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The Blessing, Power and Authority of the Church

A study in Matthew 16:17–19

Ian S. Kemp

This paper attempts an exegesis of a passage of Scripture which has been the subject of vast scholarship and conflicting interpretation. We seek to look at it afresh and to find some relevance to current issues in the Church.

The Church is confused about her own constitution. Why she exists, who she belongs to, and even who belongs to her are questions that receive the most diverse answers though they concern the very heart of the Church's being. The Church has her back to the wall. Usually a tiny minority in a pluralistic society which either ignores her, despises her, opposes her or threatens her very existence, the Church questions her inferior position and is painfully conscious of her weakness. The Church also has lost her nerve. What can she say in the world when she is rent asunder by inner division, doctrinal confusion and moral failure?

What the Church of our day needs is deep conviction on those very points where she is most confused. Jesus laid those convictions like foundation stones when He first spoke to Peter about the Church in [Matthew 16:17–19](#). "You are mine," He said. "You are a power structure. You have enormous authority." Our purpose in this study is to try to establish the correct meaning of this crucial statement of our Lord's. Clarity of thought here should help the Church towards a much needed conviction.

Jesus' teaching about the Church came in direct response to *Peter's confession*. Some understanding of the content of that confession will thus help us to see the issues to which Jesus responds.

The confession was the first considered affirmation by any of the disciples of Jesus' Messiahship. It is true that the Gospel writers refer to Jesus as Christ before this scene at Caesarea Philippi ([Matt. 1:1, 16, 18, 11:2](#)) and that he had been so acknowledged by devils ([Matt. 8:29](#)) and by followers of Jesus ([John 1:41, Matt. 9:28, 12:23, 14:33, 15:22](#)). But these acknowledgements were spontaneous and tentative rather than considered statements. Now with Peter's confession in [Matt. 16:16](#), we have a deliberate conscious expression rejecting other popular possibilities that Jesus was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. So far as Peter was concerned [p. 10](#) he had come to the conclusion that Jesus was the Christ and Son of the living God.

The confession involves several significant insights on Peter's behalf.

1) It showed that Peter saw *Jesus as the promised Messiah*. Current popular hopes for the Messiah were for a political leader, at best an ideal human king. But Peter's observations of Jesus the wandering teacher, miracle worker, prophet and friend led him to see in this non-political figure, one who fulfilled the Scriptural hope of Messiah. Further, Peter even went beyond the Scriptural pre-figuration of a human king in the line of David when he said that this clearly human Jesus Messiah was the Son of the living God. Peter had an insight into Jesus that was unequalled among his contemporaries.

2) It showed that Peter saw *Jesus in terms of the Kingdom of God*. "Son of God" in pre-Christian Judaism was a term understood as "God's adopted vice-regent in His Kingdom." "Son of man" the term which Jesus used in questioning His disciples about who people thought He was, is also a term implying the Kingdom of God. The well known passage in

[Daniel 7](#) from which the Son of man terminology comes, sees him “given dominion and glory and kingdom ... His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away, and his Kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” ([Dan. 7:14](#)). Moreover Daniel saw that the Kingdom shall be received by “the saints of the Most High” ([Dan 7:13](#)) implying that somehow these “saints” are associated with the Son of man who receives the Kingdom. Peter’s confession thus implies that Jesus is the King exercising authority with his saints in the Kingdom of God.

3) The confession also shows that Peter saw *Jesus as unique*. Of all the Gospel accounts of this confession at Caesarea Philippi, it is only Matthew who records the words “Son of the living God.” Biblical thought about the living God is that God has life originally in Himself, His life is indestructible and He therefore lives eternally. It also refers to the transcendence of God’s existence over men and of His action and intervention in the affairs of men. Peter, in saying that Jesus is the Son of the living God, is thus affirming that Jesus is in a unique relationship to Him who is the transcendent and indestructible God, that he knows the mind and purposes of the living God as only a son may know the mind of his father. When the disciples said that men were identifying Jesus with John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah, they meant that these men saw Jesus as similar to men of the past, or as possessing some characteristics of those men in history. But when Peter confessed, he saw Jesus as transcending all such characters of [p. 11](#) the past, unique in all history, alone of His own kind. That Peter, a devout monotheist, could in this his first considered opinion of Jesus nearly ascribe to this man Jesus characteristics of deity which were later openly affirmed by the Church (“Jesus is Lord”) shows how radical his thinking was.

