

Rethinking a Key Biblical Text and Catholic Church Governance

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Abstract

For years Matthew 16:17–19 has been used in the Roman Church to legitimize a certain approach to its institutional form of governance that virtually excludes all the baptized but the hierarchy. Using the historical-critical method accepted by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), this article shows that this “Petrine” text is absent in its parallels in Mark and Luke. Furthermore, in official church teaching, which stresses Peter’s “binding and loosing” as a key justifier for this form of governance, no discussion is made of the parallel text of “binding and loosing” in Matthew 18: 17–20, which articulates how this power is to be used in and by the community. Using the PBC’s document on the appropriate *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, this article argues that such a selective approach to Matthew 16:17–19 reveals an example of the PBC’s warning against texts being used in fundamentalistic ways which support ideological positions.

In March 2003 Yale University’s Catholic Center sponsored a conference: “Governance, Accountability and the Future of the Church” (Oakley). In his keynote address, Donald Wuerl, then Bishop of Pittsburgh, stressed the need to distinguish between divine “givens” and human contingencies. In his response, *New York Times* religion columnist Peter Steinfels agreed. However, he added, the received tradition about some purported divine “givens” regarding church governance may be open to criticism if, given their development in the tradition, they evidence an origin more human than divine.

For centuries Catholic tradition has viewed Matthew 16:17–19 as a “divine given.” In this text about “the church,” Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven along with the power to bind and loose. While the text about the giving of the keys and the power to bind and loose does not specifically equate the keys with the power of binding and loosing, as Catholic tradition evolved, these three lines came to justify a certain form of governance in the church (*ekklēsia*) with little or no mention of the other time “*ekklēsia*” is used: Matthew 18:17–20. Here the Greek shows that the same power of binding and loosing given Peter has a parallel in the local community itself; furthermore, both texts reveal that the divine authority of the “heavenly father” stands behind both the Petrine and the communal expressions of

power (Matt 16:17; 18:19).

In this article, using the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s (PBC) 1994 document, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (*IBC*), I will argue that the popular Matthean text about Peter’s reception of the keys and the power to bind and loose is not, properly speaking, a “dominical saying” or attributable to Jesus. I will also point out that, because of the way Catholic tradition has divorced this text from its context and selectively used it (to the exclusion of Matt 18:17–20), the consequent interpretation promotes a *de facto* divinely ordained form of governance in the church without any parallel accountability to the communal power given the wider church itself as found in that text of Matthew

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18:17–20. Finally, I will argue that this selective use of the former text at the expense of the latter not only reflects a certain “pre-understanding” of church governance and accountability; it also reveals a fundamentalist approach to the Bible’s interpretation in the Catholic Church—the very kind of fundamentalism rejected by the PBC’s own document on the *IBC*. Why this continues can be understood only if it is seen as serving some kind of ideological purpose.

The Appropriate Use of the Bible in the Church

| Mark 8:27–30 | Luke 9:18–21 | Matthew 16:13–20 |
|--|---|--|
| Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist”; and others, “Elijah”; and still others, “one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” | Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” They answered, “John the Baptist,” but others, “Elijah,” and still others that “one of the ancient prophets has arisen. He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.” | Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” |
| And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. | He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone. | Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. |

The *IBC* (with a Preface by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) was written “to attend to the criticisms and the complaints as also to the hopes and aspirations” about biblical issues, “to assess the possibilities opened up by the new methods and approaches and, finally, to try to determine more precisely the direction which best corresponds to the mission of exegesis in the Catholic Church” (PBC: 500). The document covers four main areas: Methods and Approaches for Interpretation, Hermeneutical Questions, Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation and the Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church.

“Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation” highlights an

approach to hermeneutics that considers the text within its historical and literary context. “Although it devotes fewer than a dozen paragraphs to the subject of hermeneutics itself,” what it says, Peter Williamson notes, “is critical for the commission’s entire presentation for Catholic interpretation. Hermeneutics is the hinge that joins faith and reason in the exegetical enterprise” (Williamson: 335).

