be several gathering places or churches.

There was a church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila. The church in the area had several congregations or gathering places, groups of Christians that gathered together for fellowship, for breaking bread, for teaching, for prayer, those kinds of things. You see, a town might have so many Christians in it that it would be impossible for all of them to meet in one place or even to know each other.

In a very large city, there might be, you know, 100,000 Christians. And it's impossible to become personally acquainted with that many people. And therefore, even in a town, the local church might be subdivided into congregational units that would meet in homes or other places that were available to them to meet.

And these units would also be called churches. Therefore, we read of Paul talking about the church in Philemon's home and the church in Priscilla and Aquila's home and the church in some other home. This is using the word church just to mean a sampling of the local church in even a smaller locality, maybe a neighborhood or a house, maybe in a building that they rented.

So the word church in its, you know, principal meaning is everyone who's been called out by Christ to be a follower of His wherever they are in the whole world. It is also used in Scripture of the Christians, all the Christians in a certain locality, usually determined by cities in the New Testament, the church in Philippi, the church in Laodicea, the church in Ephesus. And then within these cities, there were smaller gatherings which were also called churches.

Now, what constitutes a legitimate church? This is very important today because there are some people who have become disenfranchised with institutional organized Christianity, and they still love the Lord. They want to be followers of Christ, and they

are, in fact, perhaps very conscientious in their following of Jesus Christ, but they don't feel comfortable in the churches, the institutional churches around them. Now, perhaps some feel like I should just tell them to put up or shut up and just get involved with the institutional churches, but I simply can't do that on biblical authority because there are some institutional churches that are, you know, so far compromised that involvement in them is to take a spiritual risk, if not with your own soul, then that of your children.

And there are certainly some towns, I've been in them, where there is so little manifestation of the true church and the attitudes of the true Christians in some of the institutional churches that those who really want to be true Christians and really want to follow Jesus will gather in other places outside of what are called church buildings. They'll gather in homes, they'll gather in parks, they'll gather in rented halls, and in some cases they won't even organize themselves as churches. They may not even call themselves churches, or they might, but they might not have any clergy, they might not have any ordained leaders, they might not even have regular meetings, or if they do, it may not be weekly, it may not be on Sunday, it might be on some evening.

These groups, in our traditional way of thinking, would not generally be called churches, but the question is, are they in the sight of God? And the reason I bring this up is because I have met pastors of institutional churches who look upon these groups that meet in homes or other places and they say, well, that's not the church, and these people ought to be in a real church, you know? They ought to join a real church, and if they don't, they're in sin. Well, that statement has no biblical authority because, of course, whatever church this pastor belongs to started out with a group of believers meeting like that, too. I mean, it was, in his mind, legitimate when his group did it, and generally speaking, his group probably branched off some earlier group, and they branched off some earlier group, and this is the way that, really, congregations multiply.

And if people are serving God, even if they're not in a traditional church, that doesn't mean they're not in a valid church. Jesus said, where two or more, two or three, he said, are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them. Now, what does it mean to be a church? What makes a gathering of people a legitimate church as opposed to not a legitimate church? I mean, Jesus said to the church of Ephesus that they had left their first love, and if they did not repent and return to their first love, he would remove their lampstand from its place, and apparently he meant he would remove their presence from his presence, and he would not allow them to continue to be a valid church.

Now, would they continue to have meetings? Possibly. It is possible for Jesus to have separated himself from a group of people because of their compromise and sin, and yet they continue, and an institutional structure continues to exist, and that being so makes you wonder, well, on what basis do we say a group is really a valid church? And certainly the best answer I can think of biblically is a valid church is one where Jesus is in their

midst, where Jesus is corporately expressed by true members of his body who gather together in order to express him and to invite him to minister among them, through them, and Jesus said it only takes two or three to do that. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst.

Now, a group of two or three people might not have a pastor. They might not even take the Eucharist. They might not even have a liturgy or a structured meeting at all, but if they are gathering together in Jesus' name in order to worship him and edify each other, is he not there in their midst? And if he is, then what more could they hope for? What more could be added than Jesus himself to make a church a valid church? You see, in our own day, I think it's very common to interpret church in entirely institutional terms.

Jesus did not do so. Jesus said, where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them. It's clear that church discipline can occur even in this kind of an informal setting because really a church is not so much a club or an organization.

A church, the church in the Bible, is a family. It's the children of one father and the followers of one leader, Jesus. And Christians who have very different opinions and practices about a lot of things can be still followers of Jesus and children of the Father.

That being so, that people meet in a situation less traditional than our own does not give us warrant to criticize or to call into question the validity of their meetings or of their life in Christ. The important thing, of course, is whether they are truly serving Christ, not whether they are conforming to some liturgy or some organized or institutional kind of Christianity. And if they are doing so, then Jesus is there in their midst.

Who can criticize that? I certainly cannot. Now, frankly, I do know people who do and who apparently feel they can. But Jesus is indicating that his family is a tight-knit group of people who love him.

It is possible to exclude people from there. It's possible to discipline, in the sense of excommunication, people from that kind of a group. You simply don't have a political structure to do it.

You have rather real relationships between people who will acknowledge and approve of certain things and not of other things as a group, corporately. And that is, I think, what Jesus had in mind when he started the church. I think it's been somewhat corrupted by what has happened since it was institutionalized.

Well, on that note, we'll have to close. Tune in again.