Peter’s confession of Jesus thus reveals that he saw the Person of Jesus as God’s agent, fulfilling Scriptural prophecy as an anointed King reigning with His saints, and as one who was in a unique relationship to the living God. It is to this confession that Jesus responds with His teaching about the Church.

The crucial verses [17-19](#) of our study are set in the context of further teaching about Jesus’ Messiahship and the true meaning of discipleship. The Messiah is to be a suffering King (21) and his followers too must tread the path of suffering ([24-26](#)). The Messiah however is to rise from the dead (27) and the disciples are to share in the eternal kingdom of the Son of man (28). The “saints of the Most High” in sharing the Kingdom are also to share the glory with the King. Thus Jesus’ teaching about the church in vv [17-19](#) must be seen in the context of suffering, self denial and ultimate victory. This is what it means to be living in the Kingdom.

The three verses, in themselves unique to Matthew’s Gospel, form a triad each of three lines, the second and third line explaining the first line in each triad, in antithetical parallelism.¹ Thus Jesus says in the first triad “Blessed are you Simon bar Jona”; then the following two statements (“for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you; but my Father who is in heaven”) explain why Peter is blessed. Similarly in v. [18](#) the statements about building the Church and the powers of death explain “you are Peter” and in v. [19](#) the explanation of the keys is found in the two following statements about the binding and loosing. We shall now look at each triad in turn.

THE BLESSING

(a) The word of blessing with which Jesus begins His response to Peter is the common word “makarios” used frequently in the New Testament of the distinctive joy which comes

¹ Jeremias in TNTW Vol V1, p.327, article *Pute*

to a man when he shares in the salvation of the Kingdom of God. Thus Mary is called blessed by all generations, for she is the mother of the Messiah who brings this salvation ([Luke 1:48](#)), and believers are pronounced blessed because they have received the message of salvation (Gal. [P. 12 4:15](#)) and have been reckoned as righteous before God ([Rom. 4:6, 9](#)). Blessing in the New Testament is usually in the context of the eschatological proclamation of the Kingdom. It expresses the tense emotion of a soul that is now set in the dawn of the new age of salvation ([Matt. 13:16, Rev. 19:9](#)), as it also expresses the joy of the one who has found in the Kingdom of God spiritual realities infinitely more valuable than any material possessions (e.g. the beatitudes [Matt. 5:3ff, 1 Peter 3:14](#)). The blessed person is in fact the one who has discovered in the Kingdom the reversal of all human values. What he now possesses be it purity of heart, meekness, pity or faith counts before God. These are the possessions that last forever. Indeed the New Testament beatitudes are intimations of future glory. Or, to put it the other way, the future glory guaranteed to the man of faith sheds light on his present sorrows. Being blessed means that he sees his present in the light of the glorious future:²

Jesus thus begins by highly commending Peter for his faith. He assures him that he has what really counts with God, and that the future glory of the Kingdom of God now perceived by Peter enables him with joy to see his present earthly life in a new light. The fact that Jesus addresses Peter here in his original family name Simon bar Jona enhances the thought that the joy and reality, the hope and assurance of an entirely new dimension of life had now come to this very ordinary human being. Life's *summum bonum* had been found.

(b) The first explanation of this new blessedness of the Kingdom Jesus now gives in the negative statement that it was not flesh and blood that had revealed the truth about Jesus to Peter. There was nothing in Simon *per se*, nothing in the human nature that was his in common with all other human beings that could have given him the insights he had expressed. "Flesh and blood" is man in his entirety, man in his weakness, and is a solemn reminder to us that by means of all his noble achievements, his flights of philosophy and his moral endeavours, the smile of God's approval, the pearl of great price, can never be obtained by man. The discovery of the truth, membership in the Kingdom, is a divine gift.

