

## KEEPER OF THE KEYS

**a sermon on Exodus 1:8 – 2:10; Romans 12:1-8, and Matthew 16:13-20  
August 27, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller  
Sumner, Mississippi**

William Barclay, the popular Biblical Scholar from the Church of Scotland, has called our Gospel lesson for the morning “one of the storm-centres of New Testament interpretation.” And that is no overstatement.

How different Christian bodies interpret the role of the Apostle Peter . . . and *specifically* his role as the “keeper” of the “keys of the Kingdom of Heaven” . . . has been a source of much church controversy, and is part of what continues to *divide* Christian denominations – Roman Catholics and Protestants, in particular.

So let me begin with my understanding of how our Catholic brothers and sisters interpret these words.

Their understanding is that the “power of the keys” is literally the power to absolve sins, a power that Christ “vested” in Peter, his “chief” apostle, who then had the *responsibility* of further vesting other church leaders. Because of this *unique* role Jesus gave to Peter, he became the “Bishop of Rome,” according to tradition, and therefore his direct successors in *that* office, have been viewed ever since in Roman Catholicism as the legitimate heads of the visible Church. The Bishop of Rome is the Roman Catholic “Pope,” the “Holy Father,” the person to whom all other church leaders answer, and the power to grant forgiveness is a power that has been vested in one “group” of the Christian Community – its *priests*.

If you are expecting me (as a good “Presbyterian”) to critique that view, and prove that it is an invalid interpretation, I hope my next words are not too disappointing. *Clearly*, Jesus *did* entrust the church to Peter, and he *did* consider the matter of “church authority” to be important.

We do have an “authority crisis” in the Church. But I and others in our

tradition believe that putting authority in *one man* (the Apostle Peter and his successors), or lodging it in one group (the priesthood generally) was not Jesus' intent, and is inappropriate, given human fallibility – articulated in words like Paul's admonition not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought . . . not to mention Peter's own failings, which are so obvious in the Gospels!

At the same time, it is important to note that Jesus did in fact *give* authority to others. Jesus *knew* that he would not be physically present with his followers much longer, and so in those latter days of his ministry he devoted an *increasing* amount of attention to instructing the apostles about how to be the leaders of the new religious faith he was founding *in his absence*.

And that is why our faith tradition has always placed great importance on both an “educated clergy” and also well trained officers. With our duties as church leaders comes legitimate *authority*, and with authority comes *responsibility*.

The “particulars” of that responsibility are tied up in the curious part of the Gospel reading about “binding” and “loosing.” Those are actually old terms that were in common usage among Jewish rabbis, and would have been immediately understood by Jesus' followers. They mean, “to forbid” and “to allow,” and they refer to the accepted role of religious leaders to make appropriate “decisions” about matters of the faith and its practice. . . as the rabbis did regularly, often through lengthy discussions and debate.

William Barclay paraphrases these words of Jesus to Peter in this way, “Peter, you are going to have grave and heavy responsibilities laid upon you. You are going to have to make decisions which will affect the welfare of the whole Church. In the days to come the administration of the Church will fall upon you. You will be the guide and the director of the infant Church. And the decisions you give will be so important, that they will affect the souls of men in time and in eternity.”

The point is, the Church is not just a social club, or even a service organization — even though it plans social functions, and carries out service projects. It is *more* than that. Its work is more *important* than that. The Church deals with individuals' sense of *purpose* and *peace* in life. It bears the responsibility for their *awareness* of God, and their *incorporation* of God's promises into their lives. It is a place where the faithful demonstrate their *gratitude*

to God, and where they *hear* God's Word, receive direction, and *participate* in what we call the "means of grace."

So the only real problem I have with the Roman interpretation of this text is its view of what it means to be the "keeper of the keys" to the kingdom, and its view of to whom, in fact, that responsibility has ultimately been given.

Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus responded, "*You* are Peter, and on this *rock* I will build my Church." Jesus used a "word play" on the words "Petros," or "Peter," and "petra," the word for "rock," to say that Peter's very *name* is "equal" to the *confession* which is the bedrock of faith.

That kind of word play is common in Scripture — particularly in regard to how individuals' *names* "embody" an idea or attitude that *defines* them. In our text from Exodus, for instance, Pharaoh's daughter is said to have given Moses his name: "She named him Moses," it says, "because . . . I drew him out of the water," a play on the Hebrew words for Moses' name (Mosheh) and the Hebrew verb, "Mashah," that means "to draw out of."

