

The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven

The Almighty God had long purposed to bring salvation to mankind through Jesus Christ His beloved Son. But being a God of order, it was His will that the knowledge and benefits of Christ's redemptive sacrifice should get first to the natural Jews before the door of faith is opened to the gentiles. This is the essence of the keys Jesus Christ gave to St. Peter.

In the book of Matthew chapter 16 Jesus Christ asked his disciples "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" They gave various answers, "Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets." Jesus Christ then asked them "But whom say ye that I am?" To this question Apostle Peter replied: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." For the faith and understanding which he exhibited by the grace of God, Jesus Christ conferred on St. Peter a special dispensation, as it is written: "And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." – Matthew 16:13-19

What Christ meant when he said he had handed over the keys of the Kingdom of heaven to St. Peter could be further understood if compared with how he used it when he denounced the religious leaders of those days. He condemned them for their hypocrisy and greed. Turning to the lawyers he charged: "Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered." – Luke 11:51,52.

The keys of the Kingdom of heaven Jesus Christ gave to St. Peter therefore bears the spiritual sense of unlocking or making known to the people certain hidden truths about the kingdom of God. It signified that he had given the apostle the authority to teach and explain the Scriptures to the people. See Matthew 13:52.

Use of the Keys

It is worthy of note that what was given to Peter was not just a "key" but "keys". The book of Acts show clearly that he (St. Peter) used the keys on two separate occasions – and that was all. One was at the time of Pentecost; the other at the call of Cornelius to apostleship. Earlier Jesus Christ had called St. Peter three times and charged him to feed his sheep. (John 21:15-17) This charge by Jesus Christ was a prophecy pointing to how Peter would use the keys given to him.

The first time he used the keys was on the day of Pentecost when he preached to a large crowd and about 3000 people were converted. – Acts 2:14-16. 37-41

The second occasion when St. Peter used the keys was at the conversion and subsequent anointing of Cornelius which marked the opening of the door of faith to the Gentiles.

The account states that while St. Peter spake: “Holy Spirit “fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost (Holy Spirit). For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost (Holy Spirit) as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.” – Acts 10:44-48.

After this incident there was no further use of the keys by St. Peter. And there was no question of its use by a “successor” as the keys were not transferable. There was no time St. Peter was made the head of the church because of his use of the keys. Jesus Christ is the head of the Church St. Paul speaking of Jesus Christ wrote: “AND HE IS THE HEAD OF THE BODY, THE CHURCH: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.” – Colossians 1:18. See also Ephesians 5:22-24; 1 Corinthians 10:4.

Also St Peter was at no time made “chief of the apostles”. Else why were the apostles debating among themselves while the master was with them in flesh as to which of them was the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven? (Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48;; 22:24-27) And why did the mother of Zebedee’s children come to Jesus Christ requesting that her two sons be given the privilege of seating on the right and left hands of Jesus Christ in the Kingdom of God? (Matthew 20:20-28) St. Paul himself had cause to declare he is “not a whit behind the very chiefest of the apostles”. (2 Corinthians 11:5) Even St. Peter did not even claim to be superior to the other apostles, rather he described himself as one of the elders. – 1 Peter 5:1

The truth about the meaning of the keys given St. Peter has been made crystal clear in this sermon. Jesus Christ said to those Jews which believed on him: “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31,32) Let us therefore follow the truth at all times for our own blessings and salvation in the end.