

# The Kingdom and the Keys

*Text: Ephesians 5:1-21; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31*

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The subject of Lord's Day 31 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* is the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Many today have never heard of them. Some think the Pope holds them, but the Reformers recovered the biblical understanding: the keys are faithful preaching and proper discipline. Christ uses these keys to open and shut the kingdom, and their right use marks a true church. When keys are misused or unused, the Spirit is grieved, Christ departs, and the church falls under the spirit of Antichrist. Where the keys are rightly used, Christ is present; where they are neglected, darkness reigns.

We read in Question and Answer 83: "What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven? The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline, or excommunication out of the Christian church; by these two, the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers, and shut against unbelievers."

The catechism places this truth in the context of the means of grace and sacraments. Where these keys are used biblically, there is a true church. But where they are misunderstood, dishonoured, or rust away unused, there is a false church—or one well on its way to becoming false. There Christ is absent, and the devil is at work. These keys determine membership in the visible kingdom of Christ. Churches that rightly exercise them manifest the kingdom; those that corrupt them destroy it. We must therefore know where the keys are, ensure that we and our children are under their power, and contend earnestly to preserve them.

## The Kingdom and Boundaries

The kingdom of heaven is the rule of God's grace through Jesus Christ by His Word and Spirit in the hearts and lives of the elect, causing them to live as obedient subjects of the triune God. The keys are Christ's official means to open and shut the Kingdom—letting in believers and excluding unbelievers. This necessarily entails boundaries. Where Christ rules, there is order, distinction, and holiness. Where sin reigns, there is confusion and collapse.

The modern spirit hates boundaries. It craves inclusivism and the destruction of all distinctions, especially religious ones. It promotes false ecumenism—the

idea that all churches should unite regardless of doctrine. This push is grounded in relativism: "It's just your opinion!" But Scripture insists on *truth*. The more the world calls for inclusion, the more it excludes faithful Christians. We are told we must not judge. But Scripture commands that we discern between the clean and unclean (Lev. 10:10), and between the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:32).

Ephesians 5:5–7 states: "This ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words... Be not ye therefore partakers with them." Paul declares this truth is part of saving knowledge—"this ye know." A Christian is not ignorant of who is in and who is out of the kingdom.

I Corinthians 6:9–11 is even clearer: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived... such were some of you, but ye are washed... sanctified... justified." Paul reminds the Corinthians that these sins—adultery, fornication, homosexuality, theft, drunkenness—once defined them, but grace changed them. Grace makes a man new and marks him out from the world.

Revelation 22:15 adds: "For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie." Outside the New Jerusalem is everyone who clings to sin and lies. The boundary is eternal.

These passages assert that those who live impenitently in sin are outside the kingdom. The last day will reveal this boundary forever. Some are within; others are shut out. That's the reality denied by false ecumenism and religious syncretism. Inclusivism hates gates and hates keys, because it hates Christ's holiness. But the Bible is firm: without holiness, "no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

### **The Kingdom and Preaching**

Question and Answer 84 asks: "How is the Kingdom of heaven opened and shut by the preaching of the holy gospel? Thus: when according to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God, for the sake of Christ's merits; and on the contrary... to all unbelievers... they stand exposed to the wrath of God and

eternal condemnation... God will judge them, both in this and in the life to come.”

Preaching is the first and primary key of the kingdom. It not only *declares* the kingdom but *brings* it. The elect are gathered, faith is created, and the door is opened. The reprobate are hardened, and the door slams shut. The gospel both saves and judges.

Every time the gospel is preached, the key turns. For the penitent, the door swings open. The soul hears it and knows, “My sins are forgiven.” For the unbelieving, the gate shuts with creaking warning. The conscience is convicted. And many, knowing this, avoid true preaching – they fear its effect. That’s why the world loves soft sermons and despises strong ones. True preaching exposes sin, exalts Christ, and places the hearer before the throne of God.

Colossians 1 describes the believer as being translated from the kingdom of darkness into Christ’s kingdom. The preached Word accomplishes this miracle. Nothing else – no band, no skit, no entertainment – can do this. When Christ’s voice is heard, the kingdom comes. That’s why Paul said, “It pleased God by the foolishness of *preaching* to save them that believe” (1 Cor. 1:21).

The church must keep the lines sharp. When preaching softens boundaries, the whole foundation weakens. If sin is no longer condemned, if truth is blurred, if other religions are “not so bad,” then the keys no longer function. Jesus warned, “Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words... of him shall the Son of man be ashamed” (Mark 8:38). The gospel must be preached sharply. The King rules by His Word, not man’s inventions. If the key is not turned in the pulpit, the kingdom is neither opened nor shut.

Preaching is not mere information. It is the voice of Christ (Rom. 10:14). It cuts the heart (Acts 2:37), comforts the soul (Isa. 40:1), and builds the church (Eph. 4:11-12). When preaching declares the forgiveness of sins in Christ, believers hear the voice of their Shepherd and enter His fold. When it declares wrath upon the impenitent, the unconverted feel the dread of judgment. Thus the key is used rightly, and the boundaries of the Kingdom are guarded by the mouth of Christ’s minister.

## **The Kingdom and Discipline**

Question and Answer 85 states: “How is the kingdom of heaven shut and opened by Christian discipline? Thus: when according to the command of Christ, those who under the name of Christians, maintain doctrines or practices

inconsistent therewith... if they despise admonition, are forbidden the use of the sacraments, whereby they are excluded from the Christian church, and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ... When they promise and show real amendment, they are again received."

Church discipline is the second key. It applies only to members. Two grounds bring a person under discipline: false doctrine or ungodly life. The member has broken vows made at public confession – either doctrinal vows (Q1) or vows of godly living (Q2). The third vow (Q3) involves submission to discipline itself. It is not a light matter. It is a matter of solemn promises before God.

The process is gradual: admonition, then suspension, then excommunication. If repentance is shown, restoration follows. But if the person rebels, the door is locked against them. Christ Himself turns the key. The kingdom is not a place of chaos. It is a house with a door and a King.

The worst response to discipline is to flee the church. That breaks every vow and throws the key into the ocean. Such people slander the elders, lie about their case, draw others into sin, and harden themselves. They may find a new church, but they take their sin with them, defile the sacraments, and cause that church to lose the third mark of a true church.

We must not be ignorant of Satan's devices. He attacks the boundaries. The wayward member convinces others, "I'm the victim," and weak members believe it. They grow bitter, don't listen to preaching, and drift. The new church confirms the sinner in their rebellion. Sin multiplies. The church is weakened, the truth is compromised, and Christ is dishonoured. Jesus sees it all. He remembers the discipline, the steps taken, the sins persisted in. On the last day, He will say, "Depart from me... I never knew you." When the keys are rightly used and rejected, Christ Himself bears witness against the sinner. He turns the key not only in time but in eternity. The one cast out by the church is cast out by *God* – unless he repents.

But discipline is not for destruction. It is remedial. It's the loving rod of a Father. It's Christ calling the prodigal home. And when one sinner repents, there is joy in heaven (Luke 15). Let the keys be used, that the door may be opened and joy restored. Let us honour the keys of Christ's kingdom and pray that they be wielded for the salvation of souls and the purity of the church.

*Our Father in heaven, bless to us Thy word. We pray, Lord God, for Thy grace that changes us and gives us a strong faith and comfort through the Word. Use the keys in Thy church and may they be effectual for our good and for our children's good. For Jesus' sake. Amen.*