

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 *Corinthians* 10:3-6)

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Email: tjtrinityfound@aol.com Website: www.trinityfoundation.org Telephone: 423.743.0199 Fax: 423.743.2005

Of Broken Hearts and Broken Shackles, Part 2

By Timothy F. Kauffman

Such an approach, however, removes Jesus' words from the Good Shepherd context in which He spoke them. In His first recorded public sermon, Jesus declared that he had been sent to preach the Good News, and thereby *to bind* up the brokenhearted and *to loose* the captives. Jesus stood in the synagogue, opened the scroll to *Isaiah* 61 and began to read (*Luke* 4:16-17). While Luke only provides a partial quotation, we need only turn to *Isaiah* to discover the fullness of Jesus' mission: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me *to bind* up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty [i.e., *to loose*] to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound" (*Isaiah* 61:1).

His preaching ministry was to be the fulfillment of the LORD's covenant promise to send a Good Shepherd to go after His lost sheep, to bind up their broken hearts and break their shackles: "I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up (שָׁבַע *hāḇaš*;) that which was broken...and they shall be safe in their land, and shall know that I am the LORD, when I have broken the bands of their yoke..." (*Ezekiel* 34:16,27).

The English "bind up" is simply "bind" in the Hebrew, being translated throughout the Old Testament according to its context. When preparing a donkey for travel, it is translated as "*to saddle*" (e.g., *Genesis* 22:3). When it refers to attaching something, it is translated as "*to bind*" (e.g., *Leviticus* 8:13). When it refers to clothing, it is "to wrap" or "to gird" (e.g., *Ezekiel* 16:10). To bind a

river is "to dam" it (*Job* 28:11), and to bind according to justice is "to govern" (*Job* 34:17). Similarly so with the Septuagint (e.g., *Numbers* 19:15, *1 Kings* 20:38, *Isaiah* 46:1) and the New Testament (e.g., *Matthew* 13:30, 21:2). But when medical services are rendered to the sick, it is translated "*to bind up*" (*Isaiah* 61:1, *Luke* 10:34). The interpretation is determined by context, and when a shepherd administers care to an injured sheep (as in *Ezekiel* 34:16), context demands that it be rendered "*to bind up*."

What has been historically overlooked in the translation of Jesus' words in *Matthew* 16:19 and *Matthew* 18:18 — "whatsoever thou shalt bind...and...loose" — is that Jesus said both in the context of an overarching Good Shepherd narrative. Because Jesus used the words "bind" and "loose" immediately following Peter's confession (*Matthew* 16:19), the words have historically been interpreted in that very limited context, assuming he was the first of the apostles to believe and therefore was both model believer and heir apparent of a plenary ecclesiastical power over access to the kingdom and forgiveness of sins. Because He also said this to the others immediately following His admonition to expel the unrepentant (*Matthew* 18:18), the words have historically been interpreted as an episcopal prerogative to administer church discipline and extend or withhold forgiveness.

However, as we shall here demonstrate, both occasions for His statement occurred in a Good Shepherd narrative governed by Jesus' application of *Isaiah* 61, *Ezekiel* 34, and *Zechariah* 11. In that context, His words ought rather be translated

“whatsoever thou shalt bind [up]...and...loose,” consistent with the covenant promise that the Good Shepherd would heal the brokenhearted and liberate the captives, and His commissioning of the apostles to do the same. When that context pertains, the verbs “to bind up” and “to loose” are not opposites, but are metaphors for preaching the Good Tidings. “To bind up” is to comfort the brokenhearted by the preaching of the Gospel. “To loose” is to free the captives thereby. The Father had sent Jesus to do both, and He would shortly commission His apostles to “bind up” and to “loose” as well.