The point is, Peter was not the rock *himself*, but he was the consummate *example* of the rock, *because* of his confession. "Rock" was a *metaphor* for his life.

Our belief, which clearly differs from that of Catholics, is that it is the *confession* upon which the Church is built, not the *person* Peter. He was one of its great leaders, and its leaders were given very real responsibilities. But the *confession* is the rock. *It* is the "key" that opens the door to the gates of the kingdom.

We are gathered here today because the "gates" have been opened to us. Somewhere, sometime, someone who was "in" the Church, opened it.

In many cases, it was our parents, who literally *carried* us into the church as infants, to be "marked" with the sign of water for the symbolic "cleansing" of our sin and "welcome into the household of God," and then nurtured us along in the faith. In other cases, it was a friend, who knew that something was *wrong* in our life, that we couldn't find our "place," that we were *struggling* with some issue, and needed direction. Perhaps, in some cases, it was actually the words of a

minister, faithfully proclaiming the *message* of the kingdom, or administering the Sacraments in Christ's name in a way that made the Christian message "come alive." Or maybe it was the *experience* of being in worship with a congregation of believers honestly seeking God's word and presence, or the words of the minister *declaring* us forgiven after *corporate* confession of our sin and shortcomings (not because of the minister's special power or authority, but because of the "role" they were playing in that moment on behalf of the whole church). Maybe it was a Sunday School teacher, or a youth group leader, who was "there" for us at an important time.

In other words, we are *all* "keepers of the keys." Every one of us who has made Peter's confession has the joyful *opportunity* and responsibility to unlock the gate to others, and invite them into the fellowship of faith, where forgiveness is experienced, and eternity becomes reality in lives changed, healed wounds, and attitudes turned *outward* — toward God, and others.

Our tradition calls it, "The Priesthood of All Believers." It is the responsibility of *proclamation*, and we *all* share that responsibility, each of us, as Paul loved to point out, by means of utilizing our varied gifts and talents for the greater good. Or put another way, Peter was not make the keeper of the keys to *keep* them, but rather to *use* them, and to *pass them on* to others!

We aren't all preachers, and Christ doesn't call us to be. We aren't all church leaders, we don't all have equal levels of "knowledge" to impart. But we all *know* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We wouldn't *be* here if we didn't. And with that confession, the *opportunity* to help others along *their* path in life is placed in our hands.

I know that "evangelism" is not our "strong suite" in the PC(USA). But I also happen to believe that our *particular* approach to the faith is one that could unlock the gates of the kingdom for many individuals who are currently on the outside looking in.

Because of our "openness" to diversity, our acceptance of the sciences and our struggle to *relate* theological reflection to other fields of study, our *engagement* with the great social issues of the day — which we are willing to debate *within* the church and even *amongst* ourselves — *all* of which are *historic* characteristics of the Presbyterian Church and the Reformed faith, *because* of who we are, and

because of how we *approach* the faith, and because of how we worship and serve, we have the ability to *reach* and *help* individuals who for whatever reason do not feel welcomed, or “accepted” in other Christian traditions.

My friends, we have a *mission*. We are keepers of the keys, too. And we have a *message*. The time has come for us to begin *proclaiming* it, and unlocking the door for others. May that be our goal this day, and always, to God’s glory, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Almighty and Most Merciful God, Maker of heaven and Earth, who has guided the human quest for knowledge and learning, and opened to us many wonderful secrets of the universe, and yet Whose knowledge is still so far above ours that our knowledge is like a single drop of water in a vast ocean, compared with Yours,

Receive, we pray, our great thanks for our human ability, however limited, to at least *ponder* great questions about our existence, and to *find* meaning and purpose in life.

We are thankful for Peter's confession, and for its underlying truth, that in Jesus, the fullness of Your presence dwelt, and the Truth of Your message was made clear: that You are merciful, and full of grace and love, and that *we* are called only to *accept* Your love, and make it our own.

In that Truth, may we live all our days. And in its light, may our burdens be lightened, our sorrows comforted, our hatred ended, and our vision for this world and our place in it made clear and bright.

Be with the leaders of our church, the leaders of our nation, and all those in whom earthly authority has been vested. None of us is *worthy*. Help us each to rule our domains in life with humility, and in the *knowledge* of Your guiding presence.

And so keep us in Your care all our days, and then receive us, we pray, into Your *eternal* presence, with the faithful of every generation, who have the privilege of serving You in that nearer presence, and enjoying the full communion of the faithful forever more.

For we make these and all our prayers in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us when we pray to say . . .