The *IBC* rejects the notion that any study of a text can occur “without starting from a ‘pre-understanding’ of one type or another.” It acknowledges that Catholic exegetes themselves can have a “pre-understanding that holds closely together modern scientific culture and the religious tradi-

tion emanating from Israel and from the Christian community.” This creates the possibility that a kind of “Catholic” pre-understanding may exist that can pose unforeseen problems when a text like Matthew 16:17–19 is interpreted. As the PBC states: “All pre-understanding . . . brings dangers with it. As regards Catholic exegesis, the risk is that of attributing to biblical texts a meaning that they do not contain but which is a product of a later development within the tradition. The exegete must beware of such a danger” (PBC: 513). Unless this danger is realized in a way that frees subsequent interpretation from its blinders, there is a chance that the way the text has come to be

interpreted by the tradition can eclipse any critical examination of the text itself.

The Context for Matthew 16:17–19 in Light of the Two-Source Tradition

The *IBC* proffers the “historical-critical method” as “the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning ancient texts” (PBC: 500). This approach, approved by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, has also been endorsed by the now-Pope Benedict XVI in his recent personal reflections on Jesus (Benedict XVI: xiv–xviii). While acknowl-

edging that some challenge the “two source” hypothesis—which posits the composition of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke arising from “on the one hand, the Gospel of Mark and, on the other, a collection of the sayings of Jesus (called Q, from the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source”)—the *IBC* states: “In their essential features, these two hypotheses retain their prominence in scientific exegesis today” (PBC: 501).

Following the Two-Source theory, the chart on the preceding page shows that the three texts are quite consistent vis-à-vis their context: Mark and Matthew have Jesus at Caesarea Philippi; Luke portrays him praying. All portray Jesus asking his disciples how people interpret his identity. Upon hearing various prophets named, Jesus directly asks them the same question: “But who do you say that I am” (Matt 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20)? In response, all the texts record Peter’s “confession” of faith, though each of the three expresses the profession with different nuances. While Mark and Luke immediately follow Peter’s confession with the note that Jesus charged them “not to tell anyone,” Matthew (who also ends with the same warning “not to tell anyone”) departs from his Markan source by adding three verses.

Fidelity to the Two-Source theory indicates that these verses clearly represent a Matthean addition. Consequently, Matthew’s inclusion of the three sentences cannot be attributed as having their origin in any actual statement by the historical Jesus. While believers may acknowledge them as a “divine given” insofar as they constitute part of the inspired text of revelation, strictly speaking, they cannot be said to be “Jesus-given.” To those whose ideological stance might find them insisting that these passage clearly represent God’s will and Jesus’ plan for the church, one can rightly ask: why does only Matthew and not his Markan source (nor Lukan parallel) include the text if Jesus was so insistent that this way of “binding and loosing” was to be so critical for the structuring of the subsequent church?

Their uniquely Matthean placement invites us to probe not only a rationale for their inclusion but why the tradition came to use these three verses as a warrant for a certain form of governance in the church. This probe is necessary, given the statement of the *IBC* about the dangers of embracing a fundamentalistic approach to the text:

In what concerns the Gospels, fundamentalism does not take into account the development of the Gospel tradition, but naively confuses the final stage of this tradition (what the evangelists have written) with the initial (the words and deeds of the historical Jesus) [PBC: 510].

Plainly, following the *IBC* vis-à-vis this redaction, these three sentences must be considered, not “dominical” but Matthean in their authorship, and, to that degree, their authority.

Partially because the three lines are not found in Mark, The Jesus Seminar rejected them as originating from Jesus himself (*Forum*, 42). However, for the reasons proffered in its document, when one applies the PBC’s own rationale in the *IBC* to the text the same conclusion follows. Consequently, for anyone to insist on an interpretation contrary to the PBC’s approach, to say nothing of The Jesus Seminar, reveals more about the proponents’ pre-understanding and/or ideological use than the passage’s dominical origin.

Some have postulated that the text may have risen from recollections in the community of an earlier encounter of Peter with the Risen Christ. Mark Goodwin argues that Matthew’s unique form of Peter’s profession—declaring that Jesus is not just “the Christ” (as in Mark and Luke) but also “the Son of the Living God”—“likewise reflects the confessional language of a church community” (Goodwin: 277). In other words, the image of Peter was already growing in prominence in the early church; the text is meant to buttress his ascendancy.

