

Session Four

Bind and Loose

Unless Someone Guides Me

Scripture, Tradition, and the Authority of the Church

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Matthew 16 is built on an Old Testament royal office, that the authority Christ gives is exercised in an actual council in Acts 15, and that the apostles themselves replaced one of their number, treating their office as something transmissible.

Catholic Touchstone. Christ did not leave a book and hope for the best. He gave men authority to teach, to decide, and to bind, and he attached his own name to their decisions. The Church's authority is not a rival to Scripture; it is the thing Scripture describes him establishing.

What You Need to Know

Tonight has the strongest single piece of textual evidence in Book One, and it is the kind the master rule of this study prefers: a verifiable echo that anyone can check with two passages open. Matthew 16:19 is not a free-floating metaphor about keys. It is a deliberate echo of a royal appointment scene in Isaiah 22. Be precise about what kind of echo. Matthew does not quote Isaiah word for word and does not name him: Isaiah has the key and the power to open and shut, Matthew has keys and the power to bind and loose. The correspondence is of imagery and office, not of wording, and that is still a great deal. If someone presses you on the verbal link, the closest verbatim New Testament use of Isaiah 22:22 is Revelation 3:7, which shows the verse was live in the apostolic Church.

In Isaiah 22, Shebna is removed from an office in the household of King Hezekiah and Eliakim is installed in his place. The office is described with four elements: the king's robe and sash, the key of the house of David laid on his shoulder, the power to open so that none shall shut and to shut so that none shall open, and the promise that he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This is the office of royal steward, the man who runs the house while the king reigns. It is an office, not a personal favor, and it passes from one holder to another, which is the entire point of the passage: Shebna is out, Eliakim is in.

When Jesus, the Son of David, hands one man the keys of the kingdom and the power to bind and loose, he is not reaching for a pleasant image. He is speaking in the vocabulary of a royal installation, and any hearer who knew Isaiah 22 had everything needed to recognize it. Do not claim more than that. We cannot document what the men standing there registered in the moment, and we do not need to. The echo is in the text, and the text is what anyone can check.

What to claim and what not to claim

Here is where this study will differ from a lot of Catholic apologetics, and where it will be more persuasive for it. Matthew 16 does not, by itself, establish the papacy as defined at the First Vatican Council. It establishes a unique commission to one man, using the vocabulary of a transmissible office.

The development from that commission to the papal office as Catholics now hold it is a matter of Tradition and history, argued from the practice of the early Church.

Say that plainly to your group. If you claim one verse proves everything, a reasonably informed interlocutor will show your people that it does not, and they will conclude the whole case was oversold. If you claim what the verse actually gives you, which is a great deal, your people can defend it all the way down.

The two hardest facts, which we state ourselves

Four verses after the promise, at Matthew 16:23, our Lord calls Peter Satan and a hindrance. Later, Peter denies him three times. Later still, St. Paul opposes Peter to his face at Antioch because he stood condemned. Do not let your group hear these from someone else first. State them yourself, tonight, and then make the point they actually support: the office was never a claim about the personal excellence of the man holding it. If it had been, it would have failed in the first generation, in front of witnesses, and the New Testament records the failure without withdrawing the commission.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Of Eliakim: “he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.” **Isaiah 22:21-22**

Note that the office carries a paternal title. Note also that the authority is described as a power to open and shut that no one can reverse. Then set it beside Matthew 16:19, where one man receives keys and a power to bind and loose that heaven itself ratifies.

The fulfillment runs further than Peter. In Acts 1 the apostles conclude from Psalm 109:8 that Judas’s office is to be taken by another, and they fill it. The Greek word for that office is *episkope*, the root of our word bishop. The apostles treated their number as a body of offices rather than a fixed list of names: when one fell vacant, they filled it.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Clement of Rome

Letter to the Corinthians, chs. 42-44

Writing from Rome to Corinth around the year 96, Clement addresses a congregation that has deposed its leaders. He argues that the apostles appointed their first converts as overseers, and made provision that when those men died, other approved men should succeed to their ministry.

Two things are worth pointing out to your group. First, this is an argument about succession made while the New Testament was still being assembled. Second, notice who is writing to whom: the church at Rome is intervening in the affairs of a church in Greece, and expects to be heard.

Well attested; substance given as summary at chapter level.