The Shepherding Context of Matthew 16:19

Jesus’ answer to Peter occurs within the context of a Good Shepherd narrative that informs our understanding of “bind” and “loose.” That narrative began shortly after John the Baptist was killed (*Matthew* 14:1-12, *Mark* 6:14-29, *Luke* 9:7-9), concluding in Cæsarea Philippi after the miracles of multiplication (*Matthew* 16:13; *Mark* 8:27). When Jesus had first seen the crowds, He was “moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd” (*Mark* 6:34). As He journeyed through the countryside He sought after “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (*Matthew* 15:24) and restated His compassion at the beginning of the second miracle (*Matthew* 15:32, *Mark* 8:2). The unfolding narrative has Jesus seeking (*Mark* 6:56, 7:24, 31), healing (*Matthew* 15:30; *Mark* 6:56) and feeding His flock (*Matthew* 15:32; *Mark* 6:37) upon the mountains of Israel (*Matthew* 15:29), by the rivers (*Matthew* 16:13, *Mark* 8:27) and throughout the countryside (*Mark* 6:56). At the same time, He spoke very sternly to the scribes and Pharisees (*Matthew* 15:1-14; *Mark* 7:1-13), rebuking them for abusing the sheep and nullifying the Word of God.

Thus did Jesus follow the pattern of the promised Good Shepherd of *Ezekiel* 34, seeking, healing and feeding His sheep “upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country” (*Ezekiel* 34:12-16). But of “the fat and the strong” shepherds, “I will feed them with judgment” — a metaphor for a sharp rebuke (*Ezekiel* 34:16). The Loaves Narrative is clearly infused with the Good Shepherd covenant promises — “And I will set up one shepherd over them”

(*Ezekiel* 34:23) — and in particular His duty to “seek that which was lost”, to “feed my flock,” to “bind up that which was broken” (*Ezekiel* 34:15-16), to break their shackles (*Ezekiel* 34:27), and to rebuke the irresponsible shepherds (*Ezekiel* 34:16). All these things Jesus had been doing from the death of John the Baptist until Peter’s confession.

Because Jesus had been sent by His Father “to bind up the brokenhearted” and “to proclaim liberty to the captives” (*Isaiah* 61:1; *Luke* 4:18), and the apostles would soon be commissioned to do the same (*John* 20:21), we must take that into account when translating δῆσῃς (dēsēs, to bind) in *Matthew* 16:19: “...and whatsoever thou shalt bind [up] on earth shall be bound [up] in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The focus of the verse thus shifts naturally away from a “universal Petrine coercive jurisdiction,” and returns our attention to the obligation of the Good Shepherd to preach the Father’s Words to the sheep. As Jesus had been, so too would Peter be entrusted with a ministry of *binding up* the brokenhearted and *loosing* the captives through the preaching of the Good Tidings Jesus had heard from his Father.

The Shepherding Context of Matthew 18:18

We find the same context, and thus the same rendering, when Jesus addresses these same words to the apostles two chapters later. Because *Matthew* 18:18 follows immediately upon Jesus’ instructions on how to restore or dismiss the sinner, binding and loosing are typically taken here to refer to the authority to regulate church discipline and forgiveness of sins. That limited context has the unfortunate effect of confounding Jesus’ rebuke of their carnal ambition with His clear admonition *to be good shepherds*. Jesus’ words in *Matthew* 18:18 were in response to their question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (*Matthew* 18:1). The apostles were exhibiting the same carnal ambition as the scribes and Pharisees who “love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues” (*Matthew* 23:6; *Mark* 12:39; *Luke* 20:46). A correction was in order.

In response, Jesus directed four, finely tuned rebukes at their carnality, each elaborate and substantive, and all governed by a shepherding narrative that must inform our understanding of

“bind” and “loose.” For brevity, we shall list them simply as 1) do not offend the little ones (the Millstone Narrative), 2) remove the hand and eye that offend, 3) seek after the missing sheep, and 4) treat the unrepentant as heathen. These diverse and sundry admonitions appear to be largely unrelated to the apostles’ original question, and historically have been interpreted in isolation from it. When it is viewed through the lens of their question, however, each of these four rebukes is directed squarely at their ungodly desire to lord authority over the sheep.

1) The Millstone Narrative (Matthew 18:2-6)

In his first rebuke of the apostles, “Jesus called a little child unto him,” implored them to become as a child, and then issued a dire warning: “But whoso shall offend one of *these little ones* which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (*Matthew 18:6*). The admonition was not merely that each apostle must “humble himself as this little child” to be “greatest in the kingdom of heaven,” but also that he must resist the temptation to lord his authority over the sheep. They were to avoid such behavior, lest the little ones perish.

