



## What Are the Keys of the Kingdom?



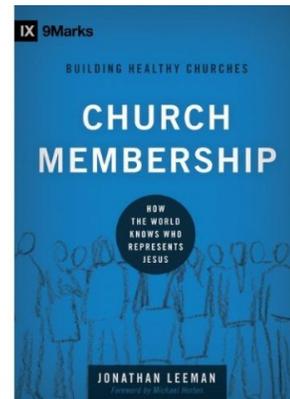
By [Jonathan Leeman](#) | 2.8.2012 Like 11

[Yesterday](#) I promised to offer my interpretation of Jesus' keys of the kingdom passages in Matthew 16 and 18. The following excerpt comes from [Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus](#), due out in April from Crossway. For a significantly longer discussion of the keys, see chapter 4 of [here](#).

Excerpt begin:

One day, Jesus warned the apostles not to trust the teaching of Israel's leaders ([Matt. 16:1-12](#)). Their term of office had expired, and they would be vacating the capitol building shortly, carrying the contents of their desks in boxes. Then he asked them who they thought he was. Peter, probably on behalf of all the apostles, answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus affirmed Peter's answer, saying that it had come from the "Father in heaven." Then he continued:

[And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.](#) ([Matt. 16:18-19](#))



This is the first of two times Jesus uses the word church. Here he is talking about the universal church: the assembly of all Christians from all ages who will gather at the end of history. Jesus will build this end-time assembly.

How will he build it? He will build it "on this rock." What rock? Theologians have long debated whether the rock is Peter or Peter's confession. In fact, I think you have to say both. Theologian Edmund Clowney writes, "The confession cannot be separated from Peter, neither can Peter be separated from his confession" (*The Church*, 40). Jesus will build his church not on words, and not on people, but on people who believe the right gospel words (like the Word himself who became flesh). Jesus will build the church on *confessors*.

Jesus then gave Peter and the apostles the keys of the kingdom, which gave Peter the authority to do what Jesus had just done with him: to act as God's official representative on earth for affirming true gospel confessions and confessors.

The interactions between heaven and earth in this passage are amazing to consider. Peter rightly confessed who Jesus was, and Jesus said that Peter's right answer came from the Father *in heaven*. Though Jesus was on *earth*, he spoke on behalf of *heaven*. Then, in the very next breath, he authorized Peter to do the same thing—to represent what's bound and loosed in *heaven* by binding and loosing on *earth*!

Bible scholars sometimes talk about “binding and loosing” as a judicial or rabbinic activity. For instance, a rabbi might decide whether or not some law applied to a particular person in a certain set of circumstances. Jesus essentially gave the apostles this kind of authority: the authority to stand in front of a confessor, to consider his or her confession, to consider his or her life, and to announce an official judgment on heaven’s behalf. Is that the right confession? Is that a true confessor? In other words...

**The apostles had heaven’s authority for declaring who on earth is a kingdom citizen and therefore represents heaven.**

I’m not saying that Jesus established a “church membership program” in Matthew 16, but he indisputably established the church (which *is* its members), and he gave it the authority of the keys to continue building itself—effectively the authority to receive and dismiss members. The authority of the keys is the authority to assess a person’s gospel words and deeds and to render a judgment.

Two chapters later, where Jesus uses the word church for the second and last time, we see those keys put into action:

*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. (Matt. 18:15-20)*

The passage begins with the picture of a brother sinning, and his sin is out of step with his confession of faith. Jesus then recommends four rounds of confrontation. In round 1, the confrontation is kept private. If the sinner repents, his confession of faith regains its credibility and the confrontation stops. His life matches his confession. He is, once more, representing Jesus rightly.

In round 2, the confrontation expands to include two or three witness, as in an Old Testament judicial setting.

In round 3, the whole church or assembly becomes involved.

If the sinner still does not repent, round 4 ensues, which involves removing the individual from the covenant community—treating him like an outsider. Sometimes this is called “church discipline” or “excommunication.”

Jesus then invokes the keys of the kingdom again: whatever the church binds on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever the church looses on earth will be loosed in heaven. And Jesus is not addressing the apostles or the universal church here. He’s envisioning a local church. The local church, it appears, has been given the apostolic keys of the kingdom. As a result...

**The local church has heaven’s authority for declaring who on earth is a kingdom citizen and therefore represents heaven.**

Jesus has authorized the local church to stand in front of a confessor, to consider the confessor’s confession, to consider his or her life, and to announce an official judgment on heaven’s behalf. Is that the right confession? Is this a true confessor? It’s just like Jesus did with Peter. And it will do these things with the ordinances which are established in Matthew 26 and Matthew 28: the Lord’s Supper and baptism.

Matthew 18, which is filled with even more earth and heaven talk than Matthew 16, presents a crystal clear picture of this authority in the context of church discipline. But the ability to remove someone from membership presupposes an overarching authority to assess a person's gospel words and deeds and to render a judgment. This authority begins the moment a person shows up in the church building doors claiming, like Peter did, that Jesus is the Christ.

The state's representative authority, we said in chapter one, is seen most clearly in its ability to end a person's life. Likewise, the church's representative authority in Christ's kingdom is seen most clearly in its ability to remove a person from citizenship in Christ's kingdom. In both cases, the full extent of institutional authority is indicated by the power to decisively end a person's membership, through death in one case and excommunication in the other.

Yet it's the same authority which is exercised when "two or three come together in [Jesus'] name" ([Matt. 18:20](#)) and baptize a person "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" ([Matt. 28:19](#)), licensing the person as an official, card-carrying disciple. No, it's not an absolute authority, any more than the state is. But Christ does mean for Christians to submit to the oversight of local churches by virtue of their citizenship in his kingdom.

Will the local church exercise the keys perfectly? No. It will make mistakes just like every other authority established by Jesus makes mistakes. As such, the local church will be an imperfect representation of Christ's end-time gathering. But the fact that it makes mistakes, just like presidents and parents do, does not mean it's without an authoritative mandate.

Does all this mean that what a local church does on earth actually changes a person's status in heaven? No, the church's job is like an ambassador's or an embassy's. Remember what I said about visiting the U.S. Embassy in Brussels when my passport expired. The embassy didn't make me a citizen, it formally affirmed it in a way I could not myself. So with a local church.

Excerpt end. Used by permission. Thank you to Crossway.

---

Copyright © 2012 9Marks