

MY APOLOGIA

By

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In this article it is my intention to reply to an article entitled “*Two or Three*” by Bro Ronnie Wolfe which is posted under "Articles" and "Local Church Seminar" at his Church's web site: <http://www.firstharrison.org>. (Shortly after I sent a copy of this to Bro Wolfe, this article was removed from his site). This article was also picked up and published by Bro Cockrell in *The Berea Baptist Banner*, Mantachie, MS, [hereafter, BBB] with the title of “Matthew 18:20” [Sept 5, 2002, p. 401]. I cannot say for certain that Bro Wolfe is referring to my article in *The Grace Proclamator and Promulgator* (hereafter P&P) but I believe he is. If the reader wishes to see my exegesis of Mt. 18:20 he will find it in P&P [Nov. 1, 2001, p.1, Texts for The Self-Constitution Theory & Dec. 1, 2001, p.1]. The following references to Bro Wolfe’s article are to BBB throughout.

Bro Wolfe takes the position that every church must have a mother church. That is, that no church can be scripturally formed, if it does not have the formal authority of a “mother church.” When this mother’s authority is given, then and only then, can a new church be constituted. I take the position that this is pure tradition. There is not one word of it in the New Testament. Furthermore, it is not the teaching of Landmark Baptists nor have I ever found it stated in any Baptist writer or record before 1900.

In this article (and in everything I write) I do the reader the courtesy of identifying every source to which reference is made. This is mentioned, because my brethren, who have written against the position taken by Bro Camp, others and myself concerning church constitution, have been extremely careful to exclude all specific references to this P&P, dates, titles, authors, books and other resources. These brethren never give the name of the magazine, paper, article, author, book, date or the person about whom they are writing. They seem to think there is virtue in vagueness. As references are seldom given one can only guess as to whom, and about what, the writer is referring.

It is always proper, when you refer to what someone has written, in any published form, to give the title of the book, the name of the magazine, paper, web site, or article, with the edition, date, page number, author and any other pertinent information which will help the reader to locate the source if he desires to do so. Honesty would seem to dictate this policy even if it were not the norm of scholarship. To a man these brethren have seldom done this! I wonder why?

Bro Wolfe’s article begins by suggesting that there is some “serious confusion” among Baptists as to the meaning of Mt. 18:20. He then divides up his study in two parts: 1) A Powerful Pretext; and 2) The Proper Context, [Ibid., p 401, col. 1].

Whenever a writer admits that his arguments are not sound, no one needs to

refute them. This is exactly what Bro Wolfe does. He launches out with several little skits in which he pretends that if Mt 18:20 refers to the constitution of a church it would make any two Christians who chanced to meet a church. But then he caught himself and said: "I would agree that some of these situations are a stretch of the mind..." [Ibid., p. 405, col. 2]. In spite of his confession, he backslides into this same error "stretching the mind" in exactly the same way later in this article, [Ibid., p. 406, col. 1]. But as his own refutation is sound, I pass it by. It makes it easy when an opponent saws off the limb he is sitting on!

Bro Wolfe charges that those who believe Mt. 18:20 pertains to church constitution are "almost universalists," [Ibid., p. 406] and calls our interpretation "the universalist interpretation of this verse" [Ibid., p. 405, col. 2] and "going the way of the universalists" [Ibid., p.406, col. 1]. By *universalist* I assume him to mean those who believe in the *universal church*. He also charges that when Mt 18:20 is applied to the founding or constitution of a church the text is a "pretext" and says it is taken completely out of "context", [Ibid., p. 401, 405 col. 2]. He finally says our interpretation of this text is "the 'new light' of contemporary doctrine" [Ibid. p.406, col 2].

Bro Wolfe gives not one source to prove these statements except for his definition of *pretext* and the quotation of one text of Scripture, unrelated to the issue, [Ibid., p. 401, col. 2]. Is my position on this text really a pretext? If so, Bro Wolfe should have told his readers what my real purpose was! But even though his whole thesis depends on Mt 18:20 being used as a pretext, he never got around to telling us what this pretext is! This is strange that one who has this grasp of matters should leave his readers in the dark on this score! But we will not let this mystery deter us but will simply examine the facts as to what Baptists have believed on this text. Did Baptist writers refer to Mt 18:20 as applicable to church constitution? If so this means the idea that churches must have a mother church in order to be scripturally constituted is the real pretext! Let us see.

The first record we will consider is:

THE LONDON CONFESSION 1644

"That Christ hath here on earth a spiritual Kingdom, which is the Church, which he hath purchased and redeemed to himself, as a peculiar inheritance: which Church, as it is visible to us, is a company of visible [1 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1] Saints, [Rom. 1:7; Acts 26:18; 1 Thess. 1:9; 2 Cor. 6:17; Rev. 18:18] called & separated from the world, by the word and [Acts 2:17 with Acts 10:37] Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement, in the practical enjoyment of the[Rom. 10:10; Acts 20:21; Mt. 18:19,20; Acts 2:42; 1 Pet. 2:5] Ordinances, commanded by Christ their head and King." — [London Confession, 1644, Art. "XXXIII].

