



Could you explain the extent of the power that Christ gave in Matthew 16:19, to "bind and loose"?

Let us read, first, the passage referred to above, in context. Christ said to Peter, beginning in Matthew 16:18: "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. 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 word "Peter," i.e., "petros" in Greek, means "a little stone." The "rock," on which Christ would build His church, is "petra" in Greek, meaning a solid rock. Christ was not saying here that Christ would build the church on "Peter," but on THE ROCK -- Christ Himself. It is CHRIST who is identified as "THE ROCK" in passages such as 1 Corinthians 10:4. Peter, as well as the other apostles, in addition to the prophets, are part of the foundation, but Christ is the CHIEF cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). The Church is built on Christ, who is the LIVING Head of the Church (Ephesians 4:15). That is why the "gates of Hades" or "Death" cannot overcome or defeat it. Christ, as the LIVING Head of the Church -- as the foundation of the Church -- has overcome death, having the "key of Hades and of Death" (Revelation 1:18). Paul explains that no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is laid, which is Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Unger's Bible Handbook agrees, as follows: "'Thou art Peter [petros, a stone] and upon this rock [petra, great ledge of rock] I will build my church (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-6, where the apostle made it clear he was never to be thought of as 'the rock').'"

The Broadman Bible commentary points out:

"In the Greek text, two forms appear in 'you are Peter' [Petros], and 'on this rock' [petra]... The masculine form, Petros [and]... the feminine form, petra... If [Peter] is the rock, it is strange that the impersonal 'this rock' follows the personal 'you are.'... Although Peter and all the apostles (Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14) were in some sense the foundation upon which the church was built, the New Testament never allows this in an absolute sense. Jesus Himself is 'the rock' upon which the church is built... there could be a church without Peter, none without Christ. Peter is neither the head nor the foundation of the church. Jesus founded it; it stands or falls with him; and he is yet its living Lord and head."

It is important to understand this background, if we want to understand correctly the "power to bind and loose." We are told in Matthew 16:19, that Christ gave Peter the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." Our recent Q&A in Update # 121 on the "key of David" explained the meaning of the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." We pointed out that "the context shows that He was revealing to Peter and the other disciples the KNOWLEDGE as to how to enter the Kingdom of God..."

In Matthew 16:19, Christ continues to say that whatever "thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Authorized Version). So, Christ addresses Peter in this passage, as the word "thou," a singular word, shows.

However, in Matthew 18:18, Christ does not only speak to Peter, when He says: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever YE shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever YE shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Authorized Version)." While the word "thou" (in Matthew 16:19) refers to just one person, the word "ye" (in Matthew 18:18) refers to more than one person. In Matthew 18:15-17, Christ had just explained the proper procedure regarding an unrepentant brother or sister. If he or she does not hear "the church," that is, the ministry, "let him be unto THEE as an heathen man and a publican." It is the church,

through its ministry, which will make the decision to disassociate from such a person. Such a decision involves, of course, a judgment whether or not the person is repentant and whether or not the sins of the person are forgiven. And so, we read in John 20:22-23 (Authorized Version): "And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive YE the Holy [Spirit]: Whose soever sins YE remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins YE retain, they are retained."

The ministry has been given the authority from God, to "bind and loose," and to "remit" and "retain" sin. It is critical that we understand correctly the scope of this authority.

When returning to Matthew 16:19, we find, in the New King James Bible, the following annotation in the margin: "Or, 'will have been bound... will have been loosed.'"

The Ryrie Study Bible explains: "Lit., 'shall have been bound... shall have been loosed.' Heaven, not the apostles, initiates all binding and loosing, while the apostles announce these things. In John 20:22-23 sins are in view; here, things (i.e., practices). An example of the apostles' binding practices on people is found in Acts 15:20."

The New American Standard Bible translates Matthew 16:19, as follows: "...and whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

Similarly the New Testament by Charles Williams: "... and whatever you forbid on earth must be what is already forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth must be what is already permitted in heaven."

