



Binding and Loosing: What Did Jesus Mean?

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Jesus gave authority to his church to make decisions concerning matters of controversy that would eventually happen in his church. How was the church to deal with such controversy? Would their decisions be binding and permitted by God?

Jesus when he was on earth instructed his disciples on how to take care of the church of God. The Apostles were to “feed the flock” under the leadership of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus told the disciples that he would build his church, like any good leader he taught his fellow workers how to deal with problems on their own if any matters would come up. Just like in any fortune 500 company, there is the President or CEO of a company, and workers under him. Those workers are expected to solve problems in their particular department. This problem solving is taught to them by the boss, so the boss doesn't have to continually watch over, or solve the problems for them, they are capable of solving problems, and they know how to do it since they were *taught by the boss himself*. And since they followed the bosses' protocol, the boss will accept whatever decision they make because they followed that protocol.

Binding and Loosing

Here we find the same way of dealing with problems in the church of God. Jesus is the “Head” of the Church (Ephesians 5:23). The church members are the laborers under Jesus. Jesus is the “Lord of the Vineyard,” “Lord of the Harvest” and the church are his laborers (see Matthew 9:37, 38; 20:1, 2, 8).

The laborers had to follow protocol or else everything they work for would fall apart because they did it their way and not God's way, Jesus said, “Therefore whosoever *heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them*, I will liken him unto a *wise man, which built his house upon a rock*: “*And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.*

“And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and *doeth them not*, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

“And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; *and it fell: and great was the fall of it.*” (Matthew 7:24-27). Jesus told them when problems would arise, because they did it his way, the house would stand, the church of God, which is the house of God would not fall but prevail in troublesome times, or when problem arise, because they followed the ways of the Head of the church, the President and CEO Jesus Christ!

Now if they followed Jesus ways, then their decisions God would accept in heaven as well as on earth. Jesus told the disciples, “. . .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 16:18).

This passage refers to “things” done in the church, “This does not refer to *persons*, but to *things* – ‘whatsoever,’ *not* whosoever” (Barnes's Notes, emphasis added). For all persons who seek God are welcome in the church of God-the reference are to “things” done in the church *among* the church members.

What is “binding” and “loosing”? “The words that follow as to ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’... belong to the scribe’s office and *not the priest’s*...As interpreted by the language which was familiar to the Jews (see Lightfoot, *Hor. Hebr.*, on this verse), the words pointed primarily to legislative *or interpretative functions*, not to the judicial treatment of individual men.” (Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers). The scribes of Israel were thought of as stewards of the treasures of divine wisdom (Matt 13:52). They were to interpret and to understand, “what is, and what is not the Lord’s will” (The International Bible Commentary, F.F. Bruce, p.1139).

The “seventy elders” of Israel—the basis of the later Sanhedrin—were charged with the responsibility of administering the law of God. Like the Sanhedrin, the apostles were granted the authority to make decisions *within* the law. They did *not* have the authority to go *beyond* the law. Like the Sanhedrin, the Apostles received the Holy Spirit to guide them. “And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20:22, 23).

Then with the knowledge of the Lord’s will, was implemented in the church, “In a sense common among the Jews, of *forbidding* or *allowing*. No other terms were in more constant use in Rabbinic canon-law than those of *binding* and *loosing*. They represented the *legislative* and *judicial* powers of the Rabbinic office. These powers Christ now transferred and that not in their pretension, but in their reality, to his apostles;” (Vincent Word Studies).

“To ‘bind’ (dēsēis) in rabbinical language is to forbid, to ‘loose’ (lusēis) is to permit.” (Robertson’s Word Pictures).

The Apostle Paul gives one example of binding and loosing in the law of God, “Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth?

“For the woman which hath an husband is *bound by the law* to *her* husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, *she is loosed from the law* of *her* husband.

“So then if, while *her* husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is *free from that law*; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.” (Rom 7:1-3). The law forbids a woman to marry another while the husband lives. But when he is dead, she is permitted to marry another because she is no longer bound to her first husband now that he is dead.

