

REFORMATION 500 WEEK 31: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM QA'S 83-85

Question 83: WHAT IS THE OFFICE OF THE KEYS? **The Preaching of the Holy Gospel and Christian discipline; by these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.**

After Jesus said He would build His church upon the rock (the foundation) of the truth Peter confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” He told Peter *how* He would build His church, “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” (Matt. 16:19). Jesus did not give the keys to Peter only, for what He said to Peter He said to all His disciples: “whatsoever **ye** [you plural] shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, whatsoever **ye** loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18 KJV). Jesus gave the keys to the whole church, which then elects pastors and elders to use the keys the way He commands in His Word (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

The authority of the keys is described in terms of *binding* and *loosing*, which terms were used by the Jewish elders for the authority to interpret and apply God’s law to particular cases, declaring what is permitted and not permitted, who would be admitted into membership and who would not. To **bind** is to shut or forbid. To **loose** is to open or permit. The keys of the kingdom are the authority “to make known the will of God by the preaching of the gospel, and church discipline,” “by which the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers, and shut against unbelievers” (Ursinus, 441).

Question 84: HOW IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN OPENED AND SHUT BY THE PREACHING OF THE HOLY GOSPEL? **In this way: that, according to the command of Christ, it is proclaimed and openly witnessed to believers, one and all, that as often as they accept with true faith the promise of the Gospel, all their sins are really forgiven them of God for the sake of Christ’s merits; and on the contrary, to all unbelievers and hypocrites, that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation abide on them so long as they are not converted. According to this testimony of the Gospel, God will judge men both in this life and in that which is to come.**

The first key is the official preaching of God’s Word by a man properly called and ordained by the church (Luke 11:52). Preachers are ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor. 5:20), who have the authority of Christ to preach what He preached, to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is open to believers and shut against unbelievers. Believers are forgiven; unbelievers are not forgiven. “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36); “unless you are converted...you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). When a minister faithfully declares the message of Christ, Christ uses His own message to save His elect people. Through His Word He opens the door to His kingdom! Peter reported that God “had *opened the door* of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). While Lydia listened to Paul preach the gospel, “the Lord *opened her heart*” (Acts 16:14). Through His Word He grants assurance to every believer: “be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you” (Matt. 9:2; cf. 1 John 1:9).

“Whenever the gospel of Christ is officially proclaimed by a minister of Jesus Christ, a ‘losing’ and a ‘binding’ take place: there is an opening and a shutting of the door of salvation. All who hear must be clearly informed as to which side of the door they are standing on. True preaching of the Word must clearly show both the marks of the godly, regenerated, forgiven soul and the marks of the hypocrite who still loves sin and is under condemnation” (Norman Jones, *Study Helps*). As ministers, we “are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and the other the aroma of life leading to life” (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

Question 85: HOW IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN SHUT AND OPENED BY CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE? **In this way: that, according to the command of Christ, if any under the Christian name show themselves unsound either in doctrine or in life, and after several brotherly admonitions do not turn from their errors or evil ways, they are complained of to the Church or to its proper officers; and, if they neglect to hear them also, are by them denied the holy sacraments and thereby excluded from the Christian communion, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ; and if they promise and show real amendment, they are again received as members of Christ and His Church.**

The second key is official church discipline. “And surely if no country or city can exist without discipline, laws and punishments, then certainly the church, which is the house of the living God also needs some form of government and discipline” (Ursinus, 442). Christ has given His Church the authority to discipline church members who openly live in sin and are unwilling to repent and abandon their sins (1 Cor. 5). Paul told the church at Corinth, “Put away from yourselves [excommunicate] the evil person” (1 Cor. 5:13). The church “shuts and binds by Christian discipline, when it excommunicates wicked and obstinate offenders, ... and it opens and looses, when it again receives [back into membership] the same persons, if they repent” (Ursinus, 441).

The procedure to follow in the case of a private offense is given in Matthew 18:15-18: “if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector [as a last resort the unrepentant church member is excommunicated and treated like any other unbeliever who needs the gospel]. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven [the authority of heaven stands behind faithful church discipline].” The church’s officers “cannot cast any out of the kingdom of God, but they can and ought to declare the rejection of those whom God declares in His Word that He has rejected [so long as they do not repent]” (Ursinus, 461).

The purpose of discipline is not to lord it over souls (Mark 10:42; 1 Pet. 5:3), but so “that the offender, being thus put to shame [2 Thess. 3:14], may repent [1 Cor. 5:5; Acts 8:18-23], and that such things as bring reproach upon the cause of Christ, may be carefully guarded against [Titus 2:8]” (Ursinus, 442). If sin is not disciplined, then *like leaven* it will spread and corrupt the whole church (1 Cor. 5:6).

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