

# THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY OF THE TWELVE

By Cornelius R. Stam

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**“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.”**

—Matt. 16:19.

**“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.”**

—Matt. 18:18.

**“Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.”**

—John 20:23.

These three verses of Scripture are, of course very significant and important in the eyes of the Roman Catholics. What communicant of the Church of Rome does not know them! And how often Catholics have used them to silence Protestants!

On these words of our Lord Rome bases her claims of authority in spiritual matters.

## ROME’S CLAIMS

The Roman Catholic Church contends:

1. That these words mean what they say.

Rome strenuously objects when Protestants modify, qualify or in any way alter the obvious meaning of these words. She insists that upon a called-out group (ekklesia) our Lord conferred full authority to act officially in His name, even to the remission of sins, and that such official acts were to be binding in heaven.

This is a strong argument. It always strengthens one’s position to be able to turn to the Scriptures and say, *“This is what it says.”*

2. Rome’s second great claim is that the authority of the Church was centralized in the twelve apostles, over whom Christ placed one of themselves, St. Peter, as chief.

This claim is based on the fact that while John 20:23 may have been spoken to many of Jesus’ disciples, Matt. 18:18 was apparently addressed to the twelve apostles, and certainly Matt. 16:19 to Peter alone.

Thus, it is claimed, authority in spiritual matters was given to the Church, represented by the twelve apostles and personified in the Apostle Peter.

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---

3. Their conclusion is that since the Church of today is (according to Catholic doctrine) a perpetuation of the organization which Christ instituted and vested with divine authority, there must of necessity be apostolic succession.

They contend that the apostolic body is perpetuated in the College of Bishops and that one of their own number, the Pope or Bishop of Rome, succeeds St. Peter as their chief and the supreme head of the Church on earth—that spiritual authority today is still vested in the Church, represented by the College of Bishops and personified in the Pope himself.

Protestants may lift their hands in horror at such claims, but next to the Roman Catholic interpretation of these Scriptures Protestant arguments are as weak as cotton thread.

## PROTESTANT INTERPRETATIONS

1. The Catholic interpretation in modified form is found in the ritualistic creeds of many Protestant denominations. They make Rome's claims—with reservations and apologies.
2. Some Protestants argue that in these words our Lord merely gave the apostles authority to *state the terms* of salvation.
3. Others contend that the apostles were given the ability to *discern and declare* whose sins were forgiven and whose were not. That is, they could pronounce sins forgiven, not by any authority which was given to them, but because of God-given powers to discern the true spiritual state of those to whom they ministered.
4. Still others claim that our Lord meant to impress upon His followers their great responsibility and to warn them that through *their* behavior some would accept Him while others would reject Him; some would have their sins remitted, while others would have their sins retained.

But all these arguments wrest the natural, obvious meaning from our Lord's plain words. And if He did not mean what He said, who has the right to tell us what He did mean?

What then? Must we return to Rome, admit her claims and commit our souls to *men*—men who can either bless or curse us according to their will—men who do not know as much about us as we ourselves?

## THE SOLUTION

The solution to this problem is again a dispensational one. It lies in the fact that from time to time God changes His dealings with men—a premise which must be granted by Romanists if indeed our Lord did confer such powers upon His disciples after several thousand years of human history had passed.

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## OFFICIALS OF THE KINGDOM

Let us consider John 20:23 in the light of its context:

**“Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: AS MY FATHER HATH SENT ME, EVEN SO SEND I YOU.**

**“And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, RECEIVE YE THE HOLY GHOST:**

**“WHOSE SOEVER SINS YE REMIT, THEY ARE REMMITTED UNTO THEM; AND WHOSE SOEVER SINS YE RETAIN, THEY ARE RETAINED.” (John 20:21-23).**

*“As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.”*

In the light of these words it is not strange to find our Lord granting official powers.

These words should be compared with His words to the twelve in Luke 22:28-30.