That Jesus had the Good Shepherd narrative in mind is evident by inspection. Only a few verses hence, He highlights the need to go after the missing sheep, and then returns to the obligation of the shepherd to seek after *these little ones*: “Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of *these little ones* should perish” (*Matthew 18:14*). This is resonant of the LORD’s criticism of the bad shepherd in *Zechariah 11:16*, who “shall not visit those that be cut off, *neither shall seek the young one.*” His first answer to their question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”, is that they must set aside carnal ambition and, as shepherds, guard the spiritual health of “these little ones.”

2) Pluck out the Eye that Offends (Matthew 18:7-11)

In a seemingly unrelated diversion, Jesus’ second rebuke is to cut off the hand or foot, or to pluck out the eye, that “offends thee” (*Matthew 18:8*). Given

the context, a more apt rendering is to remove that which “causes thee to offend.”¹ This passage is typically interpreted as guidance on self-control and personal sin, but such an interpretation isolates it from the fuller context of the question at hand—namely, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” This second admonition, too, is directly related to the care of the sheep, for it follows on his warning not to “offend one of these little ones” (*Matthew 18:6*). He warns against offending by hand, foot, and eye (*Matthew 18:7-9*), and then returns to His point: “Take heed that ye despise not one of *these little ones*” (*Matthew 18:10*). The warning was to guard against *offending the sheep*, a reading supported by both *Zechariah* and *Mark*.

First, Mark’s account of the Millstone Narrative has Jesus transitioning from warning not to offend the little ones — e.g., “it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck” (*Mark 9:42*) — directly to the severe measures against such offenses: “And if thy hand offend.... And if thy foot offend.... And if thine eye offend” (*Mark 9:43, 45, 47*). Clearly “the offenses” of *Mark 9:42* are offenses against “these little ones.” Second, the discipline of maiming an arm or plucking out an eye is a punishment explicitly reserved for the bad shepherd in *Zechariah 11*. Woe to him who offends, say both *Zechariah* and Jesus: “Woe to the idol shepherd that leaveth the flock! the sword shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye” (*Zechariah 11:17*). “...woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off.... And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out...” (*Matthew 18:7-9*).²

¹ At its core, the warning is about *causing another to sin* (*Matthew 18:7*), and thus, some literal translations so render it. E.g., “cause thee to offend” (*Geneva Bible, 1857*); “give thee cause of offence” (*Smith’s Literal Translation*).

² We observe that Jesus had used this same language in the Sermon on the Mount: “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out.... And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off...” (*Matthew 5:29-30*). Situated as it is after His instruction against lustful glances (*Matthew 5:28*), the application is typically limited to the self-control of one’s eyes and hands lest one stumble into sins of the flesh. But not a few commentaries wonder at the resulting *non sequitur*: “if thy right *hand* offend...” (*Matthew 5:30*) does not follow necessarily from “whosoever *looketh*” (*Matthew 5:28*). A closer look is merited. While the Sermon on the Mount surely impressed the crowds (*Matthew 7:28*), it was nevertheless

The shepherd's duty was to use his feet to go after the missing, eyes to search for them and hands to bind up their wounds. Amputation or removal was a fitting admonition to those who wanted to be greatest in the kingdom but lacked the requisite desire to search for the sheep and bind up their wounds. His words are hyperbolic, but nevertheless derivative of Zechariah's warning. Jesus' second answer to their question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" was that they should embrace their role as humble shepherds. They were to exercise self-discipline lest they "offend one of these little ones" by presuming to be the greatest, but not caring for the sheep of the fold.

3) *Seek the Missing Sheep (Matthew 18:12-14)*

Little commentary is needed here to illustrate Jesus' continued appeal to the Good Shepherd narrative in His third rebuke: "How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray..." (*Matthew 18:12*). It is nevertheless instructional to notice the parallels between what Jesus says here, what *Ezekiel 34* had prophesied, and what Jesus himself had done throughout the Loaves Narrative. Jesus saw the multitude "as sheep having no shepherd" (*Matthew 9:36*). He sought, healed, and fed them on the mountains, by the rivers and throughout the countryside. Seeking the sheep is the duty of the Good Shepherd (*Ezekiel 34:12*) and