The reader will note what these able compilers thought of Mt. 18:20 and whether it had a bearing on church constitution. Were these persecuted men, living in daily

jeopardy of life and limb, using Mt 18:20 as a pretext?

BENJAMIN KEACH

In a church manual entitled *The Glory of A True Church*, Keach wrote in 1697:

“What tends to the Glory and Beauty of a true Gospel Church.

IX. In their having the divine Presence with them: Or when the Glory of God fills his Temple.” [Refs given are]— Ex. 20:24; Mt. 18:20. – [Benj. Keach, *Glory of A True Church*, Quoted in *Polity*, edited by Mark Dever, p. 85].

I wonder if Keach was using Mt. 18:20 as a pretext?

In 1774 the Charleston Association prepared for its churches a *Summary of Church Discipline*. Here is what they said concerning church constitution:

“The Scriptures do not absolutely determine the number of persons necessary to constitute a church; but as our Lord has said, *Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them, Matt.18:20*, it should seem as if that number of godly persons might, at least in some urgent cases, form a church essential, though not a church complete, or duly organized, for lack of officers. Experience has sometimes proved that such small beginnings have been succeeded with a large increase, consistent with that encouraging promise, *Isa. 60:22, a little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation.*” –[*Ibid.*, p. 118].

According to Bro Wolfe these renowned Baptists must have been confused for they too used Mt. 18:20 as a reference to church constitution!

PHILADELPHIA ASSOCIATION

In 1795 the Philadelphia Association asked Samuel Jones to prepare a Treatise of Church Discipline for their churches. Jones prepared this Treatise and it was revised by a committee formed of one from each church and approved and printed in 1805. You can be certain this was what these churches believed and practiced.

Concerning the constitution of a church Jones says:

“5. A number of believers are united together into a particular church, by an act of mutual confederation. ‘Gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.’ 2 Cor. 8:5.”

“6. Whether the requisite number should be twelve or thirteen, because our blessed Lord and his disciples, at the first celebration of the Lord’s supper, made that number, or whether three will be sufficient, because of the promise in Matt. xviii. 20. may be doubtful: but there ought to be so many, as to answer the end of that holy institution.” –[Samuel Jones, Quoted in *Polity* by Dever, p. 141].

Bro Wolfe suggests in his article that Mt 18:20 has nothing, and can have nothing, to do with church constitution and anyone who so uses this text really has something to hide. I wonder what these men was trying to hide? Is it possible that Bro Wolfe and the brethren who contend for a “mother church essential” are wrong?

A.C. DAYTON

In these next two quotes by Dayton, he does not actually quote Mt 18:20 but it is clear that he is referring to this passage.

“He invested every member with the right to execute his laws, but only when assembled with the brethren. As many as could conveniently unite came voluntarily together and by mutual consent were constituted an ‘*ekklesia*,’ or official assembly, of Christ. It was subject to *his* laws: it **acted by his authority: it used his name** to give a sanction to its acts; and as he had *authorized* it, and conferred on it all its authority, so he promised to be in its midst by his Spirit, and to ratify in heaven what it did upon earth.” — [Dayton, *Theo. Earnest*, II, p. 115-6, emphasis mine– JC].

You will note here that this Old Landmarker thought baptized believers could constitute a church and they did so **not** by getting “mother church” authority but by getting the authority of Christ according to Mt 18:20 directly.

Again he says: “But now, as the King has gone to Heaven, whom has He left to attend to the business of the kingdom in His absence? Who shall appoint officers? Who shall receive new members? Who shall dispose or exclude the unworthy? Who shall provide for all that is needful for the purity, the permanence and the extension of the kingdom? He provided for all this before. He went, **by directing as many of the citizens of the kingdom as could conveniently meet together, to assemble and organize themselves into a ‘church,’** which should in its corporate capacity attend to all these matters. It is this Church which must receive the profession of faith, determine on its genuineness and administer baptism.” — [Dayton, *Alien Baptist* 1858, p. 167, emphasis mine – JC].

Perhaps Bro Wolfe will tell us if this Old Landmarker was a *universalist*! Perhaps he will tell us that Bro Dayton was a “new lite”! Or maybe, just maybe, he will tell us he was just referring to Mt 18:20 as a pretext. One other alternative is possible– Bro Wolfe just might be wrong on this text and as to what is necessary to constitute a church. These old Baptists certainly thought so!

CLARK- PENDLETON

J.M. Pendleton and Geo. W. Clark prepared a commentary. On Mat. 18:20 their note is as follows:

“*In my name*: united in and acknowledging my authority and worshipping as a church, or members of a church. *In the midst*: sanctioning their gathering, directing their consultations, answering their prayers, and blessing them. Ch. 18:20.” –[Com. By Clark, Pendleton, Mt. 18:20].