(c) The divine gift is the positive part of Jesus' explanation of the blessedness of the Kingdom, the third line in this first triad. The heavenly Father had revealed it to Peter. So Peter's confession was more than insight. His understanding of Scripture, of the Kingdom and of Jesus Himself was the result of revelation. God had shown it to him personally. Here in a moment God's eternal light focussed on [p. 13](#) one man. Here in this one man the work of the Father had taken place bringing Peter into possession of the Kingdom, causing him to see life in the light of eternity and effecting a radical shift in the centre of his own being.

It has been suggested³ that the key for interpreting verses [17-19](#) is this personal revelation of the Father to Peter. Each of the three statements that begin each triad "Blessed are you ... You are Peter ... I will give you the keys" are to be seen not as three different ways of saying that Peter is to be the principal person in the Church, but three different results of the revelation which the Father has made to Peter. This is a helpful key to interpreting the passage, and to our understanding of the Church. The underlying primacy here is not that of Peter as many have suggested from Jesus' words in the next triad. The underlying primacy is that of the Father and His will. Jesus virtually says here that Peter himself is of no significance: left to his own intelligence he would have come to

² See F. Hauck in TNTW Vol IV, p.369, article *makarios*

³ R. Newton Flew: *Jesus and His Church* p. 92.

his own conclusions and they would be wrong. But what *is* of significance is the will of God the Father who guided Peter to the truth. The basis is not Peter, nor the rock, but the Father, the Father's will and the Father's personal revelation to an ordinary human being.

Such, then, is the blessing. It is characterised by a faith in Jesus that transcends natural human understanding, by a joy that exults in receiving what transcends every earthly possession, and a hope that bears present tensions in view of eternal guarantees. It is the result of the heavenly Father's initiative, the gift of His personal revelation.

THE POWER

Verse [18](#) begins with the emphatic *Kago do soi* "But I again say to you ..." indicating that the revelation which the Father had given to Peter in the confession he had made, is now being followed by a further revelation which Jesus makes in this and the next verse. "Light received brings more light." "To him who has shall more be given." Peter, once open to the revelation of God, is now given more. A principle of all spiritual growth, indeed, of all church growth, lies here.

The revelation now given to Peter concerns the church, specifically mentioned as *ekklesia* only in this verse and in [Matt. 18:18](#) and nowhere else in the Gospels. We start with the opening statement "You are Peter" and the two explanatory statements following it. We shall [p. 14](#) therefore look for the significance of Simon's name Peter, given to him by Jesus some time earlier ([John 1:42](#)).

1) *Peter's name*. There is an obvious word play on *petros* the name of Peter, and *petra*, the rock on which Jesus will build His church.

Many have thought that in the subtle distinctions of these two words Jesus was saying that Peter himself was of little significance (*petros* = stone), but what counts for the Church is the rock (*petra*) on which it stands. The rock is then variously interpreted as Jesus, God the Father, or Peter's confession, any of these being of greater significance than Peter himself just as a rock is greater than a stone.

But we should be cautious about the subtleties of such word play.⁴ The word which Jesus most probably used in Aramaic is *Kepa(s)* meaning a rock. Being a feminine word in Aramaic, *Kepa* would rightly be translated into Greek as *petra*. But if a man is to be given a Greek name meaning rock, the feminine form *petra* could not be used: it would have to be the masculine form *petros*. Seen in this light the distinctions in our text must not be pressed and we shall settle for the basic idea that Jesus said to Simon "You are Rock, and on this rock I will build my Church."

But in what way precisely is Peter the rock on which Jesus will build His Church?

The Roman Catholic interpretation is that in these words Jesus conferred on Peter "the primacy of jurisdiction over the entire Church" and that "the primacy principle and foundation of the structure are to endure as long as it (the Church) does and that Peter is to transmit his authority to his successors."⁵ The whole argument of the papacy is built on the interpretation of this verse.

