

*Matthew 16:16 Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

The "power of the keys" is a phrase in general use to denote the extent of ecclesiastical authority. It is from this passage that churches in the reformed world and more particularly the Presbyterian world find the authority for church discipline.<sup>1</sup> In the Westminster tradition this assumed power also includes the power to retain or remit sins.

The church has never had such power and never will for only God can forgive or remit sins.<sup>2</sup> The Second Helvetic Confession more properly recognizes this fact and says that the preacher not the church remits sins in the preaching of the Gospel. That is the proper understanding of the power of the keys also. This power was given to Peter first and later to all of the apostles.<sup>3</sup> This is the power of the Gospel, which will set men free and open the gates of heaven to them.

The power of the keys was never intended to be about ecclesiastical authority much less discipline. It was the giving of the New Testament in the blood of Jesus Christ along with the command to take this Word to the ends of the earth, beginning in Jerusalem, then Judea, and finally the whole of the world. Here is the command to go and make disciples of all nations as clearly as it is in the passage using these same words.<sup>4</sup> Here is the true authority and power of the church concerning the remission of sins.

If it was true that the church much less any man had the power to remit sins then the eternal election could be set aside by the will of man, not God. The election will stand forever and is the first order of business in the remission of sins and entrance into the

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<sup>1</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXX -- Of Church Censures

I. The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.[1] 1. Isa. 9:6-7; Col. 1:18; I Tim. 5:17; I Thess. 5:12; Acts 20:17, 28; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24; Eph. 4:11-12; I Cor. 12:28; Matt. 28:18-20; John 18:36

II. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.[2] 2. Matt. 16:19; 18:17-18; John 20:21-23; II Cor. 2:6-8

III. Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.[3] . 3. I Cor. 5:1-13; 11:27-34; I Tim. 1:20; 5:20; Matt. 7:6; Jude 1:23

IV. For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the church; according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.[4] 4. I Thess. 5:12; II Thess. 3:6, 14-15; I Cor. 5:4-5, 13; Matt. 18:17; Titus 3:10

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 1:18 "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:18 "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

<sup>4</sup> 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

kingdom of heaven. Further, if such was possible the gate to heaven would be surely sealed forever to such a person because no sinner may enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is made even more clear in 1 Corinthians 5:5 “To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” The church clearly has the authority to discipline as indicated in this verse and confirmed in the verse under consideration. But it is not the power of the keys but the power to bind and loose from which such authority is given. Binding and loosing are legal terms as such whereby in the Old Testament the high priest could bind a law, that is make it the rule of the land or loose the people from the obedience of the same. Here then this authority is given first to the apostles and through them to the church. Notice carefully that the church was not given permission to condemn the soul, which the binding of sin would do, but rather to deliver the flesh that it might be destroyed for the express purpose of the soul being saved.

All should find great comfort in this in that it leaves the only one worthy to judge as the only judge of record now or in the end of the age the sole judge of all men according to their works. God did not leave the fate of one soul in the frail hands of humanity or to the whim of the church and her courts.

As can be seen this in no way changes how the church disciplines but it does change where the church gets the authority to discipline wayward children of the Lord.

Church discipline fails not because of the lack of biblical authority then but for the lack of relationship between so-called believers coming under discipline. True believers will yield as noted in Proverbs though they may go through a season of rebellion and require ever increasing pressure by way of church censure, they will submit because their relationship with Christ has value to them. We see this pragmatically displayed in the rebellious children of the world who for lack of relationship in dysfunctional homes will not submit to the authority and discipline of the parents.

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