

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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## Of Broken Hearts and Broken Shackles

By Timothy F. Kauffman

The case for Petrine Primacy, and ostensibly the case for Roman and Papal Primacy, rests entirely on Jesus' response to Peter's confession: "upon this rock I will build my church;" "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it;" "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom;" and "whatsoever thou shalt bind [and] loose..." (*Matthew* 16:18-19). His response has taken on such a mythical character that the words have long been subordinated to the myth, obscured either by pious guesswork and ancient speculation or by centuries of attempts to clarify or to correct the conjecture. Two religions have thus emerged from the vortex of Jesus' response. One rests confidently on the man, Peter, and the other points to the implications of his confession, eager to stand on more solid ground than Peter can provide. A comparatively simple textual analysis reveals that Jesus built His Church neither upon Peter, nor upon his confession, nor upon the apostles, nor even upon Himself, but upon the Words His Father had commanded Him to speak. Even Christ Himself concedes that His Father's Words are the only appropriate foundation, a truth confirmed by Isaiah whom He cites authoritatively. Once this is understood, it becomes clear that Jesus' further promises about "the gates of hell," "the keys of the kingdom," and "binding" and "loosing" must also refer to "the foolishness of preaching," a commission He had received from His Father and would soon confer on the Eleven.

Interpretations of *Matthew* 16:18 are varied and diverse. Peter was the first to confess Christ's divinity, says one Roman Catholic apologist, and therefore Jesus meant to build his Church *upon*

*Peter*.<sup>1</sup> A Protestant responds that Peter was "first to confess," so *his confession* is the rock.<sup>2</sup> Peter's confession was "so strong," says another, that Jesus promised to build his Church upon *the apostles*.<sup>3</sup> No, "Christ is the Rock," says another.<sup>4</sup> Or perhaps Peter is the rock "*by virtue of his confession*," says yet another.<sup>5</sup> The early writers are of no assistance, exhibiting no uniform understanding of the passage. Tertullian (199 AD) understood Peter to be "the rock" who had "the keys,"<sup>6</sup> but binding and loosing "had nothing to do with the capital sins of believers" or the particular power of the Roman bishop.<sup>7</sup> Cyprian of Carthage (250 AD) took "upon this rock" to mean that "the Church is founded upon the bishops,"<sup>8</sup> and Firmilian of Cæsarea (256 AD) held that "the foundations of the Church were laid" upon Peter, but not upon the bishop of Rome.<sup>9</sup> In a fawning letter to Damasus (376 AD), Jerome

<sup>1</sup> Dave Armstrong, "50 New Testament Proofs for Peter's Primacy and the Papacy," October 13, 2015, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davearmstrong/2015/10/50-nt-proofs-for-petrine-primacy-the-papacy.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Is Peter the 'Rock' / Pope in Matthew 16:18?" accessed August 27, 2022, <https://reformedwiki.com/peter-rock-pope-matthew>.

<sup>3</sup> Allan Ross, "24. Peter's Confession and Christ's Church (Matthew 16:13-20)," March 31, 2006, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://bible.org/seriespage/24-peter-s-confession-and-christ-s-church-matthew-1613-20>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://blog.tms.edu/upon-this-rock>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-does-this-rock-refer-to-matthew-1618/>.

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 22 (c. 199 AD).

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *On Modesty* 21.

<sup>8</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle* 26 1.

<sup>9</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle* 74 17.

affirmed that the bishop of Rome was “the rock on which the church is built,”<sup>10</sup> but when Jovinianus argued for a married clergy (for Jesus had built his church on Peter, *a married apostle* (393 AD)), the histrionic and misogynistic Jerome reversed himself, insisting that Jesus had built his church upon “all the Apostles, and they all receive the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and the strength of the Church depends upon them all alike.”<sup>11</sup> Lacking any compelling evidence, and certainly finding none in the early church, the *Catholic Catechism* simply declares that *Matthew* 16:18-19 is a summary description of a multifaceted Petrine, Papal, Roman prerogative.<sup>12</sup>

These diverse and conflicting interpretations may be attributed to the longstanding assumption — ancient and modern, Protestant and Catholic — that Jesus responded as He did because Peter was the *first* of the apostles to believe. The apparent primacy of his confession makes the words “thou art Peter” (*Matthew* 16:18) the governing construct through which the rest of Jesus’ response is interpreted. The rock, the gates of hell, the keys of the kingdom, the binding and the loosing — are all loaded on Peter’s frail shoulders because of his allegedly exemplary confession.

However, it is evident from the Gospels, Jesus’ prayer to His Father and the events leading up to Peter’s confession, that ten other apostles had already confessed their faith. The substance of their confession was simple: “they...have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me” (*John* 17:8). Of this simple truth, Andrew (*John* 1:41), Philip and Nathanael (*John* 1:45, 49) confessed upon their first meeting. The rest confessed on their way across the Sea of Galilee (*Matthew* 14:33), leaving only Judas and Peter in unbelief.\* When Peter finally confessed Jesus as the Son of God, he was the *last* of the

apostles to believe, completing the chief objective of Jesus’ preaching ministry: to deliver the Father’s Word *to the Eleven* (*John* 17:8-12). “All that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you,” he told them (*John* 15:15), and to his Father, “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them” (*John* 17:8). When Peter’s confession is thus understood as the *completion* of a task rather than its *beginning*, the focus shifts away from Peter and back to the task: delivering his Father’s Words. The subsequent promises are understood in light of *that task alone*.

Because the miracles of the loaves and fishes contextualize Peter’s confession, we shall begin with a harmonization of the Gospel accounts to show that the Father’s Words remained the focus of Jesus’ interaction with Peter from beginning to end. Once that context is established, we shall demonstrate that each subsequent phrase — “upon this rock,” “the gates of hell shall not prevail,” “I will give unto thee the keys” and “whatsoever thou shalt bind...and...loose” — are also shown to refer not to a Petrine administrative ecclesiastical primacy, but rather to the preaching ministry Jesus had received from his Father and the Eleven would receive from Christ. Then, because *John* 20:23 — “Whose soever sins ye remit...and...retain” — is often interpreted through the lens of “binding” and “loosing,” we shall conclude with an analysis of that verse as well.

### **The Harmonized Loaves Narrative**

What is lost in the historical exegesis of *Matthew* 16:19 is that Jesus responded to Peter’s confession in the aftermath of the two miracles of the loaves and fishes — the feeding of the 5,000 and of the 4,000 — a narrative in which Peter’s confession is shown to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy that the Church would be built upon the Words of the Father. After the first miracle of the loaves on the eastern shore (*Matthew* 14:13-21, *Mark* 6:30-44, *Luke* 9:10-17, *John* 6:1-13), the people confessed that Jesus was “that prophet that should come into the world” (*John* 6:14), a reference to *Deuteronomy* 18:18 in which the Father promised to raise up a Prophet and “put my words in his mouth.” Thence crossing the sea, the apostles encountered Jesus walking on water and confessed, “Of a truth thou art the Son of

<sup>10</sup> Jerome, *Letter* 15 2.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 1, 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC, hereafter), 553 (compare 881).

\* Clearly Judas was not among those in the ship who believed, for Jesus later attests that Judas had not and would not believe (*John* 6:64). Had Peter believed with the rest in the ship as they crossed the Sea of Galilee (*Matthew* 14:33), Jesus’ response in *Matthew* 16:18 would not have been so salutary or inflective.