The argument is not so convincing however when we consider that in the two other New Testament responses where the apostles are said to be the foundation of the Church, Peter's name is not even mentioned ([Eph. 2:20](#), [Rev. 21:14](#)). Add to this Paul's own confrontation when he "withstood Peter to his face" ([Gal. 2:11-14](#)) and Peter's own self-

⁴ See R. N. Flew, *op. cit.* p.93. D. Hill *Gospel of Matthew* p.261.

⁵ Canon Boulenger: *Apologetique* pp.335-39, quoted by A. F. Kuen, *I will build my church*, p.109.

effacement when he does not think of himself as invested with special privileges ([Acts 10:26](#), [1 Peter 1:1](#)) but stands equally with others as a “fellow elder” ([1 Peter 4:1](#)).

Undoubtedly Peter did have primacy of a sort in the early church. He was the first to lead Jews into the Kingdom on the day of Pentecost ([Acts 2](#)), and Gentiles not long afterward ([Acts 10](#)). He was [p. 15](#) singled out by Christ for strategic pastoral ministry ([Luke 22:31ff](#)) and confirmed in this after the resurrection ([John 21:15ff](#)). His leadership in the Jerusalem Council ([Acts 15](#)), and in the churches of Asia Minor (1 Peter) is clear. But any primacy for the Roman Church and its bishop as successors to Peter cannot be found in our passage. Jesus is speaking here about the foundation of the Church, and in the nature of things that cannot be repeated.

The common Protestant reaction to this view appealing to the distinction between *petros* and *petra* is that the Rock is not Peter but the confession which Peter made or the truth revealed to him.

While this satisfies the Protestant desire to refute the Roman Catholic claim and to have a propositional basis for the Church it depends too heavily on the linguistic subtleties and seems motivated by dogmatic presuppositions. Both Catholics and Protestants alike have been able to find in this passage what each wanted to find.

We cannot but admit that Jesus was referring to the person of Peter himself. Jesus builds his Church on a man, not on stones or dogmas, but on human beings. Indeed He builds His Church on a new man, a Simon, who on an earlier occasion had been renamed with a name designed to fill him with hope as he followed his new Master. Further, Jesus builds His Church on the man who as a result of following Jesus is open to the revelation of God in Christ, who now confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, and whose life is now integrated to God through Christ. This is the kind of man who very soon becomes a person to be reckoned with, to whom others naturally turn, a man who though by nature impetuous and unstable, is now as good as his new name. On such a man the next stones in the Church can now be placed.

A Rabbinic parable throws further light on Peter as the Rock. It likens God to a king who wanted to build a house but could find no sure foundation, so he dug down deeply till he found rock. “So” says the parable, “when God saw Abraham who was to arise, He said, ‘Now I have found a rock on which to build and establish the world’ ”.⁶ Thus [Isaiah 51:1](#) calls on Israel to look to the rock (Abraham) whence they were hewn. It is more than likely that Jesus had some such thought of Israel’s foundation rock in mind when He spoke to Peter, and said to him in effect “Just as Abraham was the foundation rock of the Old Israel, so you Peter, the man to whom my Father has revealed the truth, will be the foundation of the new Israel”. [p. 16](#)

But why this one man Peter? In what way is he different from other like confessors? We have already seen that the argument for the primacy of Peter cannot be sustained on Biblical grounds. Peter is not here being given status in the Church. It is rather a question of priority. In order of time Peter is the first stone of the new church structure; other similar stones will be placed on him as the church in time rises and grows. Spokesman here, as often for the twelve disciples, Peter appears as the representative disciple on which Christ builds his Church. Thus Paul can speak of all the apostles including Peter as the foundation of the Church ([Eph. 2:20](#)) and, with a change of metaphor, of James and John along with Peter as pillars of the Church ([Gal. 2:9](#)). Peter the Rock then is the kind of man on whom Jesus builds His Church. There are other rocks on which the Church is built, impetuous, vascillating, denying like Peter maybe, but men with hearts open to God, men confessing the Christ, men whose characters become like their names because their lives

⁶ G. F. Moore: *Judaism*, vol. 1, p.538.

are integrated in Christ. In such men God is at work. In such men the power of the Church is to be found. Power in the Church begins here. The great need of today is for men and women of this order. The Church of Jesus Christ cannot have power unless it is built on rocks and supported by pillars like this.

