

The keys of the kingdom as paradigm for building up the church in reformed church government

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Abstract

The keys of the kingdom, building up the church and reformed church government

*This article adopts an ecclesiological approach and concentrates on the prominent concepts the keys of the kingdom and building up the church. The article attempts to determine the significance those concepts may have for the government of the church and emphasises the close relationship between the keys of the kingdom and the building up of the church. According to Reformational viewpoints the administering of the keys serves the edification of the church. It becomes clear that the *notae ecclesiae* and the keys of the kingdom function as the basic elements of the church order and must be regarded as the basis or pillars upon which the church is built.*

1. Introduction

This contribution adopts an ecclesiological approach and concentrates on the prominent concepts *the keys of the kingdom* and *building up the church*. My intention is to investigate these concepts in the context of Reformational literature, and to determine the significance they may have had and still may have for the government of the church.

My hypothesis is that genuine reformed church polity or church government serves the *aedificatio ecclesiae* since it defines or stipulates from Scripture and confession the ways and means in which to administer the keys of the kingdom.

It is essential to emphasise the importance of church government and to put it into perspective, mainly for the following reasons:

- On the one hand, all the tensions and disruptions which have characterised the family of reformed churches throughout the world during the past two centuries lead some observers to the conclusion that church government may have been overrated in the past (Te Velde, 1989:23). One perceives a sense

- of mistrust towards church polity because, according to such sceptics, the Reformational church orders have failed and have in fact been responsible for the disruption and disintegration of the church and of the unity of the church rather than for the building up of the church.
- On the other hand, many theologians feel the need for, and realise the importance of concentrating on the issue of edifying the church. But the emphasis has changed – from church government or church polity to Practical Theology. A tendency exists to associate church polity with rules and regulations and to reserve the edifying of the church for Practical Theology. This symptom has already been discussed (Spoelstra, 1992:299-321; also see Nel, 1987:26-37).

Furthermore one feels the obligation to emphasise the mostly neglected reference to and the significance of administering the keys of the kingdom when theologians do research on issues such as building up the church.

2. Scriptural concepts

The terms “keys of the kingdom” and “building up the church” appear in St. Matthew 16:17-19: “... and upon this rock I will build my church ... And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven ...”.

2.1 Keys of the kingdom

In a comprehensive exegesis of this text, Floor (1981:63-74) points out that the focal point is the church (verse 18). Scripture makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the one and only Head of the church: He carries the keys of the kingdom (Is. 22: 22; Rev. 3:7) and He will build his church. He is the *real* subject.

Christ gave the keys to the church, and this implies that the church now has the responsibility and the ministerial jurisdiction to serve Christ and his church (Ridderbos, 1972:309-320). This is also why the Holy Spirit descended on the church to equip and prepare it for its task and function as bearer of the keys (Acts 2; St. John 20:22-23).

According to St. Matthew 16:17-19 and 18:17, the administering of the keys of the kingdom is the responsibility of the local church (Plomp, 1969:80-84; Ridderbos, 1972:314). Calvin’s interpretation of St. Matthew 16:17-19 and 18:17 gives us the meaning of the *potestas ecclesiae*. This ministerial authority or potency of the church is threefold: *potestas doctrinae*, *potestas iurisdictionis* and *potestas in legibus ferendis*. The *disciplina ecclesiae* is part of the *potestas iurisdictionis*, the latter being the responsibility to govern the church. The administering of the keys of the kingdom is therefore more than church discipline, but church discipline, on the other hand, is always the administering

of the keys of the kingdom. According to Calvin, it must be borne in mind that Christ's purpose in giving the church these *potestates* is to build up the church, not to destroy it (*Institutes* IV, 8, 1; IV, 11, 1; IV 10; Plomp, 1969:63, 73).

The verbs used in St. Matthew 16:18-19 have a voluntaristic meaning and are an indication of the will and promises of Jesus Christ with regard to the opening of the kingdom of heaven for believers. This aspect must be seen as the fulfilment of the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament and as proof that God "through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community ..." (Heidelberg Catechism, 21).