**“Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations.**

**“AND I APPOINT UNTO YOU A KINGDOM, AS MY FATHER HATH APPOINTED UNTO ME.**

**“That ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”**

In Matt. 19:28 the matter of the thrones is stated even more definitely: “YE ALSO SHALL SIT UPON TWELVE THRONES JUDGING THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL.”

In Mark 2:7 the scribes find fault with Christ, saying, “WHY DOTHS THIS MAN THUS SPEAK BLASPHEMIES? WHO CAN FORGIVE SINS BUT GOD ONLY?”

Are we prone, perhaps, to agree too wholeheartedly with these scribes? We must not forget that our Lord Himself said, “*For the Father judgeth no man but hath committed all judgment unto the Son...and hath given him authority to execute judgment also* BECAUSE HE IS THE SON OF MAN.” (John 5:22, 27).

The Lord Jesus certainly had the authority to admit men into the kingdom or shut them out from it. Surely *He* could remit sins, and what *He* did on earth was certainly binding in heaven.

# THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY OF THE TWELVE

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---

And now He gives these powers to His disciples.

**“AS MY FATHER HATH SENT ME, EVEN SO SEND I YOU.**

**“AND I APPOINT UNTO YOU A KINGDOM, AS MY FATHER HATH APPOINTED UNTO ME.”**

The twelve apostles were to be the officials of the kingdom and what is an official without authority?

## **PETER AND THE ELEVEN**

Matt. 21:43 makes it clear that the kingdom was to be TAKEN FROM the chief priests and elders in Israel.

**“THEREFORE SAY I UNTO YOU, THE KINGDOM OF GOD SHALL BE TAKEN FROM YOU, AND GIVEN TO A NATION BRINGING FORTH THE FRUITS THEREOF.”<sup>1</sup>**

Luke 12:32 makes it clear that the kingdom was to be GIVEN TO the “little flock.”

**“FEAR NOT, LITTLE FLOCK; FOR IT IS YOUR FATHER’S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM.”**

Matt. 19:28 makes it clear that authority in this kingdom was to be centralized in the twelve apostles.

**“AND JESUS SAID UNTO THEM, VERILY I SAY UNTO YOU, THAT YE WHICH HAVE FOLLOWED ME, IN THE REGENERATION WHEN THE SON OF MAN SHALL SIT IN THE THRONE OF HIS GLORY, YE ALSO SHALL SIT UPON TWELVE THRONES JUDGING THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL.”**

In Matt. 16:19 Peter is singled out as chief of the twelve when our Lord says,

**“AND I WILL GIVE UNTO THEE THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.”**

Again and again we find Peter singled out as their leader.

In connection with the choosing of Matthias as Judas’ successor, we read:

**“And in those days PETER STOOD UP IN THE MIDST OF THE DISCIPLES...” (Acts 1:15).**

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<sup>1</sup> Note carefully here that the kingdom was to be given to “*a nation*,” not “*the nations*.” Moreover, this “nation” was to bring forth the fruits which Israel, under the leaders of that day, had failed to produce.

# THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY OF THE TWELVE

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---

The record of the great Pentecostal address opens with these words:

**“BUT PETER, STANDING UP WITH THE ELEVEN, LIFTED UP HIS VOICE...” (Acts 2:14).**

Concerning those brought under conviction at Pentecost, we read:

**“Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said UNTO PETER AND TO THE REST OF THE APOSTLES, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37).**

Thus divine authority was given to the “little flock” represented by the twelve apostles and, personally, by Peter himself. This authority extended even to the remission of sins.

Was the remission of sins then left in the hands of failing men? No, not *failing* men, for while great authority was committed to them there was no room for failure. Let us consider this more fully.

## THE OFFICIAL ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

It is significant that the first official act of “the little flock” was the appointment of a successor to Judas.

Some suppose that the appointment of Matthias was a mistake; that Paul should have been the twelfth apostle. But there was no mistake.