God” (*Matthew* 14:33). That confession, of course, excluded Judas who would never believe (*John* 6:64) and Peter who had returned to the boat full of doubt (*Matthew* 14:31). At the western shore, they encountered the scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus roundly criticized for “making the word of God of none effect” (*Matthew* 15:1-14; *Mark* 7:1-16). Venturing by foot through Tyre, Sidon, and then round about to Decapolis on the eastern shore in search of “lost sheep,” they witnessed more healings and confessions of faith (*Matthew* 15:21-31, *Mark* 7:24-37). Having witnessed another miracle of multiplication (*Matthew* 15:32-39, *Mark* 8:1-10) and sailing again to the western shore, Jesus admonished the Jews not to murmur at his many followers, for Isaiah had prophesied “they shall be all taught of\* God” (*John* 6:41-47, citing *Isaiah* 54:13). Facing the Pharisees and Sadducees who demanded a sign from heaven (*Matthew* 16:1-4, *Mark* 8:11-13, *John* 6:30-59), He refused, and His challenging responses were too hard for them, so “from that time” onward, many of his disciples “went back,<sup>13</sup> and walked no more with him” (*John* 6:60-66). Departing again for the eastern shore, he warned the apostles of the “doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees” and the Herodians (*Matthew* 16:5-6, *Mark* 8:14-15). He implored them to discern the meaning of both miracles (*Matthew* 16:7-12, *Mark* 8:16-21), whereupon the focus of the conversation pivoted back to the doctrine of His Father. With crowds thinning because of His “hard saying,” and with no recorded confessions since the Syrophoenician woman many days past (*Matthew* 15:21-28; *Mark* 7:24-30), and meandering through Bethsaida (*Mark* 8:22) and “the coasts” and “towns” of Caesarea Philippi (*Matthew* 16:13; *Mark* 8:27), two significant questions pertained: “Will ye

also go away?” (*John* 6:67)<sup>†</sup> and “Whom do men say that I am?” (*Matthew* 16:13; *Mark* 8:27; *Luke* 9:18). At long last, Peter finally confessed what ten others had already realized: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (*Matthew* 16:16), acknowledging as well that he could not turn away, for “thou hast the words of eternal life” (*John* 6:68). Having accomplished His mission of bringing the Eleven to faith, He immediately began to instruct them of his coming death and resurrection (*Matthew* 16:21; *Mark* 8:31; *Luke* 9:22), but not before observing that Peter, too, had fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy. All who are “taught of God” and have “learned of<sup>†</sup> the Father, cometh unto me,” Jesus had told the Jews (*John* 6:45). Now, at long last, Peter too had been taught by the Father: “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, *but my Father which is in heaven*” (*Matthew* 16:17).

### Upon This Rock

This harmonization shows how prominently *the Father’s Words* factored into the narrative leading up to Peter’s confession,<sup>\*</sup> and thus, how

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<sup>†</sup> Some commentaries assume this conversation took place mere hours after the feeding of the 5,000, but the text does not allow it. The miracle occurred before Passover (*John* 6:4), when many of the Jews, and certainly the scribes and Pharisees, would have been in Jerusalem “to purify themselves” (*John* 11:55). With Passover on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan (*Leviticus* 23:5) and seven more days for the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*Leviticus* 23:6), Jesus’ conversation with the Jews in *John* 6:30-32 would have taken place many as two weeks after the miracle. His question to Peter in *John* 6:67 would have taken place days or weeks after that, allowing time for John’s observation, “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (*John* 6:67). Only then did Jesus ask, “Will ye also go away?”

<sup>†</sup> “learned of the Father” has the sense here of “learned from the Father,” as Jesus confirms in his response to Peter, *i.e.*, “my Father which is in heaven...hath...revealed it unto thee”

<sup>\*</sup> Peter’s confession in *Matthew* 16:16 is substantively the same as that of *Mark* 8:29 (“Thou art the Christ.”), *Luke* 9:20 (“The Christ of God.”), and *John* 6:69 (“You are the Holy One of God.”). While some commentaries allege three separate, progressively significant confessions, first on the Sea of Galilee with the rest (*Matthew* 14:33), then in Caesarea Philippi (*Matthew* 16:16, *Mark* 8:29 and *Luke* 9:20), and again in *John* 6:69, such an ordering detracts from the simplicity of the desired confession: “that I came out from thee,” and “that thou didst send me” (*John* 17:8). If Peter had confessed with the others on the Sea in *Matthew* 14:33, it is unclear why Jesus

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\* as the rest of the verse implies, “taught of God” (διδάκτοι τοῦ Θεοῦ) has the sense of “taught by God” rather than “taught about God.”

<sup>13</sup> The Greek, ἀπῆλθον εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω, is literally “went away back,” returning to their previous locations. They “walked (περιεπάτου) no more with him” has the meaning of no longer traveling about with him throughout the “villages, or cities, or country” (*Mark* 6:56), implying a passage of time as disciples struggle to accept his teachings, give up following him about from place to place, and turn back to their own villages, cities and towns.

prominently *the Father's Words* factored into Peter's answers and Jesus' response. In this account of Jesus' and Peter's interaction, not one, but two questions had been asked of him. In response, Peter expresses belief in His teachings — *i.e.*, “thou hast the words of eternal life” (*John* 6:68), a material confession of belief in the Father's words (*John* 14:24). What is more, Peter's confession, “You are the Holy One of God” (*John* 6:69) is shown to be substantively the same as that of the witnesses to the first miracle, “This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world” (*John* 6:14), which is also a material confession of belief in the Father's Words (*Deuteronomy* 18:18). That confession, Jesus says, was a fulfillment of *Isaiah* 54:13, “And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD” (*John* 6:45). Those two questions, and Peter's response to them, therefore show that the focus of Jesus' conversation with him — *the only focus of His conversation* — was the Words of His Father. Because Peter's confession fulfilled *Isaiah* 54, we may now discern what He meant when He promised to build His church “upon this rock.”

It is in *Isaiah* 54 that the Lord not only identifies himself as the Church's husband — “For thy Maker is thine husband ... and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel” (*Isaiah* 54:5) — but also promises to build His Church upon a foundation of stone: “O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, *I will lay thy stones\* with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires.*

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considered his confession in *Matthew* 16:17 to be new information. Similarly, the title used in *John* 6:69 is similar to that of *Isaiah* 54:5 in which the Church's husband redeemer is identified as “the Holy One of Israel,” a title indistinguishable from “the Holy One of God,” a term Peter also uses of Him in *Acts* 3:14. Therefore we may say first, that Peter did not confess with the others in *Matthew* 14:33, and second that *John* 6:69 records the same confession after the second miracle of multiplication, as recorded in the Synoptics.

\* It is of some significance that Jesus' Old Testament citations were often from the Septuagint, as is the case in *John* 6:45 citing *Isaiah* 54:13. An interesting artifact of the Septuagint is that *Isaiah* 54:11 refers to a singular “stone”: “I will give carbuncle for thy stone (*λίθον σου*), and for your foundations, sapphire.” Peter indicates that “stone” (*lithos*) and “rock” (*petra*) are interchangeable in both Old Testament and New (*Isaiah* 8:14; *1 Peter* 2:8) as do *Matthew* (13:15) and *Luke* (8:6). As Jesus implies in *Matthew* 16:17, and Peter later realizes in *1 Peter* 1:23, he had been reborn by the “stone” of *Isaiah* 54:13.

And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. *And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children”* (*Isaiah* 54:11-13).

