



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 13.4 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Jesus' Use of the Word "Church"

The four Gospels record only two times Jesus Himself used the word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) in His teaching. In the first time Jesus was together with His twelve apostles in the mountainous area of Caesarea Philippi. In response to Jesus' question: **"Who do you say that I am?"**, Peter said: **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"** (Matthew 16:15-16). Jesus was pleased with this answer, and He told Peter in the presence of the whole group: **"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter (*petros πέτρος*), and on this rock (*petra πέτρα*) I will build My church (*ekklesia ἐκκλησία*), and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you (singular) 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"** (Matthew 16:17-19).

It is important that we understand the context and meaning of Jesus' words in this passage, for the Roman Catholic Church interprets these words in a way that goes far beyond what Jesus actually said. By asking what His apostles had to say about Him, Jesus was calling for them to make their confession that He was no ordinary person, but that He was in fact **"the Christ"**, that is, the Messiah (Anointed One) prophesied throughout all the days of the Old Testament. As was often the case, Peter spoke up first among the apostles. He said that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the very Son of God. Peter could not have come up with this better confession on his own. Jesus said that Peter was blessed because the Father had revealed this great truth to him.

Then Jesus repeated the name that He Himself had given to Simon Bar-Jonah, the name Peter, *Petros* (Πέτρος), which means a stone or a rock. (Cephas also means a stone, and sometimes Peter is given that name in the Bible.) Then Jesus introduces a new word, *petra* (πέτρα), which means a solid rock foundation. *Petra* (πέτρα) is not the same word as *petros* (πέτρος), and therefore we should not make the mistake of thinking that the man Peter is the foundational rock on which Jesus will build His Church. Rather, it is Peter's confession (given to him by the Father) of Jesus as the Christ that is the *petra* (πέτρα) on which Christ intends to build His Church. Jesus Himself is the foundation of the Church. Jesus will build His Church by creating in men's hearts the conviction and confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, as God had worked in Peter's heart. Thus, Jesus' Church consists of those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and are willing to confess Him as such.

The Church of Christ is made up of those who believe as Peter confessed and are willing to join Peter in this confession. Those who believe in Jesus as the Christ are the Church of Christ, and **"the gates of Hades"** will not be able to prevail against this Church. Hades refers to the kingdom of Satan, who is engaged in a perpetual battle against Christ and His Church. But God's people, His band of believers, will not be stopped. They will continue to confess the name of Christ so long as the earth endures, and when Jesus returns triumphantly in glory at the end, they will continue to confess His name in heaven. Christ's Church is eternal and invincible.

Jesus then gives to the individual believer, Peter, the keys of the kingdom of heaven. With these keys Peter is given the privilege and duty of binding and loosing on earth, and his binding and loosing on earth will be carried out in heaven as well. The same keys are given to every individual believer in Christ – everyone who believes and confesses as Peter has just done. The binding and loosing are

explained by Jesus' words to His disciples on Easter Sunday evening: **"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"** (John 20:22-23). Loosing is the same as forgiving sins. Binding is the same as retaining sins, that is, not forgiving them.

Now that we have studied Matthew 16:13-19 in its context, let us briefly outline the Roman Catholic false understanding of these verses. They claim that Jesus is making Peter the visible head of Christ's Church on earth. In their opinion Jesus is calling Peter *himself* the rock on which Christ builds His Church. By giving Peter the keys, they believe that Jesus was giving Peter the authority to make laws for all the Christians on earth. Moreover, they say that Jesus intended this headship of Peter over the Church to be handed down to his successors, the Roman popes, who therefore are the rightful rulers of Christ's Church on earth. This Roman Catholic interpretation has no foundation in the rest of the Scriptures and goes way beyond what Jesus' words actually say. In fact, this explanation of Jesus' words was not the way the early Christians understood these words. It was not until hundreds of years later that this interpretation was invented to increase the authority of the Roman pope.

We turn now to the second time the word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) is used in the Gospels. Again we find Jesus with His apostles, this time giving instructions to them concerning what we call "church discipline". These are Jesus' words: **"Moreover 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 (*ekklesia* ἐκκλησία). But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you (plural) bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you (plural) loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"** (Matthew 18:15-18).

Jesus' followers are not to ignore open sinning. Christians sin daily, confess their sins daily, and are forgiven daily, for Christ's sake. But when a Christian notices that another Christian is continuing to sin openly without repenting, their concern for the person will lead them to talk privately with them about their sin in the hope of leading the person to repentance. When it is clear that the sinning person is not listening, the matter should be discussed in the presence of one or two others; these others will again try to bring the unrepentant sinner to repentance. When it is clear that this is not leading the person to repent either, Jesus' instruction is this: **"Tell it to the church."** In this case the word "church" cannot mean all of Christ's believers throughout the world. It would be impossible to tell every believer everywhere. The "church" in this case means the believers in Christ who are near at hand, that is, the group of believers who know the person who is unrepentant. These then are called on to add their testimony to that which has already been given, in the hopes of gaining the sinning person, that is, leading them to repentance. Finally, when the person will not listen to this larger group of believers, there remains nothing else to be done except to regard this impenitent sinner as no longer a believer in Christ – no longer a Christian – but rather a non-Christian, a heathen.

After giving these instructions to His followers, Jesus repeated the words He had said to Peter about binding and loosing. Notice in this case, however, Jesus uses the plural you, not the singular you. In other words, the keys of the kingdom of heaven were not just given to Peter alone, but to the whole group of believers. The keys are given to Christ's church on earth.

Questions

1. What important question did Jesus ask His apostles near Caesarea Philippi?
2. What did Jesus have to say about Peter's answer?
3. What is the difference between *petros* (πέτρος) and *petra* (πέτρα)?
4. On what does Christ build His Church?
5. What is meant by binding and loosing?
6. How does the Roman Catholic Church understand Matthew 16:17-19?
7. Give some evidence to show that this understanding is incorrect.
8. What is meant by church discipline?
9. What are the four steps outlined by Jesus regarding open sin?
10. What did Jesus mean when He said: **"Tell it to the church"**?
11. To whom have the keys of the kingdom of heaven been given?
12. How do we open heaven to sinners?
13. How do we close heaven to sinners?