addressed to His disciples (*Matthew 5:1-2*), on the very same point addressed in *Matthew 18:7-11*: "be[ing] called great in the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew 5:19*). Greatness would come by being better *teachers* and *examples* — in a word, *better shepherds* — than the scribes and the Pharisees had been in teaching the sheep of the Law and the Prophets (*Matthew 5:19-20*), a lesson not lost on Peter (*1 Peter 5:2-3*; *2 Peter 3:2*). With that introduction, Jesus proceeded to illustrate correct and incorrect understandings of the Law and the Prophets, drawing His teachings from both, with the shepherding narrative ever in mind (e.g., "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing..." (*Matthew 7:15*). The maiming of hand and eye (*Matthew 5:29-30*) is both a legal precept against they that harm another by malice (*Exodus 21:24*; *Deuteronomy 19:21*) and a prophetic precept against the bad shepherds who harm the sheep by dereliction (*Zechariah 11:17*). As the Sermon is a warning *against* stumbling into the error of the bad shepherds — the scribes and Pharisees (*Matthew 5:20*) — His reference here ought to be understood through the "bad shepherd" lens of *Zechariah 11:17* rather than as a commentary on "whosoever looketh on a woman to lust..."

would be required of his apostles. Jesus' answer to their question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" was that they must seek the sheep instead of misleading, neglecting, and lording authority over them, for it is not the Father's will "that one of these little ones should perish" (*Matthew 18:14*).

4) *Treat the Unrepentant as Heathen (Matthew 18:15-17)*

In yet another apparently unrelated diversion, His fourth rebuke admonishes the disciples to deal with sins privately if possible, but to elevate them to the attention of the church if not. On its face the passage is not immediately relevant to the question at hand — "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" — yet upon inspection, it derives from the Good Shepherd Narrative of *Ezekiel 34*. This is evident in several ways.

First, Luke's account of the Millstone Narrative has Jesus transitioning from the warning against offending "these little ones" — e.g. "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck" (*Luke 17:2*) — directly to the command to be reconciled with an offending brother: "Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him" (*Luke 17:3*). Clearly, dealing with trespasses fosters the well-being of "these little ones."

Second, the three New Testament Millstone Narratives deal with *maintaining peace* (*Mark 9:42-50*, *Luke 17:1-4*) and *removing the unrepentant* (*Matthew 18:6-19*) that the sheep may know that *the Shepherd is in their midst* (*Matthew 18:20*). These derive from the Good Shepherd narrative in which the Lord's objectives are *to comfort* and *to protect* the sheep by *His presence with them*: "...and they shall be safe in their land.... And they shall no more be a prey to the heathen.... Thus shall they know that I the LORD their God am with them" (*Ezekiel 34:27, 28, 30*).

Unsurprisingly, when viewed together, the Millstone Narratives aggregate these three constructs. They are derived from Ezekiel's Good Shepherd motif.

"Let him be unto thee as an heathen" (Matthew 18:17)

Jesus' direction on how to deal with a sinning brother was not chiefly to establish a mechanism for reconciliation and excommunication (though it certainly does). Rather, the chief objective was to illustrate the shepherd's duty to foster peace among the brethren — "if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother" — and barring that, to remove the oppressive and unrepentant upon the testimony of two or three witnesses: "if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." That these two objectives are in view is clearly demonstrated by the illuminating parable (*Matthew* 18:23-25) that accompanies Jesus' instructions. The king forgave an extraordinary debt (*Matthew* 18:27), but the forgiven servant was merciless regarding a much smaller transgression (*Matthew* 18:30). The first recourse should have been to have "compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee" (*Matthew* 18:33). Failing that, a plurality of witnesses — "his fellow servants" — reported what had happened, and the unforgiving servant was excommunicated on their testimony (*Matthew* 18:34). The immediate objective is reconciliation and peace among the sheep. Barring that, the removal of the oppressor becomes paramount, and the offender is excommunicated and treated as a heathen (*Matthew* 18:17), removing "the shame of the heathen" so that the sheep be "no more be a prey to the heathen" (*Ezekiel* 34:28-29, *Matthew* 18:17, 34). It is notable as well that the victim in the story would need his wounds treated — for his oppressor "took him by the throat" (*Matthew* 18:28) — and his shackles broken — for his oppressor "cast him into prison" (*Matthew* 18:30). With the sheep now properly cared for, "thus shall they know that I the LORD their God am with them," the Lord says (*Ezekiel* 34:30), "for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (*Matthew* 18:20). These are the words of a Good Shepherd, the prevailing narrative both in *Ezekiel* 34 and in *Matthew* 18:23-25, the very parable Christ gave to illuminate his meaning in *Matthew* 18:15-17. The aim of the Millstone Narrative of *Matthew* 18 is peace among sheep, removal of the "heathen" oppressor, and the comforting knowledge of the presence of the Good Shepherd in their midst.