Understanding Peter's confession in the light of *Isaiah* 54:13 illuminates the phrase “upon this rock,” showing that it refers neither to Peter, nor to his confession, nor to Christ but to the revelation of the Father: “flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (*Matthew* 16:17). Peter had been taught by the Father, as *Isaiah* had prophesied, *and Jesus would build His church upon that: the Word of His Father.*

Of this the Scriptures abundantly testify. *Isaiah* wrote, “Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste” (28:16). The prophets spoke beforehand by the Spirit of Christ in them (*1 Peter* 1:11). Jesus received a preaching ministry from his Father (*John* 12:49, *Deuteronomy* 18:18), delivered His Father's words to the apostles (*John* 15:15) and reported to his Father that he had delivered His Words to them (*John* 17:8,14). He promised the Father would send the Spirit who “shall not speak of himself” but only what he had heard (*John* 16:13), reminding them of his Father's Words (*John* 14:24-26). He prayed not for the whole world, but only for those who would believe His Father's Words (*John* 17:9,20). Peter applied *Isaiah's* prophecy to Christ, for to believe “on him” — “a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence” — is to believe on “the word” that he preached (*1 Peter* 2:6-8). But to believe Jesus is to believe the Father, “For I have not spoken of myself” (*John* 12:44,49). The stumbling stone, that offensive rock upon which the Church is built can be nothing other than the Word of the Father. As Jesus said, “whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them” is like a man whose house survived the storm because “it was founded upon a rock” (*Matthew* 7:24-25; *Luke* 6:48), a precept that comes to us directly from *Isaiah* 54:11, in which the Lord promises to lay a foundation for his Church, “tossed with tempest,” but storm-worthy nevertheless. The Church is built upon Jesus, the apostles and prophets (*Ephesians* 2:20) not because it is built upon the men or their offices but because

Jesus was commissioned to deliver the Father's Word, and commissioned the prophets and apostles (*John* 12:49; *1 Peter* 1:11; *John* 16:13) to deliver the things "now reported unto you" (*1 Peter* 1:12) There simply is no other viable candidate for "this rock" than the Word of the Father that Jesus, the prophets and apostles delivered.

*Jesus' Wordplay in Matthew 16:19*

Roman Catholicism has of course planted her flag on Peter. Her apologists allege that by renaming him Peter, Jesus assigned Simon "a particular powerful role" as "the foundation stone of the Church" based on the Scriptural precedent of naming and renaming people based on their special roles.<sup>14</sup> Scriptural examples of this are several: Eve (*Genesis* 3:20), Abraham (*Genesis* 17:5), Sarah (*Genesis* 17:16), Jacob (*Genesis* 32:28) and Jesus (*Matthew* 1:21). In each case, the reason for the name is provided explicitly, but Jesus gives no such reason here. He renamed Simon but assigned no role at their first meeting (*John* 1:42). By the time Jesus calls him Peter again, He first calls him Simon, son of his earthly father, then calls him Peter, now child of his Heavenly Father, contrasting Simon's earthly patrimony with Peter's heavenly patrimony: "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee..." (*Matthew* 16:17). "... but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter..." (*Matthew* 16:17-18).

The wordplay is immediately evident, and it was not lost on Peter who would later conclude that we are born again not of flesh and blood *but of the Word of the Father*, just as Jesus taught him at his confession: "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (*1 Peter* 1:23).

Jesus had played Peter's given name (Simon) and earthly patrimony (Jonah) against his new name (Peter) and the revelation of the Father (the rock) to illustrate this very construct: it is the rock of his Father's Word, not flesh and blood, that is the incorruptible seed by which we are born again. Unbelieving Simon was born of the corruptible seed

of his father, Jonah, but believing Peter of the incorruptible seed of the Father's Words, the foundation stone of *Isaiah* 28:16 and *Isaiah* 54:13, "the rock" of Jesus' parable (*Matthew* 7:24-25; *Luke* 6:48), the "stone of stumbling" and "rock of offense" of *Isaiah* 8:14—the very rock Peter identifies as "the word" that Jesus spoke (*1 Peter* 2:8), and that Jesus identified as His Father's words (*John* 14:24). Jesus had not assigned "a particular powerful role" to Peter, but rather had acknowledged the "particular powerful role" *the Father's Word* had played in Peter's rebirth.

*"The Nearest Antecedent" Fallacy*

In the eyes of the Roman apologist (and indeed of some Protestants), "upon this rock I will build my church" must refer to what immediately preceded it, namely "thou art Peter." Roman Catholic apologist Suan Sonna cites a Protestant theologian to support his argument: "The emphatic, 'this,' as in 'upon this rock' naturally refers to the nearest antecedent, Peter."<sup>15</sup> Such a claim, however, betrays a lack of familiarity with how Jesus communicated. Indeed, in the very Loaves Narrative leading up to Peter's confession, Jesus does precisely what Sonna believes he ought not, making "this" refer not to the nearest antecedent, but to one further removed:

*I am that bread of life.* Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. *This is the bread* which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. (*John* 6:48-50)

Applying the Roman rules of grammar, "This is the bread of life" would have referred to its nearest antecedent, the manna that had left their fathers dead, a wholly unnatural reading. A more sober contextual reading points rather to "I am that bread of life." The same is true in *Matthew* 16:18. As we have demonstrated above, "upon this rock" refers not to its nearest antecedent, "thou art Peter," but to the revelation by which Peter had learned from the

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<sup>15</sup> Sonna, Suan. "Peter (Not His Profession of Faith) Is the Rock." *Catholic Answers*, 25 May 2022, <https://www.catholic.com/audio/caf/peter-the-rock-not-his-profession>. Sonna cites Marvin Richard Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*: Volume 1, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903, 91-92.

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<sup>14</sup> Fr. Hugh Barbour, O. Praem. "Names Written in Stone." *Catholic Answers*, 23 August 2020, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/names-written-in-stone>.

Father. Peter had been taught by the Father in accordance with *Isaiah* 54:13, for Jesus was laying the stone of his Father's Words as the rock foundation for His church in accordance with *Isaiah* 54:11. Ten other apostles already stood upon that rock. With Peter's confession, Jesus' task to deliver the Father's words *to the Eleven*, was finally complete.

### **The Gates of Hell**

Building upon its claim that "this rock" must refer to Peter, the Catholic *Catechism* claims "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (*Matthew* 16:17) must refer to "the great Church that is here [at Rome]."<sup>16</sup> Jesus' statement is thus construed to guarantee that the infallible Roman church can never stumble into error. However, the harmonized Loaves Narrative again reveals the correct understanding. As with "upon this rock," the Words of the Father are still in view.

The "gates of hell" in *Matthew* 16:18 are none other than the "gates of death" (*Job* 38:17; *Psalms* 9:13, 107:18) and the "gates of Sheol" (*Isaiah* 28:10) identified for us in the Old Testament. It is a metaphor for death, for to approach the gates is to prepare for the final transition from life to death. But the Father's words have the opposite effect: "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (*John* 5:24). "And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day" (*John* 6:40).

This is the Good News Jesus preached: "whosoever believeth in him should not perish" (*John* 3:16). "They shall never perish" (*John* 10:28). "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (*John* 11:25). "On such the second death hath no power" (*Revelation* 20:6). "Death is swallowed up in victory" (*1 Corinthians* 15:54). "I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone," sayeth the Lord, "and your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand" (*Isaiah* 28:16-19). It is not the infallibility of Peter or the Roman religion that Jesus had in mind, but the infallibility of His

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<sup>16</sup> CCC, 834.

Father's Words that cannot fail to accomplish the purpose for which He sent them (*Isaiah* 55:11). The gates of hell cannot prevail against his Church because his Church is made up of "all thy children" who have been taught by the LORD (*Isaiah* 54:13), and therefore have "passed from death unto life" (*John* 5:24) and "shall never perish" (*John* 10:28).

