

Who Holds the Keys? By Mike Gendron

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Two thousand years ago Jesus said to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loose in heaven." This reference to the "keys of the kingdom" is found only in [Matthew 16:19](#), however the authority to "bind and loose" is given to all the disciples in [Matthew 18:18](#). Many biblical scholars believe the "keys" are symbols representing the authority to govern and minister theocratic principles on earth. However, the interpretation of this verse has been the subject of debate for hundreds of years.

Within the Roman Catholic tradition, doctrines have developed that give the papacy authority to delegate the power to forgive or retain sins through a sacramental system of penance and absolution. The Catholic Encyclopedia states, "The power to confer or withhold forgiveness might well be viewed as the opening and shutting of the gates of heaven." It was used both as "admission to" as well as "excommunication from" the kingdom. The power to "bind and loose" also gives the Popes authority to pronounce doctrinal judgments, making disciplinary decisions in the Church and even canonize saints. This authority and power prescribes what and who Catholics must believe and how and when they must worship.

The Vatican teaches that Peter's keys have been handed down to his successors throughout the centuries. This has given credence to the papacy to govern the kingdom of God, which they believe, is the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, Peter and his successors are said to have special spiritual powers as Christ's representative on earth.

Proponents of the Roman Catholic tradition point to history as supporting evidence for their interpretation of the keys of the kingdom. However, most of their historical support comes from tradition dating back only the fourth century.

An accurate historical and grammatical interpretation must consider the use of terms at the time of the writing of the original text. The concept of the kingdom and the keys must be understood from their usage in the first century. Peter and the disciples understood the kingdom to be the visible rule of Christ over the earth, not the spiritual rule of Christ over His invisible church. The king would rule from Jerusalem, free Israel from political bondage and destroy her enemies. After Israel rejected the offer of the kingdom, Christ began to teach about it from a different perspective. He taught that it would be a mystery, invisible, and progressive. It would be both present and future and could be entered only by regeneration. The kingdom would not be limited to the church, but would work through the church to proclaim the good news of God's redemptive rule.

After the events of Pentecost, Christ's teaching and the indwelling Holy Spirit, gave the disciples a clearer understanding of this kingdom. The real authority of the keys given by Christ is ultimately in the revelation of God's principles from the Scriptures for His theocratic kingdom. Men of God were able to discern the correctness of doctrine and practice using the whole counsel of God ([Acts 17:11](#)). An example of this is found in [Luke 11:52](#), where Jesus denounces the Pharisees for misrepresenting God and the Scriptures with a religion of their own making. As a result they were shutting the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. "Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering."

The ultimate power to open and close the gates of heaven is the Gospel, which "is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe" ([Romans 1:16](#)). Peter's first proclamation of the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost, in Acts chapter 2, opened the door of the kingdom to thousands. Since then, the disciples, and all Christians who have succeeded them, have been opening and closing the doors of the kingdom with the Gospel. Those who hear it and believe it are forgiven (loosed) of their sin and enter the kingdom, while those who reject the Gospel remain unforgiven (bound) of their sins and can not enter the kingdom ([John 3:36](#)).

The contrast between the Catholic interpretation of the "keys of the kingdom" and the historical-grammatical interpretation is significant. One centers around the teachings of men and is based on tradition and reason, while the other centers around the Word of God and is based on His revealed will and reign.