

# **The Truth About Binding and Loosing**

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*This article is presented to dispel the myth of the quasi-spiritual use of binding and loosing.*

## **Introduction**

There are three passages in the New Testament which give the church some amazing authority. These are Matthew 16:19, Matthew 18:18, and John 20:23. Jesus gave the church authority to “bind” and “loose,” and to “remit” and “retain” sin. What exactly does this binding and loosing have to do with? What does it mean to be bound or to be loosed? Does the initiative to bind or loose, to remit or retain sin begin with men, or God? Does the church have the power to initiate action or decisions on earth that heaven is obliged to ratify, sanction, or confirm, or is the church obliged to carry out the decisions previously made by God in heaven? In short, who decides what is bound or loosed, God or men?

Historically, these passages have been viewed in various ways. Tertullian, Cyprian, and Origen viewed the binding and loosing as the authority of the church to excommunicate individuals from or reinstate individuals to fellowship with the church. They saw it as having to do with disciplinary action. Sacramentalists viewed the binding and loosing as the authority of the church to either administer the sacraments to professing believers or withhold from them the sacraments (baptism, communion, last rites, etc.). Because Sacramentalists view the sacraments as holding the power to transfer the grace of God, the administration of the sacraments either grants them forgiveness of sins or bars them from forgiveness. Martin Luther believed that binding and loosing had to do with the church’s authority to forgive or retain sins. Where he and the Catholic church disagreed was on his belief that all Christians had the authority to bind and loose invested in them as believers. Catholics (who are Sacramentalists) held that only priests and bishops had the authority because only they could administer the sacraments.

Presently, there are two predominant views other than the one I will espouse in

this paper. The first interprets binding and loosing as having to do with the church's authority to legislate matters not specifically addressed in Scripture. This view sees the "whatsoever" of Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 as referring to rules or laws. The logical outcome of this view destroys the Scriptures as the final rule for the Christian life, because the church can legislate other mandates not found in the Bible which must be obeyed in order for one to be in right standing with God. Proclamations made by the collective church become as binding and authoritative for the church as the Word of God itself. It is claimed that what the collective church decides is law on earth, Christ also makes law in heaven. To disobey the decisions, then, would be to disobey Christ, and puts the believer in the position of an unbeliever.

The second view is prevalent among the "word of faith" and charismatic movements. These typically view binding and loosing as having to do with spiritual warfare. As with the above view, "whatsoever" is typically viewed as something other than people. Undesirable circumstances, bad attitudes, works of the flesh, evil spirits, and financial difficulties are usually bound, while desirable circumstances, good attitudes, the fruit of the spirit, angels, and wealth is loosed.

### **Matthew 16:19**

The context of this verse must be examined if the meaning of binding and loosing is to be discovered. In verses 13-15 Jesus inquired of His disciples concerning other's opinions as they pertained to His identity. After a few responses Jesus inquired of the disciples who they thought He was. Simon Peter answered saying, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). Jesus responded to Peter's confession by promising him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus continued to say, "And whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (v. 16:19). The authority to bind and loose was inextricably joined with the possession of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Those keys belonged to the kingdom and allowed entrance into it just as keys belong to a door and allow one to unlock it, thereby allowing entrance into the particular locale. Peter received the keys by believing and confessing Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God. "Indeed, the confession of Jesus as the Messiah is the key to entrance into the kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

The question arises, then, as to whether this authority was given solely to Peter, or if it is given to the corporate church. As has just been pointed out, the keys of the kingdom were given to Peter based upon his confession of Jesus to be the Christ. With the keys, Peter then possessed the authority to bind and loose. It would seem likely that all those who confess Jesus to be the Son of God would also be given

the same authority since it was predicated on and derivative from the confession of Jesus to be the Son of God. In this instance Peter was the only one given the authority because he was the only one who made the confession.

The apparent limitation is expanded in Matthew 18:15-20 where Jesus again gives the authority to bind and loose as it pertains to church discipline. Here Jesus gave this authority to the corporate church, not just Peter, or any other individual. The authority to bind and loose, then, is given to individual believers as well as the corporate church, based upon their confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Probably the most crucial element of this passage pertains to *what* is to be bound or loosed. Much of the argument centers on the word “whatsoever.” It is translated from the Greek *ho*, being neuter in gender. Because of this some have been led to believe that the binding and loosing pertains to concepts, objects, or rules. Although the context in this passage does not demand that it refer to people, the context of Matthew 18:8 where the same Greek word appears in the same setting, definitely demands the meaning of people. The context refers to the disciplinary procedures of the church concerning sinning brothers. D.A. Carson adds some insight for the reason of the usage of the neuter form:

Greek often uses the neuter of people for classes or categories rather than for individuals. The context of v. 19 supports this; for the keys in the preceding clause speak of permission for entering the kingdom or being excluded from it, not rules of conduct under heaven’s rule.<sup>2</sup>

The words translated “bind” and “loose” are from the Greek *deo* and *lyo*, which are themselves translations of the Aramaic *asar* and *sera*. This was the Jewish formula for excommunication and reinstatement. With this historical meaning in mind, then, Peter was given the authority to bar entrance into, or allow entrance into the kingdom based upon one’s confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Peter did just that throughout his ministry. He allowed entrance into the kingdom to the 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost who believed his message (Acts 2:38-41), and Cornelius’ household because of their faith (Acts 10). He barred access into the kingdom to the Jewish leaders (Acts 3) and Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8) because of their unbelief and impure hearts.

The phrases “shall be bound in heaven” (*estai dedemenon*) and “shall be loosed in heaven” (*estai lelumenon*) are perfect passive participles in the Greek text. The fact that these verbs are passive in voice indicates that those who are indicated by *ho* are to receive the action, not participate in the action. As we shall see momentarily, it is God who delivers the action.

The English perfect tense cannot adequately convey the meaning of the Greek perfect. The way it is commonly translated in English versions gives the pseudo-appearance that the binding is future in reference. This is not the case. The Greek perfect tense views the action as being completed in the past, but with continuing effects, reaching into the present. A more correct translation, then, although awkward in the English, would be “is having been bound” and “is having been loosed.”

Whenever the Greek perfect tense is used, one must ask himself why the author chose its usage over the aorist tense, which is the most basic tense utilized to show what has happened in the past. Although the perfect tense also deals with action in the past, it goes beyond that by showing that the completed action still has effects continuing on into the future. In a sense then, the perfect utilizes both the past and present tenses simultaneously.

The Greek future verb meaning “he/she/it will be,” *estai*, immediately precedes both participles in question. Jesus’ point was that in the future (after the inauguration of the church at Pentecost), Peter would bind or loose in the present something that was already bound or loosed in the past, and continues to remain bound or loosed by God in heaven. The perfect was used instead of the aorist to present the event as one that has effects for the present (occurring when we bind or loose in the present) but was already settled in the past (God’s judgment to allow or bar one from His kingdom based upon their response to Him in faith).

Whatever was to be bound or loosed would not begin with Peter’s initiative or the initiative of any other, but with the initiative of heaven (heaven is a Jewish euphemism for God). The church is to carry out the decisions made by heaven. Heaven is not obliged to ratify the church’s decisions. Jesus was not giving Peter the authority to arbitrarily allow some people into the kingdom of heaven and prohibit others. Peter merely pronounced those “admitted” whom the Father had already admitted because of their faith in Jesus Christ, and pronounced “barred” those whom the Father had already barred because of their unbelief.

### **Matthew 18:18**

Matthew 18:18 has a similar meaning to that of Matthew 16:19, but the binding and loosing here has to do with the disciplinary action of a sinning brother, as the context of Matthew 18:15-17, 19-35 indicates. If the brother fails to repent after going through the correct preliminary procedures, the church is to excommunicate him from fellowship with the body of Christ, i.e. bind him. If the brother is repentant, the church is to reinstate him to fellowship with the church, i.e. loose him.

The same perfect passive participle is used in this passage as in Matthew 16:19, thus indicating that the church is only following the leading of Holy Spirit. They are excommunicating those whom the Father has already considered excommunicated and reinstating those whom the Father has already reinstated. Surely God will not consider an innocent party excommunicated just because they were excommunicated by the church. Neither will he reinstate an unrepentant believer just because the church has decided to reinstate him.

### **John 20:23**

John 20:23 is similar to the other two passages in its structure, differing only in that it speaks of “remitting and retaining” instead of “binding and loosing,” and the verbs in question are in the indicative mood rather than functioning participally. Forgiving sin is a divine prerogative of which man has no part (Psalm 130:3-4; Mark 2:5-12), so Jesus could not have meant here that we arbitrarily forgive the sins of some and not others. Jesus was giving the church the authority to pronounce forgiven those whom the Father had already forgiven in heaven as a response to their repentance, faith in Christ, and water baptism in Jesus’ name, and to retain the sins of those whom the Father has retained due to their lack of repentance and unbelief. Again, it is pronouncing in the present the divine initiative from heaven already settled in the past.

### **Conclusion**

The authority of the church is not to decide what to do and then have God back up their decision. The authority of the church is to carry out the will and decisions of God upon earth as they have been established in heaven. This is in perfect accord with the way Jesus instructed us to pray: “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

### **Footnotes**

1. Daniel L. Segraves, *Systematic Theology II* (Stockton: n.p., 1998), p. 30.
2. D.A. Carson, in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 372.

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