2) *The ecclesia*. Our explanation of Peter the rock has already led us into the second line of this triad—"on this rock I will build my Church" (v.18). But there is more to notice.

The term *ecclesia*, as already noted, occurs only here and in [Matt. 18:18](#) in all four Gospels. This has caused some to see it in these passages as a reading back into the teaching of Jesus the ecclesiology of the later institutional Church.⁷ But to treat Jesus' words here in this way as unauthentic is not necessary once we grasp the significance of the word *ecclesia* for Matthew's readers.

A. H. McNeile has pointed out that whether Jesus had used either of the Aramaic words *Qahal* meaning the body of Israel assembled as a congregation or *kenishta* meaning a synagogue, "for Matthew's Greek readers *ecclesia* was the only possible word to express the Christian body as distinct from Jews".⁸ That Jesus intended it to be distinct from Israel is seen in His calling it "My Church." Though the Church is co-terminous with the Old Testament body of Israel whom God had called to Himself, it was nevertheless to be *a new body*, called by Christ, and *His* possession. This particular point in Jesus' life [p. 17](#) just at the end of His Galilean ministry and on the point of His going to Jerusalem to be killed, He chose as the fitting time to prepare His disciples to become that new body. The teaching that immediately followed concerning the suffering Messiah and the cost of discipleship begins to outline that newness.

The *intimate bond* between Jesus and His Church is also bound up in this term *ecclesia*. Because Jesus had asked the initial question about the Son of man (see [Matt. 16:13](#)), the [Daniel 7](#) association of the Son of Man with the saints of the Most High must have been in His mind. There the Son of Man is no mere individual but the representative of the Saints of the Most High who share rule in the Kingdom with Him. "Just as the poimen (shepherd) is no real shepherd, without the poimnion (flock), so the Christos is no true Christ without the *ecclesia*".⁹ Here surely is the germ of Jesus' later teaching about the Vine and the branches ([John 15](#)) and Paul's teaching about the Church as the Body of Christ ([1 Cor. 12:12ff](#), [Eph. 5:27ff](#)). Jesus' Messiahship implies the Church. They belong together.

The *security of the Church* is found in the fact that it is Jesus who will build His Church. "I will build *my* Church." Built on the rock of people who confess like Peter gives it one kind of security. But its ultimate security is in the will of Christ Himself. Because He wills to build His Church, the Church is not any kind of human institution, but a divine creation, rooted in the will of God, growing up under the direction of Christ Himself.

Thus in explaining what is to be built on the rock Jesus speaks of the Church as a powerful community. The Church is to be the new people of God grouped around the Messiah who suffers, dies, and rises again. It is to share with Him His rule in the everlasting Kingdom of God, and it is to grow up at the will of and under the direction of Christ, the Son of God.

3) *Powers of death*. In the third line of this triad (v.18), Jesus says "the powers of death shall not prevail against it." Here is more about power.

"Powers of death" is the R.S.V. translation of *pulai hadou* or "gates of Hades." Hades was the common term in the ancient world for the place of departed spirits, the

⁷ S. David Hill, *op. cit.* p.259.

⁸ A. H. McNeile *Gospel according to St. Matthew* p.241.

⁹ Gloege, cited in K. P. Schmidt, TNTW, vol. 3. p.518ff.

underworld, similar to the *Sheol* of the Old Testament. In terms of ancient oriental and biblical cosmology the underworld was viewed as a place in the hollow earth, a land, a city, a fortress or a prison with strong gates which prevented the escape of its occupants or barred access to any invaders. The gates of [p. 18](#) Hades came to be a synonym for Hades itself or more particularly as in later Judaism a vivid term to describe the strength and security of the underworld.¹⁰ R.S.V. “powers of death” conveys that idea. But since Hades in New Testament times often meant the realm of the ungodly dead¹¹ “powers of evil” is also a possible translation.

