

Peter, Pentecost, and the Keys of the Kingdom

Binding, Loosing, and the Opening of the Church

By James Burke • May 16, 2026

Few passages in the New Testament have generated more debate than Christ's words to Peter in Matthew 16:

"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 16:19 (KJV)

For centuries, Christians have argued over the meaning of the keys, the identity of the rock, and the meaning of "binding and loosing." Entire systems of church authority have been constructed upon this passage.

But one of the most neglected questions is this: How does Matthew 16 actually function within the narrative of the New Testament itself?

When we follow Peter through Acts, a striking pattern emerges. Peter stands at the center of the three great covenantal openings of the church:

- Acts 2 — the Spirit falls upon Jewish believers in Jerusalem.
- Acts 8 — the Samaritans are publicly incorporated into the church.
- Acts 10 — the Spirit falls upon the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius.

These are not three churches. They are not three separate Pentecosts. They are three covenantal openings of one kingdom through one gospel by one Holy Spirit under one Lord.

And Peter is present at all three.

This strongly suggests that the "keys of the kingdom" are not best understood as arbitrary ecclesiastical power, but as covenantal stewardship: the apostolic opening of the kingdom to all peoples according to the will of heaven.

1. The Promise of the Keys

Matthew 16 begins with Peter's confession:

"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The verbs δεσμεύω ("you may bind") and λύω ("you may loose") are aorist subjunctives. But the really important feature is the construction:

δεσμεύοντες δεσμεύονται λυόμενοι

These are future periphrastic constructions using:

- the future of εἶμι ("will be"),
- combined with a perfect passive participle.

The perfect tense carries the idea of a completed action with continuing result. Literally, the sense is closer to:

- "will have been bound"
- "will have been loosed"

In other words, the grammar points not to heaven passively ratifying Peter's independent actions, but to Peter acting in correspondence with heaven's already-established will.

This is enormously important. Peter is not portrayed as an autonomous ruler determining heavenly reality. Rather, Peter publicly declares and administers on earth what heaven itself has established.

That understanding fits the narrative of Acts perfectly.

3. Pentecost: Opening the Kingdom to the Jews

In Acts 2, Peter stands publicly and proclaims the risen Christ. The Spirit falls. Thousands believe. The church is publicly launched.

This is the first great opening of the kingdom of God.

Importantly, Peter does not manufacture the event. The Spirit descends from heaven. The exalted Christ pours out the promised Spirit. Peter responds by declaring what God has done:

"Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted... he hath shed forth this..."

— Acts 2:33 (KJV)

The pattern is already visible. Heaven acts. Peter declares. The kingdom opens.

4. Samaria: No Second Church

Acts 8 is one of the most unusual passages in the New Testament. Philip preaches in Samaria. Many believe and are baptized. Yet the Spirit does not publicly fall upon them immediately.

Why? Luke tells us:

"For as yet he was fallen upon none of them..."

— Acts 8:16 (KJV)

Only when Peter and John arrive do the Samaritans receive the Spirit publicly. This delay is theologically significant.

The Samaritans had long existed in tension with the Jews. There was deep ethnic, religious, and historical hostility between the two peoples. If the Samaritans had received the Spirit independently of apostolic recognition, the danger of a permanent Samaritan church existing separately from the Jerusalem believers would have been enormous.

But God visibly prevents that division. Peter comes. The apostles lay hands on them. The Spirit falls.

The message is unmistakable: The Samaritans are not receiving a rival church. They are being incorporated into the same body. The same kingdom is opening to them.

5. Cornelius: The Kingdom Opens to the Gentiles

Acts 10 marks another decisive turning point. Peter receives the vision of the clean and unclean animals. At first, he struggles to understand its meaning. Then he is brought to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile.

While Peter is still preaching, the Spirit falls:

"The Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word."

— Acts 10:44 (KJV)

Again, Peter is present. Again, the event is public. Again, heaven acts first.

Peter himself interprets the event as divine initiative:

"What was I, that I could withstand God?"

— Acts 11:17 (KJV)

Even more importantly, when Peter later explains the event to the believers in Jerusalem, he says:

"The Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning."

— Acts 11:15 (KJV)

Notice the language carefully. Peter treats Pentecost as "the beginning." The event at Cornelius' house is not a separate Pentecost establishing a separate Gentile church. It is the same Spirit opening the same kingdom to another people.

6. One Pentecost, Three Openings

When Acts is read carefully, the pattern becomes difficult to ignore.

- Acts 2 — Jews.
- Acts 8 — Samaritans.

- Acts 10 — Gentiles.

And Peter stands at the center of all three.

These are not disconnected stories. They are the progressive opening of one church to all peoples.

Christ had promised in Acts 1:8:

"Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

— Acts 1:8 (KJV)

Acts unfolds exactly along those lines. The Spirit is not creating multiple churches. The Spirit is visibly demonstrating that all who belong to Christ belong equally to one body.

The Jew does not stand above the Samaritan. The Samaritan does not stand below the Gentile. The church is one.

This is why the Spirit's outpourings in Acts function as covenantal witness events rather than endlessly repeated conversion patterns. The church was being publicly established across ethnic boundaries. Once those boundaries were crossed and recognized apostolically, the foundation was laid.

7. Why These Events Are Not Repeated Today

Modern readers sometimes attempt to turn the events of Acts into a repeatable formula for all Christian experience. But Acts presents these moments as foundational transitions in redemptive history.

The church was moving from promise to worldwide mission. The Spirit was publicly testifying to the inclusion of all peoples in Christ. That foundational work does not need to be repeated endlessly.

The church is no longer in its opening phase. The kingdom has already been opened. The foundation has already been laid. Believers today are not waiting for a new Pentecost, a Samaritan Pentecost, or a Gentile Pentecost. They are brought by faith into the already-established body of Christ.

8. Ephesians 2 and the One New Man

What Acts narrates historically, Ephesians explains doctrinally. Paul writes:

"For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us."

— Ephesians 2:14 (KJV)

Then:

"To make in himself of twain one new man..."

— Ephesians 2:15 (KJV)

And finally:

"For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father."

— Ephesians 2:18 (KJV)

This is the theological meaning of the Acts progression. The Spirit's outpourings upon Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles were public demonstrations that Christ was creating one new humanity. Not many churches. One church. Not many peoples competing for covenant standing. One people in Christ.

Conclusion: The Keys Opened One Kingdom

The keys of the kingdom were not given so Peter could establish personal supremacy or arbitrary authority. They were given so the kingdom of Christ could be publicly opened through apostolic witness.

In Jerusalem, Peter opened the door to the Jews. In Samaria, Peter witnessed the inclusion of the Samaritans. In the house of Cornelius, Peter saw the Gentiles brought into the same Spirit-filled body.

At every stage, heaven acted first. The Spirit fell. Peter recognized and declared what God Himself was doing.

The church of Acts is therefore not a story of competing Pentecosts or rival peoples. It is the story of one Lord, one Spirit, one body, and one kingdom opening to the nations.

Christ built His church. The Spirit filled its sails. And through the keys of the kingdom, the doors were opened to the world.