The disciples were obeying the Scriptures which distinctly said, “*Let another take his office.*” (Cf. Psa. 109:8 and Acts 1:20).

Moreover, the selection of Judas’ successor was of primary importance and urgency since there must be twelve apostles to occupy twelve thrones before the kingdom could be offered to Israel, and Saul of Tarsus was not saved until some time later.

Furthermore, Paul would not have qualified, for to be numbered with the eleven it was necessary to have been with the Lord continuously “*beginning from the baptism of John, unto the same day that he was taken up...*” (See Acts 1:21-22 and cf. Luke 22:28-30).

The objection that Matthias is not mentioned after this is groundless, for this may also be said of some of the others. The fact is that the Holy Spirit Himself numbered Matthias with the eleven and bestowed upon all twelve the miraculous powers which were the credentials of their apostleship.

In addition to all this we have the words of our Lord to the very ones who appointed Matthias, that “**WHATSOEVER YE SHALL BIND ON EARTH SHALL BE BOUND IN HEAVEN.**” This should be conclusive.

## THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY OF THE TWELVE

By Cornelius R. Stam

---

Coming now to the Pentecostal scene itself we find the apostles fully exercising their authority. Peter is saying to his convicted hearers,

**“REPENT, AND BE BAPTIZED EVERY ONE OF YOU IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS, AND YE SHALL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST.” (Acts 2:38).**

Notice carefully that water baptism was essential to salvation. The apostles baptized them “FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS.” Compare this with the words of our Lord, “WHOSE SOEVER SINS YE REMIT THEY ARE REMITTED UNTO THEM,” and “WHATSOEVER YE SHALL BIND ON EARTH SHALL BE BOUND IN HEAVEN.” There is perfect harmony here.

But could not some shrewd person have deceived the apostles? *Did Ananias deceive them?* He was carried out dead!

But could there be no mistake? No, for “THEY WERE ALL FILLED WITH THE HOLY GHOST.” (Acts 2:4) and were given special miraculous powers, including the “gift of knowledge.”

Let us go on to the tenth chapter of the book of Acts.

Peter was not out of the will of God when he hesitated to go to the Gentiles. He well knew the prophetic program, that the nations were to be blessed through the RISE of Israel. (Isa. 60:1-3). Had he not himself quoted to the men of Israel the great Abrahamic covenant, “AND IN THY SEED SHALL ALL THE KINDREDS OF THE EARTH BE BLESSED?”

He understood that according to that program it was unlawful for him to go to one of another nation until Israel had accepted Christ and become God’s priestly nation. He was in accord with His Master’s will, for the Lord Himself said, “LET THE CHILDREN FIRST BE FILLED.” (Mark 7:27). Even according to the “great commission” the apostles were to begin their ministry at Jerusalem. (See Luke 24:47 and Acts 1:8). Israel was first to be brought to Messiah’s feet.

But here is Peter on Joppa’s housetop, “*very hungry.*” What is he hungry for? Pork and other “unclean” food? Physically, perhaps, but the Holy Spirit interprets the vision for us and we find that a greater hunger fills his heart. Oh, that Israel might, as a nation, receive Messiah and that the good news might be spread to all the world! The unclean meat spoke of the Gentiles, who would be received once the “great commission” got under way—but Israel was preventing it.

It was this hunger to which our Lord responded by a *special commission* to Peter to go to the Gentile house of Cornelius, “nothing doubting.” He could not understand it but he went and before the matter was settled he had to appear before the other apostles to explain his action, and they in turn “*glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.*” (Acts 11:18).

# THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY OF THE TWELVE

By Cornelius R. Stam

---

Without in the least detracting from the kingdom aspect of this scene, let us note that when Peter went to Cornelius' household it was definitely *not* according to the prophetic program. It was not because the nation Israel had received Christ. *It was in spite of the fact that Israel was rejecting Christ. But what Peter had done on earth was bound in heaven.*

This incident comes significantly after the stoning of Stephen and the salvation of Saul, and lays the foundation for the subsequent ministry of Paul, which had to do with the blessing of the Gentiles through the FALL of Israel. Peter's experience was absolutely unique. We never find him ministering to Gentiles again. But it was Peter's experience upon which the great argument for Paul's later ministry was based and which gave it recognition among the twelve. None could deny that it was now God's purpose to send blessing to the Gentiles in spite of Israel.