Katishuo (R.S.V. “shall not prevail against”) can be used in a passive sense meaning “be a match for”, so that Jesus’ meaning is that the powers of death shall not be able to stand up against the Church. This presents the Church as an attacking force against death or evil, a picture not unknown in the New Testament¹² and in Christian hymnology.¹³ But if we hold to Jeremias’ contention that *katishuo* followed by the genitive in Jewish Greek is always used in an active sense meaning “to vanquish, overpower” then the gates of Hades in Jesus’ words are the aggressors against the Church.¹⁴ Death in its attack against the Church shall have no power over it.

This view is strengthened when we understand the significance in ancient cosmology of the sacred rock which topped the hollow mountain inside the earth. The double function of this rock was to support the sanctuary built on it and to close off to the world the underworld with its dead in the inside of the mountain. This mountain is also the source of the primal flood which threatens to burst in upon the world, but which is sealed off only by the rock securely placed on top with the sanctuary above it.¹⁵ The powers of death therefore are seen to be the attackers against the rock and the Church built upon it. But the Church, possessed and built by Christ who, so He now reveals to His disciples, will soon go to the realm of the dead and return victorious ([v. 21](#)), is equipped with all the power it needs to resist such an attack.¹⁶ The promise of Jesus to Peter therefore means that the community that trusts in Him is secure from the powers of death and from the evil which those powers exert.

A little reflection on current social injustices, religious persecutions and ruthless oppression leads us inevitably back to the powers of death. For the threat of death is constantly used by the oppressor against the oppressed. “Give us what we demand or we will kill you” [p. 19](#) is his weapon of attack. And the poor man yields, because death has the last most powerful word. But linked to a risen victorious Lord, a new power structure has arisen in the community, the Church over which the powers of death have no power. This small community, powerless in the eyes of the world, suddenly stands up against death with a new confidence. Death no longer cowers them into fear and submission. Should some of their number die in the conflict, their death is to the community but a victory and others are quick to take their place. The oppressor is unnerved for he does not know how to deal with a people who have conquered his ultimate weapon. He desists from evil, and

¹⁰ O.T. has several such references. [Job 17:16, 28:17, Ps. 9:13, 107:18, Is. 38:10.](#)

¹¹ See J. Jeremias TNTW vol. 1, p.147, article *Hades* and Vol. V1, p.926, article *Pute*.

¹² See [2 Cor. 10:4, Eph. 6:10ff.](#)

¹³ “Onward Christian soldiers ...”

¹⁴ J. Jeremias, TNTW, vol. V1, p.927, article *Pute*.

¹⁵ J. Jeremias, *op. cit.* p.96, article *petra*.

¹⁶ See also [1 Peter 3:19.](#)

justice and righteousness begin to appear. So long as the Church maintains its faith in Christ the Son of the living God, the life of its deathless Lord makes it a power structure against which man's last most terrifying weapon has no effect.¹⁷

THE AUTHORITY (V.19)

Handing over the keys was in Biblical and later Jewish usage, as in our own, a sign of full authorisation. We are thus presented in this verse with the authority of the keys put into the hands of the man on whom the Church is being built. Again we look for the meaning of the first line of the triad and then its explanation in the two lines following.

1) *The keys.* [Rev. 1:18](#) speaks of Jesus having the keys of Death and Hades, meaning most probably, not the keys TO the place of the dead (objective genitive) but the keys OF death (subjective genitive), that is the keys which the personified Death and Hades carry as lords of the underworld. By virtue of His death and resurrection in which the decisive battle between Jesus and these lords has now taken place, these keys are now in the hands of Jesus Himself. It is attractive to think that these are the keys which Jesus gives to Peter for in the previous verse Jesus has been speaking of the gates of Hades. And tradition has firmly allowed the keys to be in Peter's hands in the age-old image of him as the porter at the gates of heaven. But we must note that Jesus spoke here not of the keys of heaven, but of the keys of the *Kingdom* of heaven. So if we see Peter as the porter we imply an identity between heaven and the Kingdom of heaven which we find nowhere in the Gospels.