So “binding” and “loosing” are “things” that were allowed and forbidden in the church of God. If problems arose in the church of God, guided by the Holy Spirit, they would seek the will of the Lord in the Bible to solve the problem, doing it God’s way, so the house of God would stand firmly.

One such problem was circumcision with the gentiles in the church in Acts 15. They came to the Apostles and elders with the problem, and the problem was solved, and they allowed the gentiles not to get circumcised because that was not needed for them to be saved. Jesus’ Blood was sufficient for salvation from their sins. This became binding in the church, and letters were sent out to the whole church telling them of their decision.

The “Keys” of Knowledge

Notice what Jesus said before He spoke of the binding and loosing, Jesus was to give them the keys of *knowledge* of the kingdom of God, “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven:” Ellicott continues, “With this there was another thought, which in the latter clause of the verse becomes the dominant one. The scribes of Israel were thought of as stewards of the treasures of divine wisdom (Matt 13:52). *When they were admitted to their office they received, as its symbol, the ‘key of knowledge’ (Luke 11:52), which was to admit them to the treasure-chambers of the house of the interpreter, the Beth-Midrash of the Rabbis.* For this work the Christ had been training His disciples, and Peter’s confession had shown that the training had so far done its work. *He was qualified to be a ‘scribe instructed unto the kingdom of heaven, and to bring forth out of its treasures things new and old’ (Matt 13:52); and now the ‘key’ was given to him as the token of his admission to that office. It made him not a **priest** (that office lay altogether outside the range of the symbolism), but a teacher and interpreter.” (Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers). It had nothing to do with salvation, that is the Priests job, who is Christ, but an interpreter, and to understand the Lord’s will, and implement it in the church of God.*

This source agrees, “The disciples of our Lord, from having the *keys, i.e. the true knowledge of the doctrine of the kingdom of heaven*, should be able at all times to distinguish between the clean and the unclean, and pronounce infallible judgment; and this binding and loosing, or pronouncing fit or unfit for fellowship with the members of Christ, being always according to the doctrine of the Gospel of God, should be considered as proceeding immediately from heaven, and consequently as Divinely ratified.” (Clarke’s Commentary).

The decision of who is saved and who is lost does not fall into the hands of the church but Jesus Christ, “The power of binding and loosing was shared (Matt 18:18); (John 20:23) by the other disciples. *That it did not involve the determination of the eternal destiny of souls is clear from (Rev 1:18). The keys of death and the place of departed spirits are held by Christ alone.*” (Scofield reference notes). Ignoring Scofield’s belief in the immortal soul, the point made is clear in the Bible, Jesus said, “*I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell [hades- the grave] and of death.*” Eternal salvation or damnation is in the hands of Jesus Christ, the Judge of all.

Christ is the one who has the lives of men and woman in his hands. He gives eternal life (see John 10:28-29). God alone knows the hearts of men and only he can judge for salvation (Rev 2:23). The church is to interpret the Lord’s will and implement it in the church of God. How is his done? By a top down government? No! The disciples used an open forum, and discussed matters of the church and came to a conclusion, then executed it in the churches. The Jerusalem conference again is a prime example of this in Acts 15th chapter.

As noted the subject came up about circumcision and salvation, and “When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem *unto the apostles and elders about this question.*” (Acts 15:2). Notice it says, “they determined” that they should go to Jerusalem to ask “the apostles and elders about this question” Not to Peter, but the “Apostles”

plural and “elders” plural, to discuss the issue. It was known *already* that the church functioned with an open forum, not by a hierarchy.

Then it says, “And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.” (v.6).

Then there was much “disputing” (v.7). Peter then gives his testimony about the revelation Jesus gave him in the 10th chapter of Acts about the gentiles. (vv.7-11)

After this, “Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them” (v.12). Then Paul and Barnabas give their testimony about the miracles done among the gentiles.

Then, “And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men *and* brethren, hearken unto me:” (v.13). James was then given the opportunity to speak.

