This article discusses the popular Pentecostal/charismatic practice of binding and loosing certain attitudes or dispositions, demonic spirits, and sometimes, even angels. Despite the widespread use of these terms and the approach to dealing with the supernatural that they represent, the official AG Web site has no authoritative statement on this matter. But teachings such as this do provide opportunities for pastors and their people to exercise discernment and sound hermeneutical practices to determine the correct interpretation of the passages used to teach the practice of binding and loosing.

We need to address the issue of binding and loosing for several reasons. First, this widespread practice reflects the need for solid biblical interpretation. People often assume the biblical support for this issue rather than carefully searching Scripture. The Pentecostal movement has always espoused the belief that Scripture alone is the foundation for all matters of “faith and practice.” Therefore, those who take the Bible seriously must discipline themselves to hold all of their beliefs and practices to the scrutiny of Scripture.

Second, we need to see popular theological issues as ways to engage Scripture and develop our abilities in biblical interpretation and application. We cannot be lax in the spiritual discipline of regular Bible study.

Third, God calls us to desire to know and delight to do His will (Romans 12:1; Ephesians 5:10,17; Colossians 1:9,10). The Word of God must pervade every thought, word, and action of those who wish to please God and know and do His will.

A final reason for serious consideration of this issue is concern for the spiritual health of individual Christians and the body of Christ. Teachings that do not have solid, biblical support often wrongly influence believers and lead to false doctrines and practices that do harm to the spiritual health of believers and the church. With these thoughts in mind, let me examine this popular teaching.

Statement of the Problem

In terms of frequency, the modern use of the terms binding and loosing is completely out of sync with the frequency of usage in the New Testament. Most Christians are surprised to learn that the verbs bind and loose only appear together twice (Matthew 16:19; 18:18). Because the same Greek word for bind used in these verses (deo) also appears in Matthew 12:29 (see also Mark 3:27), many Pentecostals and charismatics have concluded that all three passages refer to the believer’s authority to bind rebellious and demonic spirits. What appears to be a simple, straightforward conclusion, however, is fraught with contextual, theological, and practical difficulties.

Description of the Difficulties
Despite the popular interpretation that Jesus’ words, “Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man?” (Matthew 12:29, NASB, emphasis added, compare Mark 3:272) prescribe a sequence for exorcism, evidence elsewhere in the New Testament makes this unlikely. For example, even though the Gospel writers recorded multiple confrontations between Jesus and demonic spirits, there is no instance in the written record in which He bound a demon before He cast it out. Furthermore, such action in relationship to binding demons is not found in the Book of Acts, the Epistles, or the Book of Revelation. In comparison to the elaborate exorcistic formulas of contemporary Jews and pagans, the words and actions of Jesus and His earliest followers are terse and to the point, “Come out!”

If Jesus was anything, He was consistent. If His first-century followers were anything, they were obedient to His teachings. If Jesus had intended to provide a description for the proper sequence of events for a successful exorcism in Matthew 12:29, He would have followed His own formula when exorcising demons. His New Testament disciples would have followed it as well.

Following the interpretative principles of Scripture interprets Scripture and examining Scripture as a whole requires that we understand Matthew 12:29 and Mark 3:27 not as a command, but rather as an analogy (an illustrative technique Jesus used regularly in all four Gospels). Satan is not a man, but similar to a rich man who must be subdued before a thief can rob his home. Satan must be disarmed before the Kingdom of God can advance (cf. Matt. 12:28).

Second, the context of Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 has nothing to do with exorcism. In chapter 16, Jesus was talking about building the church (verse 18). The keys He gave were for unlocking the kingdom of heaven (verse 19), not for the locking (or binding) of the dominion of darkness.

In Matthew 18, binding and loosing does not take place in a context of exorcism, but in administering church discipline. The leaders of the church have the responsibility to determine who is allowed to remain within the new covenant community and under what conditions. If this is the case in Matthew 18 and the language (“binding and loosing”) is identical to the language of Matthew 16, the contexts of these two passages are likely related.

In discussing the relationship between these two passages, it is important to consider the hermeneutical principle “Scripture interprets Scripture.” This principle requires that the unclear or disputed passage be interpreted on the basis of the clear passage. In this instance, Matthew 18:18 functions as the clear and undisputed passage.

Third, when people incorrectly interpret and apply Matthew 16 and 18, theological and practical problems inevitably arise. For example, nowhere in Scripture (as in Jewish and Christian literature outside the Bible) does God give believers the task of binding Satan or demons. Instead, God and His angelic intermediaries alone handle this activity (Revelation 20:1,2).
In recent times, the interpretation of loosing has sometimes made reference to a believer’s prerogative to allow demonic forces to exercise a certain amount of freedom. More often, however, loosing is applied to releasing a spirit of revival or intercession. In extreme instances, the spirit of Elijah or some other biblical figure is “loosed”. With respect to the first three interpretations, it is more appropriate to attribute such initiatives to the work of the Holy Spirit rather than to the dictates of man. Regarding the last interpretation, the language and the concept it represents border on necromancy (interaction involving the dead) and are spiritually unhealthy and biblically inappropriate (compare Leviticus 19:26 and Deuteronomy 18:10,11). Interaction involving departed saints is within the purview of God alone.

