

Born from Above – a solution to the mystery of the New Birth

Part 5

In John 3, Jesus declared that to enter into the Kingdom, one needs to be born again. The New Birth is necessary to enter into the Kingdom of God. But although the conversation with Nicodemus provides some clues to what the New Birth actually is, it is never fully revealed. As has been argued, this was God's purpose. The Kingdom was not a reality yet, the Spirit was not given yet, and thus: the New Birth was not possible yet.

The main thrust of the argument in these articles is, that at the day of Pentecost, all that had changed. The Kingdom had become a reality in Heaven, since Jesus took the throne after His ascension. The Holy Spirit had been poured on the faithful followers of Jesus, meaning, that the Kingdom now also had become a reality on earth.

And Peter had been given the privilege to open up the Kingdom, because Jesus had given to Peter the keys of the Kingdom: this is recorded in Matthew 16:

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:18-19)

The Catholic interpretation of this verse is, that Jesus handed spiritual authority over the Church to Peter. Peter would, by this statement of Jesus become the leader of the Church. He would have the highest authority. He would make the rules. And this "rulemaking" is what is meant with "binding and loosing".

The website "Catholic Answers" puts it this way:

"Binding and loosing" is a phrase which comes from the rabbis. It refers to the authority to make decisions binding on the people of God. This authority includes interpreting and applying the Word of God and admitting people to and excommunicating them from the community of faith. For the Jews this meant the community of Israel. For Christians this means the Church."

We see here that binding and loosing is applied to several things at once:

- Authority to make decisions binding on the people of God.
- Interpreting and applying the Word of God.
- Admitting people to and excommunicating them from the community of faith, i.e. the Church.

We can see how such an interpretation has led to the Pope's authority over the Catholic Church. The authority of Peter as the leader of the Church was to be passed on to Peter's successor, and that ultimately led to the Catholic system with a Pope having the highest authority over the Church. The Pope can declare things "binding" to the people of God; the Pope is the ultimate authority in interpreting the Word of God; the Catholic Church has the power to admit people to or excommunicate people from their community of faith.

Now, the purpose of this book is not to prove that the Catholic interpretation of Jesus' words to Peter is wrong. In fact, I believe that most of what is presented in this book aligns quite well with Catholic theology. But as we can see from *Catholic Answers*, the interpretation of what Jesus did by giving Peter the keys of the Kingdom is very broad. "Peter having been given the keys of the Kingdom" is interpreted very broadly as Peter having been given a general position of authority over the church, ranging from "making binding decisions to the people of God" to "interpreting the Word of God" and to "having the power to excommunicate those in the church or forgiving sins of those in the church". The question which of course can be asked is, whether this very broad picture of Peter becoming the Head of the church is warranted from the Biblical text.

What I want to argue for is a more specific or narrow interpretation of Jesus's words to Peter. An interpretation that does not contradict Catholic theology on the primacy of Peter, but neither does it affirm it.

The "Keys of the Kingdom" might be connected with a statement in the prophet Isaiah, which talks about the "Key of the House of David". Catholic explanations always refer to that passage. Let us read what it says:

"In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, ²¹ and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your sash on him, and will commit your authority to his hand. And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. ²² And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." (Isaiah 22, 20-22)

Now there is not much known about this Eliakim. What we do know from scripture is, that he, here in Isaiah called the son of Hilkiah, became the royal steward or prime minister of King Hezekiah of Judah. According to Isaiah 22, this Eliakim replaced the current steward Shebna, who did not do a good job and is rebuked by God through the prophet Isaiah in this chapter. King Hezekiah was one of the few "good" kings in the history of the Davidic kingdom. As the prime minister of Hezekia, Eliakim basically was "running" the kingdom, he was the one who practically was governing the kingdom of Judah in those days.

More specifically, Isaiah interprets what "having the key of the house of David" means. He says that Eliakim had the power to "open" and "shut"; Eliakim could "open" the house of David, but also "close" the house of David. Now what does that mean? Naturally, it would mean that Eliakim could give people access to the king, as well as to the resources of the treasury and storehouse of the king. That is one of the roles of a steward: as the king's representative, a steward is in charge of the treasury of the king. He decides whom to give or whom to deny access to the riches of the kingdom.

Besides Matthew 16, there is another mention of "the key of David". It is in the letter to the church of Philadelphia in the book of Revelation:

"These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." (Revelation 3, 7-8)

Now it is clear from this passage, that it is Jesus who holds the key of David. And here also the “opening” and “shutting” is mentioned. Specifically, because of the good deeds of the Philadelphian church, Jesus promises them an “open door that no one can shut”. And then he goes on explaining what that means: Christ promises them that *they will be kept from the hour of trial that is going to come*. An “open door” here means a *specific blessing* to that church.

Jesus is the one who holds the key of David in the book of Revelation – and he is the one who gives access to the treasury and riches of God the Father, the King of the universe. In fact, Christ is the only way to the Father. He himself said that no one would come to the Father except through Him. Let us review those magnificent words of Jesus:

*“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”
(Matthew 14:6)*

Christ is the way – Only through faith in Christ as our Lord (“Christ” = “the anointed one”, i.e. the King) we have access to the Father.

Christ is the truth – He reveals to us the truth about the Father, and in general, the truth about the unseen spiritual realities.

Christ is the life – To be *in Christ* means to have life: the eternal life of the Spirit of God.