In his seminal work on the three verses, Ulrich Luz argues for the text’s post-apostolic origin, possibly in Syria (Luz: 46). He outlines four possibilities for the text’s interpretation that have been proffered. The first three interpretations are expressed in what he terms the “Typical” (Peter represents every disciple), the “Eastern” (the rock is Peter’s confession) and the “Augustinian” (the rock is Christ). The fourth position posited represents the “Catholic” pre-understanding.

Not surprisingly, an unawareness or unwillingness to acknowledge a “Catholic pre-understanding” of the text can lead to certain scripturally unwarranted assumptions about authority in the church, such as that noted earlier by Donald Wuerl. As such, this invites us to consider the *IBC*’s earlier warning about the way the Catholic tradition reveals a “pre-understanding” that can be considered fundamentalistic, at least when it comes to the Matthew 16:17–19 passages.

Interpreting a text in a fundamentalistic way, if we follow the *IBC*, “starts from the principle that the Bible, being the word of God, inspired and free from error, should be read and interpreted literally in all its details.” It states that such a “literal interpretation” of the scriptures can become “naively literalist” in its interpretation when it excludes “every effort at understanding the Bible” in a way “that takes account of its historical origins and development.” Such an approach is opposed “to the use of the historical-critical method, as indeed to the use of any other scientific method for the inter-

pretation of Scripture" (PBC: 509).

The *IBC* affirms fundamentalism's "right to insist on the divine inspiration of the Bible, the inerrancy of the word of God and other biblical truths" that are core to its basic approach to biblical interpretation. It states, however, that such a fundamentalistic approach can become ideological when it demands "an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research" (PBC: 510). This concern about the possible fundamentalistic use of the Matthean 16 text in the church for ideological purposes (which rigidly stresses as doctrinal a form of governance that highlights the hierarchical form to the exclusion of its horizontal expression) invites us to consider the only other Matthean text which uses the word "*ekklesia*," especially since its wording shows that the power to bind and loose (absent the keys) is extended beyond Peter to be given to the community (Matt 18:17–20).

The Context for Matthew 18:17–20 in Light of the Two-Source Tradition

| Matthew 16:13–20 | Matthew 18:15–20 |
|---|---|
| <p>Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him,</p> <p>Blessed are you, Simon son of John! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven, And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."</p> <p>Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.</p> | <p>If another member of the community sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.</p> <p>If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."</p> <p>Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.</p> |

Both Matthew 16:17–19 and Matthew 18:17–20 are unique to the First Gospel—a strong indication they were both written to reflect dynamics occurring in the Matthean house churches more than being attributable to any words indisputably declared by Jesus. The Greek makes it clear that

the power to bind and loose singularly given to Peter more universally in Matthew 16:19 (albeit with the keys) is also given to the local community in Matthew 18:18 (when two or three gather in Jesus' name (i.e., in his presence and power).

Simply speaking, according to Luz, the "power of binding and loosing given to Peter in v 19 is given to all the disciples in 18:18" (Luz: 45). Echoing Luz, Mark Allan Powell writes that this power "is no longer to be exercised by one gifted leader (e.g., Peter) but is now to be exercised by the community as a whole" (Powell: 443). Similarly, John Meier argues: "For Matthew, church leadership does not swallow up the authority of believers acting as one body. Thus Matthew can assign to the local church in 18:18 the power to bind and loose which is given to Peter in 16:19" (Meier: 132).

Given the parallels between the texts, one can ask: Is there *any* difference between the power to bind and loose given Peter in Matt 16 and that given the community in Matt 18? Is there a Petrine way of exercising the power to bind and loose in the *ekklesia* and a communal way of exercising the power to bind and loose in the *ekklesia*? The answer to both questions must be "Yes." Both texts are "complementary" (Meier, 132). However, while highlighting their similarity, it can also be asked: Is this *power* to bind and loose the same?

Luz and some other contemporary Matthean exegetes who say it is, but this position needs nuancing, given the context for the specific texts. These parallels between the two Matthean texts are best summarized by a current member of the PBC, Donald Senior:

Peter's role as foundation rock brings with it new authority, and once again, the evangelist uses biblical and Jewish imagery to convey this. The disciple is given "the keys of the kingdom" a probable reference to Isaiah 22:22, where Eliakim is made prime minister of Judah in place of the faithless Shebna. Eliakim is given "the key of the House of David . . . should he open, no one shall close, should he close, no one shall open." And Peter too shall have such powers. He has the discretion of "binding" and "loosing," Jewish legal terms that referred either to the power of interpreting the obligations of the Law or to the power of excommunicating from the synagogue. It is

not clear which of these is being conferred on Peter here (note that similar powers are given to the *community* in 18:18) [Senior:161].