A second line of interpretation sees the keys as the key of David [p. 20](#) which according to [Rev. 3:7](#) the risen Christ possesses. The imagery of this verse goes back to [Isaiah 22:22](#) where "the key of the house of David", that is, King David's palace in Jerusalem, is given to Eliakim with unlimited authority over the royal household. Christ, the representative of the Davidic line ([Rev. 22:16](#)) is thus seen to possess the key to God's eternal palace opening and shutting where no man has any authority. If this is the kind of authority given to Peter alone so that like a Grand Vizier, he opens and shuts the kingdom of heaven, then the history of the early church denies it. For in the early church Peter's leadership is shared. But this kind of authority is indeed given to the apostles as the following two lines of the triad will explain.

A third line of interpretation is also worth considering. While there is no known non-Christian instance of the term "keys of the Kingdom of heaven",¹⁸ nor does the term appear anywhere else in the New Testament, there is in [Matt. 23:13](#) a presupposition of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. For in this passage Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of shutting the Kingdom of heaven against men neither going in themselves, nor allowing others to enter. And in what appears to be a parallel passage in [Luke 11:52](#), Jesus accuses lawyers of taking away the key of knowledge, not entering themselves, and hindering others who would enter. There was a Rabbinic saying: "He who has knowledge of the law without reverence to God, is like a treasurer who has been given the inner key, but not the outer key. How can he enter?" So knowledge of the Torah was considered to be possession of the key. The teaching of the scribes was the exercise of the key, and since it was said of the scribe "When he has opened, no one shuts," the decisions of the scribes were of absolute validity.¹⁹

¹⁷ See V. Mangalwadi TRACI Journal No. 17, p.19ff; No. 18, pp.60, 61; No. 19, p.32 for examples of this in U.P., India, and a helpful discussion of this theme in relation to social justice.

¹⁸ J. Jeremias TNTW, vol. 111, pp.744ff. Article *Kleis*

¹⁹ J. Jeremias, *op cit.* p.747, footnote 42.

It appears therefore that Jesus has in mind the claim of the theologians of the day to have the power of the keys by virtue of their knowledge of Scripture. Jesus accuses them of not using this power and of so debarring people from the Kingdom of God. If this were the background to Jesus' thought in giving the keys to Peter, then Peter is being entrusted with the authority to declare the will of God as it is revealed in Scripture, through his teaching, preaching and judging. If we bear in mind Bultmann's observation that knowledge in the Septuagint is "a spiritual possess on resting on revelation"²⁰ then the key now given to Peter is the authority to proclaim the Word of God on the basis of the revelation about Christ which he has received for [p. 21](#) the purpose of admitting people into the Kingdom of heaven. Not long after this, Peter was exercising this authority among Jews ([Acts 2](#)) and Gentiles ([Acts 10](#)). Peter was the first to use this key, but not the only one. The authority for ministry in the new household of God lies here and is used whenever enlightened believers by proclaiming the Biblical truth about Christ open to others the door of revelation through which they themselves have passed.

2) *Binding and loosing*([19b](#), c) The change from "Kingdom of heaven" to "heaven" in these two lines is noteworthy because "heaven" meaning God's dwelling place here stands, as it often does, for God Himself. Binding and loosing in Rabbinic language meant forbidding and allowing practical matters of conduct. It would appear therefore that Jesus tells Peter that he will exercise a legislative authority adjudicating on matters of conduct with such absolute authority as God will recognise in heaven. Roman Catholic interpretation has followed this line of thought.