So to have access to the Father means to have access to eternal life. That is the purpose of every human being coming to Christ: to go from death to life; to come from darkness into the light; from condemnation to acceptance. And that is what the Kingdom of God is all about: the eternal, spiritual blessing of eternal life; the forgiveness of sins; God’s righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17-20). Access to the riches of the Kingdom is access to eternal life. To enter the Kingdom one must be born again. Everyone who has received that life, has become a child of God has entered the Kingdom, and has the promise of inheriting that Kingdom one day.

Back to the verse in Revelation 3, Jesus is still holding the keys that can open and shut. But that does not mean, that He would not be able to give those keys to somebody else. The gospelwriter Matthew records for us, that Jesus in fact handed those keys to Peter.

Now what about the the “binding and loosing”? What is that referring to? Here we actually have a New Testament verse using the same words, but with a precise interpretation of its meaning:

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:15-18)

It is clear from this context that “binding and loosing” has to do with forgiveness and excommunication. If a brother sins against you, and he does not listen to you, the church

should be told – and if that brother also refuses to listen to the church – the brother should be treated like a Gentile and tax collector – meaning, he should be treated like someone outside of church. From this evolved the doctrine of excommunication. A person, living in sin, could be excluded from the church (with the purpose of bringing him to repentance). If however, that brother is brought to repentance, he should be forgiven.

Binding and loosing should be understood as *retaining* and *forgiving* sin. Someone whose sin is retained, is still “bound” by it, still in “chains”. Someone whose sin is forgiven, is “loosed” from it, “set free” from it.

The same thing is expressed in John 20:

“After Our Lord breathed on his apostles, he said to them: “Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained”. (John 20:22).

Interestingly, in this verse, the reception of the Holy Spirit (which happened at the day of Pentecost) is tied here by Jesus to spiritual authority to *forgive* and *retain* sins. Only God can forgive sins. When Jesus was on earth, he also forgave people’s sins – doing what only God can do. What gave Jesus that authority? Undoubtedly that authority came from the Holy Spirit’s presence in Jesus. And in John 20 Jesus gave that same authority to his apostles – they would also be able to forgive sins – when they had received the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus – having the Holy Spirit – was able to forgive sins in God’s name, Christians – having the Holy Spirit – are able to forgive sins in Jesus’ name. Spiritual authority flows from God to Jesus through the Holy Spirit and from Jesus to his apostles through the Holy Spirit.

We have therefore good reasons to believe that when Jesus speaks about binding and loosing, in the context of giving the keys of the kingdom to Peter, that He also specifically means retaining and forgiving sins. If we read it that way, everything starts to make sense:

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

“Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” means “everybody, whose sins you forgive on earth, that will be a reality in heaven”. The forgiveness of sins of course is part of salvation – it is part of the New Birth – and it is through the New Birth people enter into The Kingdom of God.

So what Jesus actually is doing is giving Peter the authority to let people enter the Kingdom. Peter can use the keys given by Jesus to open up for the Kingdom and letting people into it. And we will read in Acts 2 how that can be accomplished.

Since Jesus had taken His throne in Heaven, Jesus was co-reigning with God the Father. The new King had left the earth and now reigned from Heaven. But that Kingdom was not to stay in Heaven, but it would also advance and conquer on earth. So Peter became a new Hilkiah, a new steward or prime minister of the King. Peter would be the one being able to open and shut – that is: to give or deny access to the Kingdom’s treasury – the spiritual riches of the Kingdom of God.

We know from the biblical account that 3000 believing Jews that day entered into the Kingdom. But the Kingdom would not only belong to the Jews. It would also include Gentiles. And so, Peter was not finished yet. He had a threefold task. With Peter, somehow, all things come three times. Three times Peter had denied Jesus, three times Jesus, after his resurrection, asked him if he love Him, three times Peter said “Yes, you know that I love you.” Three times Jesus said to him “Tend my flock.” And then, three times Peter was allowed to use the Keys of the Kingdom to open the Kingdom up for the world. Firstly, for the Jews at Pentecost. Secondly for the people of Samaria; and thirdly, for all the Gentiles.

We read in Acts that the apostle Philip preached the gospel for the Samaritans. They were baptized, but did not receive the Holy Spirit. We read in Acts 8, that Peter and John travel to Samaria, where they prayed with the Samaritans – and they also received the Spirit.

And then, thirdly, Peter was also allowed to open up the Kingdom for the Gentiles. That happened in a place named Joppa, where Cornelius, a Centurion, lived. Peter received a vision from God (three times!), of which the purpose was to show Peter, that salvation also was to be for Gentiles. When Peter traveled to Joppa, he was allowed to preach the gospel for Cornelius’ and his house – a gentile family. While he was still preaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles – God’s proof that the Kingdom also was for them. Gentiles also were to be included in the people of God. Forgiveness of sins was also for them; the doors of the blessings of salvation had also been opened to them.

Peter succesfully used the Keys, which Jesus gave to him, three distinct times: with the Jews, with the Samaritans, with the Gentiles. What a privilege for Peter, the one who had denied Christ three times! What a display of God’s mercy and grace in the life of this ordinary fisherman!

	Jesus’ words	Interpretation
General Assignment	<i>“I will give you the keys of the kingdom”</i>	You (Peter) have the power to “open up” (or “shut”) the Kingdom: to let people enter into the Kingdom (or to deny entrance into the Kingdom) which means: to give access to the Kingdom’s spiritual riches, such as salvation, which includes the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.
Specific Assignment	<i>“Whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven.”</i>	The sins of whom you (Peter) retain on earth, they will be retained in Heaven, the sins of whom you forgive on earth, they will be forgiven in Heaven.