While I find parallels such as those noted by Senior, I

also believe, with Meier, that evident dissimilarities exist and that “the differences between 18:15–18 and 16:17–19 should not be overlooked” (Meier: 132). It can be debated whether Günther Bornkamm was correct in conjecturing a “possibility that in Matt. 18:18 the emphasis is on discipline, and in Matt. 16:19 on teaching.” If one prescind from such a hypothesis and looks solely at the texts, however, it is clear that the Petrine form of the same power to bind and loose given the community is accompanied by a critical element not shared with it: the “keys of the kingdom of heaven.” But conversely, the local church’s power to bind and loose is linked to the unique ability given the members of the church to excommunicate. This is not specifically shared with Peter, nor is the promise of Christ’s abiding presence: “Wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name, there I am.”

It will always be debated by biblical scholars as to what the power of the keys means vis-à-vis jurisdiction in the church or if such even can be deduced at all from the text. Still, to equate the transmission of the keys with a kind of unilateral authority given to Peter, along with a justification of absolute and/or unilateral authority of the papacy over bishops, the bishops over priests and the pastors over the people, invites all who promote this selective interpretation of the text not only to ask about their possible ideological reasons for doing so, but to heed another *IBC* caveat: “No single interpretation can exhaust the meaning of the whole, which is a symphony of many voices. Thus the interpretation of one particular text has to avoid seeking to dominate at the expense of others” (PBC: 515). In other words, when it comes to “governance” in the Roman Catholic Church, the two entities receiving the power to bind and loose must be balanced: one recognizing the unique role of the keys in the Petrine “office” in the church as such, and the other given the local church which also has been promised (by two “amens”) the abiding presence of the “I am” to ratify its decisions (Crosby 1993: 156–58).

While Senior says it is “not clear” whether the binding and loosing in Matthew 16 refers to Peter’s “power of interpreting the obligations of the Law or to the power of excommunicating from the synagogue,” it is clear from Matthew 18 that the power of excommunication is at the heart of the exercise of power given the community itself. Whether it is decided to follow the example of Jesus (who seemed open to tax collectors—Matt 9:10) or to ostracize them by excommunication will also receive different interpretations (although, from Peter’s protestation on how many times forgiveness is necessary toward recalcitrants in the community [Matt 18:21] and Jesus’ response [Matt 18:22], we will see that those open to

never closing anyone off might be better grounded).

All of chapter 18, building on Matthew 17:24–27, reflects Matthew’s ideal of governance and accountability within the house churches; it is a *Haustafel* (Crosby 2005: 63, 70–73, 109–10, 119–25, 166–68, 263) or, as others might describe it, a *Gemeindeordnung* or “Rule for the Congregation.” Unlike those forms of governance identified with patterns in the first century Mediterranean world grounded in exclusively patriarchal forms, Matthew’s form of governance in the local church of Matthew 18 reveals another model based on communal affirmation accompanied by a parallel form of correction characterized by forgiveness. This seems clear when the Matthean Jesus declares that, if people will not submit to the will of the community’s power to bind and loose, they are to be treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt 18:17).

Matthew 18 articulates for the Peter of Matthew 16 that compassion, release and forgiveness (rather than separation or excommunication) must characterize the “binding and loosing” in the household(s) of faith

Interpreting this text as demanding a parallel treatment to be followed by his disciples based on the pattern of Jesus (Crosby 2002: 142ff), Peter (the one to whom Jesus has already given the keys and the power to bind and loose—Matt 16:17–19) asks Jesus how many times forgiveness should take place: “‘As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times’” (Matt 18:21b–22). At this point, Matthew’s Jesus articulates the parable about unlimited forgiveness (Matt 18:23–34). He concludes by warning Peter and the rest of his audience constituting the house churches: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matt 18:35). It is clear that Matthew 18 articulates for the Peter of Matthew 16 that compassion, release and forgiveness (rather than separation or excommunication) must characterize the “binding and loosing” in the household(s) of faith, whether local or universal (Powell, 433).