It is important to note that the building up of the church and the opening of the kingdom are relative concepts. The ultimate purpose or aim of building up the church is not to establish or create a world-church, a *landskerk* or *volkskerk*: building up must be directed towards the kingdom of God. This means that the significance and task of church government is to serve the church in such a way that the church may grow in faith, obedience and submission to God as the people of his covenant.

2.2 Building up the church

The fundamental promise in St. Matthew 16:17-19 that He will build his church, and the frequency with which this metaphor of building occurs in the epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter, lead us to conclude that the building up of the church is a central theme in the New Testament. It has become a very popular subject in reformed theology (see Roberts, 1963; Ridderbos, 1966:479-543; Coertzen, 1981; Te Velde, 1989, 1992, 1993; Nel, 1986; Noordegraaf, 1990: 123-145; Kellerman, 1993:331-345; Du Plooy & Venter, 1996).

We can distinguish two elements in the instruction to build up God's church: extensive and intensive activity (Te Velde, 1989:8; Venter, 1986:1; Roberts, 1963:163-169).

There are many references in the new Testament to the ways in which God uses his church as instrument in the process of erecting or edifying the church. In St. Paul's epistles to the Corinthians (2, 12:28) and the Ephesians (4:7-16) it becomes clear that Christ as the Head of the church has given the church the *diakonia* and the *charismata* for this purpose (Versteeg, 1989:49-74; Du Plooy, 1982:188-198).

3. Reformation and church government

A study of Reformational literature on the government of the church makes it clear that the Scriptural terms *keys of the kingdom* and *edifying the church* occur

prominently and frequently. This is not surprising, since Calvin was very outspoken on this point, namely that the church must be governed strictly according to Scripture.

Allow me to focus briefly on the viewpoints of some Reformers, namely Luther, Bucer and Calvin, and to refer to a few confessions and church orders.

3.1 Luther

Luther reacted against the *successione apostolorum* doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. According to this doctrine, the pope (and his delegates) as the successor of St. Peter has received the keys of the kingdom. This means that the pope has authority over the church. He is the *vicarius Christi* and carries the keys in his hand (*Petro claves committuntur coelorum*). He therefore has the authority to be the administrator of the sacrament of penance (Simpson, 1992:1501).

Luther has a much broader perspective in this regard. According to Luther, the administering of the keys of the kingdom includes proclaiming the gospel, administering the sacraments, discipline, absolution, deposition of ministers, and so forth. In the light of his emphasis on the priesthood of believers, the believers or congregation has the power of the keys.

With regard to the building up of the church, one must remember that Luther is primarily concerned with the doctrine of righteousness by true faith. He is soteriologist rather than ecclesiologist. He did, however, show some interest in order and mutual discipline, and tried to establish orderly gatherings of the congregation. This proves that Luther had the building up of the church in mind (Van't Spijker, 1990a:311-315).

He, however, did not make any real progress in this regard, mainly because of unfavourable circumstances in the country. The farmers were in revolt and most people were poorly educated and not capable of governing the church properly. The development of church government in Germany in the 16th and 17th centuries led to a state of affairs where the state obtained jurisdiction over the affairs of the national church (*landskerk*).

Two Reformers who largely contributed to the development of reformed church government were Bucer and Calvin. They understood the need and the necessity for the self-governing of the church and for distinguishing between the affairs of the state and those of the church (Van't Spijker, 1990b:86-103; 1993:178-201; Bronkhorst, 1947).

3.2 Bucer

Bucer proceeds from the viewpoints of Luther, but goes much further. He believes that the church is a community of believers, the one body of Christ, gathered by the Holy Spirit, where it is everyone's task to contribute to the edification of the congregation (Van't Spijker, 1972:24).

Bucer is concerned not only with the righteousness of the church (like Luther), but also with its holiness. He therefore stresses that the church, and not the public authorities, should administer the keys of the kingdom in view of the holiness of the church. The church is essentially a community of believers, of love and discipline (Van't Spijker, 1993:316).

Van't Spijker (1993:317-323) clearly indicates that Bucer concentrated mainly on the *aedificatio ecclesiae*, and that he distinguished between extensive and intensive activities.