"Have peace one with another" (Mark 9:50)

While Matthew's account emphasizes the removal of the offender, Mark and Luke focus rather on maintaining peace. Luke dwells solely on that theme: "if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day...forgive him" (*Luke* 17:3-4). Mark, on the other hand insists on removal of the offense in order to maintain peace within the body: "And if thy hand.... And...thy foot.... And...thine eye offend.... For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another" (*Mark* 9:42-50).

This cryptic command to "have salt in yourselves" derives from the ancient "covenant of salt" (*Leviticus* 2:13; *Numbers* 18:19) as a Davidic (*2 Chronicles* 13:5) covenant of peace that the sheep may "have one shepherd" and dwell in safety (*Ezekiel* 34:23-25; 37:24-26).

We therefore observe that when the Millstone Narratives are understood together, it is evident that all three derive from the Good Shepherd narrative of *Ezekiel* 34 and have the well-being of the sheep in mind — establishing peace through repentance and forgiveness within, and keeping the "evil beasts" and "heathen" safely without — all while binding up their wounds, loosing their shackles and assuring the flock of the presence of their Good Shepherd. These are the three main objectives of the Good Shepherd Narrative of *Ezekiel* 34. The Millstone Narratives reflect that, including the one in *Matthew* 18.

Keeping in mind therefore that Jesus' four admonitions in *Matthew* 18 are thus imbued with the Good Shepherd narratives of *Ezekiel* 34 and *Zechariah* 11, we conclude that the word "bind" in *Matthew* 18:18, too, has the care of the sheep in mind, and must be so understood: "...Whatsoever ye shall bind [up] on earth shall be bound [up] in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven...."

Binding up the wounded and loosing the captives is the duty of the Good Shepherd (*Ezekiel* 34:16,27), and his duty is fulfilled in the preaching

of the Good Tidings to them (*Isaiah* 61:1). The focus of *Matthew* 18:18 therefore shifts naturally away from a “universal Petrine coercive jurisdiction,” and returns our attention to the duty of a good shepherd to deliver the Father’s Words to the sheep. As Jesus had been, so too would the apostles be entrusted with a ministry of *binding up* the brokenhearted and *loosing* the captives through the preaching of the Good News Jesus had heard from his Father.

As with “upon this rock,” “the gates of hell shall not prevail,” and “the keys of the kingdom,” we conclude here also that “whatsoever thou shalt bind [up]...and...loose” was also spoken in the context of the preaching ministry Jesus had received from His Father. According to *Isaiah* 61:1, He was to preach the Good News that broken hearts may be mended, and prisoners loosed; or, as Ezekiel prophesied, to “bind up that which was broken” and to break “the bands of their yoke.” In both *Matthew* 16:19 to Peter, and in *Matthew* 18:18 to them all, “to bind” and “to loose” are better rendered “to bind up” and “to loose,” a reference to the Good Shepherd’s ministry to the sheep, and cannot under any circumstances be taken to refer to a “universal coercive jurisdiction.”

“Shall have been bound [up]...and...loosed...”

It is noteworthy that Jesus had been speaking in the past perfect tense in *Matthew* 16:19 and *Matthew* 18:18, as in “whatsoever thou shalt bind [up] on earth shall have been bound [up] in heaven...”. Because the binding up and loosing is tied to the Good Shepherd’s role of preaching Good Tidings, we are not left guessing how the binding up and loosing occurs beforehand in heaven. The Good Tidings proclaim the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ. Jesus was “foreordained before the foundation of the world” to be slain for our sin (*I Peter* 1:19-20), and accordingly “he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love” (*Ephesians* 1:4). Whatever “binding up” and “loosing” was to be accomplished through “the foolishness of preaching” was determined in Heaven “before the foundation of the world.” As Jesus said to the Seventy, “rejoice, because your

names are * written in heaven” (*Luke* 10:20). After all, the Word of God does not return without having accomplished “the thing whereto I sent it” (*Isaiah* 55:11).