Voice of the Church

St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Against Heresies, Book III (summary)

Irenaeus answers people claiming secret apostolic teaching by pointing to something public: the churches the apostles founded can name the men who have held the teaching office in unbroken order since. He then sets out such a list for the church at Rome.

His argument only works if succession was an ordinary, well-known, checkable fact in the second century, not a later invention. He expects his opponents to be able to verify the list.

Summary of his argument in Book III; no chapter number printed.

Voice of the Church

St. Leo the Great

Given as a summary of his teaching; no locus printed

Leo, bishop of Rome in the middle of the fifth century, teaches in substance that the care Christ entrusted to Peter does not lapse with Peter's death, but continues in those who hold his chair, so that what Peter received is exercised by his successors.

Represent this as what it is: a fifth-century bishop of Rome articulating the claim, not a first-century proof text. It is genuine and early evidence of how the office was understood, and that is what we are claiming for it.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 552-553 treat Peter's confession, the keys, and the power to bind and loose, and connect the keys to the authority to govern the house of God.
- CCC 880-882 set out the college of the apostles with Peter at its head, and the bishops with the Bishop of Rome at theirs.
- CCC 857 gives apostolicity: the Church is built on the apostles and continues to be taught by their successors.
- CCC 891 states the conditions under which the Roman Pontiff teaches infallibly. Read the conditions carefully; they are narrower than most people assume, and knowing them precisely is worth more than any argument you can make tonight.

Thread Watch

Leader only.

- THREAD A, the Unnoticed Premise. Tonight it takes its heaviest positive hit: not only does the text fail to teach the text-alone rule, it describes Christ installing an authority. Still do not name the thread. Next week.
- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. One session to go. If anyone reaches for their envelope tonight, stop them.
- THREAD C, the Ethiopian's Question. Ask it at Acts 15: the council faced a genuine dispute where both sides had Scripture. How did they settle it?

Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can describe the Isaiah 22 office and point to the elements it shares with Matthew 16 and name the ones it does not.
- 2. Every participant can state honestly what Matthew 16 does and does not establish on its own.
- 3. The group discovers, in Acts 15, a council settling a doctrinal dispute by decision rather than by each party citing texts.
- 4. Every participant knows about the rebuke at Caesarea Philippi, the denials, and Antioch, and can explain why none of them undoes the commission.
- 5. Nobody leaves thinking the case rests on a pun about a rock.

Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 10 minutes.
- The Isaiah 22 live discovery and questions 3 and 4: 25 minutes. This is the heart of the session.
- Acts 15, questions 5 and 6: 20 minutes.
- The steelman and question 7: 25 minutes.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 12 minutes.

If you are running short: compress Acts 15 to question 5 only. Do not cut the Isaiah discovery and do not cut the steelman.

THE OBJECTION BENCH

Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.

"The rock is Peter's confession, not Peter. Petros is a small stone, petra is a boulder."

Handle the Greek honestly rather than aggressively. In Aramaic, which is what our Lord was speaking, the word is Kepha with no gender distinction at all, and John 1:42 preserves that name. Greek needs a masculine form for a man's name, which is why a masculine ending appears.

Then make the simpler point. Every other element of the sentence is addressed to the person: you are, I will give you, whatever you bind. It would be very strange for the one clause in the middle to switch to addressing an abstraction.

Finally, concede something real: the confession genuinely matters, and Peter's authority is not independent of the faith he just professed. That concession costs nothing and is true.

"Jesus calls Peter Satan three verses later."

Agree, and get there first. Also raise the denials and Galatians 2:11 yourself.

Then ask what the objection would prove. If the commission depended on Peter's reliability, it collapsed within a chapter, and the evangelist who recorded the collapse also recorded the promise, in the same Gospel, without apparent embarrassment.

"James presided at the Council of Jerusalem, not Peter."

Read Acts 15 carefully with them rather than asserting. Peter speaks and the assembly falls silent (15:7-12). James then speaks, appeals to the prophets by citing Amos 9:11-12, says my judgment is (15:19), and proposes the terms. The letter then goes out from the apostles and the elders with the whole church (15:22-23). Give James his full weight; the objector will have read the passage.

Do not overclaim here. The passage does not read like a papal decree and pretending it does will cost you. What it does show, decisively, is a council of the Church settling a doctrinal question with binding authority and writing that it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. That is the point tonight, and it is enough.