Fourth, in many circles it has been in vogue to practice the binding of certain attitudes or personal attributes that are labeled spirits. Thus, parents are often encouraged to bind the spirit of rebellion in their unruly children. Similarly, we often hear well-meaning people bind the spirit of unbelief over persons or groups. As spiritual as this language sounds, it belies an unbiblical frame of reference. God created people as free moral agents. He gives us the capacity and responsibility to choose. God will not answer a prayer that requires Him to violate this aspect of human nature that He intentionally created. When we pray like this, we place ourselves outside the Scriptures that are to function as our only rule for faith and practice. Once departure from the parameters of Scripture occurs, further departures become more likely, such as the belief and practice of commanding angels that some have embraced.

What Is the Proper Interpretation and Application?

Now that we have discussed what Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 mean, we need to discuss what they do mean.

First, to understand the binding and loosing terminology in Matthew 16:19, we must begin with Matthew 18:18. When the principle of immediate literary context is employed, the meaning of this passage becomes clear because it contains numerous contextual indicators. The elements of a “brother [who] sins” (verse 15), “reprove him” (verse 15), “witnesses” (verse 16), “church” (verse 17), and excommunication (“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer” (verse 17, NASB) leave no doubt that the passage is not about exorcism, but excommunication. In this context, verse 18 occurs: “Whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (NASB).

When Matthew 18:15–20 is taken as a whole, Jesus was authorizing church leaders to follow a specific process to preserve the purity and witness of the church. They are deputized to protect the reputation of God and His church, and, if need be, dismiss members who blatantly persist in sinful lifestyles. Their decisions are authoritative (binding) and final.

Lest we take the traditional translation of these words to the extreme, we need to note that this text does not grant unbridled human influence on the decrees of God. Authoritative
Greek reference grammars note that we need to render verse 18: “whatever you shall bind on earth shall have [already] been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have [already] been loosed in heaven.” Christian leaders are to reflect the will of God in their decisionmaking, not generate it. As with many other Scripture passages, this one teaches us as His servants to do His will rather than requiring that He do our will (Matthew 6:10; 7:21; 26:39; Romans 12:1; Ephesians 5:10,17; Colossians 1:9,10).

The final two verses of this passage provide further evidence of the judicial (versus exorcistic) nature of the passage, “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst” (Matthew 18:19,20, NASB).

Usually these verses have been used to guarantee answers to prayer requests offered by two or three believers “who are in agreement” with one another. But the words, “Again I say,” clearly fuse this teaching with the previous instruction. In other words, Jesus was reiterating the same truth He communicated in verse 18. The “agree...about anything that they may ask” (verse 19) has limits defined by the context in which the phrase occurs. Because the broader context concerns church discipline, it is likely that Jesus meant that God is willing to answer prayers for strength, wisdom, insight, courage, and impartiality for the confronters/discipliners and for conviction, contriteness, responsiveness, repentance, and forgiveness for the sinner.

The guarantee of God’s presence among the “two or three...gathered together in [His] name” (verse 20) fits perfectly in the judicial/disciplinary context. The “two or three” mentioned are not arbitrary numbers. They refer to the “witnesses” whom the judge could call forward to establish the sinful words or deeds of the accused by their eyewitness testimony (see Deuteronomy 17:6,7; 19:15–21; 1 Timothy 5:19). The two or three Jesus mentions in Matthew 18:20 no doubt refer to the witnesses in verse 16.

These words carry a promise and a warning. The promise is God’s guarantee that no leaders or witnesses will have to go through this difficult experience alone or in their own strength. They will experience God’s presence, authorization, and empowerment despite the strain of the situation. The warning, however, is seen in the fact none less than God oversees the process. His earthly representatives must remember His personal holiness, righteousness, justice, and impartiality when they pass judgment. Their decisions must reflect the heavenly decree.

Encouragement and challenge such as this was common in the early centuries. We can see this in a passage from rabbinic literature that provides further biblical foundation: “The judges should know whom they judge, and in Whose presence they judge, and Who it is Who judges with them. And the witnesses should know about whom they give testimony, and in the presence of Whom they give testimony, and with Whom they give testimony, and Who it is Who is a witness with them, since it is said, ‘Then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the Lord’ [Deuteronomy 19:17, NASB], and it is
said, ‘God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers’ [Psalm 82:1, NASB].

Second, after we establish that the binding and loosing Jesus commanded in Matthew 18:18 concerns church discipline, we can move to 16:19. The context is less obvious, but the unusual yet overlapping language supplies ample reason to suspect that the context is similar to that of 18:18. The fact the verbs bind and loose appear in both passages and nowhere else in Scripture suggests that the contexts are related. Other criteria will need to be satisfied, however, before we can reach a conclusion.