Whose Soever Sins ye Remit...and...Retain (*John* 20:23)

Although Jesus’ promise of *John* 20:23 was not part of His response to Peter in *Matthew* 16:19, the passage has nevertheless been used to reinforce the Roman Catholic interpretation of “to bind” and “to loose.” The Council of Trent linked the two verses together to assign to the priest “the power of binding and of loosing,” such that “priests alone” are given the authority to remit and retain sins.³ However, because “to bind [up]” and “to loose” in *Matthew* 16:19 both refer to the Good News of *remission of sins* — to wit, the *binding up* the wounded and the *loosing* of the captives — that “power of binding and of loosing” can by no means be understood to refer both to *retention* and *remission* of sins. Such a rendering would conflate the Good News of wounds *bound up* with the bad news of *sins retained*. Jesus did not claim in *Luke* 4:18 to have been anointed to preach a gospel of *retention of sins*. He had been anointed to preach the remission of sins by which the brokenhearted are healed (bound up) and the captives freed (loosed).

We may discern the extent to which the apostles were authorized to remit and retain sins first by understanding how Christ appropriated such authority to himself. When he said to Mary, “Thy sins are forgiven” (*Luke* 7:48; *John* 11:2), it was an announcement, not an absolution, for she had already been forgiven before He said it (*Luke* 7:47), having heard and believed the Words of the Father prior to His arrival at the house of the Pharisee (*John* 5:24). So with the palsied man in Capernaum. “Thy sins be forgiven thee” (*Matthew* 9:2, *Mark* 2:5, *Luke* 5:20) was announced as an accomplished fact, not because the man and his friends had come requesting forgiveness, but rather because Jesus had “preached the word unto them” (*Mark* 2:2) and they had already believed before penetrating the roof

* Literally, “were”.

³ Council of Trent, 14th Session, November 25, 1551, Canons on Penance, Canon X.

(*Matthew 9:2, Mark 2:5, Luke 5:20*). Just so with the retention of sins, for “if any man hear my words, and believe not,” it is not Jesus who condemns him, but “the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day” (*John 12:47-50*). Did Jesus have authority on earth to remit sins? Yes, He did (*Matthew 9:6, Mark 2:10, Luke 5:24*), but according to His own testimony, it was not He, but *His Father’s Words*, that remitted them. His only duty was to preach (*John 12:50*). Did Jesus have authority on earth to retain sins? Yes, He did, but it was not He, but *his Father’s Words that retained them*. “And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not...the word that I have spoken...shall judge him,” that is, the Word of His Father (*John 12:47-48*). “Whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him,” the Father declares (*Deuteronomy 18:19*). Sins are either remitted or retained *by the preached Word*, not by the preacher.

As the power to remit and to retain is intrinsic to the message, not the messenger, we may safely conclude that neither the apostles nor their successors were imbued with such power as Rome claims for her priests. Even Christ did not claim it of Himself, but only of the Father’s Word. “The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord” (*Matthew 10:24*), and therefore the ministry of the disciples cannot have exceeded the ministry of the Son. Sins are remitted by the preaching of the Father’s Words, and they are retained the same way. How and whether the Words of the Father remit and retain the sins of the hearer is His prerogative alone. He hides the Gospel “from the wise and prudent” and reveals it to “unto babes” (*Matthew 11:25-26, Luke 10:21-22*). He reveals “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” to the elect and withholds it from the reprobate “lest at any time they should...be converted” (*Matthew 13:15*). He forbids the preaching of the Word lest the hearers be saved (*Acts 16:6-7*) and commands the preaching of the Gospel to open the hearts of the hearers (*Acts 16:10-14*).

When the disciples testified, it was not they that spoke, “but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you” (*Matthew 10:20*). When Jesus preached the Good Tidings, they were not His words, but his Father’s (*John 12:49*). The Thessalonians received

Paul’s preaching “not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (*1 Thessalonians 2:13*). It is *the preached Word of the Father* by which sins are remitted unto “life everlasting,” or retained unto condemnation, not an imagined apostolic sacramental power of absolution. This Paul knew very well, rejoicing that God “maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place” (*2 Corinthians 2:14*), and thus, it was not his but God’s prerogative to make the Good Tidings foolishness “to them that perish,” but life to those who are saved (*1 Corinthians 1:18*), “the savour of death unto death” to the perishing, but “the savour of life unto life” to the elect (*2 Corinthians 2:15-16*). To “remit” or “retain” sins in *John 20:23* refers to God’s sovereignty in election and reprobation by the “foolishness of preaching,” whereas the power “to bind up” and “to loose” in *Matthew 16:19* and *18:18* refers solely to the effectual ministry of the Good Tidings to the elect.