"Binding and loosing is given to everyone in Matthew 18."

Correct, and we taught that ourselves last week. Concede it immediately.

The distinction is the keys. In Matthew 16:19 the noun is plural, keys, but the recipient is one man, and behind them stands the Isaiah 22 office. Do not build anything on the grammatical number of the noun; build it on who is handed them. Binding and loosing is shared; the stewardship is not. Hold both rather than collapsing one into the other.

"There were wicked popes."

Yes, and name one or two if you know the history. Do not minimize.

The promise is about the preservation of teaching, not the sanctity of the man. CCC 891 states the conditions for infallible teaching and they are narrow. A pope's private opinions, personal conduct, and political

decisions are not covered, and Catholics should say so loudly, because most objections here are aimed at a claim the Church never made.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you did not leave your people without shepherds. Thank you for the men you have sent, the good ones and even the poor ones, and for keeping your promise through both. Teach us tonight to want the truth more than we want to be right. Amen.

Win

1. Who has ever handed you keys? What did it mean that they trusted you with them?
2. When two people you respect disagree about something serious, how do you decide?

Build

THE GROUND The Isaiah discovery is the centerpiece. Give it room.

Live discovery. Split the group in two. Give one half Isaiah 22:19-22 and the other half Matthew 16:17-19, without telling either half what the other has. Ask each group to list everything their passage says about the person receiving the office. Then bring the lists together on paper where everyone can see both.

3. What do the two lists have in common?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A single man singled out and renamed or newly designated. A key or keys given to him. Authority to open and shut, or bind and loose, that no one reverses. And in Isaiah, explicitly, a position that one man vacates and another fills. Then name what is NOT shared, before anyone else does. The robe and sash and the paternal title belong to Isaiah alone; Matthew 16 does not call Peter a father. The parallel is strong without them, and a leader who claims them will be corrected by anyone holding the Matthew text.

Let them find it themselves. This is the strongest evidence in Book One precisely because no one has to take our word for it.

If they miss the transmissibility, point at Shebna. The whole passage is about a change of officeholder. An office that can change hands is by definition not a personal gift that dies with the man.

4. What does that mean Matthew 16 is doing? And what does it not yet establish?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

It is an installation scene. Jesus, addressed two verses earlier as the Christ, the Son of the living God, installs a steward over the household of the kingdom in the vocabulary of the Davidic court.

What it does not establish on its own: the full doctrine of the papacy as later defined, including universal jurisdiction and the conditions of infallible teaching. Say this plainly. Those are argued from the continuous practice of the Church, not from one verse.

Being honest here is not a retreat. It is what makes the rest of the case survive contact with someone who knows the objections.

Read aloud: Acts 15:1-2, 6-29.

5. A genuine doctrinal dispute breaks out. How is it settled?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Not by each party producing a proof text and leaving it there. By the apostles and elders assembling, debating, hearing Peter's testimony, hearing James cite Amos 9:11-12 and give his judgment, and then issuing a decision in a letter that binds the churches. Scripture is used inside the deliberation; what settles the question is the decision the assembly reaches with it. Say that carefully, because it is the honest form of the point and the stronger one.

The dispute was serious and the Scriptures of the time did not obviously settle it: circumcision is commanded in Genesis 17 in perpetual terms. Both sides could quote.

6. Look at the wording in verse 28. What do they claim for their decision?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

That it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. They attach the Spirit's authority to a decision reached by an assembly of men, and then impose it.

This is what Session 1 was pointing at from the beginning. This is the pattern Acts 15 puts on display: when the New Testament shows us a doctrinal dispute actually being settled, it is settled by the decision of an authorized body, not by each side's private reading. One narrative does not by itself make a universal rule, and do not claim that it does. What it does give you is the clearest case in the New Testament of that machinery in operation, and the letter it produced binds churches that were never in the room.

DIG DEEPER: The office that outlived its holder

In Acts 1:20-26 the apostles apply Psalm 109:8 to Judas and conclude that his office should be taken by another, then fill it by lot after prayer.