It seems that these brethren thought a church got its authority from Christ and not from another church. But then, surely this is just a *pretext!*

J.R. GRAVES

Next we will give some quotes from J.R. Graves himself. Graves quotes Mt 18:20 thus: “Christ said, where two or three are gathered in my name [authority], there am I in the midst of them.” [New Great Iron Wheel, p. 135]

Would Bro Wolfe please tell us if J.R. Graves himself was using Mt. 18:20 as a *pretext!* Was he a universalist? Was he a “new lite”? Why do these brethren not make these matters clear?

Graves did not believe in the mother church theory:

“Each particular Church is independent of every other body, civil or ecclesiastical, and receiving its authority directly from Christ, it is accountable to him alone.” [Graves in the *Great Carrollton Debate*, p. 995].

Contrary to what Bro Wolfe tells us in his article, Graves believed churches did not derive their authority from another church **but directly from Christ** according to Mt. 18:20. Is this not a “pretext” with a passion?

Graves labors hard to make his position clear

: “...Therefore, each assembly was a complete Church, and being complete in itself, it was independent of all other like bodies in other localities, and being each independent it was divinely invested with all the powers and prerogatives of a Church of Christ. — [New Great Iron Wheel, p. 125].

Graves tells us this is how a church is constituted but Bro Wolfe is bold to say: “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.”– [Ibid., p. 405, col. 3]. Bro Graves says they are “divinely invested” according to Mt 18:20. Bro Wolfe says this is “ludicrous”! Was Graves using Mt 18: 20 as a “pretext”? Was his position “ludicrous”? What is the position of Landmark Baptists on this score? Perhaps Bro Wolfe will iron all of this out for us!

Graves goes on to say:

“Then your ‘church’ (?) has never yet done one of the five or six distinct duties Christ commands and requires each of his churches to do, and the first among these is: —

(1.) To voluntarily organize themselves, by mutual covenant, into a christian assembly; and to eat the Lord’s Supper as a church, all assembled in one place.” [Graves in the *New Great Iron Wheel* p. 127].

One can see at a glance that what Bro Wolfe believes about church constitution and what the Old Landmarker believed are incompatible! Graves says it is a “duty” for baptized Christians who wish to compose a church to “organize themselves by mutual covenant into a christian assembly”. Bro Wolfe declares this to be heresy. Impossible! Unscriptural! And I, for one, am ready to admit that there is a “pretext” afoot! But the question is: Is the position of self constitution a pretext or is the position of the mother-daughter church a pretext?

Graves goes on to quote Tertullian:

[A. D. 150] “Ubi tres ecclesia est, licet laici. ‘ Three are sufficient to form a church although they be laymen. ’” [Graves in the *New Great Iron Wheel*, p. 136]. Graves quotes this with approval.

Well, how did Graves teach a church was constituted? What did he believe Mt. 18:20 meant in practical application? Let Graves tell us himself:

“You deny to your members any voice—

1. In organizing themselves into a Scriptural church—in determining the formation of their government and form of organization.

2. In covenanting together to observe the laws of Christ in all things, and to watch over each other for good.” — [*New Great Iron Wheel*, p. 351].

Graves not only taught this, he also wrote this in his paper, *The Baptist*, for forty years. He included it in his books and debated these issues through the years. In the *Great Carrollton Debate*, held in 1875 at Carrollton, Mo., Jacob Ditzler, the Methodist, debating with Graves, contended that Christian people, baptized or not, could constitute a church [p.944]. All Graves had to do was to give out the line the Authority brethren do— *You must have a mother church to give you authority. Without this you cannot start a church.* The only problem with this is that Graves did not believe this. Rather he gave the Landmark Baptist position and it is clear he thought Mt. 18:20 was applicable to church constitution!

" Now I wish Elder Ditzler to know that there is a world-wide difference between originating an organization different from anything that can be found in the Bible, different from anything the world had ever before seen or heard of, and calling it a Church, and organizing a Christian Church. **It is true that two or three baptized individuals can organize a Church, provided they adopt the apostolic model of government, and covenant to be governed by the sole authority of Jesus Christ.**" — [Graves, *Great Carrollton Debate*, p. 975, emphasis mine–JC].

I have given you a considerable number of renowned Baptists authors and documents, covering almost 400 years of our history, as to their understanding of the use of Mt 18:20 and church constitution. Were these brethren using Mt 18:20 as a **pretext!** Bro Wolfe makes this claim! He makes no exceptions. Thus, he accuses all of these Baptist authors who used Mt 18:20 in reference to church constitution, as doing so with deception, subterfuge and ulterior motives (this is the idea behind a *pretext*) rather than an honest and fair exegesis of this text!

Bro Wolfe tells us you must have a mother church to constitute another church. He produced no positive NT law declaring this. He gave no Baptist manual stating this. He cited no confession of faith teaching this. He quoted no Baptist preacher defending this. He produced no Landmark Baptist who espoused this view. In fact, he gave no evidence whatsoever for his position except his “think so!”

Now that is what I call a pretext!”