Bucer identifies three essential elements: the dispensation of the doctrine, the sacraments, and the functioning of the discipline (Van't Spijker, 1993:192). These elements are not only the *notae ecclesiae*, but also serve as the design for the church orders because they constitute the main subjects dealt with in a church order.

3.3 Calvin

Calvin was a disciple of Bucer's and followed him in many ways, but he also had his own views.

According to him, administering the keys of the kingdom on behalf of the church is a very important concept, especially with regard to the government of the church (*Institutes* III, 4, 10-14; IV, 11, 1 and 5-6; Plomp, 1969:72-75). He emphasises the ministerial aspect. Administering the keys does not mean that the church has any authority in itself. The authority is vested in Christ, but He uses the church as his instrument (*Institutes* IV, 11, 1).

The local church is primarily the place where these keys have to be administered (*Institutes* IV, 3, 8; IV, 11, 6; Plomp, 1969:62-75). The local church has to be organised and structured under the supervision of the offices to be a holy community of believers who partake of the Lord's Supper and constitute a community of disciplined people (Van't Spijker, 1990a:324).

It has become clear that Calvin's vision of the church conforms with that of the New Testament. The church has neither a powerful secular structure under the supervision of the pope, nor that of a *landskerk* – (Luther) or *volkskerk*-structure. Moreover, it cannot tolerate interference by public (state) authorities (Zwingli, Erastus). According to Calvin, the offices have the function to

administer the keys of the kingdom in order to edify the church, and this is done mainly in, and on behalf of, the local church. This is the *potestas ecclesiae* as explained earlier when Calvin's exegesis of St. Matthew 16:17-19 and 18:17 was dealt with.

In his *Ordannances ecclesiastiques* Calvin does not make provision for major assemblies. This does not mean that he is in principle against major assemblies, but it must be emphasised that Calvin does not associate a major assembly with the church. He is prepared to accept the decisions of major assemblies, provided that Christ is the chairman (president) of the gathering and the decisions are taken according to Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Calvin acknowledges the importance of mutual assistance between churches in the governing of the church (*Institutes* IV, 9, 1-13). In other words, Calvin believes that the power of the keys rests primarily in the hands of the local church and that it is primarily the duty of the offices to administer the keys (*Institutes* IV, 3, 8; IV, 11, 6).

Calvin stresses the following aspects concerning the edification of the church (Van't Spijker, 1990a:323-332):

- The doctrine of the church is not meant to satisfy curiosity, but to be taught in the grace of God so that we may grow in piety and devoutness (*Institutes* I, 14, 3).
- Christ Himself is the One who builds up his church, and the offices in the church are the principal nerves by means of which God binds the body of Christ together. This point of departure leads to the view of the church as an institution (*institutio*), and to the instauration (*instauration*) and building (*aedificatio*) of the church (*Institutes* IV, 3, 2).
- It is the task of each and every believer to assist in building up the church, since the gifts with which we have been blessed are not to be used for our own benefit but for the benefit of the congregation (see Calvin's commentary on Heb. 5:12 and 1 Cor. 14:26).
- The very essence of the building up of the church is to grow in grace and it is based on faith and repentance.
- The doctrine (*doctrina*) and church government (*disciplina*) can not be separated since the discipleship of Christ is the result of the preaching of the doctrine. The church order is meant to be instrumental. It must serve as a channel or passage for the true doctrine which is the soul of the church (Van't Spijker, 1990a:331-332).

- Hence the church order must be composed on the basis of, and in the closest relation with the Word of God, in order to serve the building up of the church.

In conclusion it is significant that, according to both Bucer and Calvin, the preaching of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of church discipline function as the basic elements of the church order according to the *ius divinum*. Unless these elements are part and parcel of a church order, that order will have little substance or value (Van't Spijker, 1972:35-37).

3.4 Confessions and church orders

Bucer and Calvin laid the foundation for the further development of the government of the church during the 16th and early 17th centuries. The synod of Dordrecht 1618/19 finalised and completed this development as far as the confession and church order are concerned. The confessions delineate the contours of the church order (*Confessio Gallicana* of 1559, art. 29-31; *Confessio Belgica* of 1561, art. 30-32; Pont, 1981; Du Plooy, 1982:342-365; Deddens, 1990:110-120).