Two Religions at War

Jesus’ words to Peter and the apostles in *Matthew 16* and *18* are pregnant with the seeds of two different religions, and like the twins in Rebekah’s womb, they are perpetually at war with one another. One, the religion, of the Lord’s everlasting favor, has understood His meaning. They are the elect who hear and believe His words unto forgiveness and justification. From the other religion, rejected and stillborn, the Lord has hidden His meaning in darkness and ignorance. Misunderstanding His words, Rome thought Jesus would have built His Church upon Peter, and that the gates of hell could not prevail against him and his infallible successors, and that by the keys of the kingdom, they could open or bar the door to heaven, binding men in their sins, or loosing them through priestcraft and sacramental superstition, remitting or retaining sins by a “universal coercive jurisdiction.” Such a religion makes merchandise of the souls of men (*Revelation 18:12-13*), shutting up the kingdom of heaven to them, neither entering themselves, nor suffering they that would (*Matthew 23:13*). It is the religion of God’s everlasting indignation (*Hebrews 10:27*).

But the people of Christ understand that “the purpose of God according to election” (*Romans* 9:11) is accomplished by *the Word of the Father*. His purpose was determined before the Word ever left His mouth and cannot return unless it “accomplish that which I please” and “prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (*Isaiah* 55:11). That religion understands it is not *Peter* but *the Word of the Father* that is in view.[†] According to *Isaiah* 28:16 and 54:11, the Lord promised to build His church “upon this rock,” not on Peter, nor upon his confession, nor upon Christ, but on the stone foundation of *the Father’s Words*. The gates of hell cannot prevail, not because of the infallibility of Peter, but because by God’s Word, the “covenant with death shall be disannulled” and the “agreement with hell shall not stand” (*Isaiah* 28:18), for he that believes *the Fathers words* “is passed from death unto life” (*John* 5:24). The keys of the kingdom of heaven refer not to an administrative gatekeeping function, but rather to a ministry of *preaching the Father’s Words*, because by the “key of knowledge” (*Luke* 11:52) “mixed with faith” (*Hebrews* 4:2) the hearers “do enter” (*Hebrews* 4:3), for both knowledge and belief come by the preaching of *the Word of the Father* (*Romans* 10:17). The power of binding and loosing is no priestly administrative function of keeping men in their sins, but a commission the Good Shepherd had received from His Father “to bind up the brokenhearted” and “to proclaim...the opening of the prison to them that are bound” by the preaching of *Good Tidings* (*Isaiah* 61:1; *Luke* 4:28). “As Thou hast sent me into the world” to *bind up* and *to loose*, “even so have I also sent them” (*John* 17:18) — to *bind up* and *to loose* (*Matthew* 16:19; 18:18). By these carefully chosen words of a Shepherd (*Ezekiel* 34), “Peter” and his “successors” are relieved of the awful burden of administering the effectual call of the Father. While *John* 20:23 was not spoken in the context of Peter’s confession, nevertheless, the Scriptures teach us that the authority to remit and retain sins refers not to his “coercive jurisdiction,” but simply to “the foolishness of preaching,” whereby the sins of the hearers are either remitted

or retained by *the Father’s Word*, for He opens or closes the ears of the hearer according to the pleasure of His will, and not according to the will of the preacher.

And thus, two religions were born of Jesus’ Words in *Matthew* 16. One, the religion of Christ, grasping His meaning, understanding that salvation is by belief in *the Word of the Father*. The other, its understanding darkened and thinking only of Peter and his successors, presumed that salvation is by “faith in the Church.”⁴ The former is the religion established by Christ, the latter an imposter, “seeking whom he may devour” (*1 Peter* 5:8). These two religions must ever remain at war until He returns.

[†] The popular view that Peter’s confession is “the rock” is not correct, but not so very far off as Rome’s, for the *object* of Peter’s confession was indeed *the Word of the Father*.

⁴ CCC, 976.