The stage was now set for the ministry of Paul. There was to be a change in program. The prophetic program was to be held in abeyance while the mystery of God's secret, eternal purpose was unfolded. The twelve were to disappear from the scene and the apostle Paul was to take their place.

## THE TWELVE APOSTLES AND PAUL

**“AND I WENT UP BY REVELATION AND COMMUNICATED UNTO THEM THAT GOSPEL WHICH I PREACH AMONG THE GENTILES, BUT PRIVATELY TO THEM WHICH WERE OF REPUTATION, LEST BY ANY MEANS I SHOULD RUN, OR HAD RUN, IN VAIN...AND WHEN JAMES, CEPHAS, AND JOHN, WHO SEEMED TO BE PILLARS, PERCEIVED THE GRACE THAT WAS GIVEN UNTO ME, THEY GAVE TO ME AND BARNABAS THE RIGHT HANDS OF FELLOWSHIP, THAT WE SHOULD GO UNTO THE HEATHEN, AND THEY UNTO THE CIRCUMCISION.”**  
(Gal. 2:2, 9).

Here, by solemn agreement, Peter, James and John promise to confine their ministry to Israel while Paul goes to the Gentiles. This is striking in view of the fact that the twelve, not Paul, had originally been sent into all the world.

Were they all out of the will of God in making this agreement? By no means! Subsequent revelation proves that they were all very much in the will of God and that Israel's rejection of Christ had brought about a change in the program.

What the apostles had bound on earth was bound in heaven and also what they had loosed on earth was loosed in heaven.

In the light of these Scriptures it is difficult to understand how any one can argue that Paul's ministry was merely a perpetuation of that of the twelve or that the kingdom of heaven and the body of Christ are identical.

# THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY OF THE TWELVE

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---

It was probably at this same council that Paul so vigorously defended the liberty of Gentile believers. Be that as it may, it is interesting to note *what was decided* at the council referred to in Acts 15.

It was *not* decided there that believers were to be free from the Law, but that *Gentile* believers were to be free. Nothing was said about the status of Jewish believers. It was apparently not even surmised that they too might be free. It was assumed that they were still to remain under the law. The full effects of Calvary had not yet been proclaimed.

The Holy Spirit's leading is clearly seen here. Liberty could not yet be proclaimed to Jewish believers.

In the first place, because of human limitations God can teach men only a little at a time. Secondly, such a drastic change would have tended to alienate Israel further from her Messiah, just when it was God's purpose to stretch forth His hands in mercy to a disobedient and gainsaying people.

So God overruled in it all. The apostles were controlled by the Holy Spirit. The Gentiles were to be free from the Law but nothing was said as to the Jews. What the apostles had loosed on earth was loosed in heaven and what they had not loosed remained bound.

It is interesting to notice the apostles' statement to Paul when he visited Jerusalem again some years later:

**Acts 21:20, 25: "THOU SEEST, BROTHER, HOW MANY THOUSANDS OF JEWS THERE ARE WHICH BELIEVE; AND THEY ARE ALL ZEALOUS OF THE LAW."**

**"AS TOUCHING THE GENTILES WHICH BELIEVE, WE HAVE WRITTEN AND CONCLUDED THAT THEY OBSERVE NO SUCH THING...."**

We repeat that in the light of all this it is difficult to understand how any one can deny the unique character of Paul's ministry. He devotes almost two chapters in his letter to the Galatians to the fact that he did not receive his message from the twelve, but *communicated* his message to the twelve, and privately to the leaders, lest his mission should be in vain.