With reference to the content of the church order of Dordrecht 1618/19, Van't Spijker (1993:197) remarks: "het staat alles in dienst van de *aedificatio ecclesiae*".

The aim and objective of the church orders which culminated in the church order of Dordrecht of 1618/19 were the salvation of the believers. It was meant to serve as a passage for the work of the Word and the Spirit through which the believers may grow in faith, repentance, justification, holiness and perseverance. One can not speak of the building up of the church unless these aspects are realised.

According to Calvin, the father of reformed church government, the emphasis of church government focuses on communion with Christ and the fellow believers (*Institutes* IV, 1, 5), and is thus a service primarily in building up the church.

4. Criticism

In recent times we have noted various reactions to reformed church government:

- Some theologians clearly state their discontent and frustration. Botha (1993:1-7) criticises presbyterial church government and maintains that the exegesis underlying the church order is at fault. According to Botha

(1993:1-7) presbyterial government fails to integrate contemporary critical and hermeneutical progress which has been made in the study of the Word of God. Botha argues that the content of presbyterial church government is irrelevant and old-fashioned (also see Te Velde, 1989:19-21).

- Other theologians outrightly reject reformed church government and favour a charismatic approach combined with sociological and psychological methods because they are strongly critical of the Reformational doctrine of the offices (see Van't Spijker, 1990a:310).

In Reformational theology itself a tendency exists to blame reformed church polity for the disruption of the churches of the Reformation during the 19th and 20th centuries. This may be one of the reasons for the lack of interest in church polity among the family of reformed churches (Bakker, 1990:30).

There is reaction against the reformed structure of the church, probably to a greater extent against the church as an impersonal institute or structure (see Spoelstra, 1986:94-110).

5. Perspective

I am convinced that the Reformational approach to church government is of vital importance because it provides adequately for the edification of the church and it teaches us how to administer the keys of the kingdom in a proper way. We can endorse the points of departure of the Reformation, namely the authority and sufficiency of Scripture and the authority of the confession.

Our main objection and matter of concern to the approaches which are critical of reformed church government is that they are inclined to invert the order and the emphasis: from God to humanity; from the offices to the congregation; from offices to gifts (*charismata*); from the church (congregation) as a community to single groups; from proclaiming the Gospel to congregational activities; from Christ as the Head to the congregation as his body. Of course it is true that these elements should not be contrasted, but they have to be in the correct order to ensure equilibrium (see Te Velde, 1989:19-20). We should not lose the perspective of the kingdom of God, nor deviate from the correct concept or precise meaning of the church, or from the relation between the *diakonai* and *charismata*. These are fundamental factors.

It is significant that, for the third time in this century, the concept *gemeentebou* has achieved such widespread popularity and has become a focal point of theological interest, especially in the reformed world (Van't Spijker, 1990a:309-310). Nowadays, however, it is a subject studied in the field of practical theology.

It should, however, be noted that from an ecclesiological point of view, there need not be tension between practical theology and church polity with regard to the building up of the church.

I shall therefore focus briefly on two more aspects, examining the second one in greater depth:

- The relation between practical theology and church polity as far as the building up of the church is concerned.
- The dilemma of presbyterial church government which results from the many different opinions on the authority of major assemblies, each of which is based on its interpretation of the concept “church”. The real issue concerns the disciplinary authority of synods, and the salient point here is whether a major assembly has the power of authority to administer the keys of the kingdom.

5.1 *Gemeentebou*

The church order of Dordrecht 1618/19 is still widely accepted as a proper and Scriptural way of governing the church. This is known as the presbyterial system. Some authors (Van Wyk, 1989:77) prefer to call it the presbyterial-synodical system, but they are criticised by others (see Boon, 1965:193, 201; Van Ginkel, 1975; Spoelstra, 1981:4-23; Coertzen, 1991a:329-342). This system of government binds local churches together (*mutuo consensu*) on the basis of the confession so that they constitute a structural unity.