### **The Keys of the Kingdom**

As with "the gates of hell," the Roman Catholic focus remains ever on Peter when Jesus says, "and I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven." The *Catechism* insists that Jesus thus granted a "specific authority to Peter...to govern the house of God."<sup>17</sup> The Roman Catholic apologist camps on Isaiah's reference to "the key of the house of David" which the Lord lays upon the shoulder of Eliakim. "So he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (*Isaiah* 22:22). Apologist Trent Horn explains,

Just as King Hezekiah gave Eli'akim authority to oversee the kingdom of Israel, Christ gave Peter authority to oversee his Church (*i.e.*, the 'keys to the kingdom'), which included the authority to "bind and loose" — in other words, to determine official doctrine and practice.<sup>18</sup>

We dismiss the claim outright. Jesus, citing the same passage from *Isaiah*, claims that He "hath the key of David," and has "set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it" (*Revelation* 3:7-8). We hardly need a key from Peter to open a door that is already open and that he cannot shut. Peter obviously could do nothing with such a key.

Peter does not have the keys of hell and death either, for Jesus currently has them in His possession: "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (*Revelation* 1:18). These keys are clearly and irrevocably tied to his victory over hell and death, a victory that will be ours at the resurrection: "then shall be brought to

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<sup>17</sup> CCC, 553.

<sup>18</sup> Trent Horn. "Defending the Papacy." *Catholic Answers*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/defending-the-papacy>.

pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (*1 Corinthians* 15:54-55). Since Jesus currently has the keys, and the promise of our victory over death "shall be brought to pass" in the distant future at the resurrection of the dead, we can safely say that Jesus currently remains in possession of them. We may conclude therefore, as with the Key of David, that Peter does not possess the keys of hell and death, either.

But Peter certainly gained possession of "the keys of the kingdom," as Jesus promised. Upon inspection we find again that Jesus was referring to the preaching ministry He had received from His Father, which ministry He would shortly pass on to His disciples. We learn from the Scriptures that one of the keys of the kingdom is Knowledge, for Jesus explicitly identified it as such. According to *Matthew* 23:13 and *Luke* 11:52, the teachers of the Jews "shut up the kingdom of heaven" by taking away "the key of knowledge," preventing people from entering. By "knowledge," we refer to the Word of the Father, "the word of the kingdom," as it is evident from the Scriptures that the Key is delivered by the "foolishness of preaching" (*1 Corinthians* 1:21). "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" because "thou hast forgotten the law of thy God" (*Hosea* 4:6). It is "the word of the kingdom" that Satan eagerly comes and takes away (*Mark* 4:15) "lest they should believe and be saved" (*Luke* 8:12). Peter had not been granted the key of Knowledge so that he could stand at the gate and regulate access, but so that he could pass the Word to others through preaching, something the scribes and Pharisees had failed to do.

Seeing that one key is Knowledge, we easily discern that the second is Faith, for we know that God has imprisoned\* all in unbelief (*Romans* 11:32) and in sin (*Galatians* 3:22). According to *Romans* 11:30-32, and *Galatians* 3:22, a man is released from that prison only by belief, so "that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe." As Jesus observed in the Parable of the Sower, if one possesses "the word of the kingdom"

and "belief" in that word, he is saved (*Luke* 8:12). Faith is the gift of God (*Ephesians* 2:8) which "cometh by hearing" the preached Word (*Romans* 10:17). Thus, the Key of Faith, like the Key of Knowledge, comes by preaching the Word of the Father.

Neither key alone is sufficient. If one hears the word, but does not believe, it is not enough, for *knowledge* must be *believed*: "... the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it" (*Hebrews* 4:2). "And if any man hear my words, and believe not...the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" (*John* 12:47-48). These had knowledge of the Word but not faith. Similarly, faith is not sufficient unless it has knowledge (the Word) as its object. In the Parable of the Sower, some "for a while believe[d]" (*Luke* 8:13), but their faith was not in "the word," for they were immediately offended "when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake" (*Mark* 4:17). They possessed *belief*, but not belief in *the Word*.

Faith and Knowledge, therefore, are the keys by which men gain entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven. Both come by the preaching of the Word of the Father. That the keys were entrusted to Peter and the rest simply refers to *a preaching ministry* that all disciples receive—a ministry of preaching the Word that faith may come to the hearers—for the Son sets men free by the truth of his Father's Word (*John* 8:31-38), and the apostles would do the same (*Romans* 6:17-18).

That Peter understood the Keys of the Kingdom to refer to *a preaching ministry* is evident from his interaction with the centurion in Joppa. When Cornelius was directed by an angel (*Acts* 10:1-6) to summon Peter from Joppa in order "to hear words" (*Acts* 10:22), Peter "opened his mouth" and preached "the word" (*Acts* 10:34-36). "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word" (*Acts* 10:44), and they believed (*Acts* 11:17). Peter's grasp of those keys is evident from his interjection at the Council of Jerusalem: "Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel [Knowledge], and believe [Faith]" (*Acts* 15:7).

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\* the Greek words for "key" (κλεις *kleis*) and "imprison" (συγκλείω *sugkleiō*) share a common root. (Bauer, Walter, *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, University of Chicago Press, 1979, 433-434, 775.

Such is the foolishness of preaching, that the Word of the Father is preached, and faith comes by that preaching. Of this Jesus also attests: “He that heareth my word [Knowledge], and believeth on him that sent me [Faith], hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (*John* 5:24). “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known [Knowledge] ... and have believed [Faith] ... Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe [Faith] on me through their word [Knowledge]” (*John* 17:8,20).<sup>19</sup>

As with “upon this rock,” and “the gates of hell shall not prevail,” “the keys of the kingdom” refer not to a Petrine administrative gatekeeping function, but rather to the ministry of preaching the Father’s Words by which men hear the truth, receive faith, and gain entrance.

#### **Whatsoever Thou Shalt Bind [Up]...and Loose**

Intoxicated as she is by the inference of an infallible, administrative Petrine prerogative from Jesus’ promises about “this rock,” “the gates of hell” and “the keys of the kingdom,” Rome gleefully embraces the power to bind and loose. Such power effectively makes Peter the sole arbiter

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<sup>19</sup> See this pairing of knowledge and faith unto salvation throughout the New Testament (*John* 5:24; 6:68-69; 17:8; *Romans* 10:8-11; 10:13-14; *Ephesians* 1:13; *Colossians* 1:4-5; *2 Timothy* 3:14-15). It is true that other passages mention faith with “works” (*James* 2:14) or knowledge and faith with fruitfulness (*Luke* 8:15), “charity” (*1 Corinthians* 13:2) or “virtue,” “patience” and “godliness” (*2 Peter* 1:5-8), but in such passages, the context is clear that fruit, works, charity, patience and virtue, *etc.*, refer to the sanctifying effects of having *believed* the truth. If one “bears fruit” from the preaching of the Word, it is because one has *believed* what was *preached*. If one is a “hearer of the word [Knowledge], and not a doer” (*James* 1:23), it is because he has not really believed it [Faith] (*James* 2:14). Additionally, if one has “all knowledge” and “all faith” but not “love,” it is evident that one’s “knowledge” and “faith” are imperfect and incomplete, for they exist in continuous violation of the Law (*1 Corinthians* 13:4-7). “Virtue,” “patience” and “godliness” are the sanctifying effects of *truth* that is *believed* (*2 Peter* 1:8). These are the fruits of having entered the Kingdom of Heaven, but they are not the “keys” of entrance. Thus, while Faith and Knowledge are frequently listed with other virtues, those virtues are the fruit of the Faith and Knowledge. They are not themselves additional keys.

of truth, salvation, and discipline, the infallible gatekeeper of heaven. Her *Catechism* states: “The power to ‘bind and loose’ connotes the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church.”<sup>20</sup> “The words bind and loose mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God.”<sup>21</sup>

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* calls this the pope’s “universal coercive jurisdiction,” ostensibly “derived from the current terminology of the Rabbinic schools,” in which “to bind” referred to the legislative and judicial authority to prohibit, and “to loose” referred to the similar authority to allow.<sup>22</sup> Peter, it seems, had been endowed by Christ with supreme, plenary, magisterial authority to administer the kingdom.

