



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 31 - August 3, 2008

83 **Q.** *What are the keys of the kingdom?*

A. The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance. Both preaching and discipline open the kingdom of heaven to believers and close it to unbelievers.

84 **Q.** *How does preaching the gospel open and close the kingdom of heaven?*

A. According to the command of Christ: The kingdom of heaven is opened by proclaiming and publicly declaring to all believers, each and every one, that, as often as they accept the gospel promise in true faith, God, because of what Christ has done, truly forgives all their sins. The kingdom of heaven is closed, however, by proclaiming and publicly declaring to unbelievers and hypocrites that, as long as they do not repent, the anger of God and eternal condemnation rest on them. God's judgment, both in this life and in the life to come, is based on this gospel testimony.

82 **Q.** *How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by Christian discipline?*

A. According to the command of Christ: Those who, though called Christians, profess unchristian teachings or live unchristian lives, and after repeated and loving counsel refuse to abandon their errors and wickedness, and after being reported to the church, that is, to its officers, fail to respond also to their admonition—such persons the officers exclude from the Christian fellowship by withholding the sacraments from them, and God himself excludes them from the kingdom of Christ. Such persons, when promising and demonstrating genuine reform, are received again as members of Christ and of his church.

There's a lot of talk about the kingdom these days. We are exhorted to build the kingdom, extend the kingdom, and bring the kingdom. The theology of the kingdom, for some, means that the church stops focusing on sin and eternal salvation and talks about the stuff that really matters, like poverty, peace, and politics. To an extent, this renewed emphasis on the kingdom is helpful. After all, Jesus message was essentially about the gospel of the kingdom, about God's reign and rule on the earth (Matt. 4:23). So, yes, as Christians we are interested in more than just getting souls saved. We are also interested in seeing the renewal of all things. Recall that Jesus instructed his disciples to pray for God's kingdom—his unquestioned sovereign dominion—to come on earth just as it exists perfectly in heaven.

Although an emphasis on the kingdom of God is undoubtedly a good thing, we must pay attention to the way in which it is described in the New Testament. In particular, we mustn't ignore the verbs related to the kingdom. I know what people mean when they talk about building the kingdom or extending the kingdom. They usually mean, "Let's make the world more like heaven" or "Let's influence the world for Christ." These are good goals. But, interesting enough, the New Testament does not talk about building or extending the kingdom. The verbs are

almost always passive. We enter into the kingdom, are given the kingdom, or inherit the kingdom. In other words, the emphasis in the New Testament is not on building God's kingdom here on earth, though it certainly grows, but on being born again and receiving the kingdom through faith in Christ. As much as it embarrasses many contemporary Christians, there is an in and out to the kingdom. Some people will inherit it; others will not (Mark 10:15; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:50). We are not members of the kingdom unless we worship and follow the King.

All of this is by way of introduction for Lord's Day 31 which talks about the keys of the kingdom. Before I joined the church in fourth grade, I had to meet with the Elders and go through the Heidelberg Catechism with my pastor. I read through the whole Catechism and studied it as best I could (or, at least pretty diligently for a nine year old). For some reason the only Lord's Day I remember being specifically quizzed on was this one about the keys of the kingdom. I think I remember being tested on it because I remember studying it. And I remember studying it because I had never heard of this terminology before and it sounded pretty cool.

I should have been more familiar with the lan-

guage because it comes right from Jesus: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19). The imagery is straightforward: entrance into the kingdom of heaven—coming under the reign and rule of God in this life and in the life to come—is through the narrow door (cf. Luke 13:24) and this door swings both ways. The kingdom can be opened and the kingdom can be closed.

With so much, everything in fact, riding on our entrance into the kingdom, we would do well to know how the door is opened and closed. Lord’s Day 31 references two keys of the kingdom: preaching and discipline.

Preaching opens the kingdom by proclaiming the gospel. Reformed Christians must not fall into the unbiblical trap of thinking that just because God elects, we have no obligation to share the gospel. As Spurgeon once remarked, he preached the gospel, even as a Calvinist, because the elect do not have yellow stripes down their backs. In other words, preachers must offer a free invitation to all to come to Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. True, no one can come unless the Father draws them (John 6:44). But we must also be clear that no one who comes to Christ in true faith will ever be cast out (John 6:37). As the Canons of Dort—yes those Canons—put it so beautifully: “Moreover, it is the promise of the gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel” (II.5). Preachers must never allow their pulpit ministry to devolve into helpful tips, good advice, and moral exhortation. We are charged with a more solemn task, to open the gates of heaven and call sinners to believe in Christ and received all his gospel promises.

Likewise, we preachers must not neglect our responsibility to close the kingdom. This is where so much of contemporary preaching fails miserably. Too many of our churches are like the false prophets of old, crying “Peace, peace,” where there is not peace. We have scores of people in our congregations, let alone the world, who have never heard of their need to repent, never heard of God’s anger against sin, never heard of the judgment to come. If preachers fail to proclaim this message—out of embarrassment, cultural convenience, or just plain biblical ignorance—they are not simply off the mark, they are being unfaithful to their calling as God’s ambassadors and unfaithful to the Word of God itself. If we are truly proclaiming the whole counsel of God, we will be an aroma of life to some and the stench of death to others (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

The second key of the kingdom is church discipline. Although discipline is scarcely practiced in this country, there is no doubt about its biblical mandate. Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 and Jesus in Matthew 18 (to name just the most famous examples) make clear that the church has God given authority to discipline its members. The purpose of discipline is not retribution and the motivation must never be personal animosity. God gives Christian discipline to the church to promote its purity, benefit the offender, and vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ (RCA Book of Church Order).

Whereas preaching looses and then binds, the nature of discipline is to bind and then loose. Discipline binds, or closes the kingdom, by excluding from church fellowship those who call themselves Christian but repeatedly, after much warning, refuse to abandon their wicked deeds. Discipline is not for light offenses, and certainly not for those who confess their sin and turn from it. Discipline is for those who, because of long seasons of unfruitfulness, give the church and its leaders no choice but to conclude “This is a bad tree.”

In making such a judgment (under Christ’s authority, not our own) the church’s goal is repentance. The hope in binding is that we may later loose. Just as the door to the kingdom is closed through church discipline, so the door is gladly opened again upon confession of sin and evidence of genuine reform. The keys of the kingdom aren’t given for power trips. They are given so that in opening the door, many may walk in, and in closing the door, many would be duly warned and seek the open door once more.

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