And James then settled the issue, not Peter, and said, “Wherefore *my sentence* is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:

“But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and *from* fornication, and *from* things strangled, and *from* blood.” (vv.19-20).

James’ decision was agreed upon *by all*, “*Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church*, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; *namely*, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:” (v.22). This is how the church was run, by an open forum, discussions and decisions were made by the church of God and all were in agreement-Not by one man, hierarchy, or dictatorship.

Jesus promised that He would be with His servants in carrying out this function of binding and loosing. Christ himself will inspire and direct His church in all such decisions by the spirit of God. It is really Christ who is guiding his church by his spirit.

Even the judges in the Old Testament were promised divine guidance in rendering their decisions. In 2 Chronicles 19:1-7 is an account of how righteous King Jehoshaphat appointed judges over the land. He was inspired to instruct them, “Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, *who is with you in the judgment.*”

“Sins” in the Church

What of the “sins” Jesus spoke of? Notice, Jesus said if anyone sins “against you” not against God, these are problems of *brother against brother*, it has nothing to do with salvation.

Jesus said, “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass *against thee*, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

“But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

“And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

“Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:15-18).

Barnes’ Notes, “That is, injure thee in any way, by words or conduct. The original word means sin against thee. This may be done by injuring the character, person, or property.”

Jesus mentions “that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established,” quoting the law of God (see Deut 19:15). In the Old Testament, there was an authoritative judiciary in Israel charged with the responsibility of deciding points of law for the people. This system is described in Deuteronomy 17:8-13. When one of these courts rendered a decision, it was as binding as any law given by God Himself—even to the extent of exacting the death penalty. What they bound on earth was bound in heaven. Of course the death penalty was only carried out by the government of the land and no one else (see Exodus 21:22; Romans 13:1-4). The church was not given that power, the church will become “Kings and priests” (Rev 5:10) in the Kingdom of God, that will be the time when that power of the “ministration of death” will be given to them and carried out on those who sin “willfully” who despised the word of the Lord.

The Church is to judge matters

The Apostle Paul wrote that our whole Christian life is to prepare us to make wise decisions when we are called on to help judge and rule the world under Christ. Our willingness to accept God’s judgments and directions in our personal lives—and, when called on, to render them wisely and justly—will be one of the deciding factors which will determine our position in the kingdom of God.

The Apostle Paul couldn’t believe that the Corinthians were actually going to the courts of the unbelievers to settle matters between Christians brothers, when the church was capable of solving the problem, “Dare any of you, having a matter against another, *go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints?*

“Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, *are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters?*

“Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more *things that pertain to this life?*

“If then ye have judgments of things *pertaining to this life*, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church.

“*I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?*

“But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the *unbelievers.*” (1 Corinth 6:1-6).

Obviously these are matters that had to do *outside of the government’s jurisdiction*, matters that could be settled in the church of God.

As noted above Jesus taught his church how to settle these matters, in Matthew 18:15-18.

First, tell the other person his fault between you and him alone. Don’t gossip or tell others. Don’t become upset or bitter over your brother’s sin. Just go and tell him about it privately. Don’t pick at your brother or pester him about trivial matters. But if he sins, go and tell him about it with the attitude of helping him. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

Secondly, if he will not hear you then take with you one or two other brethren and rehearse the matter again in their presence. Be sure they are mature Christians-men of understanding who will be able to make your sinning brother realize the seriousness of his mistake.

Thirdly, if he will not heed their warning to repent, then tell the matter to the whole church. They will carefully review the case; probably have a long talk with the party in error. If after all this the sinning party still refuses to repent, Christ said “let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” (v.17). Does this mean you are to hate him or to hold him in contempt? It certainly does not. It does not mean that we should cease to show kindness to him and aid him in affliction or trial, for that is required toward all people; but it means that we should treat him as we do other people *not* connected with the church (see below for further explanation). Naturally, you should continue to love your erring brother and pray that God will bring him to repentance. But you are not to talk to him about it anymore until he acknowledges his error and gives evidence that he has repented. If your brother finally does repent and turn from his error, then you have “gained your brother” (v.15) because he repented and came back into the fold of the church.