Such a sweeping claim requires proof, and there is none to be found for it. To rely upon contemporary Rabbinic legal theory to interpret Jesus’ statement is mere guesswork. Could we not as easily guess that Jesus referred to *Job* 38:31, in which constellations are alternately bound and loosed, to show that Peter had the power to declare on earth the relationships of the stars of the heavens? One guess is as good as another, but guessing is folly. Jesus already revealed the meaning of “to bind” and “to loose” at the beginning of His preaching ministry.

The longstanding exegetical error — committed equally by the ancient writers, by Roman Catholics and by Protestants (this writer, included) — has been to take “to bind” and “to loose” as opposites, as if Peter had been commissioned either to bind or to loose *something*. All that is left is to determine what that “thing” is. There are no commentaries on this passage that take any other approach, vary though they may on the object of Peter’s prerogative.

Such an approach, however, removes Jesus’ words from the Good Shepherd context in which He spoke them. In His first recorded public sermon,

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<sup>20</sup> CCC, 553.

<sup>21</sup> CCC 1445.

<sup>22</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “The Pope.”

Jesus declared that he had been sent to preach the Good News, and thereby *to bind* up the brokenhearted and *to loose* the captives. Jesus stood in the synagogue, opened the scroll to *Isaiah* 61 and began to read (*Luke* 4:16-17). While *Luke* only provides a partial quotation, we need only turn to *Isaiah* to discover the fullness of Jesus' mission: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me *to bind* up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty [i.e., to *loose*] to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound" (*Isaiah* 61:1).

His preaching ministry was to be the fulfillment of the LORD's covenant promise to send a Good Shepherd to go after His lost sheep, to bind up their broken hearts and break their shackles: "I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up (שָׁבַרְתִּי ḥābāš;) that which was broken...and they shall be safe in their land, and shall know that I am the LORD, when I have broken the bands of their yoke..." (*Ezekiel* 34:16,27).

The English "bind up" is simply "bind" in the Hebrew, being translated throughout the Old Testament according to its context. When preparing a donkey for travel, it is translated as "*to saddle*" (e.g., *Genesis* 22:3). When it refers to attaching something, it is translated as "*to bind*" (e.g., *Leviticus* 8:13). When it refers to clothing, it is "to wrap" or "to gird" (e.g., *Ezekiel* 16:10). To bind a river is "to dam" it (*Job* 28:11), and to bind according to justice is "to govern" (*Job* 34:17). Similarly so with the Septuagint (e.g., *Numbers* 19:15, *1 Kings* 20:38, *Isaiah* 46:1) and the New Testament (e.g., *Matthew* 13:30, 21:2). But when medical services are rendered to the sick, it is translated "*to bind up*" (*Isaiah* 61:1, *Luke* 10:34). The interpretation is determined by context, and when a shepherd administers care to an injured sheep (as in *Ezekiel* 34:16), context demands that it be rendered "*to bind up*."

What has been historically overlooked in the translation of Jesus' words in *Matthew* 16:19 and *Matthew* 18:18 — "whatsoever thou shalt bind...and...loose" — is that Jesus said both in the context of an overarching Good Shepherd narrative. Because Jesus used the words "bind" and "loose"

immediately following Peter's confession (*Matthew* 16:19), the words have historically been interpreted in that very limited context, assuming he was the first of the apostles to believe and therefore was both model believer and heir apparent of a plenary ecclesiastical power over access to the kingdom and forgiveness of sins. Because He also said this to the others immediately following His admonition to expel the unrepentant (*Matthew* 18:18), the words have historically been interpreted as an episcopal prerogative to administer church discipline and extend or withhold forgiveness.

However, as we shall here demonstrate, both occasions for His statement occurred in a Good Shepherd narrative governed by Jesus' application of *Isaiah* 61, *Ezekiel* 34, and *Zechariah* 11. In that context, His words ought rather be translated "whatsoever thou shalt bind [up]...and...loose," consistent with the covenant promise that the Good Shepherd would heal the brokenhearted and liberate the captives, and His commissioning of the apostles to do the same. When that context pertains, the verbs "to bind up" and "to loose" are not opposites, but are metaphors for preaching the Good Tidings. "To bind up" is to comfort the brokenhearted by the preaching of the Gospel. "To loose" is to free the captives thereby. The Father had sent Jesus to do both, and He would shortly commission His apostles to "bind up" and to "loose" as well.

#### *The Shepherding Context of Matthew 16:19*

Jesus' answer to Peter occurs within the context of a Good Shepherd narrative that informs our understanding of "bind" and "loose." That narrative began shortly after John the Baptist was killed (*Matthew* 14:1-12, *Mark* 6:14-29, *Luke* 9:7-9), concluding in Cæsarea Philippi after the miracles of multiplication (*Matthew* 16:13; *Mark* 8:27). When Jesus had first seen the crowds, He was "moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd" (*Mark* 6:34). As He journeyed through the countryside He sought after "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (*Matthew* 15:24) and restated His compassion at the beginning of the second miracle (*Matthew* 15:32, *Mark* 8:2). The unfolding narrative has Jesus seeking (*Mark* 6:56, 7:24, 31), healing (*Matthew* 15:30; *Mark* 6:56) and feeding His flock (*Matthew* 15:32; *Mark* 6:37)

upon the mountains of Israel (*Matthew* 15:29), by the rivers (*Matthew* 16:13, *Mark* 8:27) and throughout the countryside (*Mark* 6:56). At the same time, He spoke very sternly to the scribes and Pharisees (*Matthew* 15:1-14; *Mark* 7:1-13), rebuking them for abusing the sheep and nullifying the Word of God.

Thus did Jesus follow the pattern of the promised Good Shepherd of *Ezekiel* 34, seeking, healing and feeding His sheep “upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country” (*Ezekiel* 34:12-16). But of “the fat and the strong” shepherds, “I will feed them with judgment” — a metaphor for a sharp rebuke (*Ezekiel* 34:16). The Loaves Narrative is clearly infused with the Good Shepherd covenant promises — “And I will set up one shepherd over them” (*Ezekiel* 34:23) — and in particular His duty to “seek that which was lost”, to “feed my flock,” to “bind up that which was broken” (*Ezekiel* 34:15-16), to break their shackles (*Ezekiel* 34:27), and to rebuke the irresponsible shepherds (*Ezekiel* 34:16). All these things Jesus had been doing from the death of John the Baptist until Peter’s confession.

Because Jesus had been sent by His Father “to bind up the brokenhearted” and “to proclaim liberty to the captives” (*Isaiah* 61:1; *Luke* 4:18), and the apostles would soon be commissioned to do the same (*John* 20:21), we must take that into account when translating δῆσῃς (dēsēs, to bind) in *Matthew* 16:19: “...and whatsoever thou shalt bind [up] on earth shall be bound [up] in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The focus of the verse thus shifts naturally away from a “universal Petrine coercive jurisdiction,” and returns our attention to the obligation of the Good Shepherd to preach the Father’s Words to the sheep. As Jesus had been, so too would Peter be entrusted with a ministry of *binding up* the brokenhearted and *loosing* the captives through the preaching of the Good Tidings Jesus had heard from his Father.

#### *The Shepherding Context of Matthew 18:18*

We find the same context, and thus the same rendering, when Jesus addresses these same words to the apostles two chapters later. Because *Matthew* 18:18 follows immediately upon Jesus’ instructions on how to restore or dismiss the sinner, binding and

loosing are typically taken here to refer to the authority to regulate church discipline and forgiveness of sins. That limited context has the unfortunate effect of confounding Jesus’ rebuke of their carnal ambition with His clear admonition *to be good shepherds*. Jesus’ words in *Matthew* 18:18 were in response to their question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (*Matthew* 18:1). The apostles were exhibiting the same carnal ambition as the scribes and Pharisees who “love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues” (*Matthew* 23:6; *Mark* 12:39; *Luke* 20:46). A correction was in order.