The reformed church order (DKO) does not go into fine detail nor does it attempt to regulate the church by laying down rules and regulations. It merely provides the principles and ground structure. Te Velde (1989:28-29) distinguishes between this ground structure and a “fill-in” structure (*invulstruktuur*). The ground structure provides the outline or contours and describes ways and means for the administering of the Word, the assemblies, the sacraments and discipline. The fill-in structure provides detail and refinement. According to Te Velde this is the field of diaconiology or practical theology. Both structures are concerned with the building up of the church.

For a perspective on the interest, meanings and difficulties of *gemeentebou*, see Kellerman (1993:331-334), Lategan (1992:54-84), Van't Spijker (1990a:309-311) and Du Plooy and Venter (1996:343-364). I should merely like to remark that the subject *gemeentebou* will have to be practised within the parameters of reformed church government. The fundamental and Scriptural principles concerning the edification of the church through the service of the keys were laid down in the Reformational period. These principles form part of the

content of reformed church polity, and further development in this regard may be significant, provided that these foundations remain intact.

5.2 Jurisdiction of major assemblies

It is necessary to focus briefly on the second part of the church order which deals with major assemblies. According to Reformational viewpoints the major assemblies have to serve the building up of the church. History reveals that serious questions about the authority of major assemblies were asked and that much confusion existed about the responsibility and jurisdiction of major assemblies with regard to the second key of the kingdom, namely the discipline of the church.

The authority of major assemblies, the precise meaning of the word “church” and the influence of state authorities in the affairs of the church have been the subject of controversy since the 17th century, and particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries (see Nauta, 1936; Van’t Spijker, 1993:181; Du Plooy, 1979; Strauss, 1992:188-197).

Crucial questions in this regard include the following:

- What is the position and authority of a major assembly in relation to the position and authority of the local church?
- Is it correct to distinguish between a local church and a national church (*landskerk*), each with its own jurisdiction and authority?

For greater insight into these problems one has to remember that various emphases and schools of thought can be identified in the broad Protestantism of the 16th and 17th centuries. For instance:

- *The Calvinist tradition.* Bucer and Calvin were strongly of the opinion that the church has the responsibility to govern itself, but then according to Scripture (Calvin’s *Institutes* IV, 3, 3; IV, 4, 1; IV, 6, 9).
- *The state-church tradition.* Exponents of this approach include Luther, Zwingli, Bullinger, the Anglican Church, Erastus and the Remonstrants (see Bakker, 1990:25). This viewpoint broadly means that state authority is responsible for the sound government of the church in that country.
- *The congregationalistic approach* of the independentism of the 17th century (see Van’t Spijker, 1990c:313-325; Deddens, 1990:106-109).

- *The Scottish presbyterian approach* which developed at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries (see MacPherson, s.a.; Coertzen, 1991b: 227).

All these traditions had a minor or major influence on the system or manner of governing churches with a Reformational background and tradition, particularly with regard to the issue of authority in the church and the meaning and consequence of the word *church*.

It is well known that, after the synod of Dordrecht in 1618/19, the Dutch state government did not allow a synod to be held in the Netherlands until 1816 (see Spoelstra, 1993:350-353).

After the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), rationalism and the French Revolution, the church in the Netherlands (since 1816) and in South Africa (since 1804) was regarded as a voluntary association and under the jurisdiction of state authority (see Jooste, 1946; Pont, 1991:28-250).

This development must be judged as directly contrary to the ideals of Calvin and to the reformed confessions of faith (see *Confessio Belgica*, art. 27-32 and 36).