The Broadman Bible Commentary points out:

"'Shall be bound' (estai dedemenon) and 'shall be loosed' (estai lelumenon) may not be precise translations of the Greek tenses behind them. In each case the Greek tense is a periphrastic form of the future perfect passive. Possibly they should be rendered 'shall have been bound' and 'shall have

been loosed,' although many grammarians would call this pedantic. If the force of the future perfect tense holds here, the meaning would be somewhat altered. This would suggest not that the action on earth would be ratified in heaven but that it is anticipated in heaven. In other words, earth follows heaven, not the reverse."

Regarding John 20:23, the Ryrie Study Bible states: "Since only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:7), the disciples and the Church are here given the authority to declare what God does when a man either accepts or rejects His Son." We might also add that Christ had announced to them that they would soon receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us wisdom and discernment, and enables especially the ministry, when used correctly, to ascertain whether a person is repentant or not.

Although Christ was talking, at that time, to Peter and the other apostles, it is clear that His statements were not just limited to them. Christ stated in Matthew 28:20 that the early apostles were to teach all the disciples "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world [or better: end of this age or civilization]." Christ included with His statement the church throughout the ages, until the very time of His return. Therefore, He did not restrict the authority to "bind and loose" just to His apostles of the very first century.

The Nelson Study Bible comments on Matthew 16:19 and on Matthew 18:18: "In rabbinical literature, binding and loosing refers to what was permitted or not permitted. So this passage may refer to judgments that Peter [and the other apostles] would make about what would be permitted or forbidden in the church... As in [Matthew] 16:19, the tenses [in Matthew 18:18] imply that what is loosed or bound on earth will have been determined already in heaven. In other words, this is a promise of divine direction..."

Jamiesson, Fausset and Brown, Commentary on the Whole Bible, states regarding Matthew 18:18: "Here, what had been granted but a short time

before to Peter only... is plainly extended to all the Twelve; so that... it means nothing peculiar to Peter, far less to his pretended successors at Rome. It has to do with admission and rejection from the membership of the Church."

The New Bible Commentary: Revised, agrees and adds the following remarks: "The promise does not of course mean that God will be bound by anything that Peter says (cf. Gal. 2:11), but that things done according to the will of Christ will have binding validity.... Judicial rulings, like the promulgation of rules of conduct, are binding."

Eerdman's Handbook to the Bible elaborates: "The authority given to Peter is given equally to the others (see [Matthew]18:18)... God is not bound by whatever Peter may say. But anything done by the disciple in accordance with Christ's will is to have permanent validity."

The Broadman Bible Commentary, commenting on Matthew 18:18, explains the meaning and scope of "binding and loosing," as follows:

"The authority to bind and loose, given to Peter in [Matthew] 16:19, is here extended to the whole church [that is, its ministry]. In [Matthew] 16:19 it seems to relate primarily to instruction, what conduct is permitted and what not [We might insert here that this would include conduct that is not clearly defined in Scripture. The Church is not permitted, however, to do away with any of God's commandments, judgments or statutes, compare Matthew 5:17-19; James 2:10; Mark 7:6-13. Likewise, the Church is not to add prohibitions regarding conduct that the Bible permits, compare Revelation 22:18; Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Proverbs 30:5-6]. Here [in Matthew 18:18] it relates primarily to church discipline. The periphrastic future perfect passive tense is used for bind and loose as in [Matthew] 16:19... Agreement between heaven and church is pictured. This, of course, presupposes that in undertaking the discipline of a member the church has been governed by the motive and spirit prescribed."

In summary, Christ empowered the leadership of the Church, throughout the Church's history and

existence, to discern God's Will regarding binding Church decisions as to what God permits and prohibits, based on His law, and who is to be excommunicated and reinstated, based on the Church leadership's discernment of the person's repentance and God's forgiveness. This is not to say that Church decisions are to be considered infallible. God does not bind in heaven a Church decision which is against His Will and His Law. We are told that all of us have to GROW in the KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST (2 Peter 3:18; Ephesians 4:13). Therefore, when God, through the power and wisdom of His Holy Spirit, clearly reveals to the Church leadership that a wrong decision was made in the past, perhaps by not fully submitting to, or understanding the Will of God, such a wrong decision must be corrected immediately.