In response, Jesus directed four, finely tuned rebukes at their carnality, each elaborate and substantive, and all governed by a shepherding narrative that must inform our understanding of “bind” and “loose.” For brevity, we shall list them simply as 1) do not offend the little ones (the Millstone Narrative), 2) remove the hand and eye that offend, 3) seek after the missing sheep, and 4) treat the unrepentant as heathen. These diverse and sundry admonitions appear to be largely unrelated to the apostles’ original question, and historically have been interpreted in isolation from it. When it is viewed through the lens of their question, however, each of these four rebukes is directed squarely at their ungodly desire to lord authority over the sheep.

#### *1) The Millstone Narrative (Matthew 18:2-6)*

In his first rebuke of the apostles, “Jesus called a little child unto him,” implored them to become as a child, and then issued a dire warning: “But whoso shall offend one of *these little ones* which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (*Matthew* 18:6). The admonition was not merely that each apostle must “humble himself as this little child” to be “greatest in the kingdom of heaven,” but also that he must resist the temptation to lord his authority over the sheep. They were to avoid such behavior, lest the little ones perish.

That Jesus had the Good Shepherd narrative in mind is evident by inspection. Only a few verses hence, He highlights the need to go after the missing sheep, and then returns to the obligation of

the shepherd to seek after *these little ones*: “Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of *these little ones* should perish” (*Matthew* 18:14). This is resonant of the LORD’s criticism of the bad shepherd in *Zechariah* 11:16, who “shall not visit those that be cut off, *neither shall seek the young one.*” His first answer to their question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”, is that they must set aside carnal ambition and, as shepherds, guard the spiritual health of “these little ones.”

2) *Pluck out the Eye that Offends (Matthew 18:7-11)*

In a seemingly unrelated diversion, Jesus’ second rebuke is to cut off the hand or foot, or to pluck out the eye, that “offends thee” (*Matthew* 18:8). Given the context, a more apt rendering is to remove that which “causes thee to offend.”<sup>23</sup> This passage is typically interpreted as guidance on self-control and personal sin, but such an interpretation isolates it from the fuller context of the question at hand—namely, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” This second admonition, too, is directly related to the care of the sheep, for it follows on his warning not to “offend one of these little ones” (*Matthew* 18:6). He warns against offending by hand, foot, and eye (*Matthew* 18:7-9), and then returns to His point: “Take heed that ye despise not one of *these little ones*” (*Matthew* 18:10). The warning was to guard against *offending the sheep*, a reading supported by both *Zechariah* and *Mark*.

First, Mark’s account of the Millstone Narrative has Jesus transitioning from warning not to offend the little ones — e.g., “it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck” (*Mark* 9:42) — directly to the severe measures against such offenses: “And if thy hand offend.... And if thy foot offend.... And if thine eye offend” (*Mark* 9:43, 45, 47). Clearly “the offenses” of *Mark* 9:42 are offenses against “these little ones.” Second, the discipline of maiming an arm or plucking out an eye is a punishment explicitly reserved for the bad shepherd in *Zechariah* 11. Woe to him who offends,

say both *Zechariah* and Jesus: “Woe to the idol shepherd that leaveth the flock! the sword shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye” (*Zechariah* 11:17). “...woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off.... And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out...” (*Matthew* 18:7-9).<sup>24</sup>

The shepherd’s duty was to use his feet to go after the missing, eyes to search for them and hands to bind up their wounds. Amputation or removal was a fitting admonition to those who wanted to be greatest in the kingdom but lacked the requisite desire to search for the sheep and bind up their wounds. His words are hyperbolic, but nevertheless derivative of *Zechariah*’s warning. Jesus’ second answer to their question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” was that they should embrace their role as humble shepherds. They were to exercise self-discipline lest they “offend one of

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<sup>24</sup> We observe that Jesus had used this same language in the Sermon on the Mount: “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out.... And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off...” (*Matthew* 5:29-30). Situated as it is after His instruction against lustful glances (*Matthew* 5:28), the application is typically limited to the self-control of one’s eyes and hands lest one stumble into sins of the flesh. But not a few commentaries wonder at the resulting *non sequitur*: “if thy right *hand* offend...” (*Matthew* 5:30) does not follow necessarily from “whosoever *looketh*” (*Matthew* 5:28). A closer look is merited. While the Sermon on the Mount surely impressed the crowds (*Matthew* 7:28), it was nevertheless addressed to His disciples (*Matthew* 5:1-2), on the very same point addressed in *Matthew* 18:7-11: “be[ing] called great in the kingdom of heaven” (*Matthew* 5:19). Greatness would come by being better *teachers* and *examples* — in a word, *better shepherds* — than the scribes and the Pharisees had been in teaching the sheep of the Law and the Prophets (*Matthew* 5:19-20), a lesson not lost on Peter (*1 Peter* 5:2-3; *2 Peter* 3:2). With that introduction, Jesus proceeded to illustrate correct and incorrect understandings of the Law and the Prophets, drawing His teachings from both, with the shepherding narrative ever in mind (e.g., “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing...” (*Matthew* 7:15). The maiming of hand and eye (*Matthew* 5:29-30) is both a legal precept against they that harm another by malice (*Exodus* 21:24; *Deuteronomy* 19:21) and a prophetic precept against the bad shepherds who harm the sheep by dereliction (*Zechariah* 11:17). As the Sermon is a warning *against* stumbling into the error of the bad shepherds — the scribes and Pharisees (*Matthew* 5:20) — His reference here ought to be understood through the “bad shepherd” lens of *Zechariah* 11:17 rather than as a commentary on “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust....”

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<sup>23</sup> At its core, the warning is about *causing another to sin* (*Matthew* 18:7), and thus, some literal translations so render it. E.g., “cause thee to offend” (*Geneva Bible*, 1857); “give thee cause of offence” (*Smith’s Literal Translation*).

these little ones” by presuming to be the greatest, but not caring for the sheep of the fold.

3) *Seek the Missing Sheep (Matthew 18:12-14)*

Little commentary is needed here to illustrate Jesus’ continued appeal to the Good Shepherd narrative in His third rebuke: “How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray...” (*Matthew 18:12*). It is nevertheless instructional to notice the parallels between what Jesus says here, what *Ezekiel 34* had prophesied, and what Jesus himself had done throughout the Loaves Narrative. Jesus saw the multitude “as sheep having no shepherd” (*Matthew 9:36*). He sought, healed, and fed them on the mountains, by the rivers and throughout the countryside. Seeking the sheep is the duty of the Good Shepherd (*Ezekiel 34:12*) and would be required of his apostles. Jesus’ answer to their question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” was that they must seek the sheep instead of misleading, neglecting, and lording authority over them, for it is not the Father’s will “that one of these little ones should perish” (*Matthew 18:14*).

4) *Treat the Unrepentant as Heathen (Matthew 18:15-17)*

In yet another apparently unrelated diversion, His fourth rebuke admonishes the disciples to deal with sins privately if possible, but to elevate them to the attention of the church if not. On its face the passage is not immediately relevant to the question at hand — “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” — yet upon inspection, it derives from the Good Shepherd Narrative of *Ezekiel 34*. This is evident in several ways.

First, Luke’s account of the Millstone Narrative has Jesus transitioning from the warning against offending “these little ones” — e.g. “It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck” (*Luke 17:2*) — directly to the command to be reconciled with an offending brother: “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him” (*Luke 17:3*). Clearly, dealing with trespasses fosters the well-being of “these little ones.”