When we look at the immediate literary context, indicators (though possibly less obvious) suggest similarity of context with Matthew 18. For example, in 16:18, Jesus speaks of “build[ing His] … church.” Verse 19 introduces the metaphor of the “keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Because of the genitival clarifying phrase “of the kingdom of heaven,” the keys must refer to authority to determine admittance and nonadmittance into the fellowship of the church. It is at this point in the verse that the phrase in question appears, “and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (16:19).

The grammatical construction here is the same as that in 18:18. Therefore, as in 18:18, we can more accurately translate it, “whatever you shall bind on earth shall have [already] been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have [already] been loosed in heaven.” In this text, Jesus commanded church leadership to reflect the will of God and not their own with respect to whom they should receive as a member “in good standing” of new covenant community.

Third, in addition to the fact 16:19 and 18:18 share the same terminology and context, literature relevant to this discussion found outside the Bible, supports interpreting these texts in the manner suggested above. The verbal couplet to bind and to loose occurs so often in rabbinic literature that it appears Jesus was employing terminology His culture would easily understand. Here are three examples:

* “During the war of Vespasian, [earlier Rabbis] bound the garlands of the bridegrooms and the [playing of] bells. During the war of Quietus, they bound the garlands of the brides and that a man should teach his son Greek. In the last war [the Bar Kochba Revolt], they bound the bride to ride in a litter within her village. But our Rabbis loosed the bride to ride in a litter within her village.”

* “If a man made a vow to abstain from milk, he is loosed [with respect to] whey. Rabbi Yosi binds it. …If a man made a vow to abstain from meat, he is loosed [with respect to] broth [in which it was cooked]…[but] Rabbi Judah binds it. …If a man made a vow to abstain from wine, he is loosed [with respect to] a cooked dish that has the taste of wine.”

* “If a man vowed to abstain from vegetables, he is loosed [with respect to] gourds, but Rabbi Akiva binds them.”
These passages from rabbinic literature confirm that the terms bind and loose, when occurring together, refer to the authority those in leadership have to forbid (bind) and permit (loose) certain practices or behaviors. Furthermore, these passages do not concern binding or loosing demonic spirits, angelic spirits, or even people’s attitudes.

What, then, is the difference between 16:19 and 18:18? Based on the contextual data already discussed, it appears that chapter 16 refers to the authority of church leadership to forbid or permit entry into the covenant community. Chapter 18, on the other hand, refers to the authority of the leadership to forbid or permit continued membership in the covenant community. While this may sound heavy-handed and judgmental to some, pastoral staffs and boards of deacons/elders function today in that way when churches are functioning in healthy, biblical patterns.

A fourth step by which to ensure proper interpretation is to compare one’s conclusions with a broad spectrum of scholarship on the passage in question. This step should not be dismissed lightly as bowing to the interpretations of the majority. Rather, serious students of the Bible must employ this step as an additional safety net or as a system of checks and balances. This step is much like scientists repeating an experiment and obtaining the same results. In this instance, it is significant that an overwhelming consensus of scholars, liberal and conservative, Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Jewish, have embraced the basic interpretation given above.

Conclusions

We can reach several helpful and practical conclusions from a careful study of binding and loosing. First, the Scriptures are instructive, encouraging, and liberating when they are properly understood and applied. The opposite can also be true. When we unintentionally misconstrue or intentionally twist the Scriptures, well-meaning people are often hurt and sometimes even brought into fear or spiritual bondage (see also Matthew 23:2-4; Acts 20:29,30; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 2:2–18; Titus 1:9–11; 2 Peter 2:1; 3:16,17; Jude 10,11, etc.).

Second, the time-tested hermeneutical principles of immediate literary context, grammatical context, Scripture interprets Scripture, the whole of Scripture, and the safety net of a community of reputable scholars are good tools for biblical interpretation. None of these approaches is beyond the reach of most people. When we faithfully employ these principles, they enable us to come closer to the intended meaning of Scripture.

Third, the proper interpretation and application of these passages help us focus on the straightforward approach of Jesus and apostolic Christianity whose only charge to demonic forces was, “Come out!” It is important for today’s church to rediscover that demons do not respond to our elaborate tactics, pronouncements, confessions, and rebukes. We most successfully impact our world when we do what Scripture calls us to do and trust God to do what we cannot do: set people free.

Fourth, when we understand these Scriptures, they support what pastors and boards have been doing for hundreds of years. If the Bible is our only rule for faith and practice, we
need to have solid biblical warrant for practices such as vetting applicants for church membership and administering church discipline. What a blessing it is to have the teachings of Jesus guide our thoughts and actions rather than tradition, personal preferences, and popular practices.


Notes


4. See the discussion on the proper translation and interpretation of verse 18 above. Also, see my article “Judging without being Judgmental,” Enrichment 2, no. 4 (1997): 92, or online at http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/199704/092_judging.cfm

5. Tosefta Sanhedrin 1:9.


8. Ibid., 7:1, emphasis added.

9. Again, see “Judging without being Judgmental.”