He stresses the fact that those who had first been sent to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem, had now agreed to turn over their Gentile ministry to him that he might proclaim "*the gospel of the grace of God.*"

## **BOUND IN HEAVEN — LOOSED IN HEAVEN**

Let us now return to the words of our Lord to Peter, to the twelve and to the "little flock."

On these words Protestantism is divided as usual, and for the same reason as usual.



# THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY OF THE TWELVE

By Cornelius R. Stam

---

Protestantism is still trying to operate under the so-called “Great Commission.” She considers the Church of this day a perpetuation of the church of that day. She has failed to recognize the unique character of Paul’s ministry. How can she expect to answer Rome?

Every Bible believer should acknowledge that our Lord meant what He said when He conferred official authority upon the group He was to leave behind. But every Christian should also acknowledge that *by this very authority the apostles turned over their Gentile ministry to Paul*. This is the answer to the claims of Rome.

Paul did not need them to appoint him the apostle of the Gentiles, for his apostleship was “*not of men, neither by man.*” But *they* needed to recognize *his apostleship*. They *did* recognize it, officially, and what they bound on earth was bound in heaven. By the same official act they themselves were loosed from the previous commission to go into all the world, for what they *loosed* on earth was loosed in heaven too. This is why Paul could later declare,

**“I SPEAK TO YOU GENTILES, INASMUCH AS I AM THE APOSTLE OF THE GENTILES, I MAGNIFY MINE OFFICE!” (Rom. 11:13).**

## APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY AND APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

Not long after the twelve had turned their Gentile ministry over to Paul God set the nation Israel aside. Do you see what happened to the ministry of the twelve? Do you see what happens to the argument for apostolic succession?

The prophetic program has been interrupted by Israel’s rejection of Christ. The Kingdom is held in abeyance. The King is a royal Exile. The prophecy has given way to “the mystery,” God’s secret, eternal purpose of grace.

To be sure our Lord will come again “*in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God.*” Nor has He forgotten His promise to give the twelve apostles twelve thrones in the kingdom. There can be no successors to Peter and the eleven, for *they themselves* are to reign with Christ in glory. What is happening now is a parenthesis in the program of God.

Delaying the judgment of Israel and the nations, God chose another apostle to bring a message of grace to this Christ-rejecting world. How great is His mercy and love!

And how are men saved today? How are their sins remitted? Must they come to some recognized authority and be “baptized for the remission of sins?” Rome, still following Peter, says “Yes.” But let us see what the Apostle Paul has to say about it.

**“FOR BY GRACE ARE YE SAVED, THROUGH FAITH; AND THAT NOT OF YOURSELVES: IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD: NOT OF WORKS LEST ANY MAN SHOULD BOAST.” (Eph. 2:8,9).**

## THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY OF THE TWELVE

By Cornelius R. Stam

---

In contrast to Peter's "*Repent and be baptized...for the remission of sins,*" read these words from the pen of Paul:

**“BEING JUSTIFIED FREELY BY HIS GRACE, THROUGH THE REDEMPTION THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS:**

**“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in His blood, to declare HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS...TO DECLARE, I SAY, AT THIS TIME HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS, THAT HE MIGHT BE JUST, AND THE JUSTIFIER OF HIM WHICH BELIEVETH IN JESUS.” (Rom. 3:24-27).**

**“THEREFORE BEING JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHIST.” (Rom. 5:1).**

What a glorious message!

And what about the kingdom? Does some man on earth hold the keys? Why, both the King and His kingdom are in exile! That is why God is honored when we, by faith, take Christ as our Saviour. And when we do this we are "*translated into the kingdom of His dear Son,*" (Col. 1:13), **ACCEPTED IN THE BELOVED ONE.**" (Eph. 1:6).

And believers are not only translated into the Kingdom of God's dear Son, but are baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ Himself and made members of His glorious Body, eternally and inseparably united with Him. (I Cor. 12:12, 13, 27; Gal. 3:26-28).