The Apostle Paul gave similar instructions to the Thessalonians in his epistles. He said, “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no *company* with him, that he may be ashamed.

“*Yet count him not as an enemy*, but admonish *him* as a brother.” (2 Thess 3:14-15). A brother who commits sin in the church it says that he is *not* your enemy, and we should not treat him as such.

It also does *not* say we should *not* fellowship with him or her. The Greek word for “fellowship” is *koinōnia* (see Strong’s #2842), meaning, “partnership, that is, (literally) participation, or (social) intercourse, or (pecuniary) benefaction: - (to) communicate (-ation), communion, (contri-), distribution, fellowship.” (Strong’s).

The word “company” used here means, “*sunanamignumi*” (Strong’s # 4874). It means, “mix up together” (Strong’s). To “mix” yourself with them, *to do what they do*. The Pulpit Commentary says, “The Greek word is rather stronger: *not to be mingled up among*. The spirit of the injunction is repeated in Eph 5:11, ‘Have no fellowship with the unfruitful *works of darkness*, but rather reprove them.’” (emphasis added). It’s about mingling with the “works” of sin. People criticized Jesus for dwelling with sinners (Matthew 9:11). But Jesus did not sin. He went to them as a “physician” to heal them not to take part in sin (vv.12-13). This is what Paul is telling the Christian here, not to take part in the sin of your brother.

This word is also used in 1 Corinthians 5, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company [*sunanamignumi*] with fornicators:

“Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world.

“But now I have written unto you not to keep company [*sunanamignumi*], if any man that is called a brother *be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner*; with such an one no not to eat.

“For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?”

“But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” (vv.9-13).

Paul said if any brother “be a fornicator” etc... his *works* are meant and his brother is not to do the same things as he does.

Paul says with “such an one no not to eat.” This means in the Greek, “But the general meaning is that of 2Thess 3:6, ‘We command you... that ye *withdraw yourselves* from every brother that walketh disorderly.’” (Pulpit Commentary, emphasis added).

“...nothing is *here* said of public excommunication,” (Henry Alford’s The Greek Testament), but to “withdraw” from the brother who walks disorderly *so you do not go along with him in the same conduct*.

We instead should “admonish” him or her as a brother or sister in Christ. The word is “noutheteo” (Strong’s #3560), meaning “to *caution* or *reprove gently*: - admonish, warn.” (Strong’s).

This is how we “Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” (v.13). This should read, “and put ye away the *evil* from among yourselves.” (Young’s Literal Trans)

“and remove ye the *wickedness* from among you.” (Murdock NT).

Bullinger writes, “With this chapter should be *compared the Lord’s words* in Matt 18:15-17, and Paul’s injunctions in 2Thess 3:6-15. The aim in every case was to *bring the offender to repentance*” (p.1704, emphasis added).

So excommunication was *never* the issue as some think, of “putting out” people, instead it was for one not to involve oneself in the sins of a brother or sister in Christ, and to “admonish” them, and bring them to repentance.

Further Instructions by Paul

The apostle Paul was inspired to write further instructions about church discipline to the churches under his care. He instructed the Galatians. “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1) , Notice that Paul admonished them to be meek or humble when helping a brother to see and overcome a sin. We must never be overbearing or self righteous in such a case, but should humbly try to help our brother correct his error-realizing that we ourselves may be tempted in the same manner.

Romans 16:17-18 is an example of binding and loosing, on how to deal with people that cause divisions in the church, “Now I beseech you, brethren, *mark them* which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid [ekkline] them. “For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.”