When the communal binding and loosing in the church of Matthew 18 is obstructed or denied in order to promote the

Petrine office and/or its defined prerogatives, one can ask whether Christ's abiding presence will be realized in such an expression of the universal church (Matthew 16). Similarly, when any local church tries to function as a power-source independent of Peter and the keys, its participation in the wider church likewise will be compromised. Rather than one or the other, power and governance in the church should be a matter of both/and; not either/or.

Matthew 16:17–19 and Catholic Fundamentalism: The Subversion of the Tradition

The selective use of the gospel texts vis-à-vis Peter's role in the church reached its apogee in Vatican I's *Pastor Aeternus*. Proponents of a more absolutizing form of papal authority used Matthew 16:18–19, along with two texts from John: John 1:42 (where Jesus gives Cephas the name "Peter" indicating a change in his previous reality) and 21:15–17 (where Jesus commissions Peter to "feed my sheep"). Raymond Brown wrote that this Gospel was written, in part, to serve as a corrective to the overly-Petrine or Apostolic ascendancy vis-à-vis Jesus Christ's pre-eminence that seemed to have been taking place at the end of the first century (Brown: 83).

These texts were included in the document as biblical warrants to prove that Christ gave Peter and his successors, by divine fiat, a kind of unilateral power in the church. "Using the standard interpretation of the Petrine texts which had prevailed in Catholic theology since Leo the Great," J. Michael Miller writes in his *What Are They Saying about Papal Primacy?*, "Vatican I taught that Jesus himself had given to Peter a primacy of jurisdiction over the whole church" (Miller: 8). Paradoxically, applying the form-critical approach promoted by the PBC to the way *Pastor Aeternus* used these biblical texts to justify its interpretation of the Petrine primacy, Ulrich Luz not surprisingly notes: "The exegetical consensus of today corresponds exactly to those positions that were put under solemn anathema by the first Vatican Council in 1870" (Luz: 41).

Given our discussion thus far, one must probe further as to why such fundamentalism continues to exist around the Matthean 16:17–19 text, despite the fact that such an approach has been rejected by the PBC itself. As noted earlier, this approach reveals a fundamentalist

way of presenting these truths [that] is rooted in an ideology which is not biblical, whatever the proponents of this approach might say. For it demands an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of

teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research [PBC: 509–10].

This insight of the *IBC* is critical to recall, especially when confronted by those who challenge what "proponents of this approach might say" that would suggest a "Catholic" pre-understanding or ideological bias. This insight also deserves recollection when such a universally recognized Matthean exegete as Ulrich Luz reminds us that such a selective interpretation might actually undermine the church's credibility. This occurs whenever the "Roman interpretation of Mt. 16:18 has too often been a self-legitimation of the rulers of the church..." He opines: "History also shows that an institution that uses such kinds of secondary biblical legitimacy for its dominant positions carries its own history as a heavy burden" (Luz: 55).

If "to approach the text apart from its context is a pre-text for a proof text," we can well learn of its application here. From this study, it is quite clear Matthew 16:17–19 has evolved to become *the* "Catholic proof text." However, if our Roman Catholic ecclesiology is to rest on the twin pillars of Scripture and Tradition, to ground and promote its governance and accountability on such a selective and fundamentalistic interpretation of this one text (or even with the Johannine texts mentioned by Vatican I) represents intellectual dishonesty and scriptural errancy. Furthermore, to justify such an interpretation with such an ideological appeal to an ever-entrenching tradition of male, patriarchal authority in the church, makes those Catholics who insist on its dominical foundation no more scripturally honest than their Evangelical equivalents who do the same when they limit the concept of salvation to texts like John 3:16 or John 14:6 to the exclusion of other texts like John 6:53–54.

In conclusion, it is necessary, as Donald Wuerl would declare, that we distinguish between "divine givens" and their "human exigencies." However, with Peter Steinfelds, it is equally imperative that we must recognize that the received tradition—in this case the interpretation of Matthew 16:17–19 as an assumed divine "given" regarding ecclesiastical governance and accountability—begs for greater biblical accuracy and historical integrity. By placing Matthew 16:17–19 in contrast to its Markan context and paralleling it with Matthew 18:16–20, it can be hoped, a more balanced form of governance in the Roman Church will begin to be acknowledged and restructured in ways that will have both dimensions of "church" be more authentic and accountable to each other.

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