Yet in [Matt. 18:18](#) the identical words are spoken by Jesus to all the disciples and in [John 20:23](#) similar words to all the disciples, so any thought of Peter's primacy must be ruled out. In these two verses all the apostles shared Peter's authority, and we may infer as we have seen in every line of these triads so far that what is said to Peter is true of all the members of the new community. The authority is given to the Church.

It is true that in [Matt. 18:18](#) the application of this authority concerns discipline within the Church. But the issue in [John 20:23](#) is broader, concerning the forgiveness and retention of sins. If we keep in mind the analogy of the scribes who on the basis of their expert knowledge of the oral tradition declared some things forbidden (bound) and other things permitted (loosed), Peter is now being told that in the coming Kingdom he would be like a scribe.

If we also keep in mind that these two lines in this triad explain the first line, this binding and loosing concerns not juridical decisions on fine matters of the law in the manner of the scribes, but the weightier matters of grace, mercy and judgment that affect people's admission into and exclusion from the Kingdom of God. This is what it means to use the keys.

On the basis of his knowledge of the Scriptures, of Jesus and of His teaching, Peter was to proclaim the Gospel. In doing so he would have authority to forgive or retain sins and to pronounce on the admission or exclusion of people from the Kingdom of God. Such authority was to be not Peter's alone, but that of the whole Church ([Matt. 18:18](#), [John 20:23](#)), a church that acts in the Spirit ([John 20:23](#)) [p. 22](#) and through the Word. Peter exercised this authority through preaching in [Acts 2](#) and [10](#) and through legislative decision along with the Church at the Jerusalem Council ([Acts 15](#)). Such authority has continued to be exercised wherever men of Peter's faith have characterized the Church ever since.

In this study we have looked at three basic factors of the Church. Each has great relevance to the church in India today.

²⁰ Bultmann: TNTW, vol 1, p.699, article *giuosko*.

1) The Church of Jesus Christ is made up of men and women who have the same faith as Peter's faith. Wherever there are people to whom God has personally revealed Jesus Christ as the Son of the living God and who integrate their lives around Him, there is the Church. Apart from this reality the Church has no foundation. Any superstructure not built on this foundation is a facade. We should not be afraid therefore if some of the current superstructures fall, nor should we waste our efforts seeking to prop them up—administrative programmes, forms of worship, properties, institutions and the like. What is of paramount importance is people who believe and confess Jesus the King. For the emergence and upbuilding of such a people our energies are to be directed.

2) The Church is a power structure against which the ultimate weapon of men and the devil has no power. In days when the Church is increasingly being told to prepare for persecution, she needs to learn *now* that because she is the Church of the risen deathless Lord, she has nothing to fear. She can stand up against all the powers of evil. She will suffer and pour out his (her) soul unto death, "yet will still stand up with boldness that will startle many nations, and kings shall shut their mouths because of him (her)" ([Isaiah 52:15](#)). There is talk today of a theology of persecution. Surely this is it. Because the Church is the community of the risen Lord, she is invincible before men's greatest power. We must preach more on these lines.

3) The Church so constituted and so emboldened has the keys of the Kingdom. With these she proclaims the Gospel of God's truth and admits into the Kingdom of God those who will believe and receive the message of the Kingdom. Not to be identified wholly with the Kingdom, the Church is nevertheless part of the Kingdom, the sign of its presence in the world and the instrument of its increase. The divine order is first the Kingdom, then the Church, then the world—not the kingdom-world-Church. The Kingdom comes with Christ, into the world. Those who enter the Kingdom constitute the Church. The Kingdom creates the Church and the Church preaches the Kingdom to the world.

Rev. Ian S. Kemp lectures in New Testament and directs the Extension Education Department at Union Biblical Seminary, Yavatmal, India. **p. 23**

Concrete Alternatives to the Historical-Critical Method

Gerhard Maier

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Dr. D. A. Carson in an article "Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends" published in ERT April 1981 discusses the Maier/Stuhlmacher debate on the historical-critical method. Dr. Maier has outlined his position in The End of the Historical-Critical Method (ET St. Louis: Concordia 1977). In this article Dr. Maier takes the debate a stage further.