Second, the three New Testament Millstone Narratives deal with *maintaining peace* (*Mark 9:42-*

*50, Luke 17:1-4*) and *removing the unrepentant* (*Matthew 18:6-19*) that the sheep may know that *the Shepherd is in their midst* (*Matthew 18:20*). These derive from the Good Shepherd narrative in which the Lord’s objectives are *to comfort* and *to protect* the sheep by *His presence with them*: “...and they shall be safe in their land.... And they shall no more be a prey to the heathen.... Thus shall they know that I the LORD their God am with them” (*Ezekiel 34:27, 28, 30*).

Unsurprisingly, when viewed together, the Millstone Narratives aggregate these three constructs. They are derived from Ezekiel’s Good Shepherd motif.

*“Let him be unto thee as an heathen” (Matthew 18:17)*

Jesus’ direction on how to deal with a sinning brother was not chiefly to establish a mechanism for reconciliation and excommunication (though it certainly does). Rather, the chief objective was to illustrate the shepherd’s duty to foster peace among the brethren — “if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother” — and barring that, to remove the oppressive and unrepentant upon the testimony of two or three witnesses: “if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” That these two objectives are in view is clearly demonstrated by the illuminating parable (*Matthew 18:23-25*) that accompanies Jesus’ instructions. The king forgave an extraordinary debt (*Matthew 18:27*), but the forgiven servant was merciless regarding a much smaller transgression (*Matthew 18:30*). The first recourse should have been to have “compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee” (*Matthew 18:33*). Failing that, a plurality of witnesses — “his fellow servants” — reported what had happened, and the unforgiving servant was excommunicated on their testimony (*Matthew 18:34*). The immediate objective is reconciliation and peace among the sheep. Barring that, the removal of the oppressor becomes paramount, and the offender is excommunicated and treated as a heathen (*Matthew 18:17*), removing “the shame of the heathen” so that the sheep be “no more be a prey to the heathen” (*Ezekiel 34:28-29, Matthew 18:17, 34*). It is notable as well that the victim in the story would need his

wounds treated — for his oppressor “took him by the throat” (*Matthew* 18:28) — and his shackles broken — for his oppressor “cast him into prison” (*Matthew* 18:30). With the sheep now properly cared for, “thus shall they know that I the LORD their God am with them,” the Lord says (*Ezekiel* 34:30), “for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (*Matthew* 18:20). These are the words of a Good Shepherd, the prevailing narrative both in *Ezekiel* 34 and in *Matthew* 18:23-25, the very parable Christ gave to illuminate his meaning in *Matthew* 18:15-17. The aim of the Millstone Narrative of *Matthew* 18 is peace among sheep, removal of the “heathen” oppressor, and the comforting knowledge of the presence of the Good Shepherd in their midst.

*“Have peace one with another” (Mark 9:50)*

While *Matthew*’s account emphasizes the removal of the offender, *Mark* and *Luke* focus rather on maintaining peace. *Luke* dwells solely on that theme: “if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day...forgive him” (*Luke* 17:3-4). *Mark*, on the other hand insists on removal of the offense in order to maintain peace within the body: “And if thy hand.... And...thy foot.... And...thine eye offend.... For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another” (*Mark* 9:42-50).

This cryptic command to “have salt in yourselves” derives from the ancient “covenant of salt” (*Leviticus* 2:13; *Numbers* 18:19) as a Davidic (*2 Chronicles* 13:5) covenant of peace that the sheep may “have one shepherd” and dwell in safety (*Ezekiel* 34:23-25; 37:24-26).

We therefore observe that when the Millstone Narratives are understood together, it is evident that all three derive from the Good Shepherd narrative of *Ezekiel* 34 and have the well-being of the sheep in mind — establishing peace through repentance and forgiveness within, and keeping the “evil beasts” and “heathen” safely without — all while binding up their wounds, loosing their shackles and assuring the flock of the presence of their Good

Shepherd. These are the three main objectives of the Good Shepherd Narrative of *Ezekiel* 34. The Millstone Narratives reflect that, including the one in *Matthew* 18.

Keeping in mind therefore that Jesus’ four admonitions in *Matthew* 18 are thus imbued with the Good Shepherd narratives of *Ezekiel* 34 and *Zechariah* 11, we conclude that the word “bind” in *Matthew* 18:18, too, has the care of the sheep in mind, and must be so understood: “...Whatsoever ye shall bind [up] on earth shall be bound [up] in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven....”

Binding up the wounded and loosing the captives is the duty of the Good Shepherd (*Ezekiel* 34:16,27), and his duty is fulfilled in the preaching of the Good Tidings to them (*Isaiah* 61:1). The focus of *Matthew* 18:18 therefore shifts naturally away from a “universal Petrine coercive jurisdiction,” and returns our attention to the duty of a good shepherd to deliver the Father’s Words to the sheep. As Jesus had been, so too would the apostles be entrusted with a ministry of *binding up* the brokenhearted and *loosing* the captives through the preaching of the Good News Jesus had heard from his Father.

As with “upon this rock,” “the gates of hell shall not prevail,” and “the keys of the kingdom,” we conclude here also that “whatsoever thou shalt bind [up]...and...loose” was also spoken in the context of the preaching ministry Jesus had received from His Father. According to *Isaiah* 61:1, He was to preach the Good News that broken hearts may be mended, and prisoners loosed; or, as *Ezekiel* prophesied, to “bind up that which was broken” and to break “the bands of their yoke.” In both *Matthew* 16:19 to Peter, and in *Matthew* 18:18 to them all, “to bind” and “to loose” are better rendered “to bind up” and “to loose,” a reference to the Good Shepherd’s ministry to the sheep, and cannot under any circumstances be taken to refer to a “universal coercive jurisdiction.”

*“Shall have been bound [up]...and...loosed...”*

It is noteworthy that Jesus had been speaking in the past perfect tense in *Matthew* 16:19 and *Matthew* 18:18, as in “whatsoever thou shalt bind [up] on

earth shall have been bound [up] in heaven...”. Because the binding up and loosing is tied to the Good Shepherd’s role of preaching Good Tidings, we are not left guessing how the binding up and loosing occurs beforehand in heaven. The Good Tidings proclaim the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ. Jesus was “foreordained before the foundation of the world” to be slain for our sin (*I Peter* 1:19-20), and accordingly “he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love” (*Ephesians* 1:4). Whatever “binding up” and “loosing” was to be accomplished through “the foolishness of preaching” was determined in Heaven “before the foundation of the world.” As Jesus said to the Seventy, “rejoice, because your names are \* written in heaven” (*Luke* 10:20). After all, the Word of God does not return without having accomplished “the thing whereto I sent it” (*Isaiah* 55:11).

**Whose Soever Sins ye Remit...and...Retain (*John* 20:23)**

Although Jesus’ promise of *John* 20:23 was not part of His response to Peter in *Matthew* 16:19, the passage has nevertheless been used to reinforce the Roman Catholic interpretation of “to bind” and “to loose.” The Council of Trent linked the two verses together to assign to the priest “the power of binding and of loosing,” such that “priests alone” are given the authority to remit and retain sins.<sup>25</sup> However, because “to bind [up]” and “to loose” in *Matthew* 16:19 both refer to the Good News of remission of sins — to wit, the *binding up* the wounded and the *loosing* of the captives — that “power of binding and of loosing” can by no means be understood to refer both to *retention* and *remission* of sins. Such a rendering would conflate the Good News of wounds *bound up* with the bad news of *sins retained*. Jesus did not claim in *Luke* 4:18 to have been anointed to preach a gospel of *retention of sins*. He had been anointed to preach the remission of sins by which the brokenhearted are healed (bound up) and the captives freed (loosed).