It is interesting to note the different approaches in the development of the Calvinist tradition, particularly with reference to the *ecclesia instituta* and the role, position and authority of a major assembly:

- It is remarkable that the French confession (*Confessio fidel Gallicana*) of 1559 differs from the Dutch confession (*Confessio Belgica*) of 1561 on the point of major assemblies. The confession of 1559 states "that assemblies may be held in the name of God, so that great and small may be edified". The church order (art. 2-5) of the same synod of 1559 is in line with this point of view and regulates the structural aspects of these assemblies (see Pont, 1981:48-54). The *Confessio Belgica* (art. 30) mentions nothing in this regard and merely refers to the council in the local church which consists of pastors, elders and deacons. Since 1559 the French church has established the church as a synodical structure. This has evoked criticism, for instance from De Morèly who (over)reacts and criticises the jurisdiction of these synods over the affairs of local churches (see Van't Spijker, 1990c:315 *et seq.*).
- Scottish presbyterianism differs from the Reformational presbyterial system. The focal point of Scottish presbyterianism is not the council of the local church or congregation, but the presbytery. The presbytery consists of the delegates of a few neighbouring congregations, and they have disciplinary

jurisdiction over the local churches. This means that they have the authority to administer the keys of the kingdom.

The arrival of Scottish ministers in South Africa (1820) led to the establishment of this system of church government in the South African reformed churches of that time. According to this approach, a major assembly can be associated or identified with the church (see Brown, 1992:691-715).

- Prominent dates such as 1816 (1816-*Reglement*), 1834 (*Afskeiding*) and 1886 (*Doleansie*) tell the story of conflict and tension during the 19th century. It is as though the various traditions had come to the surface. Issues discussed during these periods included the disciplinary authority of major assemblies, the relation between the local church and the *algemene kerk*, the question of whether a group of churches in a certain district or country could be called *ecclesia instituta*, and so forth (see Du Plooy, 1979:110 *et seq.* and 1982:405-409; Spoelstra, 1993:349-369; Bouwman, 1937; Visser, 1982:304-389; Kleyn, 1888; Rutgers, 1887:184; Strauss, 1992:188-197).

I believe that this controversial phase had a negative effect on the church, especially as far as reformed church government is concerned. It did not contribute to the building up of the church, nor did it succeed in uniting the churches. On the contrary, it probably promoted the disruption of the reformed churches.

I regard questions such as the following as fictitious or false statements of the problem:

- Which institution has greater authority: the local church or the *algemene kerk*? The local church or the synod?
- Does the presbyterial system of church government imply a dualistic concept of the church, i.e. local church versus the major assemblies (or synod) of the so-called national church, or vice versa?

I believe that Christ carries the keys in his hands. He is the only Head of his church, and He has never transferred his authority to any human being, such as the pope, nor to a synod or the local church. What He did is the following: He instructed his church as his instrument to serve in his kingdom, and to administer the keys in the name of Christ and in the strength of the Holy Spirit on behalf of the church.

In the process of fulfilling this function, the local churches should assist one another; they should help and support one another. Church polity is primarily

a spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in his Word (see *Confessio Belgica*, art. 30). A community or fellowship of churches does not constitute a church (*ecclesia instituta*). Churches (in a local sense) which assist one another are doing so in obedience to Christ and their community, and co-operation rests on the basis of love and faith (see Du Plooy, 1982:405-509).

One has to beware of associating the building up of the church with visible establishments and large church structures, and of operating with a dualistic concept of the church. We have to speak of churches *in* major assemblies, and not of the major assemblies of the church! This terminology accords with the Reformational system of church government.

Major assemblies have a functional significance for the edification of the churches wherever they exist. They also serve the attributes of the church, such as unity, holiness and catholicity. They are indeed indispensable. The decisions of the assemblies will be considered binding unless they are in conflict with the Word of God. Thus, local churches as well as major assemblies have the responsibility and jurisdiction to administer (*bedien*) the authority of Christ the Lord.

6. Conclusion

It is my conviction that it is of vital importance to appreciate the contributions Calvin in particular made to Scriptural church government.

- One must have a correct understanding of the keys of the kingdom and the call to build up the church.
- Reformed church polity should not be regarded as a purely juridical subject which only concentrates on rules and regulations.
- Reformed church polity must continue to maintain the principles in this regard and to provide the parameters for the continuation of the proclaiming of the Gospel of the kingdom, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of church discipline. This is the basis or pillars upon which the church is built, because they are the hallmarks of the true church.
- There should develop a closer relationship and cooperation between church polity and the field of practical theology with special reference to the task and obligation of building up the church.

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