

I like to joke in the classes I teach, that I would view my life worthwhile if my tombstone read:

“He got them to pay attention to context and culture!”

Working a crowd into an “amen-ing” frenzy with a proof-text having no biblically legitimate application is a widely practiced and learnable skill. A shoe salesman’s persuasion, with Tony Robbins’ charm, and a breathy evangelist’s passion can entrench a good bit of doctrinal and methodological nonsense into the Body of Christ. Accuracy sometimes suffers in direct proportion to heart rate and goose bumps: an adrenaline rush being equivalent to “the anointing” or “the Spirit moving!” Mmmmmm . . . Maybe . . . maybe not . . .

If a thumping heart has no essential spiritual significance, neither does intellectualism. The danger in any study of the Scriptures is that an idea or a theory of God can easily become a substitute for God: impressive to the mind when God as a living reality is absent from the soul.¹ A.W. Tozer decried the substitution of the voice of the parrot for the voice of the turtledove in the Church:² that is, the uncritical repetition of what we have been taught or experienced, assuming that what is, must be; or that assent to Paul’s doctrine is the same as possessing Paul’s life.

None of us are totally free from the imperceptible influence of our experiences, assumptions, and culture upon our understanding of Scripture. If the Scripture is alive, and it is, the ever-present challenge is to allow its Voice to speak to us, not to project our voice onto it, thus hearing only what we have been conditioned to hear.³ The Word of God does not present itself to us. We present our selves to it. Familiarity deadens the hearing and numbs the conscience. The curse of modern Christian leadership is the pattern of looking around and taking our spiritual bearing from what we see, [or what we desire!]⁴ rather than from what the Lord has said.⁵

By neglecting culture and context, Matthew 18 (Mt.18) has suffered from careless interpretation and questionable application. It is commonly used as a procedural template for resolving interpersonal offences and local church issues. It’s also frequently applied to the believer’s authority in spiritual warfare to: bind and loose principalities, bind satan, bind the strong man, “bind people to the will of God,” and “loose” angels, etc. I believe we have seen what we wanted to see and heard what we wanted to hear.

Matthew 18:15-17—Application Errors

The “Can’t Talk” Rule⁶

In some authoritarian climates, Matthew 18:15-17 is unfortunately used as biblical license to enforce the “can’t talk” rule. The “can’t talk” rule silences people by labeling *them* as the problem if they notice a problem! If they speak out loud about a problem, they are the problem!⁷

¹ Heschel, Abraham J. *The Prophets*, New York: Harper-Collins, 1962.

² Tozer, A. W. *Keys to the Deeper Life. The Sunday Magazine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957.

³ Acts 13:27. The essence of religiosity is to be committed to the Scriptures but not hear the Voice in the Scriptures.

⁴ My addition. Some “faith” theologies concerning church growth are no more than unbridled human desire for success, energized by Madison Avenue sales techniques, with the window dressing of a few Proverbs thrown in to provide “biblical” cover . . . if it gets the results we want, it *must be* God. A well-known TV prophet (so-called) said: “Faith is imagination, imagination is creative power.” In other words, any thing you can imagine, you can create, and slap God’s endorsement on it. It’s yours. That’s not Biblical faith. It’s paganism which saturates American “Christian” TV. God is not “utilized.” Human imagination is the root of idolatry!

⁵ Tozer, A. W. *Tragedy in the Church: The Missing Gifts*. CampHill: Christian Publications, 1984.

⁶ See, Johnson, David & Van Vonderen, Jeff. *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1991.

In these environments Mt. 18 is used to silence dissenting speech and troublemakers. The potential merit of a concern or point of view is nullified, and a fair hearing denied, by pointing to the alleged procedural violations (failing to follow Mt. 18) of the one bringing up the issue. The Christ-like response would be to deal with both: the issues of concern and the procedural violations (if they really exist). Using Mt. 18 as a shield against criticism or complaint (justifiable or not), is as unfortunate as it is common.

⁷ Ibid.