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\* Literally, “were”.

<sup>25</sup> Council of Trent, 14<sup>th</sup> Session, November 25, 1551, Canons on Penance, Canon X.

We may discern the extent to which the apostles were authorized to remit and retain sins first by understanding how Christ appropriated such authority to himself. When he said to Mary, “Thy sins are forgiven” (*Luke* 7:48; *John* 11:2), it was an announcement, not an absolution, for she had already been forgiven before He said it (*Luke* 7:47), having heard and believed the Words of the Father prior to His arrival at the house of the Pharisee (*John* 5:24). So with the palsied man in Capernaum. “Thy sins be forgiven thee” (*Matthew* 9:2, *Mark* 2:5, *Luke* 5:20) was announced as an accomplished fact, not because the man and his friends had come requesting forgiveness, but rather because Jesus had “preached the word unto them” (*Mark* 2:2) and they had already believed before penetrating the roof (*Matthew* 9:2, *Mark* 2:5, *Luke* 5:20). Just so with the retention of sins, for “if any man hear my words, and believe not,” it is not Jesus who condemns him, but “the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day” (*John* 12:47-50). Did Jesus have authority on earth to remit sins? Yes, He did (*Matthew* 9:6, *Mark* 2:10, *Luke* 5:24), but according to His own testimony, it was not He, *but His Father’s Words*, that remitted them. His only duty was to preach (*John* 12:50). Did Jesus have authority on earth to retain sins? Yes, He did, but it was not He, but *his Father’s Words that retained them*. “And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not...the word that I have spoken...shall judge him,” that is, the Word of His Father (*John* 12:47-48). “Whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him,” the Father declares (*Deuteronomy* 18:19). Sins are either remitted or retained *by the preached Word*, not by the preacher.

As the power to remit and to retain is intrinsic to the message, not the messenger, we may safely conclude that neither the apostles nor their successors were imbued with such power as Rome claims for her priests. Even Christ did not claim it of Himself, but only of the Father’s Word. “The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord” (*Mathew* 10:24), and therefore the ministry of the disciples cannot have exceeded the ministry of the Son. Sins are remitted by the preaching of the Father’s Words, and they are retained the same way. How and whether the Words

of the Father remit and retain the sins of the hearer is His prerogative alone. He hides the Gospel “from the wise and prudent” and reveals it to “unto babes” (*Matthew* 11:25-26, *Luke* 10:21-22). He reveals “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” to the elect and withholds it from the reprobate “lest at any time they should...be converted” (*Matthew* 13:15). He forbids the preaching of the Word lest the hearers be saved (*Acts* 16:6-7) and commands the preaching of the Gospel to open the hearts of the hearers (*Acts* 16:10-14).

When the disciples testified, it was not they that spoke, “but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you” (*Matthew* 10:20). When Jesus preached the Good Tidings, they were not His words, but his Father’s (*John* 12:49). The Thessalonians received Paul’s preaching “not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (*1 Thessalonians* 2:13). It is *the preached Word of the Father* by which sins are remitted unto “life everlasting,” or retained unto condemnation, not an imagined apostolic sacramental power of absolution. This Paul knew very well, rejoicing that God “maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place” (*2 Corinthians* 2:14), and thus, it was not his but God’s prerogative to make the Good Tidings foolishness “to them that perish,” but life to those who are saved (*1 Corinthians* 1:18), “the savour of death unto death” to the perishing, but “the savour of life unto life” to the elect (*2 Corinthians* 2:15-16). To “remit” or “retain” sins in *John* 20:23 refers to God’s sovereignty in election and reprobation by the “foolishness of preaching,” whereas the power “to bind up” and “to loose” in *Matthew* 16:19 and 18:18 refers solely to the effectual ministry of the Good Tidings to the elect.

### **Two Religions at War**

Jesus’ words to Peter and the apostles in *Matthew* 16 and 18 are pregnant with the seeds of two different religions, and like the twins in Rebekah’s womb, they are perpetually at war with one another. One, the religion, of the Lord’s everlasting favor, has understood His meaning. They are the elect who hear and believe His words unto forgiveness and justification. From the other religion, rejected and stillborn, the Lord has hidden His meaning in

darkness and ignorance. Misunderstanding His words, Rome thought Jesus would have built His Church upon Peter, and that the gates of hell could not prevail against him and his infallible successors, and that by the keys of the kingdom, they could open or bar the door to heaven, binding men in their sins, or loosing them through priestcraft and sacramental superstition, remitting or retaining sins by a “universal coercive jurisdiction.” Such a religion makes merchandise of the souls of men (*Revelation* 18:12-13), shutting up the kingdom of heaven to them, neither entering themselves, nor suffering they that would (*Matthew* 23:13). It is the religion of God’s everlasting indignation (*Hebrews* 10:27).

But the people of Christ understand that “the purpose of God according to election” (*Romans* 9:11) is accomplished *by the Word of the Father*. His purpose was determined before the Word ever left His mouth and cannot return unless it “accomplish that which I please” and “prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (*Isaiah* 55:11). That religion understands it is not *Peter* but *the Word of the Father* that is in view.<sup>†</sup> According to *Isaiah* 28:16 and 54:11, the Lord promised to build His church “upon this rock,” not on Peter, nor upon his confession, nor upon Christ, but on the stone foundation of *the Father’s Words*. The gates of hell cannot prevail, not because of the infallibility of Peter, but because by God’s Word, the “covenant with death shall be disannulled” and the “agreement with hell shall not stand” (*Isaiah* 28:18), for he that believes *the Fathers words* “is passed from death unto life” (*John* 5:24). The keys of the kingdom of heaven refer not to an administrative gatekeeping function, but rather to a ministry of *preaching the Father’s Words*, because by the “key of knowledge” (*Luke* 11:52) “mixed with faith” (*Hebrews* 4:2) the hearers “do enter” (*Hebrews* 4:3), for both knowledge and belief come by the preaching of *the Word of the Father* (*Romans* 10:17). The power of binding and loosing is no priestly administrative function of keeping men in their sins, but a commission the Good Shepherd had received from His Father “to bind up the brokenhearted” and “to

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<sup>†</sup> The popular view that Peter’s confession is “the rock” is not correct, but not so very far off as Rome’s, for the *object* of Peter’s confession was indeed *the Word of the Father*.

proclaim...the opening of the prison to them that are bound” by the preaching of *Good Tidings* (*Isaiah* 61:1; *Luke* 4:28). “As Thou hast sent me into the world” to *bind up* and *to loose*, “even so have I also sent them” (*John* 17:18) — to *bind up* and *to loose* (*Matthew* 16:19; 18:18). By these carefully chosen words of a Shepherd (*Ezekiel* 34), “Peter” and his “successors” are relieved of the awful burden of administering the effectual call of the Father. While *John* 20:23 was not spoken in the context of Peter’s confession, nevertheless, the Scriptures teach us that the authority to remit and retain sins refers not to his “coercive jurisdiction,” but simply to “the foolishness of preaching,” whereby the sins of the hearers are either remitted or retained *by the Father’s Word*, for He opens or closes the ears of the hearer according to the pleasure of His will, and not according to the will of the preacher.

And thus, two religions were born of Jesus’ Words in *Matthew* 16. One, the religion of Christ, grasping His meaning, understanding that salvation is by belief in *the Word of the Father*. The other, its understanding darkened and thinking only of Peter and his successors, presumed that salvation is by “faith in the Church.”<sup>26</sup> The former is the religion established by Christ, the latter an imposter, “seeking whom he may devour” (*1 Peter* 5:8). These two religions must ever remain at war until He returns.

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<sup>26</sup> CCC, 976.