Paul says here like in 2 Thessalonians 3 to “mark” or “note” that man. People who cause divisions and offences in the church we ought to “avoid” them. 1Peter 3:11 uses the same word, he says, “...*Eschew* [ekklino] evil and do good”

Barnes, says, “*Do not follow them*; compare 1Tim 6:3-5; 2John 1:10; Gal 1:8-9. That is, avoid them as ‘teachers;’ do not follow them. *It does not mean that they were to be treated harshly*; but that they were to be avoided in their ‘instructions.’” (emphasis added). We are to *avoid* their *instructions* and not to do what they do.

Then afterwards we are to do what Jesus and Paul said to do, admonish them, correct them. If they do not hearken then “let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” God willing he or she repents so the brother is “gained” once more in the church of God.

The Purpose of being seen as a Heathen or Publican?

Why did Jesus say this? What was its Purpose? Some churches of this world have forms of “excommunication” whereby the object seems to be to hurt and defame the one who has been put out of church fellowship. This is not God’s way.

As we have seen before, a sinning brother is to be admonished in order that he may come to repentance. The object is to help these people-to *wake them up* not to hurt them.

In 2 Corinthians 2:1-11, we find that Paul asked the brethren at Corinth to accept the repentance of the fornicator, “Sufficient to such a man *is* this punishment, which *was inflicted* of many. “So that contrariwise ye *ought* rather to forgive *him*, and comfort *him*, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. “Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm *your* love toward him.” (vv.6-8)

The word “punishment” is only here in the New Testament, and it means, “The word *epitimia*, which occurs here only in the New Testament, but is also found in Wis. 3:10, means ‘punishment,’ as in later Greek, and *is not used in its classical sense* of ‘rebuke’ (Vulgate, *objurgatio*); but the *mildness of the word*, perhaps, implies that the Corinthians had not *resorted to the severest measures*.” (Pulpit Commentary, emphasis added). This means more of one being corrected than a rebuke.

This was “inflicted of many” meaning the majority of the church members agreed to this, doing what Jesus said to do, “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church:” (Matthew 18:17). Obviously there was no top down government as some churches of God seem to think, but an open forum and the whole church discussed matters pertaining to them. If a matter concerns you, or an organization that you were involved in, wouldn’t you want input in these matters?

This punishment or correction was to let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” A brother or sister who sinned, and *refuses* to repent to let him be like a person of the world. Satan is called the god of this world (2 Corinth 4:4). So he was handed over to Satan. Barnes says, “They say, that in the Scriptures there are but two kingdoms recognized - the kingdom of God, or

the church, and the kingdom of the world, which is regarded as under the control of Satan; and that to exclude a man from one is to subject him to the dominion of the other.”

1 Corinthians 5:1 is speaking of this same fornication. Paul said to, “To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (v.5). Let him go into the world, *since he does not want to repent, and the world refuses to repent, and the brother obviously has the same attitude as the world* that Satan has provided, to see all its evils, and the consequences of sin. To see all that Satan provides for people which is death, destruction, disease and war. When one realizes this, he will “destroy of the flesh” meaning, “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify [Grk “kill”] the deeds of the body, ye shall live.” (Rom 8:13). The fleshly sinful deeds one will destroy, and he will repent, and the “spiritual” begotten man, the “inward man” (Rom 7:22) will be saved and resurrected when Jesus comes.

“But this handing over to Satan was, as we have seen, designed solely *for a merciful purpose, and to awaken his repentance, so as to secure his ultimate salvation* (1Corinth 5:4, 5).” (Pulpit Commentary, emphasis added).

The verses in 2 Corinthians 2 indicate that the man had now repented and was sorrowing greatly over his error. He had learned his lesson. So now he came back into the fellowship of the church and was completely forgiven-by God, and Paul said the church must forgive him as well “lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices” (verse 11). If God’s people continued to shun this man, he might have committed suicide, “such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow.” (v.7). Paul did not want that, but “confirm *your* love toward him.” (v.8) be forgiving and loving towards the person who repents and asks forgiveness.

This is how the church of God should conduct itself with these matters, with love, mercy and forgiveness, not with hate and excommunication. God is merciful and binding and loosing is for correcting the Christian, so one can see why he or she is being corrected, and find the mercy of God in it.