The Greek word rendered office there is *episkope*, from which we get bishop. Take the narrow claim, which is the durable one. The apostles treated the commission as an office, something that can fall vacant and has to be filled, not a personal gift that dies with the man. Note the limit too, and state it yourself: Acts 1:21-22 requires the replacement to have accompanied them from the baptism of John to the ascension, and no later generation can meet that. So Acts 1 does not by itself prove succession down the centuries. It proves the apostolic commission was understood as an office from the first weeks. That the office kept being filled after the eyewitnesses died is shown from the practice of the Church, which is what Clement and Irenaeus give us tonight.

The Steelman

THE DEPTH Read in full. This one is strong and the group should feel it.

The strongest form of the objection.

Look at what the man actually did. Four verses after the promise, at Matthew 16:23, Christ turns and calls him Satan and a hindrance. On the night it mattered, he swore he had never met him, three times, the first of them to a servant girl and the rest to bystanders around a fire. Years later, with the Gospel itself at stake at Antioch, he behaved so badly that Paul opposed him to his face and wrote that he stood condemned, and it is Paul's account that ended up in Scripture.

And when the Church faced her first great doctrinal crisis, the decision at Jerusalem is announced

by James, not Peter. The letter goes out from the apostles and elders together. There is no throne in the text, no jurisdiction, no appeal to Rome, because there is no Rome in the story at all.

What there is, is a rock, and the rock is what Peter had just said. Flesh and blood did not reveal that confession to him, and it is the confession that the Church is built on. Read the whole passage and the natural sense is that Christ builds his Church on the faith that has just been professed, not on the man who a moment later would try to talk him out of the cross.

7. Take the objection one part at a time. What is true in it? What does the text still say?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

True, and we should say it before they do: the rebuke, the denials, and Antioch all happened, and Scripture preserves all three. Concede also that Acts 15 is not a papal decree and that reading one into it is a stretch.

On the rock: the Aramaic Kepha carries no gender distinction, John 1:42 preserves the name, and every surrounding clause is addressed to the person rather than to an idea. Concede that the confession matters and that Peter's role is not detachable from the faith he professed. Then note that the passage does not merely say rock; it hands over keys, and keys belong to a man, not to a proposition.

On the failures: the objection assumes the promise was a compliment. It was not. Every element of the Isaiah 22 office is about function, not virtue. Christ chose a man he knew would deny him, said so in advance, and gave him the commission anyway, which tells you what kind of promise it is.

On Acts 15: agree that it shows a college acting together, and take the win that is actually there. A council of the Church settled a disputed doctrine with binding authority and claimed the Holy Spirit for the decision. Whatever else you conclude about Peter, the text has just shown you the Church exercising exactly the authority the last three sessions have been describing.

Where to land: Matthew 16 gives a unique commission in the language of a transmissible office. Acts 1 shows the apostles treating their commission as transmissible. Acts 15 shows the authority in operation. Clement, Irenaeus, and Leo show it understood that way early. That is a cumulative historical case, and it is the honest one.

Send

8. Does it change anything for you that Christ built on a man who failed publicly and was forgiven publicly?
9. Where in your own life do you resist being told something rather than deciding it yourself?

Live It This Week

- Read John 21:15-19, where the man who denied three times is asked three times and given a charge.
- Pray for the Pope by name once this week, whatever you think of him.
- Look up the actual conditions in CCC 891 and learn them well enough to state them from memory.
- Bring your sealed envelope next week. Do not open it.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you gave keys to a man who would fail you, and you kept your promise anyway. Thank you for an authority that does not depend on our worthiness. Give our shepherds courage, and give us the humility to be led. Amen.

Memory Verse

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” **Acts 15:28**

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

- Isaiah 22:19-22, the royal steward (live discovery)
- Matthew 16:13-19, the confession, the rock, and the keys (core text)
- Matthew 16:21-23, the rebuke
- John 1:42, you shall be called Cephas
- Matthew 18:18, binding and loosing given to the Church (carried from Session 3)
- Acts 1:20-26, the office of Judas taken by another
- Psalm 109:8, quoted by the apostles
- Acts 15:1-2, 6-29, the council (memory verse at v. 28)
- Genesis 17, the perpetual covenant of circumcision (why the dispute was hard)
- Galatians 2:11, Paul opposes Peter at Antioch (steelman)
- John 21:15-19, the threefold charge

Catechism: CCC 552-553, 857, 880-882, 891.

Patristic: St. Clement of Rome, Letter to the Corinthians chs. 42-44. St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies Book III. St. Leo the Great, on the see of Peter.